B for Bad Cinema: Aesthetics, Politics and Cultural Value

A Report by Ramon Lobato, University of Melbourne, Australia

Film studies has tended to be most comfortable in the realm of the exceptional (the masterpiece, the progressive text, the filmic controversy) and the popular (the blockbuster, the classical Hollywood film, the genre text). By and large, it has had less to say about the rest of film culture – the many thousands of films which do not get reviewed by critics, which lack the production values to be taken seriously as cinema, or which confound or contest norms of taste, aesthetics, and textual quality.

Welcome to the world of B for Bad Cinema: Aesthetics, Politics and Cultural Value, a three-day conference hosted by Film and Television Studies in the School of English, Communications and Performance Studies at Monash University. Held at the University's Clayton campus in south-eastern Melbourne, B for Bad Cinema was a welcome opportunity to hear from over a hundred scholars about recent research on a wide variety of topics and texts, loosely connected under the bad film rubric.

Presenters travelled from across Australia and New Zealand to attend, with some hailing from universities as far afield as Taiwan, Denmark, the USA, Canada, Wales, India, and Malaysia. This was the first time a conference of this size has addressed bad cinema in Australasia, and it is one of the few events of its type to have been held anywhere in the world.

Keynote addresses by international guest speakers Ernest Mathijs (University of British Columbia), Murray Pomerance (Ryerson University), and Jamie Sexton (Aberystwyth University) each took a different slant on the theme. Mathijs provided a fascinating discussion of how notoriously inept films like The Room and Troll 2, which unwittingly defy the technical norms of narrative cinema through continuity and pacing errors, can change the way we experience time. Sexton surveyed a series of historical precedents for the study of cult cinema, while Pomerance explored the on-screen depiction of badness through a discussion of evil film characters from Hitler to Hannibal Lecter.

In other keynotes, Melbourne-based critic and scholar Adrian Martin (Monash) offered a reading of the films of French art director Jean-Claude Brisseau through the lens of debates around badfilm, thus opening up a new perspective on a concept which is usually applied only to forms of commercial cinema, while Angela Ndalianis (University of Melbourne) surveyed recent developments in the zombie film genre along with cross-media migrations of zombies into literature, comics, and video games.

Parallel sessions were divided into five streams, so unfortunately I was able to sample only a small number of the papers on offer. Many presenters approached the topic by focussing on B genres and their contemporary reincarnations. Mark Ryan (Queensland University of Technology) offered a richly detailed industrial analysis of recent Australian horror production, ranging from major titles like Wolf Creek through to ultra-low-budget "credit-card" horror films sold through international long-tail circuits. Several papers in other parallel streams also focussed on genres such as splatter, blaxploitation, sexploitation, J-horror, the giallo film, and reality TV. Even Brazilian women-in-prison movies were covered in a paper by Antonio Marcio da Silva (Birkbeck University of London).
Other papers introduced a new dimension to debates around bad film by considering the ethics of film/TV production and circulation. Sun Jung (Victoria University) examined a recent controversy in Korean TV involving the sexual and economic exploitation of young female soap stars which culminated in the tragic death of the starlet Jang Ja-Yeon.

In her study of Filipino *pito-pito* films, Shirlita Africa Espinosa (University of Sydney) developed a compelling critique of some of the assumptions and exclusions which structure the reception of "bad" cinema from developing nations. This was also a theme echoed in film critic Ekky Imanjaya's paper on the so-called "exploitation" films of New Order Indonesia. Both papers called attention to the US/Eurocentrism of cult film distribution, which removes Asian film cultures from their sociocultural contexts and repackages them as third-world kitsch for consumption by first-world cinephiles. These critical perspectives on what is often erroneously understood in the West as Asian cult cinema were a welcome addition to existing discourse around this topic.

Tessa Dwyer (University of Melbourne) explored issues of language in cinema, focussing on bad subtitling and dubbing practices. Dwyer raised a series of important questions about the functions of translation as both a cross-cultural mediator and an agent of meaning in its own right, and made a strong case for an emergent "error theory" through which to study the textual modifications, additions, and subtractions which are inherent in all acts of filmic translation.

The panel "Teaching Bad Objects in Film Studies", chaired by Jodi Brooks (University of New South Wales), Therese Davis (Monash) and Belinda Smaill (Monash), canvassed pedagogical issues around both good and bad cinema, touching on the material constraints and implicit value assumptions that shape what is screened in university film/TV studies classes.

Day two of the conference culminated in a party at the The Order of Melbourne, an inner-city bar, with local soul DJ Mohair Slim spinning film-related B-sides and rarities. The conference also featured a meeting to discuss the foundation of a proposed National Association of Film Studies – Australian film scholars should hear more about this initiative in the coming months.

Throughout the three days of *B for Bad Cinema*, a small army of volunteers ensured the smooth running of the conference, working tirelessly with the organising committee of Alexia Kannas, Claire Perkins, Con Veveris, and Julia Vassilieva. On behalf of all attendees, I extend my thanks to everyone involved in *B for Bad Cinema* for an enjoyable and stimulating event.

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