

**NOT A FLAW, BUT A FEATURE:  
THE LANGUAGE, AESTHETICS, AND VALUE OF BAD CINEMA**

by

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## **Abstract**

The goals of academic film scholarship can be vaguely defined as the desire to better understand cinema as a medium through different critical frameworks. Among these include the aesthetic devices film uses to communicate or how the medium is engaged with by audiences. Bad movies, an easily recognizable mode of cinema with no clear definition, have rarely been considered a practical area for study in this discipline, and this is in part due to the language used to describe them.

Colloquial traditions refer to bad cinema with terminology that is highly evaluative, nonspecific in its definition, and dismissive of the mode of cinema as being essentially a waste of time. These casual methods of describing bad cinema influence the language used to describe it in scholarship, making it difficult to present analysis of bad movies in the rare event that said analysis is even performed. It is often assumed that because bad films by definition lack aesthetic value it would be unnecessary to engage with them in a scholarly context, yet by some accounts a significant portion of the texts that make up film as a medium would be considered “bad”.

This arguably leaves a significant segment of this medium understudied, but I argue this is not merely the result of an oversight. Film scholarship is limited by flawed language designed primarily for the communication of value-judgments among casual viewers, a language that is unable to speak to the role badness can play in shaping the text of a film. Therefore, in this thesis I unpack and critique the scholarly language used to define badness in cinema to problematize the assumptions created through this language. I follow this by proposing a new set of descriptors to articulate ‘bad’ as not holding a single fixed meaning but instead as the conflation of eight distinct aesthetic properties or patterns of reception. This thesis endeavours to encourage the development of and carve a space for the study of bad cinema in a scholarly context.

## **Lay Summary**

Academic film scholarship largely seeks to understand cinema as a medium, its aesthetic devices, and how it is engaged with by audiences. Traditionally bad movies have not been considered significant in the study of film, in part due to the problematic language used to describe them. Bad cinema is consistently referenced with terminology that is evaluative, dismissive, and vaguely defined. However, these “bad” texts make up a significant portion of film as a medium, and film studies’ ability to engage with this topic has thus far been limited by flaws in the language. Therefore, in this thesis I will unpack and critique the scholarly language used to define badness in cinema in order to problematize the assumptions behind it, propose a new set of descriptors to solve these problems, and encourage development of a space for this mode of cinema to be more thoroughly studied in the future.

## **Preface**

This thesis is the original, unpublished, and independent work of the author, Jared Aronoff.

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This thesis is, was, and always will be

*For Sharktopus*

Half shark. Half octopus. All killer.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

There is no special training required to identify a bad movie.<sup>1</sup> Anyone reading these words, regardless of their understanding of film studies or familiarity with film as a medium, will likely be able to name a film that they would identify as “bad”. This is not a coincidence, nor is it exclusive to casual audiences, nor is it a skill that will come from reading this thesis. As observed by Noël Carroll, differentiating between the “good” and the “bad” is a part of everyday film culture, if not something humans do with the majority of our experiences (Carroll 265).

Given how the capacity to identify badness in cinema is so universal, it would not be unreasonable for my reader to question why such a topic might be worthy of academic study. Traditional common sense would dictate that if bad movies are so easily identifiable to the point that they can be recognized even by a casual viewer, there would be little to say about them that was not already self-evident. My reader may believe that since these texts are so ubiquitous, little would be learned from engaging with them in-depth other than developing a better understanding of good movies by comparison. It is this line of thinking that I believe is counterproductive, as it is the very ubiquity of these texts and prominence of a viewer’s capacity to identify them that itself demands scrutiny. The uninteresting, the boring, the unsatisfactory, the clichéd, or the repetitive make up a significant proportion of this medium. While critics or viewers are justified in ignoring these texts as they do not produce interest or pleasure, for scholars who aim to

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<sup>1</sup> Alternative words to ‘bad’ that hold clearer definitions have been considered to describe the topic of this thesis, yet ‘bad’ was chosen as it is the most commonly used. This thesis will not reach or even pursue a single definition for the word ‘bad’, seeking instead to understand it. ‘Bad’ is engaged with here with full acknowledgement that it is a highly unstable term with no solid means for classification, allowing this very instability to become the object of study. The aim of studying such a term is primarily to dissect how and when it becomes invoked, and what can be learned from the circumstances of that invocation.

understand this medium, how it works, and the cultural influence that it can hold, it is essential to find a place for this mode of cinema in film studies research.

As of this moment, the discipline of film studies is not equipped with language that is capable of producing an effective study of bad movies. The language we use to study an object has an impact on what studies will be performed and what conclusions can be reached, so understanding where this language may be flawed is essential. Any study of bad cinema would be weakened if the language being used was itself incomplete, nonspecific, or actively misleading. As a result of this, while I may aspire one day to produce in-depth scholarly analyses into texts which have been ignored, forgotten, or otherwise deemed to lack aesthetic value, this preliminary study must be conducted first. Before bad movies can be studied themselves, there must first be a dissection of the flawed language that is used to discuss badness in cinema, where this language comes from, and what new language can be adopted in its place.

## **1.1 The Origin of the Problem**

The discipline of film studies arose out of the study of literature around the 1960s, and was shaped early on by a desire to legitimize film as an art form. Film scholar James Monaco in his book *How To Read a Film* outlines the history of this discipline and describes an initial inferiority complex when film was “the youngest of the arts” (Monaco 390). He cites Christian Metz in suggesting that it was the partial function of early film theory and criticism to rescue film from its “bad object” status in the 1950s and 1960s, suggesting that the thought process went: “if film can support a weighty system of theory, then it must be just as respectable as any of the other, older arts” (Monaco 390).

Film rose quickly to mass cultural appeal throughout much of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, and as a result was not commonly regarded as a medium to be taken especially seriously until it became an accepted subject for academic study in the 1970s. Many early works of film theory were therefore prescriptive – making claims about what film should aspire to become rather than concentrating analysis on what forms of cinema were already taking place (Monaco 389). Today film studies has “matured”, and has become a discipline much less likely to insist on rules for the medium to follow in favour of developing “sophisticated values” based on the intersections of opposing theory (391). Film theory is now interested in topics such as the connection film has with culture and with the individual, in taking aesthetic or philosophical approaches to understanding the medium, in understanding the relationships of certain aspects of cinema as a whole to each other, or the relationship between individual parts within a specific film (391). In this maturity, film theory has thus become less interested in the need to highlight which texts should be considered representative of the medium. Essentially, film theory has begun to distance itself from evaluation.

## **1.2 Film Scholarship and Evaluation**

For the purpose of this thesis a distinction between evaluation and value-judgments is necessary. Value-judgments are subjective statements of personal preference such as ‘I like this’ or ‘I do not like this’. Evaluation, in contrast, is the act of endowing something with a property of *value* that, as of that moment, the thing holds. This value is described as a property of the object itself, as a trait that it is in possession of. Statements such as “this is good” or “this is bad” do not articulate the value of an object as a subjective personal response but, instead, describe the object as exhibiting an essence of “good” or “bad”, an essence of value. Value in this context is a

social relationship between the object and the world around it. When an object is described as ‘good’ it is thus endowed with a property of being socially valuable, deemed to be worthy of time, attention, or energy. This distinction between evaluation and value-judgments is important to draw despite common usage of the phrases as interchangeable and the considerable overlap between the two. The difference is shaped by language; a value-judgment is presented as a description of an experience by the viewer, whereas evaluation speaks to a property of the text.

Many have argued, including Noël Carroll in *On Criticism* and Robin Wood in *Sexual Politics and Narrative Film*, that evaluation is central to the task of art criticism – if not the ultimate goal. By this logic, art criticism can be understood as an activity meant to draw attention towards texts which hold value and away from those which do not. In an early draft of Northrop Frye’s seminal analysis of literary criticism *Anatomy of Criticism*, Frye had argued for evaluation to be treated as the end goal of criticism and that because of this it was important for critics to “find trustworthy criteria of evaluation” (Hamilton 21). In a later draft Frye changed his position, realizing that “evaluation was a minor and subordinate function of the critical process, at best an incidental by-product, which should never be allowed to take priority over scholarship” (Hamilton 21). In his final draft of *Anatomy of Criticism*, Frye would eventually write

Value-judgements are subjective in the sense that they can be indirectly but not directly communicated. When they are fashionable or generally accepted, they look objective, but that is all. The demonstrable value-judgement is the donkey's carrot of literary criticism, and every new critical fashion [...] has been accompanied by a belief that criticism has finally devised a definitive technique for separating the excellent from the less excellent. But this always turns out to be an illusion of the history of taste. Value-judgements are founded on the study of literature; the study of literature can never be founded on value-judgements. (Frye 20)

This statement, particularly the final sentence, proved controversial as Frye became accused of “wishing to eliminate evaluation from criticism” (Hamilton 5). Frye would later clarify this as:

When value-judgments are founded on the study of literature, we get genuine criticism. When anyone attempts to found the study of literature on value-judgments, we get the history of taste, a series of fashions and whims, rationalizings of prejudice and custom, poets or genres ranked in a hierarchy according to some prefabricated generalization. (Hamilton 21-22)

In this instance, Frye is not only demonstrating the need for my first distinction between value-judgments and evaluation, but he is providing context for the next distinction that I wish to make. Frye suggests that when value-judgments are produced as the result of the “study” of a text – when analysis and existing critical theory are used as the starting point – this produces criticism. When value-judgments themselves are the starting point however, and the study of a text is used to justify those, Frye is suggesting that this produces norms of taste.

Frye’s distinction between the value-judgment as a conclusion of analysis and analysis used to justify a value-judgment is somewhat echoed in a distinction Monaco makes many years later between film criticism and film theory: “two related but not identical activities that have as their common end an increased understanding of the phenomenon of film” (Monaco 389). Monaco describes theory and criticism as existing on a kind of sliding scale of complexity. On one end of this scale is a film review, merely describing a text and then evaluating it. On the other end is film theory, in which the intellectual activity is performed “primarily for its own sake” and, at the highest end of the scale, “has little or nothing to do with the actual practice of film” (389).

There is a surface-level similarity between film theory and film criticism that results in the two often becoming lumped together. Both are performed through common theoretical activities including interpretation (a dissection of the text to understand explicit meaning), elucidation (a dissection of symbols to understand implicit meaning), analysis (a dissection of the previous two to understand how a text is communicating with its viewer), and symptomatic

contextualization<sup>2</sup> (a dissection of the meanings themselves, and how they fit into a larger cultural or ideological context). Both film theory and film criticism engage in these theoretical activities, yet the difference between them is in their goals. Film criticism is primarily interested either in evaluation or in using evaluation to reach a larger conclusion, whereas film theory is interested in performing these activities essentially for their own sake, or to “explain the nature and functions of cinema” in the process (Bordwell 4).

There is certainly overlap between film theory and criticism, but the differences between them can be seen through the shifting functions of analysis or symptomatic contextualization. In the context of criticism, analysis can be used to evaluate the text on its own terms – to understand what it is trying to communicate in order to assess whether it has succeeded in doing so. However, within theory, analysis can be used to understand how film itself can function as a language, to form an understanding of how the medium communicates through the analysis of what it is saying. Symptomatic contextualization in the context of criticism, meanwhile, can be used to understand if the text’s relationship with the outside world will produce a social good. Within theory, symptomatic contextualization functions to allow a scholar to reflect upon the relationship between a text and the culture it comes from, and how both can influence one another. Evaluation can be described then, not just as central to the task of criticism, but as the key differentiating factor between film criticism and film scholarship.

This claim that evaluation forms the primary distinction between film theory and film criticism is supported by the presence of an unspoken rule in film studies. This norm states that

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<sup>2</sup> Because there is no single phrase to broadly describe the theoretical process of examining the ideological messaging of a text in its cultural context, I have synthesized this phrase from a combination of David Bordwell’s “Symptomatic Meaning” and Jerome Stolnitz’s “Contextual Criticism”.



what we do as film scholars requires us to avoid evaluation of the texts we are studying as the implication of a value-judgment would weaken the kinds of arguments we make. This is because evaluation, in a traditional context of criticism, functions as a kind of elimination process to determine if a text is worthy of the cultural capital associated with holding value. When a text is deemed to hold the property of 'good' it is thus suggested that the text becomes worthy of being the subject of critical theory, and further analysis can be used to confirm this worthiness. In contrast, when a text is unworthy, when a text is 'bad', further analysis is delayed. If analysis has deemed a text unworthy of the cultural property of value, it logically follows that there would be no reason to continue said analysis if it has been concluded that the text is itself a waste of time. A scholar wishing to continue analysis must either take an extra step to contest said badness or else accept that their energy may be best directed elsewhere. Sianne Ngai picked up on this in her description of the "interesting" as an aesthetic category. Ngai suggests that when one refers to a bad movie as being 'interesting' one is making a plea for extending the period of aesthetic evaluation, suggesting "let us keep talking about this movie, let us continue giving it attention even though it is not particularly good" (Ngai 170). Ngai suggests that we instruct our peers to recognize a work as interesting when we want an opportunity to present evidence for our interest in it. In other words, a word such as 'bad' is a conclusive term used to codify a potential end to the critical process, while the word 'interesting' is used to re-open and extend the period of criticism.

It will be essential to recognize evaluation as a key point of distinction between film theory and film criticism going forward, but this is not to say that there is anything necessarily wrong with evaluation in the context of film criticism. The purpose of criticism is arguably to use similar theoretical devices as film theory to identify texts which can be demonstrated to hold

a property of value. Criticism is useful because it draws cultural attention towards texts which encourage the medium to evolve, and evaluation is a tool aiding in this process. However, in the context of theory, the goal is not to use these devices to identify value but to further understand the medium itself. It is thus counterproductive to incorporate evaluation into film theory because evaluation functions to identify texts unworthy of analysis and eliminate them from study. In practice, evaluation recontextualizes the premise of the theory itself. If the value of a text is found to be negative this derails the critical process as the “bad” text does not merit further engagement beyond a demonstration of its value. If the value is positive, the overall argument is weakened by the implication that behind this theory is a value-judgment, that the object in question is being studied only because it is representative of the author’s aesthetic taste. This can therefore be argued to form the reasoning behind this unspoken norm in film studies.

### **1.3 The Paradox of Evaluation**

While this unspoken norm may be present in the discipline, it is impossible to execute in its entirety. In order to engage in film theory – to use the aforementioned theoretical devices to understand the medium better – evaluative language must indeed be avoided, yet this forms a tension in the discipline. Value-judgments are also a fundamental component in the process of consuming a film casually, and film theory does not take place in a vacuum – despite Monaco’s suggestion that in its highest form, it becomes disconnected from reality (Monaco, 389).

For film scholars, a professional relationship with the medium is informed by trends and practices of casual film viewership. Film scholars will watch movies for pleasure, discuss them colloquially with friends and families, read film reviews, and know which texts bring pleasure and which do not, which texts will be dusted off on a rainy day, and which texts one prefers to

avoid altogether. As Carroll observed, film culture is part of everyday society (Carroll 265), and despite studying the medium professionally film scholars must balance this with an active participation in normative practices of film viewership. The above activities all involve making value-judgments, and the ubiquity of these practices will inexorably influence our theory.

It is worth noting that the unspoken norm I speak of is so unspoken that in my research not a single piece of writing could be uncovered that argues for it explicitly. Because the reasons for why evaluation should be avoided are not readily available, the way this norm becomes invoked can shift. Where evaluation should be avoided so as not to engage with the scholarly worthiness of a text, it can sometimes lead to the treatment of evaluation in film studies as a kind of taboo or limit which texts film scholarship will engage with. There is minimal scholarship on evaluation outside of instructions for how best to perform it within criticism. Notably, film theory engages in little effort to understand the texts which have already been deemed unworthy by criticism, how they work, and what they can teach us about the medium as a whole.

The paradox produced by this is why a study of the language used to describe bad movies is an essential first step that will allow the films themselves to be studied effectively. To perform a study of a film such as, for example, *A Talking Cat!?!* (David DeCoteau, 2013) while using existing language requires the scholar to immediately weaken their argument in one of two ways. A conscious justification of the scholarly worthiness of the film can be presented, implying that the study must be explicitly defensive of its own presence. Or, the study can proceed as it would with any other text, yet existing language in reference to certain key aesthetic elements of *A Talking Cat!?!* identifies the text to a reader as “bad”. The language available to describe these elements is by nature imprecise, evaluative, and will thus produce in a study such as this a subtextual implication that analysis of this film is ultimately unnecessary. Either of these

implications would weaken a study such as this, and thus I seek to construct a means of describing such a text to avoid these weaknesses. I will describe 'bad' movies not as a mode of cinema defined by the absence of cultural or aesthetic value, but instead as a mode of cinema defined by a series of common aesthetic properties. These properties, while intersecting, will be treated as separate from one another and from connotations of value, described with neutral language designed to eliminate questions of their worthiness in a scholarly context.

#### **1.4 Aims of This Research**

I will argue in this thesis that existing language in film studies is ill-equipped to engage with aesthetic properties that hold an association with value. I intend to propose a means for describing these texts that acknowledges such properties as aesthetic features, defines them using value-neutral language, and separates them from the umbrella concept of 'bad'.

In Chapter 2, I review critical work that has sought to define either what it means for a text to be 'bad' or how aesthetic value should be quantified. In this chapter, I demonstrate that the word 'bad' holds no singular, fixed definition despite numerous attempts to understand it.

In Chapter 3, I extend the implications of this, arguing that the word 'bad' is itself an insufficient descriptor due to its vague meaning and evaluative connotations. I argue that badness has been historically difficult to define because it does not hold just one meaning, and that it is best understood as an indication that a text exhibits a series of aesthetic properties that have been conflated by association under a single term. I outline each of these properties, identifying them with value-neutral language and proposing this language as an alternative to traditional descriptors.

Chapter 4 puts this new language into practice, engaging in a study of the aesthetics of student films. While an unconventional choice, the student film offers a mode of cinema with a unique aesthetic that cannot be addressed by scholarship without the kind of value-neutral language I am proposing. In this chapter, I use student films to concentrate specifically on the aesthetic property I refer to as “transparency of production” in order to examine how this property can both occur within a text and influence the way it communicates.

This thesis aims to encourage further academic recognition of bad cinema in the field of film studies. Bad movies can be the subject of studies that aim not merely to recognize them as such, but to learn about cinema through them as a mode that is by definition ignored. It may be true that any viewer can identify a bad film, but because of this it is our job as film scholars to understand how this contributes to existing forms of meaning-making within cinema if not how evaluation itself informs the film experience. This thesis is a first step in that direction.

## Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

An appropriate starting point when seeking to redefine the scholarly language used to address badness in cinema is to answer a key question: what is it that makes a movie ‘bad’? It is essential for a number of reasons to come to a working definition of what is meant by ‘bad’ before proceeding with this project, particularly to ensure that the word we are using successfully conjures the same collection or grouping of texts for different readers. ‘Bad’ is a word that occurs frequently in English in reference to art, but does not have a fixed definition. Despite this it is possible for anyone, including both myself and likely my reader, to identify a recently-viewed film that would fit the category of ‘bad’.<sup>3</sup> However, this hypothetical text could be vastly different from one conjured by a different individual performing the same thought experiment, making the notion of ‘bad’ unquantifiable and therefore an ineffective form of measurement.

Just because this question is difficult to answer does not mean there are not those who have tried. Among aesthetic philosophy, film criticism, and reception theory there have been many attempts to find a workable definition of ‘bad’, understand what it means to identify a text as such, or to make more scientific the process of art criticism. In this chapter I intend to outline a number of these, attempting to synthesize them into a single definition. Each of the following understandings of badness appears to resolve part of the problem, yet many contradict one another, avoid answering our main question, provide answers which are incomplete, or treat evaluation to be either an inevitability or the end goal of the critical process. The single-syllable

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<sup>3</sup> The text I would identify in this thought experiment would be the animated film *The Queen’s Corgi* (Ben Stassen and Vincent Kesteloot, 2019).

word we use to indicate to one another the concept of an unsatisfactory aesthetic experience implies that the meaning behind it is simple, but the definition of 'bad' is anything but this.

## 2.1 The Reception Approach

Badness is often articulated as a formal property of a text, yet badfilm scholar Becky Bartlett observes that the academic placement of the topic as a subset of cult studies results in an overwhelming emphasis on the audience (Bartlett 42), contributing to an existing perception of evaluation as an event that happens on the level of the viewer. Reception studies is nevertheless a useful tool in understanding the role audiences play in defining what makes a bad movie, and therefore in answering part of our main question. This trend in film studies emerged in the 1980s, at a time when Hollywood was expanding into new markets of video and pay-television (Austin 5) and becoming increasingly interested in event cinema and tie-in merchandising (6). Reception scholarship grew out of the recognition that new areas of research could be uncovered by intersecting the study of film with trends in cultural studies or media studies, allowing film audiences to receive more scholarly recognition than they had in the past (1). This sub-discipline was motivated in part by the reaction to film scholars' disregard for audiences and the desire to contest the dominance of textual analysis within film studies (2).

Reception scholars, such as Janet Staiger, have argued that contextual factors, rather than textual ones, account for the experiences that spectators have while watching film and their use of art in navigating everyday life (Staiger 1). The reception approach suggests that how we watch a film, where we watch it, and who else is in the vicinity can influence the way we respond to a text, studying the emotional, cognitive, and behavioural responses that humans have to pieces of cinema (23). Staiger outlines in her book *Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception* a

historical materialist approach, which describes the process and phenomena of reading strategies in more specific detail. Here questions like ‘did the viewer find this film to be good or bad’ are avoided, instead asking whether the spectator is reading for a plot or watching for favourite stars, if verisimilitude matters to this viewer and what may create that, or whether the viewer is looking for subtext to bring closer connections between the text and their identity, finding queer subtext for example or how race may produce “oppositional” gazes (24).

The normative explanation of viewer behaviour is that they respond exclusively to tangible properties within the text, but reception theory argues that this explanation is inadequate (38). This direct response model assumes that spectators are knowledgeable and cooperative (40), that they are interested in being logical and seeking diegetic coherence, and that our understanding of viewer response must be informed by the contextual factors around that text and that viewer. As film viewers, we tend to assume that it is the text itself that determines how we interpret it, that the filmmaker is seeking to solicit a response and it is our job to embody that response (29). For reception scholars it is the opposite, in that the context plays a much larger role than technical features in explaining the interpretation of events (Staiger, “Interpreting Films” 81) and this includes both the interpretive strategies used by the spectator and the evaluative responses the spectator may have.

While the goal of reception studies may not be to define badness in art, we can glean a definition from the above theories. These reception scholars would arguably suggest ‘bad’ to not be a term referring to a tangible property within a text, but instead one used to mark a cultural distinction that identifies works outside of the social role of “art”. Within this understanding, ‘bad’ then becomes a response that a viewer makes as a result of contextual factors around a text, functioning not as a formal property of the work itself, but as an action performed by a viewer as



part of their social role as a participant in the cultural activity of engaging with film. The word 'bad' allows us to draw upon a text's relationship to the larger category of 'art', allowing us to better identify what art is 'good' in opposition to this.

This understanding of 'bad' that I have gleaned from reception scholars is supported by the book *The Crash Controversy*, in which Martin Barker, Jane Arthurs and Ramaswami Harindranath study the reception to David Cronenberg's 1996 film *Crash*. These film and social science scholars observed how *Crash* received a full-scale backlash from media and from society in response to content that was seen to be too extreme. The evaluation of this film was tied specifically to fear of its content, fear that it would corrupt or traumatize immature or vulnerable viewers (Barker et al. 8). For *Crash*, "the various vehemently argued reviews and news stories which surrounded the film's release marked this as more than 'just a film'. It was a political event" (27). This was a film that was culturally determined to be bad, not in a formal sense but specifically as it was seen to be irresponsible to distribute for consumption by the masses.

The public debate around *Crash* that emerged upon its release is relevant to understanding the social function of badness, as this discourse centered not around evaluating the film formally, but instead distinguishing it as a matter of classification. *Crash* was not 'art', many of its detractors claimed, it was 'pornographic' (39). Pornography, of course, holding an inferior social status to art, and serving as a functional claim to the text's badness through that distinction. The fact that the debate was often framed around this question of classification-as-evaluation is revealing, as it emphasizes value in this context in relation to the perceived social role of a text rather than its formal qualities. The emphasis here designates *Crash* within a distinct social role, marking formal evaluation of the text largely irrelevant. Regardless of whether this classification of *Crash* was justified, it can be argued that there is a social function

to language which communicates to others that a certain text does not fulfill what has been expected by a percipient<sup>4</sup> and that, as a result, the work must be classified within a broad category of non-art. This, a reception scholar might argue, is why words like ‘bad’ exist.

These reception-based theories are useful, and are especially relevant in an age of mass media where many texts are indeed no longer ‘just a film’ but represent cultural events that shape our social interactions or political discourse, but art is more than just its social function. The problem of the reception model is that it restricts an understanding of ‘bad’ to a description of what is, exclusively, an action that is performed on a work of art. The reception approach is useful in directing attention to the context around a film or the way viewers can be influenced by that context, but this only represents part of the answer to our question. This model is ineffective in how it ignores the way that badness is consistently talked about as a feature of the text itself, as a matter of form or execution. Thus, a definition of what makes a work ‘bad’ must incorporate an understanding of badness which also frames it as a formal property held by the text.

## **2.2 Film Criticism**

If turning to the collective perceptions of a film in its social context is unsuccessful at fully answering the question of what makes that movie ‘bad’, perhaps a more professional group should be considered. Film critics are useful here as they are not only the most likely to articulate value as being a formal property of the text, but would also be the self-proclaimed experts on the

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<sup>4</sup> A word borrowed from Jerome Stolnitz, ‘percipient’ is used throughout this thesis less in reference to the notion of an informed viewer as described by Stolnitz, and more as an additional synonym to ‘viewer’ meant to signify an individual perceiving an artwork in any medium which may or may not be cinema.

matter. It is essentially their job to form evaluative statements about works of art, making it therefore likely that film critics have collectively given this question a great deal of thought.

Film critic and scholar Noël Carroll, in his book *On Criticism*, argues directly against the kind of perception-based approach that was described in the previous section. Carroll states that, in the context of film criticism, what he refers to as the “success value” of a work should be prioritized over the “reception value”. Carroll defines “success value” as whether or not the artist has succeeded in achieving their ‘ends’ and defines “reception value” as whether or not the art creates ‘valuable experiences’ (Carroll 53). “Reception” here is thus used differently from how it was approached above, now described by Carroll to be a viewing stance that seeks out the most valuable experiences possible in a text, taking as its axiom that our perception and therefore evaluation of a work is entirely subjective, and that as a result the goal of experiencing art should not be to evaluate it but to find the most reasons to enjoy or get fulfillment out of it.

Carroll is highly dismissive of this reception approach as he describes it, arguing that it only became relevant to evaluation when art (film in particular) became a commercialized, leisure activity (53-54). Carroll defines criticism as an evaluation that is grounded in reasons (8), and repeats this definition regularly. The articulation of the value of a work, according to Carroll, is key to the critical process if not the end goal of it, and in proper criticism this evaluation will be backed up by reasons to justify said value. Carroll is interested in the “success” of art, and believes film critics should be as well, arguing that this form of criticism should be prioritized over that which considers the role of the spectator (49).

The evaluation of this “success” for Carroll comes from prioritizing the intentions of the artist, as the critic must find the category that a work wants to fit itself into before evaluating its capacity to fit within that category. Under this model, a critic could observe the film *Pink*

*Flamingos* (John Waters, 1972) – a text intending to offend, repulse, and be challenging to watch – and evaluate it as “good” if the critic found themselves successfully offended or repulsed.

Carroll’s success model has thus effectively produced a sort of ‘test’ that can be applied individually to different films in order to consistently demonstrate aesthetic value.

Carroll’s success model is therefore useful in helping us to understand badness, yet it is the hard-line stance that he takes on this approach that ultimately weakens his argument. Carroll dismisses a perception-based approach almost entirely, stating that

[Reception value] is not a plausible alternative, if we are speaking of criticism in an evaluative register. For, unless we already know the reaction that the artwork truly deserves, how would we know whether the audience was responding well or badly when they applaud [it]? (49)

Essentially, Carroll is arguing here that an evaluative approach must be the object of criticism, because to focus on the feelings or experiences produced in a percipient does not allow a critic to evaluate the text. This kind of circular reasoning is indicative of larger issues with Carroll’s presentation of “success value”. Carroll’s argument suffers largely from the choice to consistently place his success-oriented approach in direct opposition to a reception model, establishing two major assumptions that carry throughout the book – that these are the only two approaches to art criticism, and that they are incapable of existing simultaneously. These assumptions are both demonstrably false, and are never expanded upon in *On Criticism*, making it tempting to call the other observations he makes into question.

Beyond the flawed reasoning in the presentation of his research, Carroll makes useful observations that are worth discussing. Carroll is essentially arguing that there is a substantive formal element of badness that can be perceived in a text, and that the capacity to perceive this element comes from recognizing when a text holds a specific intentionality, yet fails to produce

that successfully. This is a tangible description of badness as a formal structure, and describes a means of reaching evaluation that implies a sense of fairness and objectivity.

The notion that badness or an otherwise objectively correct evaluation can be gleaned from a text merely by adopting the correct critical framework is not uncommon. In one of the most widely-used first-year film studies textbooks *Film Art: An Introduction*, David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson, and Jeff Smith include a brief section titled “Evaluation: Good, Bad, or Indifferent?” in their chapter on film form. In this section, Bordwell, Thompson, and Smith differentiate between “personal taste” and “evaluative judgment” (Bordwell et al. 61) and encourage many students at an early stage of their academic careers to think critically about their assumptions around evaluative criticism. *Film Art* presents this in a way that effectively builds upon many of the attitudes most students would walk into a first-year film course holding, but also reinforces a lot of norms around evaluation in the process.

*Film Art* suggests that the process of evaluation can be improved if the critic finds a specific criterion to “objectively” evaluate a film with. Some of the example categories provided by *Film Art* include realism, morality, coherence, complexity, or originality (61). Here, a “deeper, objective evaluation usually teaches us more about how films work” (62), and that it is possible for a viewer to have “guilty pleasures” – films that we find enjoyable despite them being bad – but the goal implied here is to make first-year students more adept at picking out what is good art when performing film criticism.

Under the model described in *Film Art*, each viewer is still responsible for personally selecting the circumstances of their criteria. The example is given that a viewer who is an aficionado of military history may judge a film entirely on whether the battle scenes use historically accurate weaponry, implying that there is a relevant component of subjectivity in

*Film Art*'s purportedly objective process. A viewer under this model subjectively chooses which criteria to evaluate a film based on, and then applies that criteria to the text objectively.

The premise behind this approach, especially when placed in the context of a first-year textbook, plants the notion that evaluation is an inevitability of the film experience. *Film Art* does not encourage students to interrogate the assumptions implied by evaluation, but suggests instead that finding more “advanced” ways of evaluating a text may help to develop a more complex relationship with cinema. While arguably problematic, this is not an unfair approach for *Film Art* to take, as first-year students bring to a film course an existing relationship to film culture. Bordwell, Thompson, and Smith may be attempting to build upon students’ familiarity with evaluation here, to encourage the development of a more complex critical framework at the beginning of a potential career in film theory or criticism. This could form a helpful step in easing students towards the norm of avoiding evaluation that arises in more advanced courses, or it may further naturalize the presence of evaluation as a norm in film reception. However, for our purposes, this does not help to define what ‘bad’ means in the context of cinema, but merely produces another strategy that claims to evaluate “objectively”.

One of the authors of *Film Art*, Kristin Thompson, takes a more complex approach in her book *Breaking the Glass Armor*. In this text, Thompson echoes the tension described by Carroll between what she refers to as the “communication model” and the “art-for-art’s-sake” model. Under the communication model, we evaluate an artwork based on its ability to communicate its desired “message” (Thompson, “Armor” 7), essentially describing Carroll’s “success value”. Under the art-for-art’s-sake model, art exists for the pleasure we experience upon interacting with it, not primarily for communication (Thompson, “Armor” 8), also described by Carroll as “reception value”. Thompson explores these two approaches and addresses the tension between

them, but does not explicitly take a ‘side’ between the two as Carroll does, instead using both to argue for a critical framework of Neoformalism.

Neoformalism is largely derived from traditions in Russian Formalism (Thompson, “Ivan” 8), a method of literary study suggesting that the pleasure of experiencing art comes from a process of defamiliarization (32). In everyday life, suggests Formalism, certain experiences become dulled by habit or familiarity (11) and art functions to renew our perceptions of them by making these familiar experiences strange. Formalism considers art to be an open system in which the background of other artworks, practical language, and everyday reality affect the text (15). As summarized by Ian Christie, Formalism considers art to be less an object or body of work as much as it is a process by which perception is slowed down (Christie 59), and was born in part out of a desire to form a more scientific basis for art criticism (Christie 58).

Neoformalism builds upon this by taking the circumstances of each artwork individually and encouraging the percipient to actively develop unique modes of critical analysis for each. Neoformalism suggests that each viewer develops an individual background from their own lives and experiences with other artworks on which to base their understanding of a text (Thompson, “Armor” 21). The priority of Neoformalist critics is less to evaluate a film, but to instead understand how it may function structurally to defamiliarize a reader’s relationship with cinema (Christie 58). The significance of realism, Thompson describes as an example, is a property of a text that is regularly used to measure for quality. Thompson suggests analysis based on realism, when not as a criterion for evaluation but as a formal trait that we attribute to artworks (Thompson, “Armor” 199), is more revealing as a framework that inevitably changes over time as cultural norms and viewing habits change (Thompson, “Armor” 198). Under Thompson’s

model, frameworks that produce evaluation in film criticism are useful in film theory for understanding a text's relationship to society, rather than 'objectively' evaluating said text.

Thompson's use of Neoformalism is only roughly similar to the criterion model described in *Film Art*, adding nuance to this question. It suggests that we treat the circumstances of reading a text as fluid, to fit the work in question and social context surrounding it, rather than to our own personal taste. This is similar to Carroll's emphasis on categorization, yet the emphasis of Neoformalism is not on evaluation, but developing an understanding of a text and how it works.

Critics and scholars of cinema are able to pull from an intimate understanding of this medium that helps to outline evaluative criticism. However, as it has been shown in this section, the approach taken by film critics often concerns itself with debating which method of criticism is most accurate among viewer-oriented and text-oriented approaches, neither of which help to define badness. Carroll has come close, arguing that the primary aim of criticism is to evaluate a work in achieving its own "ends", and while this definition is not comprehensive, it will be useful going forward. Thompson is the exception to this, moving beyond this debate in favour of a Neoformalist approach. Yet Neoformalism largely bypasses evaluation, placing it more within the realm of film theory and thus making it largely unhelpful to this particular exercise.

A consistent issue with the approach of many film critics is that they treat the necessity for evaluation as an inevitability if not, in such approaches to criticism as those described by Carroll or *Film Art*, as the end point of the critical process. It would be incomplete to suggest that the process of film criticism must end when a text is identified as "good" or "bad", as this ignores valuable critical questions that can be asked about that evaluation. These questions become ignored by the implication that examining film criticism theoretically is only valuable



insofar as it explains the ‘correct’ way to ultimately reach evaluation. Perhaps, then, we may find success by asking this question more broadly, from beyond film studies.

### 2.3 Philosophy of Aesthetics

To introduce philosophical traditions into this study represents a more abstract approach, and runs the risk of expanding the terms of our question beyond “what makes a film bad” to “what makes something ‘beautiful’” (with the understanding of what is ugly defined by opposition), but it provides a valuable enough perspective that I believe it to be worth this risk. Jerome Stolnitz summarized many theories of aesthetic philosophy in his book *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art Criticism*. Here Stolnitz describes largely the circumstances of what creates “aesthetic value” as a means of connoting beauty. “Beauty” here can be seen for our purposes as roughly synonymous with “good”, as it tends to be associated with “sensory attractiveness or pleasantness, relatively great complexity in the object, conspicuous formal values, pleasing or edifying subject matter, and conventionality of subject, form, and treatment” (Stolnitz 271).

The emphasis in Stolnitz’s writing may be on beauty and pleasantness, yet he also touches on the possibility for the opposite to exist. Stolnitz suggests that there are two kinds of answers usually proposed when questioning the existence of ugliness (275). One answer, Stolnitz claims, will narrow the area of ugliness by attempting to show that what has often been taken to be ugly is, in reality, not. Stolnitz cites scholars such as Stephen C Pepper who states “ugliness is a moral disapproval of the absence of aesthetic value” (qtd. in Stolnitz 277). The other answer, Stolnitz argues, will deny the existence of ugliness altogether, citing Bernard Bosanquet who argued that what we call ‘ugly’ is due to a weakness on the part of the spectator (275).

Stolnitz suggests that evaluative categories such as ‘beautiful’ or ‘ugly’ have lost their traditional role in aesthetic vocabulary and have taken on a critical vagueness that shows they can no longer serve as the central categories in describing aesthetic value (270). Stolnitz states that placing ‘beauty’ and ‘ugliness’ in opposition to one another is flawed, as it is possible for an object to be simultaneously ugly and yet hold aesthetic value, and that this object may not be beautiful but could be “interesting” (271). Yet the ‘interesting’ has been described, itself, as an aesthetic category that holds evaluative connotations.

Sianne Ngai, in her book *Our Aesthetic Categories*, conducted a detailed study of three distinct aesthetic categories not often thought of as such – the cute, the zany, and the interesting. Ngai described the interesting as an aesthetic category defined explicitly in relation to what it is not, that we only find something to be interesting when compared with something else (Ngai 25). The interesting, therefore, is an aesthetic category with no distinguishing characteristics, it just exists. The interesting is also a category with a specific relationship to evidence – encouraging us to immediately point towards non-aesthetic qualities in a text to justify its categorization (119). However, there is no piece of evidence that can void an existing judgment of an object as ‘interesting’ (120). What counts as interesting is what “contains a *greater* quantity of intellectual content or aesthetic energy” (121) – greater being the key word. The interesting is therefore a category of evaluation, a category of “comparative individualization” (122) even if it is not thought of as such. The identification of something as ‘interesting’ still comes from a subjective ‘interest’ in the object, for which non-aesthetic, concept-based judgments are used to support feeling-based aesthetic judgments, including ones based on pleasure. (118)

Ngai suggests that by interrogating this justification of the interesting it can be suggested that this aesthetic category may just be a purely performative, empty phrase. She writes:

The conflation of judgment and justification staged in 'interesting' is in fact endemic to the use of 'interesting' in ordinary conversation, where it is often used to implicitly invite others to demand that those who make this particular aesthetic judgment take the next step of explaining why. (46)

Much of how Ngai describes the aesthetic category of the 'interesting' could therefore be loosely transferred to a description of the category 'bad'. Personal feelings of satisfaction form the base of a viewer's aesthetic evaluation of a text, and are often backed up with non-aesthetic evidence. 'Bad', in this sense, is a claim that asks to be supported, to be justified through reasons.

Jerome Stolnitz, in his study, tries to break down the methods we use to come to these reasons. Stolnitz details three different "kinds" of value judgments that have existed in the history of art criticism, each holding cultural influence as a result. Objectivism is the first of these "kinds" and is a process of criticism that takes aesthetic value to be inherent to the work. Objectivism suggests that it is the work itself which is capable of holding "value" and that this "value" is a tangible formal property of the text (Stolnitz 390). Stolnitz describes what he calls the main "thesis" of objectivism in four rules:

- (1) The value-judgment can be confirmed or disconfirmed. The judgment is true when the property which it ascribes to the work is actually present in the work.
- (2) Therefore, when two people disagree about the value of a specific work, only one of them can be right. The one who is wrong is attributing a property to the work which it does not in fact possess.
- (3) "Good taste" is the capacity to apprehend the property of aesthetic value, when it occurs in an object. A man has "bad taste" when he lacks this capacity.
- (4) Therefore, some aesthetic judgments are authoritative, others are not. (Stolnitz 392)

By this logic, when one person claims "*Sharktopus* (Declan O'Brien, 2010) is a great movie" and another counters with "How dare you say such a thing about a film called '*Sharktopus*', it is clearly a bad movie" what is happening is that they are evaluating the work on different grounds. Stolnitz would argue that this is the equivalent of these two individuals disagreeing in the claims

“this table is brown” and “no you’re wrong, it is wooden” (Stolnitz 394). These two statements about *Sharktopus* can be simultaneously true if they are both intended to mean, for example, “I like it” or “I do not like it” because ‘like’ connotes a personal relationship with the text and does not speak to the capacity for that work to hold the intrinsic property of “value”, which would exist within the text despite disagreement (396).

Subjectivism is the second “kind” of criticism and is a framework that views taste and evaluation more as a matter of “habitual preference” (409). Under subjectivism it is the percipient who is the final judge of whether they have successfully received pleasure from a work (413), and there is no authority who can inarguably dictate the beauty of a piece of art (412). Subjectivism argues that the premise of objectivism is fundamentally classist in nature, as it requires someone to be educated or otherwise elite for their evaluations to be taken seriously (409). Subjectivism also forms a direct counter to a notion proposed by Carroll – that art can be evaluated based on its relative “success” – because art has no clear function. Stolnitz cites Curt John Ducasse, who argues that an object such as a railroad bridge can be evaluated by driving a train across it and watching if the train successfully makes it to the other side (qtd. in Stolnitz 411). This is an objective test which can prove or disprove the functional value of the bridge, yet there is no similarly objective test for a work of art, given that art lacks a similar explicit function. This, Carroll might counter, is why we provide ‘reasons’ to back up our evaluation. Yet under subjectivism, these reasons are merely explanations of why we were caused to be personally pleased or displeased by the text, rather than formal properties.

Stolnitz is quick to point out problems with subjectivism. He observes that there is a distinct difference between a ‘cause’ for disliking a work (the psychological trigger which directly influences our response to a text) and a ‘reason’ (the justification we give for that

response). Stolnitz also observes that subjectivism does not account for the possibility that a percipient could misread or misunderstand a text, making their evaluation actually incorrect (414), nor can it explain why certain artworks have endured over time (412).

It is clear that a pattern has begun to emerge here. Three scholars, Stolnitz, Thompson, and Carroll, have now referenced a tension between a form of evaluation which prioritizes the experience of the percipient, and a form of evaluation which prioritizes relevant formal properties that can be found in the text. This tension is mirrored in the distinction I drew in the previous chapter between evaluation and value-judgments, though the concepts do not perfectly line up. For the sake of efficiency, this thesis will largely be using Stolnitz's terminology of objectivism and subjectivism to stand in for similar terminology from scholars like Carroll (success value and reception value) or Thompson (communication model and art-for-art's-sake model). However, unlike these other scholars who describe this as a dichotomy, Stolnitz makes it clear that he is dissatisfied by both of these approaches and the perceived tension between them, and thus proposes a third category in an attempt to explore that dissatisfaction.

Objective relativism, Stolnitz's third "kind" of value judgment, is essentially a middle ground between objectivism and subjectivism. Objective relativism evaluates a text based on tangible properties and successes within it, but also bases those properties and successes on what brings 'pleasure', 'displeasure', or other responses in the percipient (420). Objective Relativism suggests that the first two kinds of value judgments – the autobiographical report of the speaker's feelings during the aesthetic experience ("I liked that"), and the other an ascription of aesthetic value to the object ("that was beautiful") – are equally valid (422).

In relativism, the most fundamental concept is "potentiality", the notion that aesthetic value is identified when the percipient recognizes the potential for that object to create a certain

kind of aesthetic response in a certain spectator (430). This suggests that to evaluate a text as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ is to essentially predict the potential for that response to occur in other spectators. This is why it is possible for a hypothetical spectator to take pleasure in an object but recognize that it lacks aesthetic value (418), for this spectator to say “*Sharktopus* was bad, but I still liked it” or “*Sharktopus* may not have been my cup of tea, but was an undeniably good movie”. Relativism is meant to reintroduce an element of objectivity into the critical process, but reframe it to emphasize different attributes as being objective.

Stolnitz describes these attributes in a different essay while responding to the writings of C.I. Lewis, stating “There can be no question that one has felt delight or its opposite on any given occasion. The important question is whether a work of art is ‘a continuing source of possible enjoyments or dissatisfactions’” (Stolnitz, “Objective Relativism” 266). Here Stolnitz observes that a viewer can objectively recognize their own experience of pleasure, and evaluate a work based on its ability to sustain that pleasure. This pleasure is at the core of Stolnitz’s prioritization of potentiality, effectively combining objectivism and subjectivism by describing the spectator’s experiences as objectively having taken place, and the potentiality to create those experiences for others as a subjective prediction. Objectivity here comes from the spectator, rather than formal properties of the text described as objectively ‘correct’ artistic decisions.

The capacity for objectivism and subjectivism to be combined forms a clear contrast to Carroll’s insistence that they be placed in opposition with one another, though a careful reader may notice that Stolnitz’s version of objectivism and Carroll’s version of objectivism do not perfectly line up. Stolnitz describes objectivism as an emphasis on value as a tangible property which can be possessed by a text, while Carroll describes “success” in terms of what an author is intending. This is because Stolnitz sees the approach prioritizing authorial intent not as a kind of

value judgment, but as a specific form of criticism, as a part of five different “kinds” of criticism, separate from the “kinds” of value-judgment outlined above.

Intentionalism, the fourth kind of criticism outlined by Stolnitz, emphasizes the intentions of an author and whether or not the text has achieved “success” within the parameters of these. This is similar to Carroll’s model, though Stolnitz strongly objects to this prioritization of authorial intent. Stolnitz outlines major criticisms of intentionalism, arguing that practically speaking it is not possible to know the intention held by an author, and that an author rarely holds a fixed intention from the beginning to the end of a creative process. Stolnitz also encourages us to recognize that a work can still be aesthetically valuable even if it does not succeed on its own terms, or that the terms an author is intending to achieve could themselves be lacking in value, making the work bad regardless of its relative success.

These criticisms laid out by Stolnitz also mirror those made by Roland Barthes in his influential essay “The Death of the Author”. Here Barthes argues that the notion of authorship is a relatively recent phenomenon in literary criticism, and that the act of writing by nature requires the author’s voice to be lost (Barthes 2). Barthes proposes that a text consists of “multiple writings, issued from several cultures and entering into dialogue with each other” and that these are synthesized only at the text’s destination, by the reader (Barthes 6). Another objection to intentionalism not proposed by aesthetic philosophy is unique to cinema – that while the author of a film is traditionally seen to be the director, filmmaking is a highly collaborative process with multiple authorship roles, each with the potential to hold a slightly different intentionality.

A solution to this objection can be found by reframing the source of the intention away from the author and towards the text. This approach can be adapted from one proposed by Umberto Eco while attempting to engage with this debate by suggesting

The problem is that, if one perhaps knows what is meant by ‘intention of the reader’, it seems more difficult to define abstractly what is meant by ‘intention of the text’. The text’s intention is not displayed by the textual surface. Or, if it is displayed, it is so in the sense of the purloined letter. One has to decide to ‘see’ it. Thus it is possible to speak of the text’s intention only as the result of a conjecture on the part of the reader. The initiative of the reader basically consists in making a conjecture about the text’s intention. (Eco 64)

This is an approach that has been picked up by a number of cult cinema scholars, notably James MacDowell and James Zborowski in their article “The Aesthetics of ‘So bad It’s Good’: Value, Intention, and *The Room*” and Becky Bartlett in her article “‘It Happens By Accident’: Failed Intentions, Incompetence, and Sincerity in Badfilm”, both of which use Eco to argue that “intention is crucial to badfilm identification” (Bartlett 44). Eco’s theory is used here to describe the role played by intention in the evaluative responses performed by cult audiences.

This form of intentionalist criticism therefore operates as a relationship between a text and a reader. Under this model a film must speak for itself and dictate its own intention, but the intentionalist critic is responsible for interpreting this intention and must be prepared to defend their claim to it. A text may be argued to intend to, for example, communicate a particular message, solicit a particular affect response, or conform to a particular genre or category. The recognition of this intention comes from analysis of the text itself, or through an observation of paratexts including such materials as posters, trailers or recorded interviews with members of the creative team (if such materials exist). Only after this argument has been satisfactorily made does the critic move on to assess the degree to which the text succeeded on these defined terms. This intention may be the product of the critic’s interpretation, but would need to be demonstrable as existing within the text itself. Stolnitz acknowledges this approach, and concedes that it can lead to a more valuable examination of the intrinsic structure of the text. Yet Stolnitz counters that it



is confusing to refer to this as a form of intention, and that as a result it should be described as something different (Stolnitz 480) as a piece of art is not itself a sentient entity.

Other kinds of criticism described by Stolnitz include criticism by “rules”, which examines the properties of a work and evaluates it based on its ability to conform to a predetermined checklist of what grants aesthetic value ( 444), similarly to *Film Art*’s criterion approach. Contextual criticism is another method, measuring the degree to which the content of the work creates “good” for society, considering for example the moral ‘goodness’ of the messages it is sending or critiquing the representation of marginalized groups (449-450). Impressionistic criticism emphasizes the feelings produced by the artwork on the critic, concerned less with evaluation and more with the critic’s enthusiasm for the work (478), similar to Carroll’s “reception value” asking if the work creates valuable experiences. Finally, intrinsic criticism focuses on the form of the work, and whether the different moving parts within the text find unity, harmony, or rhythm with each other to form a cohesive whole (483).

These approaches, presented by Stolnitz and other aesthetic philosophers, suggest different critical frameworks for evaluation that help to answer part of our question, but do not present a clear definition, specifically, for the word ‘bad’. Part of this comes from evaluation again being treated as the end to the critical process, as each of these methods describe how to *reach* an evaluation but not what to do afterwards. Perhaps the solution will be found in approaches that start from a place of evaluation, and use that to find new meanings within a text.

## **2.4 Camp, Paracinema, and When Bad is Just the Beginning**

Some approaches to badness do not take it just within the context of criticism, but treat it rather as a step to reach larger conclusions about how a text might be aesthetically relevant or

culturally significant. Susan Sontag's 1964 essay "Notes on Camp" is a highly influential piece of writing that identifies and defines "camp", an aesthetic category that deliberately turns its back on the normative distinction between good and bad taste. (Sontag, par. 34) Sontag does this not to argue that what is good is bad, but to introduce a new set of standards. Camp, as argued by Sontag, is concerned with artifice, (7) extravagance (25), unchecked ambition, (24) and placing everything in "quotation marks" (10). Camp is art that asks to be taken seriously but cannot because it is "too much" (26) and as a result becomes 'good' specifically because it is awful (58).

Camp is therefore a mode of perception, taking an ironic stance towards an aesthetic object and appreciating it specifically for its extremity, extravagance, and badness. The camp spectator revels in the process of interpretive transformation of the object, asserting dominance over that which would have been initially created as an item of mass culture (Taylor 16). Sontag clarifies a distinction between what she calls 'deliberate' camp and 'naïve' camp (Sontag, par. 18-20). Pure camp, Sontag argues, is always naïve camp because camp is at its most campy when it is unintentional. Pure camp happens, according to Sontag, when a work aims to be serious but fails, and that when a work actively pursues an aesthetic of camp it is harmful to the camp. Intentionality, for Sontag, is essential to determining what constitutes camp.

The inclusion of this distinction between naïve and deliberate camp, however, does not hold up under a more contemporary conception of camp. Sontag's statement that self-awareness is not compatible with camp is a reflection of the state of camp at the time of the essay's writing, when camp held a specific subcultural purpose. In the mid-1960s, camp was a form of cultural poaching that gay men used as a survivalist mechanism before the Stonewall riots in 1969 brought mainstream attention to Queer communities. In this context, camp allowed a group of

people whose existence was not acknowledged in cultural products to claim ownership over those products and present a self-deprecatory parody of their own social status (Ross 146).

Post-Stonewall, gay men became a major consumer target under capitalism (Ross 144) and, as a result, camp became itself appropriated by the mainstream, invoked now on a more recognizable, more intentional basis. Camp then no longer existed “in the smirk of the beholder” (Hess qtd. in Ross 145) but instead became its own aesthetic language. Where textual self-awareness was once the antithesis of camp, it was now an emphasized feature. The meaning of the word camp then became overtaken by an understanding of camp not as a viewing position but as an aesthetic category. This meant that the act of ironically poaching a text and reframing it in a new context has become decontextualized from its roots, and is no longer associated with or exclusively performed within Queer subcultures. What was once camp can no longer be classified as camp, because dominant culture understands that word to mean something different.

As a result, many alternative phrases have been proposed to fill the space left by ‘naïve camp’ to describe the viewing practice of ironically poaching an existing text, often one seen as “bad”, and reading it in opposition to its intentionality. The phrase ‘so-bad-it’s-good’ gets the point across to the uninitiated, but as argued by Bartlett can be problematic given its paradoxical nature and implied meaning of “good” as referring exclusively to pleasure (Bartlett 43). *Nanar* is the French word, used by the PBS Idea Channel to describe the phenomenon in an educational YouTube video (Rugnetta 2014). Scholars such as MacDowell and Zborowski, as well as Bartlett, have also used the term “badfilm” (MacDowell and Zborowski 2) to refer to cult texts such as *The Room* or classic low-budget American science fiction and horror films such as *The Creeping Terror* (Vic Savage, 1964) or *Robot Monster* (Phil Tucker, 1953) which have developed cult followings specifically as the result of their badness (Bartlett 40).

Jeffrey Sconce has coined the term “paracinema” to describe the viewing practice of valorizing cinematic “trash” (Sconce 105), regardless of whether those films have been rejected or just ignored by ‘legitimate’ film culture. Sconce describes that what makes paracinema unique from camp is that camp was primarily a form of ironic colonization, allowing gay men to rework Hollywood cinema through a new subcultural code, whereas paracinema is an aesthetic of vocal confrontation, seeking to promote an alternative vision of cinematic art (102). Paracinematic taste involves a reading strategy that renders the bad into the sublime (113) and advocates for a departure from the standard of a dismissive taste directed towards trash cinema. Key to Sconce’s theory is that paracinematic films are not ridiculed for their deviation or failure, but instead celebrated as unique cinematic experiences (112).

It is not often that we conceptualize failure as being worthy of celebration, though cultural studies scholar Jack Halberstam argues that this should change. In his book *The Queer Art of Failure*, Halberstam describes failure as a “weapon of the weak” (Halberstam 88) that historically has been “a category levied by the winners against the losers and as a set of standards that ensure that all future radical ventures will be measured as cost-ineffective” (174). Halberstam in this text is advocating for a reclamation of failure, suggesting that if failure were something embraced or celebrated it could form a critique of dominant norms and ideologies that are in control of what constitutes ‘success’. Disturbing clear boundaries such as those between child/adult or winner/loser would, Halberstam argues, allow us to use the negative effects of failure (disappointment, disillusionment, despair) to poke holes in the “toxic positivity of contemporary life” (3). He argues that, socially, we tend to blame ourselves and each other for the failure to adhere to societal structures, rather than critiquing those structures (35). This links the cultural narrative of failure specifically to the ideological narratives constructed by capitalism

in which success is equated with profit and failure is defined by the inability to accumulate profit (88). Therefore, to summarize Halberstam's theory, if our conception of success is based on our conception of common sense, and common sense is dictated by what is 'normal', and what is 'normal' is dictated by those in power, then by challenging the social necessitation of success we can in turn form a rejection of hegemonic power structures.

This approach towards failure taken by Halberstam, as well as other approaches by Sontag or Sconce represent an attempt to move beyond the mere classification of something as "bad" and ask more interesting questions about what 'badness' or 'failure' can teach us about ourselves or the world we live in. Questions like 'how does the ironic enjoyment of a bad film happen' or 'what can be learned by embracing failure' require us to accept as a premise that the objects being discussed as 'bad' or as 'failures' are being accurately described as such. Therefore, while these theories are certainly useful in their own right, they manage to provide even less satisfactory definitions of what it means for something to be 'bad' than those provided by either film criticism or aesthetic philosophy. What this does is provide us a reason to avoid taking badness at face value or treat it as an inevitability, though it does not help us to understand, comprehensively, what that word means.

## **2.5 Reframing the Question**

This chapter has reviewed existing literature in order to glean a single definition out of the word 'bad' from multiple different contexts in which it would be relevant. As has been demonstrated by the incompatibility of the above definitions, such a task is functionally impossible and in retrospect was doomed to failure from the beginning. However, while I remain largely unsatisfied by the above definitions, each one does answer a piece of the larger question.

Reception studies can be used to describe badness in terms of its social function, framing evaluation as an action performed upon a work of art to gatekeep its description as such. This is demonstrated by the evaluative backlash to *Crash*, a backlash which was concerned in large part with evaluating the film through social classification. However, this understanding of evaluation is very different from that presented by film criticism, in which the emphasis appears directed more towards an effort to find scientific criteria for evaluating a text formally. These attempts are mirrored by those performed in the philosophy of aesthetics, and were helpfully broken down by Stolnitz into different aesthetic categories that will be useful in the following chapter, but none directly define the word 'bad' and many describe radically different processes.

Perhaps this failure to define badness can be embraced, as Halberstam might suggest, to provide a means for this normative category to be destabilized. If 'bad' cannot be defined, perhaps a more indirect approach will prove more useful. Clearly the word does not lack meaning altogether, as the work of Sontag, Sconce, or Halberstam demonstrate that it is possible to develop academic studies that use the accepted badness of a text as their starting point. Perhaps then, the problem is that the word has too many definitions. Perhaps in order to understand badness and to talk about it in a scholarly context we need to problematize the assumption that 'bad' is a word with a singular, identifiable meaning. The attractive assumption is that the word 'bad' can be understood only when one of the aforementioned approaches is demonstrated to be correct, yet all of them are equally flawed and especially so in their relation to one another. Yet perhaps none of them are flawed. Perhaps the solution may not be that only one of these approaches is the most correct but that the word 'bad' needs to be itself destabilized, broken down, and untethered from goodness. Perhaps the question we should be asking is not "what does 'bad' mean?" but instead "what do *we* mean when we call something 'bad'?"

## **Chapter 3: Dissecting Badness**

The absence of a clear definition for the word ‘bad’ creates a number of problems for the study of bad cinema. Most notably that it is impossible to study something without a definition, as a reader could become confused by the meaning of what is being described. My solution is therefore to abandon the desire to answer this question and ask instead what percipients are referring to when they call a text “bad”. This new question forms part of a larger solution that I will argue for in this chapter, as I demonstrate that the word ‘bad’ is itself the central problem with studies of badness and must therefore be largely eliminated from scholarly engagement with bad texts. As a solution this likely appears confusing and paradoxical, and I concede that this may feel counterintuitive. However, as I will argue in this chapter, the elimination of ‘bad’ from the lexicon of badness studies will ultimately allow for greater clarity within this area of research. In Chapter 1, I described an unspoken norm in film studies advising against evaluation. To follow this line of reasoning requires us to accept that in order for effective film theory to take place, the impulse to evaluate must be ignored and any existing evaluative conclusions made by external sources must be rejected. This may appear counterproductive to a study of badness, but will be demonstrated in this chapter as allowing for greater clarity. The introduction of new modes of description in place of ‘bad’ will aid in this clarity, emphasizing aesthetic properties and viewer engagement over claims to value.

### **3.1 Problematizing the Word ‘Bad’**

The word ‘bad’ and its antithesis ‘good’ are used in a broad range of contexts throughout the English language to communicate something as being desirable or undesirable, favourable or

unfavourable, worthy or unworthy. It is worth observing how both of these concepts are defined oppositionally – understood in relation to what they are not, specifically in relation to one another. ‘Bad’ is thus understood only in contrast to ‘good’, and vice versa, as each existing value-status threatens to be revoked in place of an endowment with the alternative. This value by itself is therefore not a meaningful descriptor of a text, nor can it be demonstrated empirically, making it both an unstable piece of evidence in support of a larger argument and an incomplete conclusion to the theoretical process.

In the previous chapter I critiqued a number of scholars for a description of evaluation that treats it as a conclusion to be reached. Given the ineffectiveness of evaluation in film theory, I argued that it belongs instead within the context of film criticism. However, this means that the scholar of bad cinema is faced with a challenge. Given that ‘bad’ is an unstable category with minimal agreement as to what defines it, considerable energy is required merely to demonstrate convincingly that a text is indeed bad before analysis of said badness can realistically take place.<sup>5</sup> Evaluative language, such as the word ‘bad’, can therefore have the effect of trapping a scholar into an unsatisfactory conclusion, as the focus of the theory must become a two-step approach in demonstrating the value of a text before unpacking the properties of said value, assuming space has been left for the not-insignificant task of the latter.

This is a claim that would be disheartening to a scholar seeking to study badness, as it essentially means that the word most efficient at describing the object of study interferes itself

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<sup>5</sup> It may be possible to present the counterargument here that a text holding a cult reputation due to its badness can be demonstrated as bad by referencing this pattern of reception. However, not all bad texts are known for this convenient documentation of their badness and, on top of that, a badfilm text such as *Troll 2* (Claudio Fragasso, 1990) that resonates deeply with its cult audience would not meet every definition of ‘bad’ simply due to the fact of that resonance.



with the study of that object. I maintain that there is an importance to the study of bad cinema, yet the knowledge of this importance must be balanced with an awareness of the theoretical challenges posed by evaluative language. The beginnings of a solution can be found, however, in the work of theorists such as Susan Sontag, Jeffery Sconce, or Jack Halberstam. These scholars are able to reach a conclusion beyond evaluation by taking a text that has been decided to lack value, and endowing it with value. These scholars do not make an initial argument to evaluate their object of study, but instead the object in question is established to lack value by assumption in order to allow that lack of value to become itself the object which is studied. Thus the rejection of a presumed external evaluative conclusion becomes itself the incitement for extending the framework of critical engagement. The initial questions of whether an object is indeed 'bad', whether such evaluation is justified, or who is responsible for making that claim are here bypassed, allowing for these texts to be studied externally from the evaluative associations that are held towards them.

This may be an effective solution for studies such as these, but does not universally resolve the problems posed by bad cinema. This presumption of evaluation needs to come from somewhere, and the study of value must also study how evaluative conclusions are reached in the first place. As viewers we often articulate value comparatively, not just in terms of good and bad, but better and worse. The process of evaluation involves the key component of a ranking system, as we understand the relationships that we hold with the texts we consume by communicating their worth relative to one another. Aficionados of cinema, fan audiences, and casual viewers alike will often construct lists with varying degrees of detail in order to demonstrate the value of texts specifically in relation to one another, and these rankings can be incredibly important to some viewers. In a time before VHS or reruns, fans of the long-running British series *Doctor*

*Who*<sup>6</sup> (1963-1989; 2005- ) depended upon a list published in the 1983 coffee table book *Doctor Who: A Celebration* which included brief episode descriptions written by Jeremy Bentham.<sup>7</sup> Some of these descriptions were evaluative, dictating which serials were to be considered the ‘best’ and ‘worst’, and because this was one of the few published lists of existing broadcast episodes at the time these evaluations became canonized within the fan community. Many years later video releases of such episodes allowed the opportunity for re-evaluation, yet the previously canonized value-judgments continue to be associated with certain serials (Sandifer 338).

It can be fun to place texts such as these in competition with one another, developing a narrative around how they fit together. Sometimes we develop systems to make our rankings seem more scientific, such as the film review blog EmanuelLevy, which made a post in 2009 detailing the rationale behind the grading system used by the site to measure “artistic merits” of films it would review and how this system was based on the letter grade scale used in schools (Levy 2009). Peter Elbow in his essay “Ranking, Evaluating, and Liking: Sorting out Three Forms of Judgment” described how liking, ranking, and evaluation can intersect in the context of grading students in an undergraduate English course. Elbow notably separated ranking and liking from evaluation,<sup>8</sup> arguing that it was evaluation which was more beneficial in helping students to improve their writing.<sup>9</sup> This is applicable to cinema in how evaluative criticism can encourage

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<sup>6</sup> While I may have used the word “cinema” in the title of this thesis, I am using *Doctor Who* as an example here despite its status as a television show. I acknowledge that there is a debate around the degree of distinction that must be drawn between television and film as mediums, but do not wish to enter into that debate here. For my purposes, television and film have similar enough structures of aesthetics and reception to make this a worthwhile example here and later on in this thesis.

<sup>7</sup> Bentham would have been considered an authority on this matter, as he was also the head of the Doctor Who Appreciation Society at the time (Sandifer 333).

<sup>8</sup> Elbow defines evaluation slightly differently as I have here, identifying it as “looking hard and thoughtfully at a piece of writing in order to make distinctions as to the quality of different features or dimensions” (Elbow 191).

<sup>9</sup> Though only in certain circumstances and only when divorced from liking or ranking.

the medium to evolve, but does not map perfectly as the role of the critic can vary from evaluating texts according to what consumers respond to or recognize as ‘good’ to evaluating based on what the critic believes *should* be considered ‘good’ (Austin 160). Ranking is thus an imperfect measurement performed upon cinema, but one we choose to perform nonetheless.

The role of ranking in articulations of badness can be used to reveal the ideological norms suggested by our impulse towards evaluation. Halberstam articulates failure as being tied to ideological frameworks associated with capitalism – specifically to the assumption that for there to be winners there must be losers. In the context of a capitalist society what is considered ‘successful’ is linked with what benefits the capitalist system. Halberstam notes how banks during the 2008 financial crisis were considered “too big to fail” and thus had to be bailed out because allowing them to fail would be paradoxical to the function of failure – to weed out that which is counterproductive to a capitalist society. (Halberstam, 3) Halberstam’s critique of our ideological conception of failure is one that can be extended towards badness. Capitalism also necessitates functionality, defining success by productivity. As Todd McGowan argues,

Productivity orients capitalist subjects around an end to be accomplished, and this end promises to exhaust the means used to achieve it. That is, the means are important only for the end that they accomplish. This is a defining capitalist idea, and the devaluing or erasing of means is essential to capitalism. Labor is important not for its own sake but for what it produces—for the capitalist and the consumer. (McGowan 157)

The capacity for art to be ‘bad’, to be unsuccessful or to fail, then comes from the assumption that art must somehow be productive in the first place. Commonly, the function of art can be seen as bringing a sense of enjoyment or fulfillment to the percipient, or as something which allows a percipient to momentarily escape from an otherwise monotonous life. These are functions, thus defining ‘good’ art as that which is productive at achieving these responses, and

'bad' art in opposition to that.<sup>10</sup> However art does not exist to hold functionality or meet the 'ends' defined by a consumer or creator but would be better defined as an exploratory exercise essential to the human experience, produced for the pleasure or communication that takes place in the act of making or receiving it. The notion that art can fail is specifically a symptom of art under capitalism.

Failure is not the only way that art can be conceptualized as bad. In the previous chapter many understandings of 'bad' were explored and two common problems consistently emerged among them. First, none of the sources I was able to reference defined explicitly what it means for a text to lack aesthetic value, each assuming that the reader already knows what this looks like. Second, each of these sources described the phenomena in question differently, and some descriptions were actively incompatible with one another. Thus, in order for us to develop a scholarly understanding of badness in cinema, a number of qualifications need to be made. A critical framework for understanding what makes something 'bad' must be separated from conceptions of 'good'. Further, the multitude of different understandings of badness must be acknowledged, but also must be separated from one another. Finally, evaluation and evaluative language must be avoided. For these qualifications to take place, the paradoxical first step must be taken to remove the word 'bad' from studies of badness.

One would assume that to avoid the word 'bad' in a study of bad cinema would function only to limit the capacity for what can be studied, but I argue that such avoidance instead opens

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<sup>10</sup> Under capitalism some art is also a reliable means to produce profit, and this art can thus be evaluated objectively as having 'failed' when it does not. While this may be an internally consistent implication of the function of art under capitalist ideology, it does not describe how it is typically consumed.

up possibilities for clarity in this theoretical area.<sup>11</sup> The vague and disparate understandings of what makes for a lack of aesthetic value must be separated from notions of ‘good’ in order to develop an understanding of this concept that can be applied to critical analysis. However, many existing definitions are incapable of describing the concept in its entirety. A common response to this fact, one which can be seen exhibited by Carroll, is to settle on a single definition and defend it as being the most-correct when compared with others. Yet the reason why so many different understandings of ‘bad’ exist is not that most of them are wrong, it is instead that each definition represents an independent sub-category. The definition of the word ‘bad’ therefore becomes much easier to understand when it is articulated not as holding a singular fixed meaning that has finally been uncovered by the eternal wisdom of academia, but as the accidental conflation of a series of intersecting sub-categories under a single problematic term.

‘Bad’ is not the only word in the English language that shifts meaning based on context, but does so in a way that is uniquely confusing. It is not just that the word can mean multiple things, it is that these meanings occur simultaneously. A word such as ‘train’ can refer in English either to a form of preparation for a physically demanding task or to an industrial machine designed to transport goods long distances, but the meaning is typically made clear by the context of the sentence. However, for the word ‘bad’, different meanings are assumed to be the same, and are described by context as such. As Carroll suggested we back up our evaluations with reasons, but we often describe functionally independent reasons as if they all belong to a single aesthetic category. By conflating these different forms of badness under a single word, it

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<sup>11</sup> This clarity may come at the expense of the conciseness of the single word ‘bad’, but I would argue that it is preferable, particularly in an academic context, to be precise rather than to be efficient.

is implied that a text must embody all forms simultaneously to be considered ‘bad’ and that, if it holds some properties associated with ‘bad’ and others associated with ‘good’, certain properties must be prioritized. If, for example, the script of a film is tightly written but tells a formulaic story, the value of one of those properties will likely be presumed to cancel out that of the other.

In order to understand these properties, language needs to be developed to describe them as value-neutral features of a text, rather than as flaws. The remainder of this chapter will thus reframe the traditional understanding of what makes a text ‘bad’ away from notions of value, and unpack disparate understandings of badness into component parts. In order to do this, I will pull from the existing tension between subjectivist and objectivist schools of thought as an initial categorization, but continue to separate the concept further. The viewer responses that endow a text with a lack of value are not all the same, nor are they mutually exclusive, and I intend to describe them as such. Further, it would be incomplete to suggest that the text itself has no role in the determination of its value, and thus I shall also propose a series of aesthetic categories that have come to be associated with badness. The emphasis on *associations* with badness is key here, framing the relationship between these properties and badness as correlational, rather than causal. The following eight properties do not themselves add or subtract aesthetic value from a text, but operate as part of how a text works formally and interacts with its viewer. These properties intersect with one another, but for the sake of clarity must be articulated individually.

## **3.2 Properties of Badness On the Level of the Text**

### **3.2.1 Transparency of Production**

A common property to be associated with badness is one often articulated as a form of technical incompetence. However, there is an inconsistency within this, as this property can

occur in texts produced by filmmakers with experience and proficiency with the medium, making ‘incompetence’ an insufficient descriptor. The solution to this contradiction is to reframe the language away from the relative competency of the filmmaker in question and towards the aesthetic experience that this can produce in a text. J. Hoberman in his article “Bad Movies” touches on this solution by describing our expectations of the conventional narrative film, how it may not demand suspension of disbelief but asks an audience member for “acceptance of its own diegetic, or fictive, space” and that a poorly-made film will “confound this minimal requirement by ignoring or (more often) bungling the most rudimentary precepts of screen naturalism” (Hoberman 519). What Hoberman is speaking to here is an expectation that has developed for cinema to exhibit a sense of naturalism, allowing a viewer to accept the reality of the diegetic space. Hoberman recounts the experience of the alternative to this, in how

I once saw a porn film set in Outer Space that used a suburban kitchen as the set for its rocket control room. The bluntness with which this profilmic reality (i.e., what’s in front of the camera) disrupted the diegetic web produced a more vivid sense of science fiction than anything in *2001*. (Hoberman 519)

In Hoberman’s experience of this porn film, he as a viewer was pulled out of the capacity to accept the diegetic world of the spaceship through the recognition that the set was clearly a suburban kitchen. In this moment, his mind was concerned not with the diegetic fiction of the text, but was instead faced with an unavoidable reminder of how the film was made at the level of production. In this sense the production of Hoberman’s porn film itself became transparent.

While transparency of production does often occur as a result of a filmmaker being unfamiliar with cinema as a form, it is best described as its own aesthetic property. Part of what makes cinema as a medium attractive to viewers is its capacity to hold up a seemingly magical, uninterrupted window into another world. Transparency of production occurs when this façade is

broken, allowing a viewer's suspension of disbelief to be interrupted by a text that reveals the artifice behind its own construction. Perhaps the boom has momentarily dropped into the shot, or an actor is unconvincingly acting, or the script uses a plot contrivance to get the story to where it obviously needs to go. Transparency of production is distracting, and it is distracting in a sense that causes a viewer to question the reality of what they are watching.

Transparency of production is a common property in films that lend themselves to paracinematic readings. *Birdemic, Shock and Terror* (James Nguyen, 2010) is a film in which the paracinema speaks through transparency in the text. Stilted dialogue is cut together in such a rhythm that each line receives its own shot with a notable absence of conventional audio editing techniques<sup>12</sup> that would typically allow the flow of the film to appear more seamless. An average viewer may not be able to articulate this, but would notice that something feels, in some vague way, "off". What an average viewer would more likely recognize are the titular birds that begin to attack at the precise<sup>13</sup> halfway mark in the runtime. Described in reviews as "clip-art eagles, crudely pasted on the screen, with only their wing tips mechanically flapping" (Scheib) or as looking "like GIF animations or sprites" (Saunders), these birds exude transparency as obvious computer-generated constructions. The birds appear so clearly divorced from the rest of the world of the film that a visual effects editor layering GIF images of birds onto the frame becomes easier to imagine than the birds themselves as diegetic objects. The birds call attention to how their presence in the film was achieved, from here drawing the association to badness.

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<sup>12</sup> As an example, there is a notable absence of L cuts or J cuts, in which the audio of a new shot is introduced either slightly before the shot, or lingers slightly after a cutaway.

<sup>13</sup> As a point of clarification, this is not hyperbole. *Birdemic: Shock and Terror* is 93 minutes and 30 seconds long. The birds attack at 47 minutes and 10 seconds into the film.



The aesthetic property of transparency of production does not need to be exclusively associated with failure. *Tout Va Bien* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1972) also makes use of this property, but deliberately. *Tout Va Bien* shoots the process of shooting a film, using the discomfort created by showing the production process within the film itself to encourage its audience to reflect on the consumerist pleasure they receive from the more aesthetically seamless classical Hollywood model. The deliberate nature of this choice allows it to be associated with success, forming an intersection between transparency of production and another property of badness.

### **3.2.2 Discrepancy in Intention**

The role of intentionality in determining what reads to a viewer as badness and what reads as an artistic choice may be highly contested but should not go understated. Carroll picked up on this by prioritizing “success value” in his theory of criticism (Carroll 53), repeatedly arguing that a text will fail if it is clearly aiming for one thing and achieving another. Stolnitz criticized this model, arguing that to define the success of a text based on authorial intent is impossible, in part because the intentions of an author cannot be reliably accessed.

Stolnitz approaches a solution to this contradiction – that intention can be found within the text itself – but does not follow up on this. Stolnitz dismisses this as confusing to describe in this way as the word ‘intention’ implies the presence of an active agent. To counter this argument, one might say that the process of watching a film involves treating it to some degree as though it is an active agent, as a viewer observes the cues it presents and responds to those appropriately. For a viewer interpreting the film *Wavelength* (Michael Snow, 1967) – an experimental film consisting exclusively of a single 45 minute zoom and loud electronic screeching – a motivation behind the work must be presumed in order to give the unconventional

choices of the film meaning. A viewer must recognize that *Wavelength* is intending to make them bored, confused, and physiologically uncomfortable before that viewer can analyze why such choices are being made. It may be true that the word 'intention' implies a level of sentience on the part of the text, but to invent a new word when texts are already read through the lens of intentionality would be more confusing. 'Intention' is simply an ideal word in this case, able to simultaneously speak to messages a work may be aiming to communicate, the categorization the text is attempting to place itself within, and/or the affect responses the text aspires to produce.

A film will usually state its intention independently, through paratexts but more significantly through the opening scenes of the film. As Umberto Eco writes, "if a story starts with 'Once upon a time', there is a good probability that it is a fairy tale" (Eco 65), a statement rephrased by James MacDowell and James Zborowski as "if a story begins in this way, then there is a good probability that it intends to be a fairy tale (or at least to invoke that mode), and is thus inviting us to approach (and importantly, evaluate) it as such." (MacDowell and Zborowski 8). As an example, the film *Donkey Skin* (1970, dir. Jacques Demy) codifies itself largely as a traditional fairy tale narrative in the opening scenes except for one moment early on in the text in which a donkey defecates gold and jewels. The crude imagery of this scene and the matter-of-fact manner in which it is presented informs the way a viewer is meant to understand the remainder of the film, implicitly instructing them to read irony, self-awareness, and revisionism into *Donkey Skin*'s approach to the fairy tale narrative.

The failure to meet a textually-articulated intention will often produce a reading of badness. VF Perkins in the article "Badness: An Issue in the Aesthetics of Film" performs an analysis of the failure in a single scene from the film *Dead Poets Society* (Peter Weir, 1989) in which Professor Keating instructs his students to demonstrate their capacity to "think for

themselves” by tearing a page out of their textbook. Perkins observes how the film’s intention to depict a narrative of rebellion towards authority conflicts with its intention to deliver compelling melodrama in this scene. It is melodramatically satisfying to watch a classroom full of students defy authority by enthusiastically defacing their textbooks, yet they all do so unquestioningly at the instruction of Professor Keating who, in this case, happens to also be an authority figure. Perkins describes how this desire of the text to “achieve dramatic vigour” exists in tension with a desire to “present a coherent and satisfying consideration of ideas” (Perkins, 36). Perkins points this out not to suggest that *Dead Poets Society* should be considered unworthy of aesthetic value, but to point to the aesthetic influence of failure upon this one scene. However, Perkins is only able to conclude in his essay that the scene in question was indicative of badness, and while he suggests that evaluation can be part of a larger effort to understand and/or share in the understanding of a text, he does not specify what that understanding is.

Thus I remain unsatisfied by the language of Perkins’ approach, because associating discrepancy in intention exclusively with failure produces an incomplete understanding of this aesthetic property. If the intention is to be found from within the text, alternative readings can produce different circumstances for success. Were that scene from *Dead Poets Society* to be read as intending to highlight a hypocrisy within Keating as a character, instructing his students to reject authority from the position of an authority figure, the scene suddenly reads no longer as being indicative of failure, but now speaks to a complexity within Keating’s character that a viewer may find more interesting. When intentions are to be interpreted from the text itself, theoretically anything can be argued to be the intention so long as it is demonstrably present within the text. Because of the ambiguity created by largely ignoring *authorial* intent in favour of textual intent, this can mean that there is no longer an intention one can argue as being the most

accurate. The solution that a talented intentionalist critic will find here is to read the text in relation to which textual intention produces the most unity of form.

### **3.2.3 Dissonance of Form**

Stolnitz describes how, traditionally, the most important formal structure has been thought of as a kind of “unity in variety” or “organic unity” (Stolnitz 230). For Stolnitz, “organic unity” occurs when the aesthetic object can no longer perform the function for which it was intended were parts to be altered – such as how the functionality of a crossword puzzle depends upon its own internal coherence (232). “Unity in variety” is less a specific style of formal structure as it is an ideal to be achieved by the use of specific formal devices including recurrence, recurrence with variation, rhythm, balance, symmetry, and evolution (234-236). Stolnitz describes how the development of a plot in literature will often make use of these devices, as the aesthetic of internal coherence produces a sense of total meaning.

I want to combine the aesthetic qualities we associate with “unity in variety” and “organic unity” to describe what I will call “unity of form”. In a text exhibiting unity of form, each element in the work is necessary to the experience of it. The text will hold a diverse collection of elements within itself, yet these are integrated with one another so tightly that each contributes indispensably to the end product as a whole. It can be textually satisfying to watch a film where all the moving parts feel like they fit together tightly to form a single cohesive entity. When plot and subplot feel wound together around a common theme, when elements such as the script, acting, music, and cinematography all support one another under a single reading, this becomes an aesthetic experience that most viewers would associate with a ‘good’ movie.

The association between unity of form and ‘goodness’ can lead us towards an understanding of what we expect from our cinema. In the inverse of this, badness can therefore occur when this expectation is not met. Disunity of form can occur merely in the absence of this aesthetic property, when the form of a text does not exhibit this sense of unity or contains elements that line up imperfectly. The reason why the absence of unity of form is associated with badness, specifically, is because the presence of unity of form is associated with goodness. However, there is a case to be made for *dissonance* of form as its own aesthetic property. A text exhibiting dissonance of form will contain moving parts that actively feel disjointed, tangential, unnecessary, or random in relation to one another. When disparate elements merely do not speak to one another, this can be unsatisfying in its disunity, when elements actively clash they create dissonance. Take the infamous scene from *The Room* (Wiseau, 2003) in which Claudette introduces that she has breast cancer only for this narrative thread to be never referenced again or hold any impact on the narrative or thematic structure of the rest of the film. There is a reason why this scene has been such a commonly-cited moment within this film’s cult community, and it is because the codified introduction of a key plot point that is never referenced beyond that scene is so jarring in its dissonance from the rest of the text that it becomes sublime.

The sublime dissonance of Claudette’s breast cancer can be read in connection with the theoretical concept of ‘ostranenie’ from Russian Formalism. Here the familiar unity of mainstream cinema is made strange, defamiliarizing our expectations of narrative to create a fresh aesthetic experience. Dissonance of form is essential to this defamiliarization effect, in which aspects of the familiar – from everyday life, existing conventions of cinema, or even the film screen itself – are destabilized (Christie 59), and this is present in other texts. In *Blue Velvet* (David Lynch, 1986) the grim subject matter of the film is juxtaposed with cinematography that

emphasizes bright colours and patriotic imagery, particularly in the opening and closing scenes of the film. Here dissonance of form is used to subtextually critique narratives of American exceptionalism by ensuring that the imagery and the content of the film do not align. Messages communicated by the narrative and the visuals both become called into question, and familiar tropes associated with youth detective fiction are made strange. Dissonance of form here is essential to this process.

### **3.2.4 Conformance to Formula**

Another property commonly associated with badness is the absence of originality. Contemporary viewers often desire art that presents new ideas, and thus evaluative associations can develop from engaging with content that feels too familiar. This can be described as a text presenting an overreliance on formula in order to work within a structure, iconography, or set of narrative beats that had been textually satisfying for viewers in the past. To some degree this is inevitable, as all art must build upon ideas that had been realized previously in order to develop new ones. Russian Formalist critics rejected the notion of originality altogether, arguing instead that every work is dependent on its relations to other systems (Thompson, “Ivan” 12). Yet there is a unique aesthetic language that develops when a text speaks through a formula that is overwhelmingly familiar, and this has come to be associated with badness.

The film *Mac and Me* (Stewart Raffill, 1988) is a beat-for-beat retelling of *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial* (Steven Spielberg, 1982) released just six years after the original film. Its heavy similarities to an existing and well-known text inevitably invite comparisons between the two. As a result of this, differences between both films can become distracting, particularly those which disrupt the unity of form in the narrative, such as the fully-choreographed dance sequence

taking place at a McDonald's birthday party – a scene that appears to exist only to advertise the restaurant chain.

The language of conformance to formula can operate in contexts that do not carry evaluative connotations as well. When framed through the lens of nostalgia, for example, this repetition of familiar narratives can read as endearing. *Stranger Things* (2015- ) makes use of a number of familiar tropes from 1980s genre fiction, often creating textual satisfaction through the recognition of its own conformance to formula. Meanwhile, when this aesthetic of overwhelming familiarity is paired with a mild aesthetic of disunity of form, yet contributing to no clear intention that can be read within the work, this familiarity produces a text that reads as mediocre, as not being especially 'interesting', even as empty.

This is an aesthetic that is arguably pursued, actively, by art under capitalism. Art produced primarily for profit will be incentivized to avoid risk, and therefore to reproduce narratives that had been financially successful or culturally impactful in the past. As John Berger describes in *Ways of Seeing*,

Hack work is not the result of either clumsiness or provincialism; it is the result of the market making more insistent demands than the art. [...] And it is in this contradiction between art and market that the explanations must be sought for what amounts to the contrast, the antagonism existing between the exceptional work and the average. (Berger 82)

It has been common practice for a long time, among Hollywood studios in particular, to produce content that is inoffensive enough that the largest potential audience will be attracted to it.

However, circumstances that could manifest as a lack of aesthetic value are not dependent upon originality, and it is possible for texts to use unoriginal ideas to present valuable narratives.

The four categories detailed above describe how certain aesthetic properties can be associated with badness. Transparency of production, discrepancy in intention, dissonance of

form, and conformance to formula are all treated as aesthetic properties here specifically to highlight how they can be better understood when divorced from an evaluative context. I have been careful to choose language that is deliberately value-neutral, articulating these properties simply as facts of how a text produces an aesthetic experience. With that said, to articulate badness as being merely a series of aesthetic properties would be incomplete. As Barthes describes, the meaning of a text is formed at the site of the reader (Barthes 6), and value-judgments are, in their own way, a unique form of making meaning out of a text. Thus, it is essential to also consider the role played by the viewer in shaping the bad film.

### **3.3 Properties of Badness On the Level of the Viewer**

What can make the term ‘bad’ particularly confusing is that while describing formal aesthetic properties of a text it simultaneously describes a relationship between text and viewer. Carroll, Stolnitz, and Thompson all recognized this as each independently described a tension within evaluative criticism between subjectivist and objectivist approaches. This indicates that there has been a strong level of disagreement over whether evaluation can be performed ‘objectively’ (articulating value as a tangible property that can be held by a text) or ‘subjectively’ (as a favourable or unfavourable response from each individual viewer).

The presence of this as a tension, described by Carroll as if these approaches cannot coexist, is a symptom of ‘bad’ being a single word that requires us to further expand its meaning. Yet to provide merely two definitions for badness does not articulate the true complexity of it, and while the role of subjectivism is significant, what we describe as ‘bad’ at this level nevertheless requires expansion. Within this subcategory there are a series of responses that each represent different relationships that a viewer may have with a text, each influencing a value-



judgment. Like the aesthetic properties, these should be articulated independently from one another with awareness of the potential for them to intersect.

### **3.3.1 Textual Dissatisfaction**

A property I have already referenced in relation to others, one of the most essential pieces to the puzzle of what we mean when describing a text as 'bad' can come from backtracking through the steps a viewer uses to reach an evaluative conclusion. Carroll described how evaluative statements must be justified through "reasons" in order to hold weight, and identifies such reasons as being "the description and/or classification and/or contextualization and/or elucidation and/or analysis of the artwork" (Carroll 153). Yet Sianne Ngai illuminates this further by arguing that these reasons come from a desire to justify subjective responses to an aesthetic object, rather than the other way around.

Aesthetic judgments, once again, thus produce a kind of illusion or apparitional quality at the level of rhetoric, analogous to that of style, by making it seem as if value judgments follow from factual ones. [...] Since aesthetic appreciation, positive or negative, always boils down to an act of projection or the externalizing objectification of subjective feeling [...], aesthetic predicates with descriptive specificity become better "tools of objectification" and, as such, more rhetorically powerful as aesthetic judgments than "undifferentiated appreciation[s] such as 'It's beautiful' or 'It's ugly.'" (Ngai, 41)

What Ngai reveals here is that evaluation originates, itself, from the place of an initial value-judgment. This value-judgment is unique to the individual and can come from a number of different sources, and one of the most significant of these can be a property as simple and non-aesthetic as textual dissatisfaction.

Textual dissatisfaction is the intrinsic, unmistakable feeling that the aesthetic experience of a text has failed to deliver a sense of fulfillment. Part of the reality of art is that sometimes,

perhaps even without reason or explanation, a viewer will simply not respond positively to a text. Perhaps the style is not to their taste, the intention of the text aims for something they are not interested in, or the execution may fall under one of the categories described in Section 3.2. Ngai compares the process of making an aesthetic judgment to the process of receiving a compliment – that just as it is the recipient of a compliment who ultimately determines if the act of complimenting was successful, it is the percipient of an aesthetic object who ultimately determines if the aesthetic experience was satisfying (Ngai 39).

Textual dissatisfaction intersects closely with all other categories described here, as this is the feeling which ultimately leads a viewer to identify a text as being “bad”. It is especially important to identify this as a *feeling*, and to separate it initially from properties of the text in order to understand it. Carroll emphasized reasons as essential to the process of evaluation, but when understanding textual dissatisfaction, it should be framed as if the feeling itself exists in the viewer before they understand those reasons, and regardless of whether the reasons are valid. A percipient may find through analysis of their dissatisfaction that they no longer agree with their initial assessment or they may also find that examining this dissatisfaction reveals aesthetic properties that they have also found dissatisfying in the past. Regardless, it is the initial gut feeling of textual dissatisfaction that happens before most aesthetic assessment.

Because this occurs at the level of the viewer, when examining it in an academic context the viewer must be centered. We are individually responsible for our own dissatisfaction, and the temptation to use theoretical tools to justify textual dissatisfaction can be significant, especially when speaking of aesthetic properties that are associated with it. It is possible for one to find themselves satisfied by the text of a film that holds aesthetic properties that are traditionally associated with badness, and it is equally possible for a viewer to find themselves dissatisfied by

the text of a film that would otherwise be considered “good”. For this reason, it is important to describe textual dissatisfaction as an independent mode of reception because, although it may be possible for this satisfaction to change, it is ultimately an individual response.

### 3.3.2 Discomfort

It is important to differentiate between textual dissatisfaction and an active sense of discomfort occurring within the viewer. Textual dissatisfaction describes an unfulfilling aesthetic experience whereas discomfort speaks more specifically to the role of pleasure. Pleasure has long been associated with the process of experiencing art, as the C.I. Lewis text engaged with by Stolnitz describes “on first hearing a piece of music, or first viewing a painting, we cannot be mistaken about our present enjoyment of it, or felt indifference or distaste” (Lewis 410). The lack of pleasure is not necessarily linked to any of the aesthetic features described in section 3.2 of this thesis, but can nonetheless influence the aesthetic evaluation performed on the text. Discomfort can come from the form or content of a work, or as the result of moral contextualization. It can also come in a physiological form from factors external to the text, such as in my experience watching *Dunkirk* (Christopher Nolan, 2017) in IMAX and finding the volume of the film to create the discomforting physical experience of a headache.

Discomfort is complicated, as it can produce unity of form when intersecting with intentionality. A text which seeks to produce discomfort in its viewer, perhaps as a means to make a particular textual argument for example, will make for a more unified experience if that discomfort is achieved. The process of perception detailed by Russian Formalism involving the sensory experience being renewed through defamiliarization (Thompson, “Ivan” 11) is not always pleasurable, and it can be troubling to watch an artwork destabilize familiar experiences

that we may take comfort in or perspectives that inform our identities. Yet a notable pleasure of art is its power to challenge, and it can be cathartic to watch the familiar societal privileging of comfort called into question. Whether this produces textual satisfaction is therefore highly subjective, as each viewer will value the role of pleasure in a different way. It is therefore important to recognize the role played by pleasure in the evaluative process, as this is a key expectation that is held towards cinema that can intersect with many of the other categories I am proposing. Yet this should be recognized as being primarily individual in nature, and therefore a variable on the assessment of aesthetic value.

### **3.3.3 Moral Contextualization**

Art does not exist within a vacuum, which is why Stolnitz proposed contextual criticism as one of the five different ‘kinds’ of criticism described in his study. Contextual criticism focuses on the text in isolation, nonaesthetically. This form of criticism uses the context around a work to explore the historical, social, or psychological implications of the art (Stolnitz 450). Contextual criticism, according to Stolnitz, describes not only the social circumstances that could influence a text, but also the social circumstances that could be influenced *by* a text. Symptomatic contextualization has a history in studies of art, film, and literature as a means of engaging with the cultural history and social context around a work of art, but it is not exclusively performed in the realm of theory.

Casual viewers perform this mode of criticism as well, just on a more informal basis. The general techniques of symptomatic contextualization can be used by a viewer to contextualize a work of art within their own moral framework. It is possible for a text to, regardless of formal qualities, present social or political ideas that the viewer feels a moral obligation to object to.

This can result in an evaluative response but this is not always the case, as said viewer may recognize a text as being politically flawed despite holding, for example, unity of form. Yet a text carrying moral associations that a viewer objects to can motivate said viewer to perform a less sympathetic interpretation of the aesthetics of the text.

Contextual social circumstances around a text are often articulated as a property held by the text itself, though it is important to recognize that it is a response occurring primarily at the level of the viewer. A film cannot embody an aesthetic property of contextual irresponsibility, but must be endowed with this by a viewer. Some texts may adopt into their intentionality a desire to be deliberately provocative, but the morality behind this is ultimately a reading produced by the viewer, and therefore it cannot be described as an aesthetic property.<sup>14</sup>

### **3.4 The Social Role of Taste**

The tension between the subjectivist and objectivist narratives of evaluative criticism articulates value as either coming from the text or individually from the viewer, yet this dichotomy is incomplete. Neither of these approaches considers the social and cultural narratives that are produced around taste or, specifically for our purposes, those produced around bad taste. “Bad taste” is often used to refer to the authoritative prescription of taste by a group or individual with the education necessary for their taste to be considered “good”. This is, of course, enormously grounded within social power structures, as the class barrier for whom is allowed to

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<sup>14</sup> I feel it is important to acknowledge on some level the social circumstances around how we talk about ‘offence’, and how the different things we describe as being offensive are often treated as equal when they are not. A raunchy comedy centering the sexualities of consenting adults and strong language encountered by someone for whom that is not their taste is not the same textual experience as a person of colour encountering a text which explicitly codifies that viewer as subhuman, and the word ‘offensive’ has, similarly to the word ‘bad’, a number of conflated meanings loosely connected by how the term is culturally invoked.

dictate taste is significant. Pierre Bourdieu called attention to this in his book *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, arguing that taste is correlated to cultural capital, and that the capacity for an individual to possess “good taste” is dependent largely on class. Bourdieu states:

A work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code, into which it is encoded. The conscious or unconscious implementation of explicit or implicit schemes of perception and appreciation which constitutes pictorial or musical culture is the hidden condition for recognizing the styles characteristic of a period, a school or an author, and, more generally, for the familiarity with the internal logic of works that aesthetic enjoyment presupposes. (Bourdieu 2)

Stolnitz engages with these notions of taste as well while discussing the premise behind objectivist evaluation, suggesting that the capacity to have ‘taste’ is not held by everyone, and is dependent upon formal education or a familiarity with the medium in question. The notion of taste is common in evaluative discourse, and thus is essential to acknowledge here. The idea that a text carries with it a formal property, accessible only to a select few, that leads it fundamentally to lack aesthetic value has been highly influential in how badness is conceptualized, and echoes of its influence can be seen in such contemporary scholars as Carroll, Sconce, or Halberstam.<sup>15</sup>

There may be some truth to the notion that having more experience with a medium can allow a percipient to have a more informed, complex response to it, yet there is an a subtext here that must be acknowledged. This is a critical framework that suggests that the aesthetic value of a text comes not from the text itself, not from the response of a viewer, but from an outside force instructing the viewer to perceive value within certain aesthetic properties or certain texts. In

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<sup>15</sup> While Sconce or Halberstam present their work explicitly as challenges to notions of taste, the fact that there is something available to be challenged speaks to the sustained influence of taste in a contemporary context.

order to describe this as a subcategory, I have therefore selected a word that re-centers the assumptions behind taste away from the quality of an individual's taste and towards the authoritative power structure implied behind this notion.

### **3.4.1 Floccinaucinihilipilification**

Among the longest words in the English language, and largely considered to be the longest non-technical word, floccinaucinihilipilification literally means “the action or habit of estimating something as worthless” (Floccinaucinihilipilification, n.). It is rarely used due to its absurd length and utter impracticality in most sentences, but perfectly describes the mode of response that I wish to engage with here. The action of floccinaucinihilipilification may have now grown to be associated more with the elitism implied behind this framework, but it continues to influence the way cinema is evaluated. The continued exposure of social discourse to authoritative descriptions of taste creates an instinctual capacity in viewers to recognize what a text that is supposed to lack aesthetic value looks like.

As viewers, we are able to recognize something worthy of floccinaucinihilipilification even without seeing it. A film such as *Nine Lives* (Barry Sonnenfeld, 2016), for example, carries with it every possible indicator of bad taste. To describe the premise (A real estate CEO played by Kevin Spacey is transformed into a cat named Mister Fuzzypants to teach him the value of spending time with his family) produces an instinctual twinge of disgust in the tasteful viewer. The poster alone communicates a level of unrelenting overly-marketable sanitization, and the tagline of the film is “His life just got put on paws”. It would be difficult for a sophisticated viewer to hold a favourable viewing stance upon beginning to watch this film. Like most texts doomed to be read within this lens of floccinaucinihilipilification, *Nine Lives* gives off the

immediate perception of trash. It exhibits a “graceless sincerity” of the “pseudo art” described by Andrew Ross as kitsch (Ross 145). While panned by critics, it does not require a professional critic to notice that *Nine Lives* is the kind of text that is not *supposed* to hold aesthetic value.

It is because of this that I argue floccinaucinihilipilification is not an event that takes place at the level of the viewer responding to the text, nor at the level of the text itself exhibiting aesthetic properties, but in the relationship between the viewer, the text, and the social norms surrounding film culture. A prospective viewer performs floccinaucinihilipilification in anticipation of how they will be perceived by society upon consuming this piece of cinema. This relationship is worth studying, as floccinaucinihilipilification is where the cultural narratives that we hold around badness can interfere with film scholarship, as it is common to approach these texts having already decided that they are unworthy of critical attention.

A history of viewers granting power to taste authorities to determine what is considered worthy of aesthetic value has influenced contemporary conceptions of taste, producing a canon of what kind art is supposed to be ‘good’. The cultural narratives that influence taste are not fixed, and a growing distrust for traditional taste authorities has introduced a shift. In many online communities, the influence behind what causes the floccinaucinihilipilification of a particular text no longer comes from film critics but from mass reception trends amongst viewership. A bandwagon effect can be observed as certain texts become popularly recognized as lacking in value, often in correlation to their saturation in popular culture. *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* (Rian Johnson, 2017) developed a strong anti-fandom response that can be attributed to this, a bandwagon that specifically rejected the overwhelmingly positive critical response received by the film for its revisionist elements, as these elements were more appealing to traditional film critics than to fans of *Star Wars* films.



Floccinaucinihilipilification, therefore, while figures like Stolnitz or Bourdieu might describe it in connection with taste or elitism, is not always the result of these influences. Floccinaucinihilipilification occurs at the relationship between a text, a viewer, and the social context that influences both. It can come not only from places of elitism but can also be imposed by a viewer upon themselves, or imposed on a text by an otherwise non-elite community.

### **3.5 The Unhelpfulness of ‘Bad’**

In this chapter I have argued that the word ‘bad’ is ineffective and must be replaced in scholarly discourse with descriptions of textual properties and viewer responses that can be articulated specifically. These properties, while intersecting, should be studied and analyzed independently from one another in order to avoid the evaluative, loosely-defined, and hierarchical associations with the word ‘bad’. By associating these properties exclusively with a lack of aesthetic value, we interfere with our capacity to engage with them at a scholarly level. Confusion aside, using a word strongly associated with evaluation to describe all of these properties is fundamentally inaccurate, as none of them are individually capable of universally robbing a text of aesthetic value. It is the act of assigning value to a text that exclusively controls its relationship to goodness or badness. As a result of this evaluation, less scholarly attention gets paid to how properties such as these can influence the ecosystem of how a text communicates, organizes itself, or engages with a viewer. Articulating badness as a fixed category with a clear definition is therefore highly flawed, and in order to develop effective scholarly writing around this mode of cinema, it must be treated as the fluid and culturally determined object that it is.

## Chapter 4: Exploring Transparency of Production

While it is one thing to separate the umbrella concept of badness into its component parts, it is quite another to separate these component parts from the value they are associated with. As argued in the introduction, evaluation is significant to the culture of how film is consumed, and the evaluative associations held towards the properties described in Chapter 3 greatly influence the way film texts are perceived. In order to expand on the arguments made in that chapter, I want to focus on just one of these aesthetic properties, divorcing it from its evaluative connotations in order to understand what can be learned when an aesthetic property associated with badness is analyzed neutrally, rather than as something that removes value from a text.

In this chapter I will thus dissect transparency of production. Each of these properties could be the subject of their own study but I have chosen this as a case study because it is often treated as a satisfactory definition for what constitutes ‘bad’ cinema. In his essay “Bad Movies”, J. Hoberman describes the technical aspect to what, in his view, makes a film “bad”:

In fact to be objectively bad, a film must relentlessly draw one’s attention away from its absurd plot. For Walter Benjamin (and even André Bazin), the seamless “equipment-free aspect of reality” that movies presented on screen was actually the “height of artifice.” The objectively bad film acknowledges this: the lie of “chronology” is confounded by imperfect continuity; “invisible” editing is ruptured by mismatched cuts; *mise en scène* is foregrounded by cloddish bits of business. [...] Such movies are unstable objects. (Hoberman 520)

In describing what makes a film “objectively” bad, Hoberman uncovers here the expectations underlying one of the most significant formal properties associated with cinematic value.

It is the ‘good’ film which carries with it an air of seamlessness, that embodies an “equipment-free aspect of reality” through “invisible” editing and a polished *mise-en-scène*. It is the ‘bad’ film which is transparent, that allows its viewer the space to witness the techniques of

production that go towards constructing its universe. As cult badfilm fans Harry and Michael Medved describe in the introduction to their book *The Golden Turkey Awards*, “we tend to see the people who make movies as demigods – larger-than-life figures who can do no wrong” (Medved and Medved 11). The classical Hollywood system emphasizes construction and seamlessness in the production as being synonymous with the aesthetic of cinema. When this seamlessness is broken however, when this “demigod” nature is revealed to be false and the techniques of production become transparent, this creates a unique aesthetic.

The association drawn by classical Hollywood between seamlessness and cinematic value leads this aesthetic to be described through the lens of technical incompetence. To treat this as a value-neutral property that can be held by a text reveals the discomfort it creates in viewers as the result of an association that has been drawn by the dominance of Hollywood norms. Key to this is the interruption of a viewer’s capacity for willing suspension of disbelief, forcing them to either consciously reassert themselves within an appropriate belief stance, or begin to notice other transparent elements as well. Regardless, the viewer recognizing transparency is no longer reading a text effortlessly, and must absorb themselves in the text through conscious direction.

Throughout this chapter I intend to explore transparency of production through a value-neutral lens, in order to understand how, as an aesthetic property, it can influence the way a film will communicate and be perceived differently when this property is held. This study, it should be noted, is designed to explicitly operate in a value-neutral register. The word ‘bad’ will be left behind as of now, not to be used for the remainder of this chapter, and other evaluative language around the texts I engage with will be avoided as well. I request that my reader treat the observations I make in the following sections not as criticisms or praises of the texts I describe, but as efforts to produce a deeper understanding of them, particularly given my choice of object.

#### 4.1 A Study of Student Films: Methodology

In order to examine transparency of production as a value-neutral aesthetic property capable of influencing the language and reception of cinema, I intend to engage in a brief study of three student films. The student film is a mode of cinema that is infused with forms of transparency at nearly every level, making it ideal for this study. Nevertheless, my choice in object remains unconventional. Student films are not usually subject to academic study, largely because they carry minimal influence over culture or the rest of the medium. The student film is also rarely watched willingly as the target audience is typically a captive one, composed of friends or family members of those involved in a production looking to support the filmmakers' creative development. Student films are not typically watched for pleasure or by conventional audiences, meaning that the tasks associated with film studies often do not apply to them. However, student films carry with them a distinct aesthetic that is easily recognizable, one that draws explicit and unavoidable attention to their own production. The student film is therefore rich with the sense of transparency that I want to focus on.

I have chosen to use student films in the hope that my object in this chapter will have a neutralizing effect on the aesthetic property I am seeking to describe. As I wish to avoid evaluation while talking about an aesthetic property with strong evaluative connotations, it is helpful to use a mode of cinema that holds an unconventional relationship to value. The viewer of a student film typically does not want to find fault with the text, consciously aware that those involved in the production are learning and have not reached the "demigod" qualities that the Medveds described in association with mainstream cinema. The aesthetic of transparency of production could be easily found in a text such as *Plan 9 From Outer Space* (Ed Wood, 1959),

but using value-neutral terminology to describe a classic piece of paracinema would risk coming across as satirical and would weaken my argument. Towards the end of this chapter I approach an opposite alternative, describing how texts including a 1965 *Doctor Who* serial and the 2017 indie film *Sylvio* make deliberate use of transparency of production to form a unique cinematic language. Yet as a viewer I possess a notable fondness for both of these texts, and writing on them in the context of evaluation could risk further destabilizing my arguments as it could appear as though I were seeking to elevate these texts to a place of aesthetic value. For these reasons, while I have chosen to reference these texts later on as they provide a valuable case study I will concentrate largely upon the neutral object of the student film to ensure that my reader may engage with the aesthetic of transparency of production through a value-neutral lens.

For the purposes of this study I have restricted my scope to student films produced by the University of British Columbia's Film Production BFA program, from third and fourth year students, that I have been granted access to by the UBC Department of Theatre and Film Visual Resources Centre. I have never met any of the cast or production crew involved with these texts, allowing me to engage with the films as I would in analyzing any other piece of cinema.

## **4.2 The Aesthetic of the Student Film**

The film *Almost Perfect* (2000, dir. Andrew Bailey) is a text that conjures the aesthetic of a student film in a way that is immediately recognizable. The film follows an awkward, unnamed, University-aged man who attempts to profess his love to a woman in his class named Chantelle. This main character leaves anonymous flowers and a note at her seat in a lecture hall, but is discouraged from claiming responsibility for the gesture due to her aggressive boyfriend and the recognition, upon seeing her up close, that she has a light moustache.

The narrative emphasis in *Almost Perfect* upon student life helps to solidify this text within a tradition of student cinema, and this contributes to the presence of transparency in the film. This student-ness is emphasized not just by the narrative itself but by the way the narrative is presented. The cinematography effectively emphasizes the presence of the camera, as scenes shot with natural lighting result in characters being occasionally backlit by an outside window. Shots are edited to last just a bit longer than they traditionally would, leaving enough space before and after the action to make the pacing feel slower, drawn out, and awkward. This awkwardness extends to the direction, as the use of over-the-shoulder shots or low-angle tilts to codify an intimidating character are presented with a static deliberateness, only furthered by the brown and beige tones of the classroom in which the majority of narrative action occurs.

This static energy is carried throughout the film, and is further emphasized in the performances of the actors. Simultaneously stilted yet overplayed, characters communicate their intentions through a language that reads with elements of deliberate camp, yet without the organic fluidity associated with camp. There is a brief moment upon the departure of Chantelle's boyfriend in which an intentionality to codify her as 'quirky' can be observed. Transporting herself almost instantaneously to the main character's side from across the room, Chantelle holds up the note he wrote for her and asks, excitedly, "did you write this note?" This moment can be argued as aiming towards a sense of deliberate camp in how the movement of the character feels robotic and heavily planned, as if the note is being raised to a precise location of the frame. Yet because the rest of the film does not carry this sense of precision, the robotic movement appears in dissonance with the character's diegetic excitement at the possibility of being courted.

This contrast between the physical and emotional delivery of the line becomes, therefore, transparent as a viewer is able to create an imagined thought process behind the actor. It becomes

easy to imagine the actor raising the prop into frame because she was specifically instructed to do so, and simultaneously delivering a line that is necessary for the narrative to progress. The character begins to read less as a fictional person for the viewer to identify with, but instead as a cog in a predetermined narrative machine. A contrast forms between the robotic movements of the actor and her excitable delivery which implies that this moment was the result of deliberate choices. This causes a viewer's awareness of the text as an artificial object to transition from a passive, unconscious awareness to an unavoidable truth. The spectator then begins to consider the authorial reasoning that could have produced a choice like this and whether that desired affect has been achieved, forgetting to invest themselves in the fiction as a result.

As the viewer becomes distanced from the fiction of the scene, it may become discomfiting to experience and encourage an evaluative response, but *Almost Perfect* is forming a unique narrative language through this. The moment when Chantelle introduces her note could alternatively be read through an intentionality to codify this moment within the aesthetic property of "cute", one identified by Sianne Ngai as representing a difference of power between subject and object (Ngai 87). Before this moment, Chantelle held narrative power through the main character's infatuation with her, yet in being won over by his note and giving him an opportunity to claim responsibility for it, she offers that power to him. However, this moment serves a dual purpose, as following this moment the character responsible for the note is suggested to be reconsidering his feelings. The camera directs our attention to a shot-reverse-shot revealing that he has noticed her moustache, implying a causal relationship between said moustache and his refusal to claim ownership of the note. Therefore, Chantelle is now meant to read as unsettling, and the transparency produced by her actor's performance contributes to a

unity of form. When read through this lens, all of the aesthetic qualities present in *Almost Perfect* are unified under a thematic awkwardness that is consistent with the persona of the protagonist.

The narrative of *Almost Perfect* therefore represents both a story that only the student film would be willing to tell in its dry presentation of undergraduate life,<sup>16</sup> but is also very much a story that only the student film *can* tell. The sense of the mundane that carries through the film emphasizes the main character's lonely awkwardness, painting a picture of the internal world of this student that is uniquely emphasized by the slow cuts and beige-toned aesthetic. As the film progresses, the main character's persona is seamlessly reflected by the stilted aesthetic of the film, as if our narrator is imbuing the world of the text with the same inelegant unfamiliarity that he can be interpreted to feel towards his own experience with social interaction. *Almost Perfect* therefore presents a unified aesthetic, one that is specifically tied to the transparency of production that defines the text. Transparency of production here does not add or remove value from the text in question, but instead represents an essential component of how the film works.

Yet regardless of how it works, the film remains a discomfoting viewing experience, one that comes from its transparency of production but intersects with conformance to formula. The plot of this film presents a familiar narrative trope of the love triangle, between the propositioner, Chantelle, and her boyfriend. This is represented not only in the trope's most basic form entirely devoid of irony or self-awareness, but in a short film with no room for subplots. This requires the narrative of the love triangle to become a central, defining feature of the text. As a result of this, the film inadvertently begins to draw attention to the love triangle as a cliché. The combination

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<sup>16</sup> The university setting in my observation is rarely used as a neutral backdrop onto which a story emphasizing the mundane is presented, outside of the student film.



of this conformance to formula with an aesthetic of transparency and a notable viewer discomfort is not uncommon. However, an average viewer when presented with a blend such as this will likely find the formula to be the most recognizable, forming the strongest evaluative associations towards the observable cliché, as this is the most tangible property observable in this dynamic.

For a viewer, the discomfort produced by *Almost Perfect* encourages a recognition of the love triangle as a narrative trope, specifically in relation to the film's transparency. The aesthetic experience of recognizing a narrative formula contributes to the transparent aesthetic, producing associations between this trope and the discomfort associated with recognizing it in other texts. Discomfort and transparency of production are features of a text that we may correlate with a lack of value, but in fact this kind of process is key to the evolution of narrative form. When this occurs in mainstream cinema transparency can not only force viewers to recognize the circumstances behind a text's production, but allow a viewer to recognize the ideological norms that ground a text, encouraging contextual criticism.

This film operates, therefore, at the intersection of a number of the aesthetic properties I have described. Transparency of production, discomfort, conformance to formula, moral contextualization: these are not isolated. I choose to separate them because it allows for a better understanding of their influence on one another, and how said influence can aid in the evolution of film as a medium. Ultimately, it is through their intersections that they must be understood, yet to describe these properties collectively would make analysis of this intersection impractical.

### **4.3 The Ambition of the Student Film**

Earlier in this chapter, I suggested that a lack of academic engagement with student films stemmed in part from the mode holding little influence over culture or other forms of cinema.

This is a claim I wish to partially retract. Student films do hold the potentiality for influence, but only in a closed circuit. Small groups of students will watch the same student films from within the community of their class and likely influence one another. It may be uncommon for the influence of these texts to travel beyond this, but influence does not operate in a single direction. The student film is heavily influenced by other texts within the medium, and can respond to narrative or stylistic cycles just as mainstream cinema can. The ambition in pursuit of a style or narrative that the student filmmaker has found inspiring is a notable feature of the student film which can make this mode of cinema endearing. Despite this, the ambition of the student film can also heavily contribute to this aesthetic of transparency, as the narrative or stylistic trends being imitated have been distilled into a format that can appear clunky and inorganic.

This is noticeably the case in *The Escape of Conrad Lard-bottom* (Shaun McKinlay, 2008), a film which follows a child named Conrad whose three siblings have each died in increasingly morbid ways. Conrad's mother, hoping to protect her last surviving son, restricts his access to the outside world. Conrad is unwilling to accept this imprisonment in his mother's home, however, and concocts a number of elaborate plans to murder her in the hope of freedom, each of which fails entirely as the result of coincidence.

*The Escape of Conrad Lard-bottom* exhibits a clear ambition to make its own escape from the confines of the student film aesthetic, presenting narrative and stylistic devices that situate the film within a cycle of "dark humour with a whimsical twist" texts that appear to have been common in the mid-2000s. Texts such as *Big Fish* (Tim Burton, 2003), *Lemony Snicket's A Series of Unfortunate Events* (Brad Silberling, 2004), or *Pushing Daisies* (Bryan Fuller, 2007-2009) appear to influence this student film. Story action in *The Escape of Conrad Lard-bottom* is narrated by a voiceover delivered entirely in Dr. Seuss-esque rhyming couplets, a fish-eye lens

accentuates certain shots, an animated opening credits sequence gives the text a storybook quality, and elements of the production design suggest a level of intended precision in the style. This is a set of stylistic decisions that appears to have been popular at the time this film was produced, with *Pushing Daisies* premiering just one year prior to this film's production.

However, this leads to a heightened reading of transparency as the style it aims for is one that requires a high level of production value and strict control over the *mise-en-scène*. It is difficult to achieve this in the context of a student film, as these elements are not typically accessible to inexperienced productions with limited resources. This visible ambition held by *The Escape of Conrad Lard-bottom* is therefore one that cannot be fully realized due to the limitations of its production, yet the ambition in pursuit of its intended style is unavoidably present. The transparency in this film then becomes highlighted by moments where the text comes just close enough to its own intentionality that this ambition can be recognized, yet is ultimately held back by its own transparency. The visual style of *The Escape of Conrad Lard-bottom* communicates an intention to produce a heavily stylized *mise-en-scène*, yet the lack of precision in framing, symmetry in set design, or consistency in colour palate is not possible in this kind of production. Other elements of the *mise-en-scène*, while whimsical and divorced from reality, become transparent in their inability to construct a reality more believable than that which concedes the techniques by which the film was produced. Conrad's hair, for example, contributes to the stylized aesthetic by appearing precise and heavily groomed, yet is so clearly a wig that a viewer must deliberately avoid thinking of it as such so as not to slip into a conscious recognition of the transparency. The animated opening title sequence carries with it the whimsical, storybook qualities that define the rest of the film, yet are not polished in the way a similar credits sequence operates at the end of *Lemony Snicket's A Series of Unfortunate Events*.

While it is best characterized as unfair to compare a student film with a major studio production, by aiming for such ambitious techniques this comparison is inevitably drawn by the text and influences a viewer's perception of it. Prominent in transparency of production is an aesthetic of incompleteness, a quality that intersects with intentionalism as the recognizable intention prompts the viewer to assess whether that intention has been reached. The recognizable ambition of *The Escape of Conrad Lard-bottom*, combined with the discrepancy in this intention, requires the viewer to consciously fill in holes while watching this film with their own imagination. In order to understand *The Escape of Conrad Lard-bottom*, a viewer therefore needs to recognize what is being aimed for and complete the text themselves, taking cues from the film and consciously filling in the blanks to fulfill the intentionality of the text in their own mind. A viewer is able to do this because transparency of production is not only an aesthetic property that can be held by a text, it is also a viewing stance that influences its own perception.

#### **4.4 Transparency of Production as a Viewing Stance**

While transparency of production has historically been an aesthetic associated with a level of 'technical incompetence', student films can hold transparency regardless of the relative 'competence' of the filmmaking. This is because transparency of production is influenced by the viewing stance of the spectator just as much as it is by the relative seamlessness of the text. The viewing stance required of a student film is a complicated one. A viewer simultaneously wants to read the text favourably, aware that what they are watching is an imperfect step in the learning process of the filmmakers, yet this viewer also carries with them a set of base expectations for film as a medium. The student film thus reads, through these expectations, as incomplete, not as its own self-contained entity but as part of the filmmakers' learning process. This viewing stance

comes from a place of good faith on the part of the viewer and is ultimately favourable towards the film itself, but nonetheless sees the text as an incomplete step towards what it *could* be, with less focus of the reading directed towards what it *is*.

Because the spectator watching a student film is reading the text as an incomplete entity tied to the creative development of its filmmaker, they are less likely to identify with characters or narrative beats, and are more likely to identify with the filmmakers themselves. The film *The Last Stop* (Eric Brunt, 2016) is a fourth-year production about a character nearing the completion of his undergrad, experiencing anxiety towards the uncertainty of the future and pressures of entering adulthood. This narrative thus reads less as the development of a unique character, but leads the viewer to read that character as a stand-in for the filmmaker. This occurs specifically as the result of the aforementioned viewing stance.

In *Breaking the Glass Armor*, Kristin Thompson describes the fabula-syuzhet distinction from Russian Formalism. The syuzhet is the structured set of all causal events as presented in the film itself (Thompson 38-39), translated into English as the “plot”. The fabula, meanwhile, is the mentally constructed, chronological, causally linked material that a viewer has produced from the syuzhet (39), translated as the “story”. To watch a film, Thompson proposes through Formalist theory, involves taking plot elements delivered out of chronological order by the text to construct a story which makes the plot make sense. In a student film, piecing together the fabula from the syuzhet can cause a viewer to imagine not the outside world of the characters, but instead that of the filmmaker. In my own experience, I do not find myself extending the world of *The Last Stop* in my own mind, but imagining instead how the writer/director is structuring this narrative around his own existential crisis upon the impending completion of his

degree. I find myself connecting to this experience as one I remember from the end of my own undergrad, but recognizing this as a feature of transparency nonetheless.

This recognition changes the way the text is perceived. *The Last Stop* ends with a visual metaphor, as the main character must chase down a large yellow school bus, driven by an older version of himself who does not know where it is going, and accept the uncertainty of his future. For the viewer aware that *The Last Stop* is a student film, it can be possible to recognize things that they might not otherwise have. For example, one might notice that the bus picks up from outside the Chan Centre on UBC campus, a building in which many required UBC film classes are held. For the filmmaker to shoot a scene in which his self-insert character chooses to symbolically leave for adulthood from outside a familiar lecture hall reads as a deliberate choice. I made this recognition upon initially watching the film, following this by also recognizing that, because this was a student film, it was likely funded by the filmmakers out of pocket. This recognition pulled me out of the fiction and drew attention to the heavy-handedness of the bus as a visual metaphor given how expensive of a choice it appears to be. It has since been brought to my attention that because school bus drivers own their vehicles it is more likely that the filmmaker merely recruited help from a friend with a bus,<sup>17</sup> yet this does not change the perception of transparency that I experienced upon first viewing the film.

#### **4.5 Transparency of Production as an Aesthetic Language**

The student film is a mode of cinema heavily influenced by transparency of production, both in how it is perceived and how it communicates aesthetically. However as an aesthetic

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<sup>17</sup> It has been confirmed through an informal Facebook search that this is most likely the case.

property, transparency is often described as holding a causal relationship to aesthetic value, essentially as a form of authorial mistake. Yet it is not the transparency itself which robs a text of its aesthetic value, but the associations that viewers hold with transparency that produces textual dissatisfaction. Like any other aesthetic property, transparency of production should be articulated as a feature of how a text communicates rather than a flaw in its execution, and reframing the property in this way can allow us to better understand certain texts.

The original run of cult science fiction series *Doctor Who* (1963-1989) was defined by a heavy aesthetic of transparency of production. This series would draw attention to its low budget through a roughly textured visual aesthetic and special effects constructed from household items such as papier-mâché or bubble wrap.<sup>18</sup> However, in the 1965 serial *The Rescue* the series plays off an expectation towards transparency that had developed around the show in the first two years of its run, utilizing this as a narrative device to signpost away from an upcoming plot twist. Towards the end of the final episode the villain of the serial, a monstrous-looking figure referred to as Koquillion, removes a mask to reveal himself to be a human character introduced earlier. This is a moment that Elizabeth Sandifer describes in her essay on the episode as playing directly upon the aesthetic expectations for transparency that had been established for *Doctor Who*.

Because the whole reason we assumed that Koquillion was a monster was that he looked like a man in a rubber suit. In the context of *Doctor Who*, looking like a man in a rubber suit is extremely convincing evidence that you are an alien and possibly a monster. Watching *Doctor Who*, in fact, requires that we rarely assume a man in a rubber suit to actually be a man in a rubber suit. And so [*The Rescue*] pulls off the absolutely brilliant trick of hiding the villain in the most obvious place ever. Nobody will ever think that the man in a rubber suit is secretly a man in a rubber suit! This is also gleefully meta, in that it makes it clear that the show has known from the start that its effects were wobbly, and thus that the effects have never been about

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<sup>18</sup> Specifically here I am referring to the Zarbi in the serial *The Web Planet* (1964) and the Wirrn in *The Arc in Space* (1974) respectively.

being persuasive illusions, but rather have been tools in a particular sort of storytelling. The limitations of the effects are part of the narrative structure of *Doctor Who*. (Sandifer 138)

Transparency of production can therefore function, as demonstrated by this episode of *Doctor Who*, not merely as an aesthetic property that imbues a text with a lack of value. It can, instead, represent an essential element behind how the text communicates.

There is an untapped potential for a unique cinematic language to develop out of transparency of production. The film *Sylvio* (Albert Birney and Kentucker Audley, 2017) is a text that speaks through a deliberate language of transparency, making the capacity for an audience to see how the text was produced essential to how it communicates. Based on a Vine channel and funded entirely through Kickstarter, *Sylvio* follows a gorilla named Sylvio who lives a mundane life in human society. Sylvio's only solace from his job as a debt collector is through the artistic expression he finds in a series of independently produced puppet show videos he calls "The Quiet Times with Herbert Herpels". When the audience of a local talk show makes a sensation out of him breaking things on live television Sylvio suddenly has a platform, and he must struggle with how he conceptualizes his art: as something he makes for himself to be fulfilled by, or something he should do for the entertainment of others.

*Sylvio* as a film operates on the intertextual relationship between the text of *Sylvio* itself as a labour of love by its filmmakers and Kickstarter backers, and the diegetic text of "The Quiet Times with Herbert Herpels" as a labour of love for Sylvio. Where this transparency produced discomfort in a text like *The Last Stop*, here it is engaged with self-reflexively – producing in the text a simultaneous paracinematic irony and genuine sincerity, both of which allow *Sylvio* to speak with a unity of form stemming specifically from its low-budget production and the viewing stance it encourages.



The viewing stance produced by this tension mirrors that of the student film in its unique combination of skepticism and favourability<sup>19</sup>. The aesthetic of *Sylvio* even feels like a feature-length student film at times, yet holds a tightness about it that allows this aesthetic to feel deliberate. Sets are dressed haphazardly with tacky items that appear to have been found either in garage sales, thrift shops, or various crew members' grandmothers' basements. Much of the acting, particularly from secondary and tertiary characters, feels stilted and forced. During the scene in which Sylvio's friend Al has his belongings repossessed by the bank, it becomes abundantly clear that the filmmakers rented a moving truck, printed out a medium-sized sheet of paper with the word "REPO" written on it in Helvetica font<sup>20</sup>, and attached the page to the truck. Sylvio himself, as in *The Rescue*, is played by what is clearly a man in a rubber suit, a choice that makes him feel actively out of place in a world much more grounded than that of *Doctor Who*.

These aesthetic choices individually could produce a form of transparency of production that would feel awkward, unsettling, or discomfiting yet when taken together they combine to form a unique cinematic language. *Sylvio* begins to speak through the pseudo-art aesthetic of kitsch in its set decoration, through a self-awareness of its status as a film funded through Kickstarter and based off a Vine channel, and through an ironic sincerity in the way its narrative is presented. This produces a unity of form, a tightness that allows the whole text to speak clearly. Here, transparency of production becomes itself the language *Sylvio* uses to communicate through, and a large part of what makes *Sylvio* a textually satisfying experience.

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<sup>19</sup> It can be argued that watching a film that has been funded entirely through Kickstarter can, in some cases, produce a similar transparent viewing stance that the student film does.

<sup>20</sup> Specifically, "Helvetica standard in bold that's been put on a text block and stretched vertically with a slight horizontal stretch or perhaps positive tracking" according to an informally consulted font expert.

#### 4.6 This Experiment in Context

In this chapter I have chosen one of the properties proposed in Chapter 3 to engage with in-depth. Future studies can and should be performed into the others, but for the purposes of this thesis it is essential to demonstrate how my proposed language could be used in practice in the context of a single case study. By concentrating on one of these properties and divorcing it from value I have demonstrated that the student film is a mode of cinema that speaks through a unique aesthetic language, one that can be recognized in other non-student texts as an unconventional form of meaning-making. Transparency of production is, therefore, not the universal indicator of objective badness proposed by Hoberman but instead its own aesthetic property that can aid in the understanding of a text.

Despite all of this, transparency of production remains an aesthetic property that is associated with technical incompetence and a lack of aesthetic value. As a result, this is an aesthetic property that is unable to receive the kind of scholarly attention necessary to engage with its contribution to the cinematic form, or for the discomfort it produces to be properly interrogated. When parts of the language of cinema are themselves undervalued and the expectations of viewers are not fully examined, valuable opportunities to learn about the structure and reception patterns of film as a medium are lost. It is in part the subtextual presence of evaluation in film scholarship that produces this, and the norms of film studies must evolve before this discipline is prepared to answer these kinds of questions. A space needs to be carved in scholarly discourse for texts that have been determined for one reason or another to lack aesthetic value. The language used to describe the properties associated with badness needs to evolve away from evaluation. In my final chapter, I will propose how I believe this can be accomplished.

## **Chapter 5: Conclusion**

### **5.1 Step Zero for Larger Projects**

This thesis has aimed to construct a language that describes badness not as the absence of aesthetic value but instead as an accidental conflation of different aesthetic properties. This language is designed to be used in future research projects to bring clarity to writing on bad cinema by prioritizing the understanding of a text over its evaluation. This language is meant to be compatible with two key approaches in the history of scholarship around evaluation simultaneously; that which describes value as a property of a text (objectivism), and that which describes value as an individual response from a viewer (subjectivism).

Without establishing a more precise language to use when talking about badness in cinema, other academic studies performed in this area will be limited by the vagueness of their own terminology. As I have demonstrated, there has historically been minimal agreement regarding how to define aesthetic value, and even when scholars use common terminology it can hold radically different meanings based on the source. Therefore, as other studies into bad cinema begin to take shape it is important that the language of these studies be interrogated. For the nonspecific terminology of badness to go unchallenged would risk studying bad cinema oppositionally, as merely a bad object from which to better understand what makes for a ‘good’ piece of cinema. For the evaluative connotations of this language to not be phased out would risk conflating film scholarship with film criticism, becoming distracted by the need to demonstrate a value judgment through analysis rather than using that analysis to better understand the text and how aesthetic properties may change the way it speaks. My solution, to articulate badness as a

set of value-neutral and distinct aesthetic properties, clarifies what is being discussed and avoids the potential for evaluative conclusions to limit theoretical engagement with a text.

To take an example, many of these issues can be found in J. Hoberman's article "Bad Movies" which, while largely describing transparency of production, assumes that the reader understands what is meant by the "Objectively Bad" film. Hoberman provides no explicit definition for this nor a defense for the notion that a film can be "objectively" bad, despite this being a heavily contested topic in aesthetic theory. Hoberman instead provides half-definitions throughout, describing the objectively bad film as that which "transcends taste" (Hoberman 518), a circular definition which defines badness in relation to taste, which is itself defined in relation to badness. Hoberman also describes the objectively bad film as one which is "usually made against all odds in a handful of days on a breathtakingly low budget" (519) which merely describes production circumstances rather than the text of the film, excludes a large number of notably bad films, and likely describes some 'good' movies as well. The cinema of Oscar Micheaux is also identified in relation to Hoberman's notion of objective badness, described as "his camera ground relentlessly on while the key light wandered, traffic noise obliterated the dialogue, or a soundman's arm intruded upon the frame" (526). Here Hoberman is describing what I have called transparency of production, yet Hoberman's analysis still conflates different forms of badness with one another. He also describes the objectively bad film as being "almost always targeted at the most exploitable or *lumpen* sections of the movie audience (ethnic minorities, teen-agers, subliterate, 42<sup>nd</sup> street derelicts)" (520). This describes, rather than the formal properties of the objectively bad text, demographics that a text may be targeted towards. This could be much more accurately described as a form of floccinaucinihilipilification, but as a result of his conflation of different forms of badness, what this sentence implies is unclear. Is

Hoberman referring here to how there is a correlation between texts that hold a cultural relationship with ‘bad’ taste and an aesthetic of transparency of production as a result of their low budgets? Or is Hoberman here exhibiting floccinaucinihilipilification uncritically, stating that it is the target audience of a text that makes it “objectively bad”?

Hoberman is not the only scholar whose writing on badness would benefit from more precise, less evaluative language. For writers such as Jeffery Sconce or I.Q. Hunter, the word ‘trash’ is often used in reference to bad cinema. This is revealing to a reader, as ‘trash’ is a word that conventionally refers to an object that is no longer functional and, for the betterment of society, must be removed in order to be out of sight, out of mind, and defined exclusively in relation to its own worthlessness. I admit that can be efficient if not satisfying to describe a film as being trash, but the evaluative connotations of this language only articulate the text in relation to its lack of value. Further, ‘trash’ only describes a specific relationship that the bad text has with society rather than a tangible textual property or reception pattern that can be analyzed.

Evaluative language, while efficient in communicating a text’s badness, does not describe all manifestations of the aesthetic properties associated with the word ‘bad’. Evaluation is counterproductive when describing, for example, student films. The aesthetic of the student film is not effectively described by the word ‘trash’. The student film does not produce the deep satisfaction described by *The Golden Turkey Awards* in the moment when the “demigods” of Hollywood are revealed to be just as prone to making mistakes as anyone else (Medved and Medved 11). In my study of student films, I was able to isolate the aesthetic of transparency of production and demonstrate the different ways it can manifest, holding different effects on the text and on the viewer in different circumstances. A study such as this requires specific, nonevaluative language in order to be effectively performed, and is therefore intended to

demonstrate the opportunities opened up by this project. I was careful to restrict the language I used to talk about the films in this chapter however, and found this strategy to be useful in ensuring precision in my analysis. In order to allow for the techniques I use here to be replicated, built upon, or interrogated by a future scholar, I will outline below the restrictions that I held myself to throughout this thesis to resolve many of the challenges I have argued come with studying bad cinema.

## **5.2 How I Have Written About Bad Movies**

As established in Chapter 3, the word ‘bad’ is itself among the most significant challenges in studying bad cinema. Its lack of a singular, clear definition makes it difficult to reference explicitly, let alone to demonstrate the presence of in a particular text. The evaluative connotations of this word restrict the conclusions that can be reached in a given study, making it largely counterproductive. ‘Bad’ is not itself an aesthetic category that texts can belong to, and I have deliberately avoided using it as a descriptor for any specific text throughout this thesis.

While I may have largely avoided words such as ‘bad’ or ‘trash’ for the sake of clarity, there have remained circumstances where these words were necessary, and thus I have not eliminated them entirely. The word ‘bad’ still holds prominent meaning in a colloquial context, and to avoid it altogether would disconnect the writing from reality, becoming inaccessible to most readers and producing a lack of clarity. As a result, the word ‘bad’ does remain relevant to studies of badness, but I have restricted its use to certain circumstances.

For example, in broad descriptions of the umbrella concept itself I found ‘bad’ to be an efficient means of communicating which mode of cinema I was describing. The word ‘bad’ may be vague in nature, but that makes it useful when describing the vague concept as a collective.

These aesthetic properties may be separate but they still intersect with one another, and while the word ‘bad’ may be problematic, it can still be effective at describing all of them simultaneously.

Further, the word ‘bad’ was useful to me when describing the reputation or reception of a text. Viewers often report on their experience with a film using evaluative language or by borrowing tools from film criticism. Thus, I found it appropriate to use the term when describing the response viewers have had to a film, the reputation held by a film as lacking in value, or the self-reported relationship a viewer has experienced with a film – including when said receptions were hypothetical. When I have referred to a spectator describing a text as “bad”, however, I made sure to place double quotation marks around the term to clarify that I was not describing a text this way myself, but rather how the text may be described by another individual.

I would also use the word ‘bad’ in meta-analyses of the word ‘bad’ itself as a label. If ‘bad’ is a label assigned by viewers, the word becomes useful when examining which contexts that label becomes invoked in. An analysis of the cutoff for what gets to be considered ‘bad’ – in various social contexts, in different times and places, within different communities, from different textual properties – is the kind of study that the work of this thesis would allow me to perform in the future and would require me to use words such as ‘bad’. However, it may have been noticed that when using the word ‘bad’ in this context I have placed it in single quotation marks, as a means to clarify that I was not invoking the term in itself but instead describing circumstances around how it can be used.

I have argued that the word ‘bad’ ultimately represents the association that has developed at the intersection between a number of aesthetic properties and patterns of reception. In Chapter 3, I broke these down into specific aesthetic properties, including transparency of production, discrepancy in intention, dissonance of form, and conformance to formula, along with patterns of

reception that included textual dissatisfaction, discomfort, moral categorization, and floccinaucinihilipilification. These phrases represent more efficient means of speaking directly to the aesthetic experience or viewer response in question, and can be used in place of ‘bad’ whenever it is advantageous to do so. I have developed this terminology in the hopes that myself or other scholars may find them useful in the future.

Another strategy that I found especially valuable, specifically in my study of student films, was to ensure that the focus of my theory would center the text itself rather than the filmmaker or process. I have found that a common temptation when writing on bad cinema is to describe said badness as the fault of the filmmaker, resulting from a lack of skill or experience, or production circumstances such as a limited budget. This comes from a form of intentionalism which specifically emphasizes an author – forming a distraction from textual properties or patterns of reception. Centering the process describes how a text came to possess its lack of value, rather than examining how it works aesthetically or the role badness plays in its reception. Thus I treated each film as a finished product rather than as a flawed object that required fixing. This allowed more neutrality while describing the texts, and avoided tangents into the speculation of how such properties came to present themselves within the text in question.

Finally, I made a point to repeatedly acknowledge value as a cultural relationship between viewer expectations and aesthetic properties, rather than either of those individually. I drew a rough line between badness as a series of aesthetic properties and badness as a mode of reception, but it was important for me to understand these as not being mutually exclusive. Compelling arguments have been made for objectivism and subjectivism individually, but there is little evidence to suggest that the two must be treated in opposition to one another. The value of a text is ultimately a fluid relationship that is held between its aesthetic properties and social



or cultural perception, rather than a formal property that it can possess in and of itself. As Stolnitz argued with his proposal of objective relativism, badness happens at the intersection between the text, the percipient, and the culture around both. Ultimately though, value is assigned by a viewer, and it is essential to be aware of this while writing on badness.

### **5.3 Conclusion**

In colloquial discourse, we tend to articulate badness in terms that are automatic, unchanging, and indisputable. This is a norm that holds influence over the way we interact with cinema, including within the realm of film scholarship. As the discipline of film studies continues to evolve, the examination of different areas of this medium will help to further piece together how it works and how to understand its cultural influence.

In order to develop a truly comprehensive understanding of this medium, no form of it should go underacknowledged. In this thesis I have argued that the aesthetic properties described here, while intersecting, are connected largely by their association with a mode of cinema that is considered to lack aesthetic value. The way to get around this is not to avoid talking about these properties, avoid talking about these texts, or to avoid talking about evaluation, but to separate these out to study as distinct yet intersecting entities with language that is precise and value-neutral.

It is essential for film studies not to uncritically accept the presence of bad movies as an inevitability of film reception. Instead, film scholars must seek to understand why it is something thought of as an inevitability, and what influence this can have upon the text and reception of this medium. Any viewer can recognize a bad movie, but the circumstances that form this recognition are far more complex than that which is implied by the single-syllable word 'bad'.

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