Introduction: B for Bad Cinema

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BAD Cinema in Context – Julia Vassilieva

André Bazin, one of the major film theorists of the twentieth century, famously entitled his opus magnum *What is Cinema?*[1] Picking up where Bazin left off, Adrian Martin recently re-inscribed the question within the context of contemporary cinema in his monograph *What is Modern Cinema?*[2] The appropriate question for us to ask here would be "What is BAD Cinema?" However, by raising this question I seek not so much to introduce the BAD cinema discourse, but to interrogate it within the broader interdisciplinary framework that *Colloquy* has consistently advocated.

The organisers of the conference "B for BAD Cinema: aesthetics, politics and cultural value", which took place at Monash in April 2009 and from which the contributions to the current issue have been drawn, traced BAD cinema's pedigree to cult film, paracinema and its early predecessors in the form of B-movies of studio era. Terminologically, BAD cinema represents an expansion of the notion of 'badfilm' legitimised in film scholarship by Jeffrey Sconce in his influential essay " 'Trashing' the Academy: Taste, Excess, and the Emerging Politics of Cinematic Style" published in *Screen* in 1995. Inspired to a large degree by Pierre Bourdieu's study of the social construction of taste and fuelled by the rise of cultural studies, the essay

drew attention to the phenomenon of paracinema as something that prob-
lematises cinema itself and the status of cinema studies. Sconce opted for
the notion of paracinema as "the most elastic textual category" that "would
include entries from such seemingly disparate subgenres as 'badfilm',
splatterpunk, 'mondo' films, sword and sandal epics, Elvis flicks, govern-
ment hygiene films, Japanese monster movies, beach-party musicals, and
just about every other historical manifestation of exploitation cinema from
juvenile delinquency documentaries to soft-core pornography."[3] Later on,
Mathijs and Mendik positioned "Badness", aesthetic or moral, alongside a
hyperbolic exaggeration of genre, intertextuality and explicit violence as de-
fining characteristics of the cult film, another sibling within the extended
(and perhaps dysfunctional) BAD cinema family.[4] The *Cult Film Reader*
that Mathijs and Mendik assembled in 2007 promised to " gnaw, scratch
and infect you just like the cult films themselves"[5], and has provided a use-
ful anthology in the theorisation of BAD cinema – from Walter Benjamin's
and Siegfried Kracauer's to J. Hoberman's and Jonathan Rosenbaum's
contributions.

For Mathijs and Mendik, as for Sconce before them, the significance of
BAD cinema as a textual, as well as a critical category, lies in its striving
"to valorize all forms of cinematic 'trash', whether such films have been ex-
plicitly rejected or simply ignored by legitimate film culture."[6] Thus, we can
say with Walter Benjamin, BAD cinema turns its gaze to the "historical trash
heap" where, as Slavoj Zizek invited us in his recent expulsive cinematic
performance beside a colossal deposit of rubbish, "we should start feeling
at home."[7] Leaving aside Zizek's timely call for re-thinking ecology as a
new philosophy of trash, what is important for the present discussion is that
trash operates here as both metonym and metaphor, where its subject mat-
ter reinforces the disturbing conjuncture between neglect, evacuation,
abandonment and rescuing inherent in the trope.

The specificity of the BAD cinema phenomenon and the polemics sur-
rounding it encompass textual characteristics of cinematic material, condi-
tions of distributions, circulation and reception, and the theorisation or val-
orisation of 'trash' at work within the academy itself. One of the central is-
sues within these debates is the vexed issue of taste, this two-headed Hy-
dra, one head looking towards artistic quality, another – towards mass ap-
peal. BAD cinema's champions believe it promotes an alternative vision of
cinematic 'art', "challenging the established canon of quality cinema and
questioning the legitimacy of reigning aesthete discourses on movie art."[8]
As such, BAD cinema debates provide a re-incarnation of high culture ver-
sus low culture polemics, once again raising the issues of criteria, legitimis-
ing bodies and access to cultural capital, thus culminating in the ostensibly

circular question "Is it good because it is bad, or is it bad because it is good?". BAD cinema's emerging anti-canon valorises controversial subject matter including all manner of sexual degradation and depravity, torture and violence, cannibalism and mutilation; it marvels at the sight of blood, excrement and slime; and it celebrates abject emotions stretching from shock, horror and disgust to boredom. BAD cinema audiences insist on and practice a number of calculated reading strategies such as rendering the bad into sublime, the deviant into defamiliarised, but above all the privileging of an ironic detachment that "redeems", as it were, the controversial pleasure that BAD cinema delivers, the strategy reflected in and embraced by the academic discourse on BAD cinema. Thus, ultimately, BAD cinema valorises difference, passionately cultivating signs of it in subject matter, reading strategies and critical discourse. In all these aspects, BAD cinema reveals its generic allegiance to postmodernism in its typical characteristics, which were pointed out as early as the mid1960's by critics like Susan Sontag and Ihab Hassan who argued that the work of postmodernists was "deliberately less unified, less obviously 'masterful', more playful or anarchic, more concerned with the processes of our understanding than with pleasures of artistic finish or unity and certainly more resistant to a certain interpretation, than much of the art that had preceded it."[9] The critical moves that encompass discourses on BAD cinema owe significantly – although often without an explicit acknowledgement of this genealogy – to such   ideas as Foucault's articulation of the power/knowledge nexus, Barthes's thesis on the death of the author, Lyotard's challenge of grand narratives and Derridean deconstruction.

   Why then should BAD cinema problematics emerge at the forefront of academic concerns now when, as David Bennett has recently noted, many commentators have delivered a verdict on the death of postmodernism and dated its death precisely as September 11, 2001 – with even a greater attempt at accuracy than with Virginia Woolf who "famously dated the birth of modernism by announcing that 'in or about December, 1910, human character changed.' "[10] 9/11 has become the key date understood by many as a turning point, after which we are said to enter the era of post-postmodernism, or modernism after postmodernism, informed by an almost militant realism, where calls for beauty, goodness, truth and God are coming from all quarters and, instead of irony, seriousness becomes a dominant emotional mode.

   It is against this background, however, that issues raised by postmodernism, including sensitivity to and insistence on difference, acquire renewed urgency, which suggests (as Bennett further notes) that the rumors about postmodernism's death may be greatly exaggerated. It would be

premature to dismiss the troubled legacy of postmodernism as there may well be issues and questions that require and warrant further attention. BAD cinema attests to such tendencies within the cinematic territory with all the implications for its unstable other – GOOD cinema. The issues of periodisation and specificity of medium add to the unique character of these problematics.

Modernism and postmodernism in cinema arrived with some delay in comparison with literature, theatre and visual arts; moreover, they continue to co-exist and overlap, as Adrian Martin points out : "…even though film history has its avant-gardes that are fundamentally linked with art movements pre-World War II, modernism in cinema takes hold only after that War, flowering particularly in the 1960s and lasting through most of the 1970s – so, roughly, a trajectory that runs from Italian neo-realism through the French New vague and finally the New German Cinema. In the early 1980s a cinematic postmodernism is born, […] modernism enters an involutive phase in its search for the new. However, I firmly believe that a notion of modern cinema is worth maintaining as our guiding thread right through to present-day production – it was not simply replaced or usurped by post-modern."[11]   The BAD cinema phenomena bear witness to these dynamics – reflecting the transition from earlier modernist gestures and practices to their postmodernist echoes, if not always necessarily cinematic by nature. Many features that are positioned as BAD cinema's characteristics – disintegration of narrative, use of found footage, desire to shock, provocation, attention to the excremental, valorisation of context and conditions of exhibition – find their analogues and predecessors in various artistic practices, from stream of consciousness in James Joyce's writing to the breakdown of grammar in the prose of Vladimir Sorokin, from Salvador Dalí's flirtations with excrement to Andres Serrano's "Piss Christ" , from the notorious exhibition of a urinal by Marcel Duchamp in 1917 to Tracey Emin's installation "My Bed" in 1998, from Dadaist collages of found objects to surrealists' automatic writing and from Antonin Artaud's theatre of cruelty to Bertolt Brecht's alienation effect. BAD cinema brings some of these tendencies to an extreme, but does so by utilising specific properties of cinema as a medium encompassed by the central role of temporality, the structuring position of the apparatus and the production of subjectivity.

Temporality is central to cinema, as Deleuze persuasively demonstrated. In a little bit more than one hundred years of its existence, cinema has experimented massively with time – from time moving resolutely forward with history in the films of revolutionary Russian directors to the "dead time" of Italian neo-realism, cinema modeled and embodied different ways of thinking and experiencing time – linear and circular, mythic and epic,

staying still and rushing ahead, ruptured and disturbed, elastic and condensed, interrupted by flashbacks and flash-forwards. What BAD cinema adds to this panoply of temporalities is not a deviation from the linear model, which is by no means new to cinema, but the fact that such deviations are happening "not by design", but are rather a result of accidents and mistakes, intrusion of chance and randomness, or (as Sconce notes) of "the systemic failure of a film aspiring to obey dominant codes of cinematic representation."[12]

By so doing, BAD cinema disturbs not only and not principally time but, more importantly, what in cinema scholarship is traditionally defined as filmic and profilmic, where profilmic refers to what is in front of the camera (the actor, the setting, the props) and leaves its impression on a film, and in that sense is 'objective', whereas the filmic indicates what is behind – the domain of human agency and subjectivity which photographs, directs and edits the film, making all sorts of choices in the process.[13] BAD cinema ushers in the eruption of the profilmic, as the human agency behind the camera retreats into non-professionalism, guess work, drunkenness, madness or leaves the scene altogether. The bleeding of profilmic into filmic, the diminished limits of control, the ghostly appearance or disappearance of subjectivity, make one think about a camera in the hands of a chimpanzee, which Komar and Melamid used for their photo-installation in the1998 Venice Biennale, or closed network video monitoring. BAD cinema's problematic intentionality is located on the quicksand between record, surveillance, chance and mistake, not so much foregrounding cinematic apparatuses but leaving them to their own devices.

The reigning concept in cinema theory since post-structuralist critique's onslaught on the structuralist theory of meaning, the notion of cinematic apparatus or *dispositif*, was elaborated most thoroughly by Jean-Louis Baudry in the mid 1970s. Baudry differentiated two aspects within *dispositif*: the *appareil de base* – camera, filmstrip, projector on the one hand, and the 'metapsychological' situation of the spectator positioned before the screen on the other.[14] The implication of a positioning of the spectator, first of all topologically, but also ideologically, connects Baudry's concept with its later use by Foucault, even though neither of them refer to the other. However, while since Foucault the idea of the apparatus has been understood as a machine that produces subjectifications, now its function might have changed. As Giorgio Agamben has argued recently, in the current phase of capitalism apparatuses "no longer act as much through the production of a subject, as through the processes of what can be called de-subjectification."[15] The question to be raised in this context is: what kind of subjectivity – if any – is produced by the specific use (and misuse) of

cinematic apparatuses celebrated by BAD cinema's practitioners, "whatever the intensity of desire that has driven" a person at the receiving end (as Agamben notes in relation to TV viewers), and whatever the supply of irony that a spectator has at his or her disposal? Contrary to the widespread celebration of a liberated subject-consumer of BAD cinema texts, allegedly enjoying unlimited freedom of "subjective" interpretation, will not a closer look at the process of engagement with BAD cinema objects reveal a dissolving of the subject? Does BAD cinema's development indicate an emergence of post-subjectivity, superseding the notorious decentred and fragmented subject of postmodernism with a stage when (according to Agamben) "processes of subjectification and processes of desubjectification seem to become reciprocally indifferent, and so they do not give rise to the recomposition of a new subject, except in larval or, as it were, spectral form"[16] ?

These questions beg another issue to be raised – namely, the issue of meaning, which BAD cinema poses no less urgently than that of subjectivity. If, in a poststructuralist discussion by theorists such as Barthes, Stephen Heath and Kristin Thomson, the issue of meaning was framed powerfully by such categories as third sense, obtuse meaning and excess, what does a shift from excess to trash entail? While the nonsensical nature of BAD cinema production would rank highly amongst its defining features, rather than lamenting the possibility of evacuation of meaning, the critical response to this situation should urge us to re-think meaning as a horizon of engagement with life.

Performing alongside Žižek in the recent documentary *Examined Life* mentioned earlier, Avital Ronell said provocatively: " I am very suspicious historically and intellectually of the promise of meaning… […] It's been very devastating, this craving for meaning … It is something with which we are in constant negotiation … To leave things open and radically inappropriable, admitting that we haven't really understood is much less satisfying, more frustrating and more necessary, I think …"

On a broader scale, what BAD cinema invites us to confront is neither the constraints of taste nor the collapse of time – but rather the limits of meaning and subjectivity. And it is this, perhaps, that accounts for the currency and urgency of BAD cinema – not so much aesthetically, but philosophically and politically. Beyond the issues of taste, aesthetics and the relationship of critical discourse to art, at the core of BAD problematics lie the issues of subjectivity, meaning and the relationship between art and life. BAD cinema raises them not as a promise, but as a challenge, and in doing so proves to be an apt heir to postmodernism. The articles assembled in this issue rise to the various aspects of this challenge.

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BAD Cinema Texts - Claire Perkins

The thirteen papers collected in this special issue of *Colloquy* from the "B for Bad Cinema: Aesthetics, Politics and Cultural Value" conference held at Monash University in April 2009 together express the diverse and evolving ways in which bad, cult and trash cinema can be understood. Encompassing a range of national cinemas, filmmaking practices and theoretical perspectives, the papers demonstrate how these mutable cinemas raise key questions on the nature and function of film spectatorship.

In a 2005 *Screen* article, cult film scholar Ernest Mathijs - a keynote speaker at "B for Bad Cinema" - described the now well established practice of stressing audience reception when considering trash or bad cinema. Mathijs wrote: "the identification of trash cinema depends heavily upon constructions of meaning relating to the conditions under which the films were made, or on the circumstances under which audiences received them. Trash cinema's reputation is often the result of conditions of creation, marketing, reception and a wide range of cultural contexts, determining to a great extent (if not completely) their status as film texts."[17] Mathijs also signalled the challenge that this category of cinema offers to reception studies insofar as bad films' reputations do not settle into a cohesive trajectory as those of canonised cinema typically do: the mark of a bad film is here understood as a capacity to move in and out of both critical favour and public interest over a sustained period of time.

Mathijs' comments emphasise the highly fluid nature of bad cinema and the often inconsistent ways in which it connects to notions of the unworthy and disreputable. While much work in the area stems from the logic of the reading protocol articulated by Jeffrey Sconce as paracinema - "a counter-aesthetic turned subcultural sensibility devoted to all manner of cultural detritus"[18] - the valorisation of the inept or exploitative does not represent a unitary methodology for defining and interpreting the category. As an idea intimately connected to issues of taste, bad cinema is instead connected through all of its approaches by the question of value and the consideration of how cultural judgements are made by audiences and critics. Like the use of the labels "cult", "trash" and "sleaze" in much of this work,

"bad" is here an ineffable quality that is a function of attitude as much as content.[19] The papers collected here reflect this attitude in attending to the value and reputation of films that range from iconic horror and slasher narratives to low budget shorts, from auteur cinema to 1950s classroom films, from Australia's bad (Ned) Kelly cinema to scatological art, and from excessive Hollywood blockbusters to Indonesian exploitation films.

Zoe Gross examines the possibility of scatological spectatorship as a mode of reception particular to trash cinema, arguing that the transgressive dynamics of the "shit cinema" of bad auteur John Waters elicit a spectatorial experience whose visceral, excessive (dis)pleasures reflect the destabilising power of scatological art itself. The contemporary industrial circulation of two iconic works of ultraviolent American cinema - *I Spit On Your Grave* (Meir Zarchi, 1978) and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974) - are considered by Tristan Fidler and Craig Frost respectively. Demonstrating the DVD critic's commentary as an increasingly prevalent channel of practical reception studies, Fidler examines how cult film critic Joe Bob Briggs' commentary for *I Spit On Your Grave* attempts to soften the "video nasty" reputation of this rape/revenge narrative by advancing a paracinematic reading that celebrates its feminist motivation and technical ineptitude simultaneously. Frost considers the more ubiquitous commercial trend of the horror remake, describing how the 2003 remake of Hooper's film - in connection with the subsequent 2006 prequel *The Beginning* - forges a new, depoliticised narrative that encourages a contemporary audience to forget any connection to the original film, which is subsequently not canonised but erased. Phoebe Fletcher also addresses the "torture porn" cycle that *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* remakes are often aligned with, but argues that the fate of the American anti-heroes of *Hostel* (Eli Roth, 2005) can be read through Fredric Jameson's notion of the geopolitical aesthetic to allegorise a dystopian critique of America's global dominance.

Two further cult works of American cinema are discussed by Mark Steven and Kirsten Stevens. In the former paper, Steven draws upon Jameson and Slavoj Žižek to argue for the specific ideological potential of bad cinema: in a close reading of the bawdy "Nerds v. Jocks" dynamic of Jeff Kanew's *Revenge of the Nerds* (1984) he suggests how bad cinema might give rise to late-capitalist cultural insights that are repressed by "good" cinema. While Steven's argument relies on inverting the celebrated lowbrow reputation that *Revenge of the Nerds* has amassed over twenty-five years, Kirsten Stevens argues for the ways in which new media technologies have transformed the fan activity that classifies a film as "cult" in the first place: through the example of *Snakes on a Plane* (David R. Ellis and Lex Halaby, 2006) she demonstrates how a cult film object can now be

prefabricated in the realm of internet anticipation that seizes on no more than a name.

Where these papers all reflect the substantial interest that cult film scholarship takes in the reputation and circulation of American exploitation, horror and B-films, several authors also examine these and other forms as they arise out of other national cinemas and filmmaking practices. Drawing on the auteur examples of *Lost Highway* (David Lynch, 1997) and *Breaking the Waves* (Lars von Trier, 1996), Hester Joyce and Scott Wilson offer an argument for a period of "Bad Form" production that emerged in Western filmmaking in the mid-1990s in an attempt to renegotiate the interpretive and spectatorial pleasure of the standard "Good Form" cinematic agency of the West. Ekky Imanjaya describes an industry that similarly employs subversive and exploitative techniques to struggle against a dominant order: he discusses how the Indonesian exploitation films produced under the New Order Regime position their villains and criminals as symbols of the Suharto government, and how local and international fan activity and targeted DVD distribution has subsequently attained cult classification for many of these films. Anika Ervin-Ward considers a converse effect by finding in the apparently conservative Cold War classroom films of the 1950s a characterisation of mid-century America that locates the anxieties of the post-WWII and atomic age upon the malleable body of the teenager.

Donna McRae and Stephen Gaunson both turn their attention to the Australian environment, but move beyond the dominant critical interest in the "Ozploitation" cycle that has arisen out of Mark Hartley's 2008 documentary *Not Quite Hollywood*. McCrae examines how Ursula Dabrowsky presents her low budget horror feature *Family Demons* (2009) as a mythical chapter in Adelaide's violent badland history that is haunted by the ghosts of domestic violence and a nation's inherited guilt. Gaunson discusses the maligned category of "Kelly cinema" and its awkward relationship to serious Kelly history, examining the place of Rupert Kathner's *The Glenrowan Affair* (1951) as both shonky gem and renegade docudrama. Both Mario Rodriguez and Tyson Namow move away from specific film case studies to consider some broader issues relating to the structure and reputation of horror and slasher films. With the aim of illuminating both the political subtexts and ongoing appeal of the horror genre, Rodriguez discusses the ritual function of horror movie villains as collective representations and social transgressors, concluding with the suggestion that recent Hollywood output - including the cycle of torture-porn - is experimenting with variations on how transgression is resolved. Namow also stresses the ideological relevance of the slasher genre by drawing a connection between Siegfried Kracauer and Carol J. Clover's appreciation of the social

value of lowbrow cinema, identifying that the slasher film's "badness" - its distance from the normal "aesthetic system" - is what enables it to effectively reflect on conditions of social reality.

Together, these papers represent the diverse approaches and innovative engagement apparent at the "B for Bad Cinema" conference and in the broader study of cult film. While advancing the understanding of this label and its connection to paracinematic discourse, this work also raises important questions on the ways in which the discipline of cinema studies continues to ascribe aesthetic, political and cultural value to all films.

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NOTES

1 André Bazin, What is cinema? Vol. 1 & 2 (Hugh Gray, trans., ed.), (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967-71)

2 Adrian Martin, What is Modern Cinema? (Santiago: Uqbar, 2008)

3 Jeffrey Sconce, "Trashing the academy: taste, excess, and an emerging politics of cinematic style", Screen 36.4 (1995), 373

4 Ernest Mathijs and Xavier Mendik (eds.), The Cult Film Reader (Berkshire, England: Open University Press, 2008), 2-4

5 Brett Sullivan, Director of Ginger Snaps: Unleashed (2004) and The Chair (2007), on-line review

6 Sconce, "Trashing the Academy", 373

7 Feature documentary Examined Life, Astra Taylor, Zeitgeist, 2009

8 Jeffrey Sconce, "Trashing the academy", 385

9 Christopher Butler, Postmodernism: A Very Short Introduction, (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2002), 5

10 David Bennet, Sounding Postmodernism, (Australian Music Centre, 2008), 20

11 Adrian Martin, "Ruinous sequels", Reading Room: A Journal of Art and Culture, Issue 3, 2009, 50-51

12 Jeffrey Sconce, "Trashing the academy", 385

13 The terms were introduced in the mid 1950s by a group of French critics led by Etienne Souriau, see Etienne Souriau L'Univers Filmique (Flammarion, Paris, 1953)

14 Jean-Louis Baudry, L'effet-cinéma (Paris: Albatros, 1978)

15 Giorgio Agamben, What is an Apparatus? (Stanford University Press, Stanford University, CA, 2009), 20

16 Ibid. 21

17 Ernest Mathijs, "Bad reputations: the reception of 'trash' cinema", *Screen* 46.4 (2005) 453

18 Jeffrey Sconce, "Trashing the academy: taste, excess, and an emerging politics of cinematic style", *Screen* 36.4 (1995) 372

19 Jeffrey Sconce, *Sleaze Artists: Cinema at the Margins of Taste, Style and Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007) 4