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Abstract: Paracinema is widely defined in terms of its binary opposition to Hollywood cinema, making it Hollywood's 'bad other'. This proposes Hollywood as the opposite of bad, and therefore good. Underlying this conceptualization is a Hollywood-centric approach to studying film in which the globally dominant cinema sets the standard by which all other cinemas are judged - and often to be found lacking. Paradoxically, cinemas seen to oppose Hollywood often tend to be valorized at the expense of the globally dominant cinema which is denigrated. Thus good becomes bad and bad is perceived as good. Hollywood, however, is seen to be doubly bad: not only is it accused of 'ruining all the cinemas in Europe', it is the 'significant bad other' from which all other cinemas need to be protected. In this scenario, cinemas are imagined to possess rigid and impermeable boundaries preserving distinctions of taste. These borders supposedly keep Hollywood conservative and immune from the ideas, images and sounds of bad cinema while those erected around bad cinema are thought to keep Hollywood out and protect paracinema's essence and 'otherness'. This article proposes replacing the notion of fixed cinematic borders within a Hollywood-centric screenscape with that of a chaotic, fluid screenscape in which global cultural flows carry 'badness' between cinemas in a transnational imaginary. In challenging the common perception of Hollywood's relationship to its 'bad other', it asks whether a cinema commonly perceived to abhor the excess, low production values and sleaze of bad cinema is widely imagined to be bad itself. But just how bad is bad, what value can we place on badness, and do two bads make a good?

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Hollywood: Bad cinema’s bad ‘other’

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Paracinema is widely defined in terms of its binary opposition to Hollywood cinema, making it Hollywood’s ‘bad other’. This proposes Hollywood as the opposite of bad, and therefore good. Underlying this conceptualisation is a Hollywoodcentric approach to studying film in which the globally dominant cinema sets the standard by which all other cinemas are judged – and often to be found lacking. Paradoxically, cinemas seen to oppose Hollywood often tend to be valorised at the expense of the globally dominant cinema which is denigrated. Thus good becomes bad and bad is perceived as good. Hollywood, however, is seen to be doubly bad: not only is it accused of ‘ruining all the cinemas in Europe’ (Godard, 1989-1998), it is the ‘significant bad other’ (Elsaesser, 2005) from which all other cinemas need to be protected.

In this scenario, cinemas are imagined to possess rigid and impermeable boundaries preserving distinctions of taste. These borders supposedly keep Hollywood conservative and immune from the ideas, images and sounds of bad cinema while those erected around bad cinema are thought to keep Hollywood out and protect paracinema’s essence and ‘otherness’.

This article addresses issues of cultural value and aesthetics to propose replacing the notion of fixed cinematic borders within a Hollywoodcentric screenscape with that of a chaotic, fluid screenscape in which global cultural flows carry ‘badness’ between cinemas in a transnational imaginary. In challenging the common perception of Hollywood’s relationship to its ‘bad other’, it asks if a cinema commonly perceived to abhor the excess, low production values and sleaze of bad cinema is widely imagined to be bad itself. But just how bad is bad, what value can we place on badness, and do two bads make a good?

Keywords: paracinema/trash cinema; Hollywood; cultural global flows; cultural hybridisation

Introduction

It may be perfectly true that a cigar is sometimes just a cigar but, as the following close reading reveals, it can be confidently stated that the bedpost in a scene from The Birth of a Nation (D. W. Griffith, 1915) is very definitely not just a bedpost. While it should be noted that in 1915 cultural distinctions of taste in Hollywood cinema were not yet in place or enforced as they would be by the mid-1930s, the scene nevertheless points to the tenuous nature of the boundaries between good and
bad taste and between highbrow, middlebrow and lowbrow that have existed from the very early days of cinema. This analysis starts with the scene immediately before the one in discussion since the build up, or foreplay, provides the context for understanding the issues of good and bad taste that are raised.

It is daytime in a verdant forest in post-bellum America. A young couple, Elsie and Ben, stroll beside a lake. They do not talk and their bodies do not touch. Desire, however, proves too strong: turning, she finds herself in his arms. While her body says stay, her head says go. For the moment, her head wins and she walks away.

The film cuts to another part of the forest where an anguished Elsie enters the frame. Torn between desire and self control, she looks back at her beau and a sob wracks her body. She throws herself down on a log in despair. And despair she might, for she and the object of her desire are politically poles apart – she is an ardent anti-slavery Unionist while he is a Confederate who, as we already know and she will soon find out, is a member of the Ku Klux Klan. Ben now dashes up and, no longer able to control her desire, Elsie stretches out her arms. They embrace … their cheeks touch … they seal their love with a kiss over which a fade draws a decorous curtain. An intertitle tells us how much he cares for her: ‘I’ll watch you safely home’.

There is a cut to another part of the forest where we see the young couple in a state of mutual bliss. They play a brief game of lover’s tag before she dashes out of frame, leaving her young man standing primed with passion. An intertitle hints at what is to come: ‘Love’s rhapsodies and love’s tears’.

Next, we find ourselves in Elsie’s bedroom. This is dominated by a large double bed at each corner of which is a tall, wooden bedpost. Elsie enters the frame, jumping and skipping with uncontainable joy. She clutches her breasts and looks at her reflection in the dressing table mirror in disbelief – can this woman really be the same person who had left this room but a few hours earlier
little more than a child? She runs to the window and there is a cut to a long shot of Ben who, standing erect and firm, is scarcely able to tear his eyes away from what must be Elsie’s bedroom window. He retreating reluctantly.

There is a cut back to the bedroom where Elsie’s excitement mounts ever higher. Petticoats swirling, she hops, twirls and runs back and forth between the foot of the bed and the window. Here she gasps with horror – Ben is no longer there! Spinning round, she runs back to the bed where, grasping the bedpost, she jumps up on the bed. She clutches the bedpost tightly to her face and kisses its bulbous tip. The film cuts to an iris-framed close-up of her face snuggled up to the bedpost. Elsie sighs, her eyes flutter upwards as her lips part slightly.

A short lap dissolve takes us to an iris midshot of Ben arriving at his house where he opens the front door and enters the dark interior. Another short lap dissolve returns us to Elsie whose amorous intentions towards her bedpost grow stronger by the frame. In close-up she again kisses its tip. Not yet spent, up she jumps and dashes to the window. But the allure of the bedpost is too strong and back she races to the bedpost where she presses her whole body against its full length. As Elsie gives a tiny, involuntary shudder, the decorum of the chaste kiss in the previous scene seems redundant.

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The depiction of female masturbation – fantasised or realised – would not be considered out of place in either soft-core pornography or art cinema but to find it in a foundational film of classical Hollywood cinema, a cinema widely considered the antithesis of both highbrow and lowbrow culture, seems more than a little unexpected to most audiences today. Both trash and high art tend to be defined not so much by what it is as by where it is found, and the ‘out-of-placeness’ of Elsie’s orgasm is emphasised in the documentary The Making of The Birth of the Nation (Robert G. Beecher, 1998). Showing several out-takes of Gish’s intimate relationship with her bedpost the
voice-over narrator intones: ‘Modern audiences sometimes wonder if Griffith fully understood the symbolic significance of his use of props. We think the repeated takes of this scene clearly indicate that he did’.

Today, most early and silent cinema is regarded as art cinema and, despite Wikipedia’s breezy claim for The Birth of a Nation as ‘the first Hollywood blockbuster’, D.W. Griffith’s films are widely considered masterpieces of high art. While the relationship between highbrow and lowbrow film culture – often characterised as the dichotomy between art and commerce – has been of significant cultural concern since the inception of cinema, this representation of female self-pleasing in a film that predates the high tide of classical Hollywood cinema serves to alert us to some issues concerning the relationship between mainstream cinema and paracinema.

Defining bad

While credit for coining the term ‘paracinema’ goes to US experimental filmmaker Ken Jacobs, Jeffrey Sconce’s application of it to films variously called bad, schlock, sleaze, or trash now dominates our understanding of the concept (Hanlon 1979; Sconce 1995). The affix ‘para’ means ‘beside’, ‘near’, past’, ‘beyond’ or ‘contrary’ and it is this last sense, that of being contrary or opposing, which I explore in this article. However charming today’s audiences might find Elsie’s petit mort, the scene is undeniably pornographic, albeit soft-core. There is also something incontestably ‘improper’ or ‘untoward’ about it – Sconce’s terms to describe what he calls the ‘ineffable’ characteristics of paracinema ‘that lie outside the borders of normative film practice’ (Sconce 2007, 4). The scene approaches Joan Hawkins’ definition of ‘sleaze cinema’ for which ‘the operative criterion … is affect’ which she defines as ‘the ability of a film to thrill, frighten, gross out, arouse or otherwise directly engage the spectator’s body’; it is this emphasis on affect that for Hawkins characterises paracinema as a low cinematic culture (Hawkins, 2000: 7). It also satisfies Carole J. Clover’s category of ‘body genre’ films (Clover 1999-2000, 14-19), which, as Linda
Williams notes, ‘privilege the sensational’ (Williams 1995, 142). For Williams, such films possess three shared features: first, ‘the spectacle of a body caught in the grips of intense sensation or emotion’; second, ‘the direct or indirect sexual excitement and rapture … visually signalled through the involuntary convulsion or spasm – of the body “beside itself” in the grip of sexual pleasure, fear and terror, and overpowering sadness’; and third, the spectator is addressed with ‘an apparent lack of proper aesthetic distance, a sense of over-involvement in sensation and emotion’ (1995, 142-44).

Precisely which side of the line between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ cinema any scene, film or genre might fall largely depends upon the spectator: audiences play a large role in defining paracinema. This has not made it any easier to categorise a constantly evolving conceptualisation of ‘bad cinema.’ As with most – perhaps all – film genres and cinema categories, the act of classification and reclassification involves inclusions, exclusions, imbrications, hybridities, contradictions, negations and affirmations, all of which generally prove difficult to disentangle. In attempting to define what is ‘good’ and what is ‘bad’ about cinema, one runs the risk of disappearing inside a vortex of changing tastes and cultures which can make it difficult, if not impossible, to work out which cinema – good or bad – one is actually talking about. This, in fact, underpins my main argument concerning how Hollywood and paracinema tend to be pitted against each other: it is not that difference disappears but that to focus upon difference within a framework of binary opposition means we focus on homogeneity and fixed borders and that we ignore, or fail to notice, the diversity, heterogeneity and flux which exists.

This article begins with Lillian Gish’s perfectly executed orgasm because although, as already stated, the film was made before the end of the First World War, the date usually fixed for the emergence of what would become refined and eventually known as ‘classical Hollywood cinema’, it makes the point that if you choose to look closely, there is trash to be found in Hollywood and Hollywood to be found in trash, and that this has always been so. To see how each comes to be located in its apparent opposite, I argue that it is important to note the flows of cultural phenomena
between not only high art and lowbrow culture, but also between the commercial mainstream and the lowbrow. This is made difficult, of course, when Hollywood and bad cinema are conceptualised in polar opposition to one another and Hollywood is placed at the centre of the screenscape from where it pushes its ‘others’ to the periphery.

**Bad opposes good**

As Sconce points out, paracinema is largely perceived as Hollywood’s binary opposite. ‘Paracinematic fans…’ he writes, ‘explicitly situate themselves in opposition to Hollywood cinema and the mainstream US culture it represents.’ The paracinema community is ‘united with the film elite in their dislike of Hollywood’ and practices an aesthetic founded on the recognition and subsequent rejection of Hollywood style.’ (1995, 381; 387). This is confirmed by Hawkins who writes that the most frequently expressed desire of paracinema fans ‘is to see something “different”, something unlike contemporary Hollywood’ and that ‘paracinematic consumption can be understood … as a reaction against the hegemonic and normalizing practices of mainstream, dominant, Hollywood production’ (1999-2000, 17).

While it is true, as Sconce himself notes, that some of his critics suggest he seems ‘to offer an unproblematic divide between mainstream Hollywood and paracinema’, for the most part they have explored the connections between highbrow and lowbrow film culture, ignored links that might exist between the lowbrow and the mainstream and persisted in defining paracinema in terms of that which is *not* Hollywood, i.e. one of Hollywood’s ‘others’. (2007, 15).² They are not alone: the most common and widespread conceptualisation of paracinema among most academics, filmmakers and audiences holds fast to the notion of bad cinema as lowbrow culture and thus non- and anti-Hollywood.

That bad cinema should be defined in terms of its opposition to Hollywood is not unusual since virtually all cinema is popularly categorised as either ‘Hollywood’ or ‘non-Hollywood.’ This
polarisation is reinforced by an over-emphasis on Hollywood cinema by the academy which tends to relegate non-Hollywood cinemas to being studied and valued for the extent to which they either absorb or reject Hollywood’s form, style or mode of practice. This Hollywoodcentric approach has been buttressed by the distribution and exhibition practices in most countries throughout the world so that Hollywood has become synonymous with cinema, that is all cinema, and with ‘good cinema’ because this is all, or almost all, the cinema that most people ever see (King, 2002, 1-9).

The process of defining and locating a cinema in relationship to Hollywood is often also one of ‘self-othering’. Paracinema is certainly not alone in this: it’s a process that has been adopted and promoted by most non-Hollywood cinemas, their filmmakers and fans. Most cinemas characterised as alternative, avant-garde, or counter cinema such as German expressionism, the French new wave, third world cinema, hungry and angry cinemas, first nation or indigenous cinemas, feminist (or women’s) cinema and queer cinema, to name but a few, are all proudly ‘non-Hollywood’ or ‘anti-Hollywood’. The same is true for most national cinemas which wear their nationality in their name badge as a matter of pride not only to distinguish themselves from other national cinemas but also, often very emphatically, to distinguish themselves from Hollywood (Mills, 2009, 94).

**Good opposes bad**

This distinction-making process has not been only that of self-definition. If non-Hollywood cinemas have been anxious to differentiate themselves from Hollywood, Hollywood has also worked hard to construct and perpetuate the distinction between itself and its others. Hollywood’s notorious censorship system has been one means of identifying and emphasising itself in opposition to the lowbrow. The 1934 Production Code specifically outlawed sleaze, explicit sex and much else that might be considered ‘untoward’ or ‘improper’ (Sconce 1995, 392). The Code’s fundamental principles stressed the importance of rigid, impermeable borders between good and bad, calling for
films in which ‘good and evil are never confused and … evil is always recognised clearly as evil’ (O’Brien, 2009, 6-7).

The studios, it seems, no longer wished to feed the perfervid imaginations of those who saw it as their God-given role on earth to control the desires of the urban working class and new immigrants, who had always constituted a large proportion of the audience. In aspiring to the high moral ground as a means of claiming to be high art, the Hollywood studios turned their backs on the masses who had flocked to the pre-code movies in pre-depression America in order to appeal to a more solidly bourgeois audience. It is this dilemma, that of apparent mutual exclusivity implicit in a ‘highbrow versus lowbrow ’ binary, that Preston Sturges plays with in Sullivan’s Travels (1941) and which makes this film as perceptive as it is funny. The dispute between the high-minded film director (Joel McCrea) and his commercially-minded producers (Robert Warwick, William Demarest, Franklin Pangbourn), playfully engages with a debate that has raged in and about Hollywood since its inception: is it the lowest common denominator form of entertainment or can it aspire to be morally uplifting art? If Hollywood couldn’t always attain the pinnacle of high art, it could at least aspire to be ‘good’.

Hollywood, then, has a long history of promoting the distinction between its ‘good’ self and its ‘bad’ others. While disparaged by its others for lacking what they themselves either possessed or aspired to, Hollywood undoubtedly possessed – and can still usually be relied upon to deliver – what millions of movie-goers around the world have always wanted: predictable pleasure, a cultural distinction which has been carefully nurtured over the years. Since the heyday of classic Hollywood cinema, those well-known studio logos – MGM’s roaring lion, 20th Century Fox’s floodlit deco skyline, Paramount’s mountain peak, RKO’s pulsing transmitter, Universal’s globe, and Columbia’s torch lady – have acted as seals on the guarantee of predictable pleasure. And even if Hollywood has changed very considerably since its classical heydays, Hollywood is still imagined to deliver a
predictable pleasure which is widely recognised as a distinction in cultural taste by audiences throughout the world.

As Sconce points out, this distinction is endorsed and perpetuated by scholars:

Throughout the history of cinema studies as a discipline, the cultivation of various counter-cinemas, exclusive cinematic canons that do not easily admit to textual pleasures of more ‘commonplace’ audiences, has been a crucial strategy in maintaining a sense of cultural distinction for film scholars, (1995, 381)

Peter Wollen addresses the distinction by constructing a grid of seven binary oppositions between mainstream and counter cinema. ‘Pleasure’, one of mainstream cinema’s ‘seven deadly sins’, takes the form of an entertainment style which aims to deliver audience satisfaction and intellectual passivity, and is in direct opposition to ‘unpleasure’, one of counter cinema’s ‘seven cardinal virtues’, which he maintains is a provocative style aiming to deliver dissatisfaction among audiences who are prepared to question the ‘reality’ that Hollywood aims to create (1982, 79-91).

**Centre and periphery**

The screenscape’s many constructed polarities are underpinned by what Jane Gaines argues are two Hollywoodcentric models, a cinematic and a critical paradigm, which explicitly marginalise non-Hollywood cinemas. In the first, ‘the protagonist-driven story film [is] valued for the way it achieves closure by neatly resolving all the enigmas it raises as well as the way it creates this perfect symmetry by means of ingenious aesthetic economics’. In this cinematic paradigm, Hollywood is ‘good’ because it obeys the ‘rules’. That is, it conforms to its own codes and conventions and to disappoint these expectations is to deliver ‘bad’ cinema. This paradigm supports and is supported by the critical paradigm in which taste cultures of good and bad also play a large part. As a critical tool this offers a model which focuses on aesthetics and engages in the analysis of the formal stylistic properties of film (Gaines 1992, 1). The combination of these two paradigms presents a view that has filtered into the public imaginary and largely coincides with Hollywood’s own view of itself. It coincides with how many, perhaps most, non-Hollywood cinemas view Hollywood and, in offering a
definition of what these cinemas aspire not to be, it places Hollywood at the centre of their self-definition. In short, it makes Hollywood the benchmark by which its others are judged and judge themselves.

In this scenario Hollywood reigns at the centre and its ‘others’ are marginalised. This perception is firmly underpinned by cultures of taste in which ‘good’ and ‘bad’ are set in fixed opposition. It leads to the intellectually suspect position in which a cinema that opposes Hollywood is valorised in a reflex action at the expense of the globally dominant cinema which is denigrated simply for not being its ‘other’. Thus Hollywood is bad because it is good at what it does, and paracinema is bad because it is good at delivering that which is not good.

A doubly bad Hollywood

As already noted, Hollywood stands accused of being bad because it lacks what its others possess (which, in the case of paracinema is ‘badness’). But more bad than this, Hollywood is also widely perceived to behave like a paracinematic zombie or a huge killer-cannibalistic spider at the centre of a global web where it either consumes its others or pushes them ever further to their doom at the outer edges of the screenscape. The neologism ‘cinephagy’, perhaps, describes Hollywood’s allegedly destructive cinema-assimilating activity. Cinematic sparagmos – the tearing off and consuming the flesh of a living body – may be an even more appropriate term in a discussion of paracinema.

This, in fact, is the well-known conceptualisation of Hollywood as cultural imperialist. It is beyond the scope of this article to address this issue but it is important to note that it is a widely held view and one expressed by Jean-Luc Godard in Histoire(s) du cinéma (1988-1997) when he made this accusation: ‘If World War I enabled American cinema to ruin French cinema, World War II, together with the advent of television, enabled it to finance, that is to say ruin, all the cinemas of Europe’. For Thomas Elsaesser this perception of Hollywood is enshrined in the ‘Hollywood versus
Europe question’, a binary he describes as ‘the founding myth’ of film studies. The perception of a virulent opposition between Hollywood and its European others is indicative of the many ‘binary oppositions that usually constitute the field of academic Film Studies, in which American cinema is invariably the significant (bad) other…’ (2005, 18).

**Overcoming a critical impasse**

We have arrived at the point where Hollywood is not only bad and doubly bad, it is also ‘other’. The solution to this critical impasse involves a paradigm shift which embraces Sconce’s insight that ‘whereas aesthete interest in style and excess always returns the viewer to the frame, paracinematic attention to excess seeks to push the viewer beyond the formal boundaries of the text’ (1995, 387). This offers a different way of looking, one which takes the viewer outside the frames containing the formal properties of the film: to look beyond and outside the film frame introduces the issue of location, an ‘elsewhereness’, to our analysis of cinema. This opens up the exploration of intercinematic relationships between Hollywood and non-Hollywood so that they may be un-framed and re-imagined. As discussed above, cinemas are typically imagined to possess rigid and fixed borders within a stable screenscape. Such borders protect classificatory categories which, as Hamid Naficy points out, ‘are important methods for framing and positioning films to target markets, distributors, exhibitors, reviewers, and academic studies. [But] they also serve to over determine and delimit the film’s potential meanings’ (2005, 120).

Borders around taxonomic categories such as Hollywood and bad cinema are commonly perceived to be impermeable; they supposedly keep Hollywood conservative and immune from the ideas, images and sounds and the rest of the cultural phenomena ostensibly belonging exclusively to non-Hollywood. Similarly, the borders around its others are constructed to protect their essential ‘otherness’ and thus keep Hollywood out. Imagined like this, Hollywood is monolithic, homogenous
and homogenising while its others are imagined to lack heterogeneity and the two cinemas exist in perpetual polarised opposition.

If, however, we accept Sconce’s proposal to look ‘beyond the formal boundaries of the text’ and adopt Arjun Appadurai’s concept of disjunctive cultural global flows as a critical framework, we can no longer ignore – or fail to notice – a fluid screenscape in which borders and cultural boundaries are porous (1990, 1-24). When applied to cinema, this framework enables us to see cultural phenomena – ideas, technologies, people, finances and the media – exiting and entering the frame as they flow with ever-increasing speed and intensity between cinemas. It reveals a screenscape characterised by globalising processes that are far more dynamic, unruly and creative than popularly imagined. From the creative tensions caused by these asymmetrical and multidirectional flows as they impact upon each other in a chaotic screenscape, a previously unobserved screenscape emerges. If we choose to look at ‘the non-diegetic aspects of the image’ as Sconce neatly phrases it (1995, 387), we can see that the cultural flows between highbrow, middlebrow and lowbrow are no respecter of cultural borders. I propose we choose to look since this is a critical framework that allows us to see how it is that trash and Hollywood can be found in each other.

From this perspective, while not denying Hollywood’s undoubted hegemony, we can re-imagine intercinematic relationships in such a way that refuses Hollywoodcentricity. Nor is Hollywood any longer the doubly bad monolithic homogenous cinema of which all other cinemas live in fear. It demolishes the binarisms in which highbrow and lowbrow cinema is pitted against the high production values of slick (though some might say ‘finely crafted’) commercial, middlebrow entertainment (Elsaesser 1994, 22-27). It means Hollywood is no longer the yardstick against which to measure the others’ otherness and bad cinema is no longer bad because it is not Hollywood.

From low to high and back to the middle
The earlier reading of a scene from *The Birth of a Nation* suggests that Hollywood has been involved in the definition of its bad other from the start. We know the middlebrow and the lowbrow co-existed in pre-code Hollywood but, contrary to popular belief, although ‘good’ was to become synonymous with the Hollywood brand name, ‘bad’ was never *completely* outlawed. As the comic producers in Preston Sturges’ *Sullivan’s Travels* (1941) reveal, the studios did encourage ‘just a little bit of sex’. And in reality, Hollywood filmmakers continued to incorporate ‘bad’ otherness in films like those which espoused a B-movie aesthetic, and slushy, occasionally sleazy, melodramas such as some of those directed by Douglas Sirk, for example.\(^3\)

Further evidence exists of the hybridising processes between Hollywood and its bad other that go unnoticed or are ignored when the screenscape is conceptualised in terms of a binary opposition between Hollywood and its paracinematic other. This can be found in Sconce’s own description of what he refers to as a ‘most elastic category’ which includes ‘badfilm, splatterpunk, mondo films, sword and sandal epics, Elvis flicks, government hygiene films, Japanese monster movies, beach-party musical, and just about every other historical manifestation of exploitation cinema from juvenile delinquency documentaries to soft-core pornography’ (1995, 372). Hollywood can be located in this list of ‘seemingly disparate subgenres’ creating a space where Spartacus, Godzilla and Gidget co-exist in close proximity.

If the trash in Hollywood today is more obvious than before, this is because, as Appadurai indicates, the hybridising, globalising processes are flowing with greater speed and intensity than ever before (1990). In one of the few articles to challenge the middlebrow/lowbrow binary of Sconce’s initial analysis of paracinema, Paul C. Bonjila notes that *Wayne’s World* (1992), Penelope Spheeris’ first commercial success, started the burgeoning trend of contemporary Hollywood lowbrow films (2005, 17). Spheeris’s career reveals cinema’s demonstrably porous borders which allow the flow of ideas, images, sounds, people and other cultural phenomena and result in hybridisation. Her first feature, *Suburbia* (1984), was produced by Roger Corman began to forge
links between trash cinema and commercial mainstream Hollywood in the mid-1950s. While the films produced by Corman are widely regarded as what one outraged Hollywood fan describes as ‘quick-and-sloppy movie poop’ (Snyder, 2009), Corman provided a career start for many filmmakers who, like Spheeris, would cross over into the commercial mainstream cinema and not necessarily challenge it. Martin Scorsese, Peter Bogdanovich, Jonathan Demme, James Cameron, Jack Nicholson, Francis Ford Coppola, Ron Howard, Robert De Niro, Sylvester Stallone and Joe Dante are perhaps the best known of these film artists.

**Trash in Hollywood; Hollywood in Trash**

Two years after *Wayne’s World*, John Waters, widely revered as a patron saint of sleaze and an ardent anti-Hollywood iconoclast, made *Serial Mom* (1994) for Hollywood. Best known for the scene in his film *Pink Flamingos* (1972) in which drag actor Divine eats real dog faeces, by the 1990s Waters had become part of the high art and avant-garde world, a respected gallery photographer, art curator, and contributor to *Art Forum* which Sconce maintains ‘testifies to the growing centrality of “sleaze” on all levels of the imaginary’ (Sconce 2005, 3). Positioned at the interstices of paracinema and mainstream Hollywood, *Serial Mom* is worthy of close analysis.

Creative influences originating outside the film’s frames include grand master of sleaze, schlock and sexploitation Russ Meyer, celebrated horror-pic director William Castle whose audiences at *The Tingler* (1959) received actual electric shocks from specially wired seats, and splatter-fest, gore-meister Herschell Gordon Lewis (*Goldilocks and the Three Bares* (1963); *The Gore Gore Girls* (1972)). Equally important are the creative influences of classical Hollywood cinema masters Otto Preminger and John Huston whose movies flow through the porous borders of the film’s frames to be seen playing on television sets in Water’s movie. The casting of Hollywood star Kathleen Turner in the title role is further evidence of the creative outcome of a middlebrow-paracinema tension. Previously known for her sexy-but-tough roles in both Hollywood and US
independent cinema (The War of the Roses (Danny De Vito, 1989); V.I. Warshawski (Jeff Kanew, 1991)) Turner plays a middle class, middle-of-the road Mom so protective of traditional family values that she’ll do anything to protect them from suspected slights. Anything includes murdering anyone and everyone who threatens her family and her sense of what is proper and ‘in place’. The avowal of conservative family values in so many Hollywood films provides an easy target for Serial Mom which simultaneously demonstrates disavowal.

In one of several inventive, reflexive comments on paracinema and affect which directly address the spectator’s body, what provokes physical disgust in Mom and the members of the jury at her murder trial is that one of the witnesses for the prosecution does not recycle her trash. Could anything be more sickening? Not for Serial Mom who has gleefully bludgeoned to death a neighbour (whose nauseous crime is to fail to rewind her videotapes before returning them to the rental store) with a leg of lamb. This particular victim is in orgasmic mode at the time of her murder: we see her singing along to the vomit-inducing song ‘Tomorrow’ as she watches John Huston’s saccharine Hollywood musical Annie (1982) and becomes orgasmic as her dog enthusiastically licks her naked feet. This scene sucks its audiences into an abyss of uproarious schlock where mutually implicated high, low and middlebrow cultural flows commingle.

Middle class suburban Baltimore with all its ‘out-of-place’ detritus provides a large trash-can for Waters to play in: the locations and incidents relating to trash in his film are numerous and inventive. Beverly Sutphin (Turner) first murders her son’s teacher for attempting to impose mainstream Hollywood values on his student whom he criticises for liking trashy, ultra-violent horror films. Angered by seeing her neighbour’s trash spill out all over the lawn because she fails to recycle, Beverly only calms down when her good friends, the garbage collectors, arrive and Beverly does her bit for saving the planet by murdering this outrageous violator of suburban sanitary regulations. She kills her daughter’s two-timing boyfriend in a urinal by impaling him on a fireplace poker which hooks out the victim’s offal (his liver) which, to her extreme disgust, splatters on her
shoe. Early in the film Beverly bombards a neighbour with obscene letters and phone calls and her scrapbook is crammed with newspaper clippings of societal trash, the mass murderers Charles Manson and Ted Bundy.

When found ‘not guilty’, serial Mom’s family is initially overjoyed but as the film ends they realise her murderous intentions upon a member of the jury who has transgressed a fashion rule by wearing white shoes after Labor Day which for Beverly means they are unforgivably out of place. That this juror is played by the former millionairess abductee, turned Stockholm syndrome anarchist, Patricia Hearst all contribute to the film’s multifarious depictions of trash. What disturbs Beverly is what disturbs – and delights – the paracinema fan and, increasingly, mainstream Hollywood movie audiences: out of place. Trash, as we know, is simply misplaced dirt and this is the message of Waters’ hybridised middlebrow-lowbrow Hollywood-trash movie. Beverly is one very middlebrow lady immoderately in love with trash, and it is trash that links excess and dearth, middle brow and low brow taste, and good and bad cinemas.

**Conclusion**

The notion of polarised otherness hides the moments of transfer and crossover, and the processes of mutual incorporation between cinemas. It misrepresents the relationship between paracinema and Hollywood and by failing to note, as David E. James argues in respect of avant garde cinema, that Hollywood ‘has been a constant presence, one that enticed as often as it repelled its would-be other and inspired as often as it inhibited it’ (2005, 4). It furthermore fails to map the ideas, images, filmmakers and other cultural material flowing in the other direction, from paracinema to Hollywood.

An awareness of hybridising processes, however, fashions a new cinematic voice that integrates the mainstream and exploitation traditions rather than pitting them against each other. As Jan Nederveen Pieterse points out, hybridising processes as a perspective belong to the fluid end of
relations between cultures: it’s the mixing of culture and not their separateness that is emphasised (2004). This isn’t going to make paracinema any more or less ‘bad’ but it does see more clearly that intercinematic relationships work in infinitely more complex and varied ways than simply in negative reaction to each other.

Notes


Notes on Contributor

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