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Bad Movie Night: Cultural Consumption in the Age of Ironic Cinephilia

On Saturday, March 22nd, I joined a cadre of intrepid film fans for a late night screening of *The Room* (2003), a cinematic catastrophe wrought by the multi-hyphenate (writer-director-star-producer) Tommy Wiseau. *The Room* is an “ironic cinephilia” phenomenon; an affront to all filmic holiness considered a wine of rare and exquisite vintage amongst connoisseurs. Bad movie buff Mecca. What made the evening unmissable was Wiseau appearing in the flesh to revel in, and stoke, the adulation of *Room* devotees. Outfitted like an early eighties rock star (straggly hair, leather vest, sunglasses), and flanked by aloof *Room* lead (slash line producer) Greg Sestero, Wiseau maned the merch table, posed for pictures, and held court over a brief but energetic Q&A. He declaimed cherished lines from the film (“You’re *TEARING ME APART, Lisa!*”), recited Shakespeare, and humbly fielded sober, probing inquiries such as “How does it feel to have created the greatest work of art of the twenty-first century?” For a wannabe Tenessee Williams -- Wiseau’s magnum opus was clearly intended as a tense, searing kitchen sink drama of lust and betrayal -- he has, by all appearances, embraced the appropriation and recuperation of his otherwise desultory freshman effort by a rabid fan base. Like nothing else I’ve experienced in a movie theatre before, *Room*’s audience was suffused with an unbridled and infectious zeal; evangelical tent meeting meets *Jerry Springer*.

A brief summary: *The Room* concerns the cuckolding of one Johnny (Wiseau) by his cunning girlfriend Lisa, who works her feminine wiles on Johnny’s best friend, Mark (Sestero). Johnny is hopelessly in love with, devoted to, and trusting of, Lisa. Lisa openly despises Johnny, and seduces Mark. Lisa’s mother has breast cancer (one of a plethora of unceremoniously discarded plot points). Johnny’s next door neighbour, Denny, is a scrappy, wide-eyed, quasi-voyeuristic post-pubescent

briefly mixed up with a violent drug dealer (another vanished story arc). The film in a nutshell: Johnny the beloved naif, Lisa the evil succubus, Mark the willing dupe, and Denny the creepy kid. After an auspicious start (multiple anatomically asymmetrical love scenes that linger on Wiseau's impressively chiseled posterior) the enterprise falls precipitously off a cliff. Wiseau is a terrible, taciturn actor (albeit no less so than any other performer); the story is transparent hagiography (too innocent for this world, Johnny will off himself over Lisa's betrayal); the plot so rife with elisions and inconsistencies as to be practically incomprehensible,[1] the directing inept, and the colours carry the drab, washed-out patina of movie shot on the cheap in every possible respect.

The critics were...unkind.

What a difference a decade makes. These days *The Room* is a certified cult hit, and Mayfair before whom *Room* unspooled was downright delirious. The "Wiseau Films" logo drew screams, character entrances elicited applause, favourite lines were chanted in concert, and much improvisational commentary was spontaneously declaimed. Whenever framed photographs of cutlery appeared in the shot (is Johnny descended from utensils?) patrons yelled "Spoons!" and flung plastic spoons through the air. At one point, mimicking jogging characters, a cohort of audience members briskly circumambulated the theatre (one slipping across the plastic-spoon-covered floor). Specific sequences prompted call-and-response dialogue chanted en masse. In one scene, Lisa invites Mark over to Johnny's apartment, and it dawns on Mark that she may have ulterior motives. "What is going on here Lisa," says Sestero, casting his dreamy deer-in-headlight eyes around the room. "That music? Those candles?" Except...there is no music, and there are no candles. Thus, at the screening:

Mark: What is going on here Lisa? That music?

Audience (in unison): *WHAT MUSIC?!*

[1] Also, actors kept quitting the production, thus new characters continuously crop up sans introduction or explanation.

Mark: Those candles?

Audience (in unison): *WHAT CANDLES?!*[2]

And so on and so forth. I had an absolute blast.

I cannot pinpoint the catalyst for my own fascination with, and burgeoning love for, bad movies (though I vaguely recall my mother renting *Conan* knockoff *Ator: the Fighting Eagle* (1982) on VHS, which sparked an awareness that movies could *be* bad), but curiosity blossomed into infatuation on a sweltering afternoon in the summer of 2002 that I spent sequestered inside downtown Toronto's (now nonexistent) Eaton's Centre second-run cineplex (more glorified television sets than silver screens; rear projection no less) to experience (witness?) John Travolta's notorious turkey *Battlefield Earth* (2000). For a high-profile, big budget, sci-fi spectacular (an adaptation of Scientology founder L. Ron Hubbard's novel of the same name) *Earth* is numbingly inept. Consider the early foot chase wherein Travolta, in full "Psychlo" regalia (think Rastafarian dreds, nose plug, zombie face paint, elephantine platform boots) pursues Barry Pepper's neo-caveman protagonist. Pepper is hoofing it full tilt (thwarted only after an ill-advised turn into an abandoned mall sends him careening through a *Simpsons*-esque endless series of glass windows) while Travolta lumbers precariously after him. Yet somehow, as the camera cuts back and forth between the sprinting Pepper and the obviously unsteady Travlota, Travolta remains impossibly hot on Pepper's heels. Director Roger Christian -- a set decorator on *Star Wars* (1977), and an art director on Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979) -- shot the majority of *Earth* on alternating canted angles, as if his camera mounts were always off-kilter. I noted at one point that the entire audience had taken to tilting our heads at forty-five degree angles to compensate.

[2] Though it is beyond the scope of the present paper, I am fascinated by the emergence, development, and dissemination of these (presumably) audience-generated practices. How do such practices catalyze, evolve, and crystallize?

Later that evening I had dinner with a friend (Erin) and confessed my cinematic sin. Not only had I seen *Earth,* but enjoyed it. A lot. I anticipated mockery and derision...but instead Erin nodded (stoically, as I recall) and replied (maybe somewhat sheepishly): “I really want to see *Glitter*.” *Glitter* (2001) is, of course, the risible feature film acting debut (and quasi-autobiographical *rise to stardom* story) of one Mariah Carey. No sooner had we arrived at a local area Blockbuster (remember those?) to rent *Glitter* than I spotted Kim Basinger’s silly *Sixth Sense* knockoff *Bless the Child* (2000). Thus, Bad Movie Night (henceforth BMN) -- a twelve year long (and still going strong) ritual -- was born. From its inception, BMN has always been a double bill.

Ironic cinephilia -- the intentional consumption and celebration of the worst of the worst filmic atrocities -- continues to promulgate as a curious alternative cultural practice. Seasonal screenings of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975) abound; *Mystery Science Theatre 3000* is a celebrated cult artifact, and participatory screenings of *The Room* are now mainstays of repertory theatres across North America. Bad movie meta-commentary is also a burgeoning cottage industry. Erstwhile *A.V. Club* blogger (and BMN patron saint) Nathan Rabin turned his interrogation of flopdom into a popular book called *My Year of Flops* (2010).[3] Michael Stephenson, child star of *Troll 2* (1990), parlayed bargain bin ignominy into documentary legitimacy with his directorial debut, *Best Worst Movie* (2009), which examines the recuperation of *Troll 2* (note: contains no trolls) from historical obsolescence. *Room* alum Sestero recently co-authored a tome entitled *The Disaster Artist: My Life Inside* The Room. Even stalwart Hollywood studio MGM jumped on the bad movie bandwagon, rebranding Paul Verhoven’s (*Robocop, Total Recall*) exuberant and repulsive (and exuberantly repulsive) *Showgirls* as contemporary “camp classic.”

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[3] In his *Flops* entry on *Carny* (which stars Gary Busey in sinister clown face paint), Rabin’s proposed neologism for the “strange process by which a filmmaker [or] actor...becomes an ironic camp icon” is “Wiseauification” (2011).

Theatrically released in 1995, *Showgirls* weaves the tale of a spirited dancer with a shadowy past. Nomi Malone ("No Me," yes?) hitchhikes to Vegas and lands work as a stripper at a seedy club. Nomi's accidental roommate, Annie, is a wardrobe mistress for a lavish showgirl spectacular -- *Goddess*. Annie takes Nomi to see the show, where Nomi catches the eye of *Goddess'* marquee performer, the seemingly internationally renowned Cristal Connors. Quickly cast in the showgirl chorus, Nomi's dreams are finally coming to fruition! However, Nomi soon realizes that her fame rests on a Faustian bargain. How far will Nomi go to supplant Connors as the star of *Goddess*?

Showgirls was an infamous commercial failure, and instantly vanished from theatres. The film's core creators were hopelessly crippled: *Showgirls'* once magisterial screenwriter, Joe Eszterhas, was relegated to direct-to-DVD purgatory, and Verhoven, who still ekes out the occasional film, had to go hat in hand to TriStar to secure backing for the low rent *Starship Troopers* (1997). Shockingly, *Showgirls* lingered, and was gradually absorbed into the *worst of the worst* canon. In 2004, MGM released an ornate *Showgirls* "V.I.P. Edition" box set replete with pasties, playing cards, and shot glasses. The DVD's lone commentary track is delivered not by personnel directly involved with the film, but Seattle-based writer-performer David Schmader. Schmader had been touring a live lecture around the film festival circuit venerating *Showgirls* as "the greatest postmodern comedy of all time" (qtd. in Verhoven 1995). When he was first contacted by MGM, Schmader assumed it was a cease-and-desist request, only to find that MGM now "[realized] more what type of movie Showgirls is, and [were] now celebrating it for what it is" (qtd. in Verhoven 1995). Schmader notes, with no lack of incredulity, that hot off of the blockbuster *Basic Instinct*, Verhoven had been slated to helm a big screen adaptation of *Moby Dick*, but chose instead to follow his bliss and re-team with *Instinct* collaborator Eszterhas on a long-percolating passion project concerning the rise to, and fall from, grace of a resourceful Las Vegas stripper-turned-showgirl. Referencing a kitschy-sounding *Showgirls*

coffee table book, Schmader relays that Verhoven had imagined his mythic spectacle as both throwback to golden-era big-budget MGM musicals, and "morality tale of American desires" (qtd. in Verhoven 2005). Schmader's arch exegesis explores, for example, the polysemic motifs of chip eating and nail painting. "More than any other bad movie...*Showgirls* triumphs in that every single person involved in the making of the film...is making the worst possible decision at every possible time. It's this incredible density of failure that makes *Showgirls* sublime" (qtd. in Verhoven 1995).

The shelves (admittedly today the term "shelf" is largely figurative) are brimful with bad movies. How does one parse the triflingly mediocre hack job or cash grab from the delightfully soul-sucking? Authors have applied a variety of metrics and lenses in an effort to understand and evaluate the "fiasco." Rabin had three criteria for including a film in *Flops*: "[i]t had to be a critical and commercial failure upon its release... It had to have, at best, a marginal cult following. And it had to facilitate an endless procession of facile observations and labored one-liners." Rabin aspires not to ridicule, but to confront and challenge "our cultural tendency to associate commercial failure with artistic bankruptcy. I wanted to give flops something everyone deserves but precious few ever receive: a second chance" (xvii). In *Fiasco: A History of Hollywood's Iconic Flops*, James Parish assigns failure according to egregious cost/revenue disparities. His requirements for passage into the bad movie pantheon include "the involvement of stars" (asserting that "filmgoers are more impressed when mighty superstars are toppled from their lofty career pedestals"), and "moviemakers' becoming so crassly and blatantly intent on turning out a hit picture that nothing else seems to matter, such as the quality of the script..." (5, 6).[4] Author Julie Salamon, granted unprecedented access to the

[4] In her account of scandal, Bird (invoking Martin-Barberro) notes the enticing element of "excess" in generating "[p]opular media narratives" (33). Some flops attain infamy, even prior to their theatrical release, through stories of profligate spending, hubristic directors, and over-indulgent/warring stars/studio executives. Bird's claim that "[t]o become a real scandal, the media accounts much spark the imagination of the public" (31) resonates with gleeful media attention to manifold production calamities, such as those that befell Kevin Costner's *Waterworld* (1995), or every movie that James Cameron has ever directed post-*Terminator.*

production of Brian de Palma's obnoxious *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (1990), takes a rare ethnographic approach in *The Devil's Candy: The Anatomy of a Hollywood Fiasco.*

> Over the years people have asked me at what moment did I realize 'Bonfire' was going to be a disaster. *The truth is, I never knew.* ... I feel a strange mixture of fondness and apprehension toward it, because it was never allowed to be simply a movie... Its symbolic value always overshadowed its failings and its virtues. (Salamon 432, emphasis added)

BMN adheres to what I call the "Casablanca Principle," a pragmatic extension of renowned screenwriter William Goldman's (*Marathon Man, The Princess Bride*) famous screen trade axiom "nobody knows anything."[5] *Casablanca* (1942) is a cherished classic that emerged from an extremely troubled and beleaguered production process, as a startling number of successes do. In the introductory essay to *Casablanca: Script and Legend*, co-screenwriter Howard Koch describes the film as "[c]onceived in sin and born in travail, it survived its precarious origin by some fortuitous combination of circumstances..." (14). At the outset of shooting, only half the script was complete. "About two-thirds of the way through...it was a dead heat. I was getting the finished scenes down to the set on the morning they were to be shot" (18). Later: "The final weeks were a nightmare of which I remember only fragments" (20). As an artistically multifarious, technically intricate, and capital-intensive form of content production, how or why certain films cohere (much less become classics), or founder and flop, remains a mystery. For every *Star Wars*, a thousand *Street Fighter*'s. The preeminent (if loosely applied) BMN selection criterion is that the potential existed for a *Casablanca,* but instead we got *Bucky Larson: Born to be a Star* (2011).

In *The Audience in Everyday Life,* Elizabeth Bird skirts up to the edge of the subjective abyss, noting that "most critics acknowledge the difficulty of trying to create meaningful criteria for what is

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[5] In *Which Lie Did I Tell?*, Goldman waxes introspective on his own foray into flophood, *The Year of the Comet* (1992). "And when I say 'flop,' I am not referring, not even remotely, to a '*succès d'estime,*' ... I am talking about the whiff, the stiff, the stinker, the all-out fucking fiasco" (50). The scale of the disaster began to take shape at a test screening when, to Goldman's growing horror, the audience began fleeing the theatre in droves. "Left a *free movie.* ... Hated what I had written so much they would rather face the reality of their own lives than what I had to offer" (57, emphasis in original).

objectively 'good' or 'bad'" (119).[6] Ironic cinephilia inspires a correlative inquiry: What makes a text *so* "bad" that it *becomes* "good"? To paraphrase Schmader, when is failure so dense that the imploding star ruptures space and time and becomes a black hole? Is a meaningful *so-bad-its-good* rubric possible to codify, or is ironic cinephilia more properly apprehended as an expression of tragic hipsterism, postmodern malaise, or straight-up masochism? Why are some flops forgotten (*Year of the Comet*), others rendered "cautionary tale" marginalia (*Cleopatra* (1963), *Ishtar* (1987)), and still others, if only rarely, granted a retroactive critical reprieve (Michael Cimino's career-crushing *Heaven's Gate* (1980)) and/or second life? How is the retrograde *Showgirls* reconstituted as postmodern comedy? How can anyone lay claim to *The Room* as anything but a mouth breathing waste of cultural space? Why *these* films, and not one of the multiplicity of other disasters/debacles?

A comparison of the differences and similarities between *Showgirls* and *The Room* is illustrative. These films sit at opposite ends of the show business spectrum. *Showgirls* had an estimated production budget of forty-five million dollars; *Room* cost around six million.[7] *Showgirls* was backed by a major Hollywood Studio (MGM); *Room* was independently produced and distributed (Wiseau Films). Showgirls was helmed and written by (once) high-profile Hollywood power-players -- Verhoven and Eszterhas respectively -- and, while it features no "A-List" celebrities, the cast is graced by respectable talent including Gina Gershon and Kyle MacLachlan.

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[6] Bird outlines some common denominators of "good" narrative (at least as far as *One Life to Live* fans are concerned), including stories that show "concern for coherent character development," and display a "recognizable internal consistency" (135), neither of which can be said to be true of *Showgirls* or *The Room.* Schmader notes, of *Showgirls,* that "every single character seems to be suffering from some degree of schizophrenia, their personalities and motivations basically unrecognizable from one scene to the next" (qtd. in Verhoven 1995).

[7] It should be noted that six million dollars, by no means a large budget by studio standards, is none too shabby for an independent effort. One of the foremost mysteries surrounding *Room* is how Wiseau raised so impressive a budget. Some sources have speculated that Wiseau is independently wealthy, or that he is a former drug-runner. Wiseau himself has asserted that the money came from importing and selling Korean garments (Shatkin 2007).

Room, by contrast, was conceived, produced, and performed by a pack of unknowns. Thus, *Showgirls* could qualify as scandalous, but *Room* would not. There was nothing especially "excessive" about Wiseau's pet project, whereas Verhoven's epitomizes the term.

It must be said that *The Room* does not fit the principle BMN criterion outlined above, in that there was little to no possibility that *The Room* could become a *Casablanca.*[8] However, this is not to say that Wiseau was not sincere in his desire to create a *Casablanca.* In *Best Worst Movie,* Alamo Drafthouse curator Zack Carlson echoes Schmader, asserting that "the best worst movies are not deliberately bad. ... The most fondly remembered stinkers are the movies where people went all out, and tried their best, and totally failed, like, gloriously" (Stephenson 2009). The first hallmark, therefore, of *worst of the worst* status is that the film's badness cannot be ascribed to cynicism or dereliction of duty. Instead, the film's authors sincerely aspired to greatness, but failed gloriously.

In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Judith Halberstam highlights the divergent but generative possibilities invigorated through failure. "Failure preserves some of the wondrous anarchy of childhood and disturbs the supposedly clean boundaries between adults and children, winners and losers." Despite a potential "host of negative affects, such as disappointment, disillusionment, and despair" (3), failure relieves the asphyxiating pressures of success: "being taken seriously means missing out on a chance to be frivolous, promiscuous, [and] irrelevant" (Halberstam 6). Success, moreover, is contingent on failure: "for someone to win, someone else must fail to win" (Halberstam 93). Accordingly, success is not a thing in itself, but one end of a range of possibility, the thresholds of which are delimited by failure and success alike.[9]

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[8] I must admit that I initially argued against *Room'*s programming at BMN, arguing that it opened the floodgates for a deluge of amateur efforts. I was outvoted.

[9] Flops might be considered the "motorcycle" to success' "automobile," in that success can not be evaluated according to any *a priori* standard, but only through comparison with failure (Packer 113).

Hollywood films are commodities first and foremost, and to a large extent "success" is conferred through ticket sales.[10] "[F]ailure's byways," notes Halberstam, "are all the spaces in between the superhighways of capital," and, thus "dominant history teems with the remnants of alternative possibilities" (19). Paul Virilio posits that "no technical object can be developed without in turn generating 'its' specific accident" (qtd. in Genosko 14). Instead of perceiving accidents as aberrations, they are, instead, innate: "the blackout is inseparable from the electrical grid" (19). If we extend Virilio's theory to film, does the narrative-driven film necessarily inhere the narratively incoherent film? Does film as commodified cultural product -- movies that make money -- necessarily generate its antithesis: films that lose money (sometimes spectacularly)?

However, as Rabin noted earlier, films are not evaluated in terms of commercial success alone, but through a coincident process of critical appraisal. Furthermore, commercial and critical success are not mutually exclusive. Some films are ridiculed by critics, but make money hand over fist. Other films might flop, but be redeemed by glowing reviews, award recognition, and loyal niche audiences. Fiascos such as *Showgirls* and *The Room,* however, suffer the double ignominy of being both commercial *and* critical failures. The *worst of the worst* -- though disparate pedigrees engender variegated expectations -- are both savaged by critics, and tank in theatres.

Bourdieu asserts that "[t]aste classifies, and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make, between the beautiful and the ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar..." (6). Ironic cinephilia represents an act of self-definition through delineation: cultural consumers that choose the ugly (/ugliest) over the beautiful, and/or the (most) vulgar over the distinguished. If there are corresponding hierarchies of texts and consumers that "predisposes tastes to function as markers of class" (Bourdieu 1-2), then the

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[10] James Cameron's *Titanic* (1995), for example, was not celebrated on its artistic merits alone, though these are legion.

rejection of taste through embracing the "worst"/"low" over the "best"/"high" could be perceived as as a consonant rejection of class; moreover, as a rejection of taste-*making* itself. The recuperation of these maligned cultural texts, texts rejected by their original audiences and critics alike, represents the refutation of "good" as ordained by an elite, or as prescribed by the mentality of the herd. Ironic cinephiles assert their right to independently assert which texts they do or do not consider "worthy."

One intriguing contradiction between the renewals of *Showgirls* and *The Room* are the dissonant reactions of their respective directors. Unlike Wiseau, Verhoven refuses to endorse the same ironic rereading of his vile vanity project, and "has consistently resisted the idea that [the movie] might have value outside of what he had originally planned for it" (Schmader qtd. in Verhoven 1995).[11] Wiseau, by contrast, has charted a diametrically opposed course, exulting in his newfound (if inverted) fame. Directors, of course, are not the singular authors of a film text. Irrespective of the potency of *auteurism* in the public perception of film authorship -- buttressed by "A Film By..." accreditation -- filmmaking is an inherently collaborative art form.[12] Without delving too far into historical articulations of authorship -- a fluid and contextually-dependent construct contradistinct from contemporary (Western) authorial "intellectual property" paradigms -- it is worth noting that pre-Elizabeth I, "authors" were nebulous and inchoate entities. Authorship was "a role not yet fully created, or instituted" (Miller 220), and represented a collective undertaking that included the persons(s) who wrote the text, as well as, potentially, the patron who funded the writer(s), the

[11] Claudio Fragrasso, the Italian director of *Troll 2,* appears genuinely perplexed by the adamant re-reception of his much maligned anti-vegetarianism treatise ("They don't only laugh at what was made to be laughed at") which, despite its critical drubbing, he maintains is "an important film that talks about...the union of the family resisting all of those things that want to destroy it and see it dead. People want to eat this family. In Italy, we call this a parable." During a post-screening Q&A, Fragrasso cannot fathom all of the ebullient derision and grows openly hostile. He begins heckling *Troll 2* cast members ("these actor dogs"), shouting: "You are wrong! You are completely wrong!" (Stephenson 2009).

[12] Coined by Francois Truffaut in a 1954 essay, the term "auteur" was initially invoked to denote "critically unsung journeymen like Hitchcock and Hawks, toiling away within the studio system...but somehow...turning out work that no other director could have put his hand to" (Shone 84). American auteurism was originally intended to retroactively identify and confer signature traits/tropes as perceived over the span of a directorial career.

publisher, the printer, the bookseller, etc. As authorial identity grew central to the (then-)burgeoning print industry (spurred less by remunerative concerns, and more by monarchical efforts to improve the surveillance and persecution of malfeasant scribblers), so too did the cult of authorship. Yes, Barthes killed the author, and Foucault reanimated the corpse as a "function," but textual interpretation remains predominantly predicated on authorial "personality," and readers are deeply invested in "the cultural import and functional breadth" of many a famous name (Griffin 22). Traditional author/audience hierarchies require readers to (at least attempt to) apprehend and internalize authorial intent (in accordance with an encoding/decoding model).[13] In this arrangement, the author is situated as authority (what Williams might refer to as "an arrogant preoccupation with transmission" (334)). When intent fails, the hierarchical circuits are shorted and the machine malfunctions. Consequently, the broken machine entices (invites?) user tinkering.

Due to this failure in transmission, engagement with -- reception and interpretation of -- texts such as *Showgirls* and *The Room* is untethered from "authorial" intent. Intent factors into ironic cinephilia only in terms of its observable shortfalls, mistakes, and misfires. Schmader observes of *Showgirls* that "[t]ender moments are ruined with this jarring vulgarity while vulgar moments are injected with nauseating attempts at sweetness" (qtd. in Verhoven 1995). According to this parsing, intent is inverted and nullified. This failure, however, presents an opportunity: the audience has unparalleled freedom to *re-author* the text.[14] Because the *worst of the worst* exist in a commercial, critical, and authorial vacuum, these texts are rendered porous and eminently interpretable and generative fields for rewriting and re-authorization; they present myriad opportunities for

[13] According to de Certeau, every act of reading "invents in texts something different from what [the author] intended" (169).

[14] Authorial acceptance/endorsement of re-authorization is appreciated (read: Wiseau), but not ultimately necessary (read: Verhoven). These proprietors have been disempowered with or without their consent.

appropriation, transformation, and re-circulation. Ironic cinephilia "invents itself by *poaching* in countless ways on the property of others," and represents an "insubordinate" act of manipulation and textual conquest "by users who are not its makers" (de Certeau xii, xiii, emphasis in original).

Consumption is inherently a form of production, introducing "an 'art' which is anything but passive" (de Certerau xxii), but entails the "*construction* of individual sentences with an *established* vocabulary and syntax" (xiii, emphasis in original). Active engagement ("enunciation") incites textual mutability that "makes the text habitable, like a rented apartment" (xxi).[15] The *worst of the worst*, perhaps, are the ultimate palimpsest, even *tabula rasa*; a rental wherein we are at our leisure to rearrange the furniture, even totally trash the joint. The combined forces of commercial failure, critical opprobrium, and authorial ineptitude have preempted a crystallization of cultural purpose. Instead they are unstable, sloppily sutured assemblages abandoned by their makers, causing critics to recoil in horror, and audiences to refuse sanctuary. The only salvation for these lost, ungainly souls lies in their adoption by those willing to love them not despite, but *because of* their ugliness.

However, it is one thing to take a monster into your home, but nursing these hideous outcasts back to health could be undertaken independently of the broader community. These texts, however, are recuperated in concert with others; through public, participatory screenings. Theatre-going is a communal and quasi-conspicuous forum for consumption. Is ironic cinephilia an expression of hostility akin to throwing rotten vegetables at clumsy pantomime troupes? Malicious communal mockery? Getting together to point and laugh at the procession of freaks?

For Bourdieu, "art and cultural consumption are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfill a social function of legitimating social differences" (7). As previously identified, there

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[15] de Certau writes that "the procedures of contemporary consumption appear to constitute a subtle art of 'renters' who know how to insinuate their countless differences into the dominant text" (xxii).

is a crucial element of agency at play: cultural consumers "distinguish *themselves* by the distinctions they make" (6, emphasis added). Williams explores the phenomenon of cultural differentiation as instantiated in "massification," asserting that "[t]here are in fact no masses; only ways of seeing other people as masses." Williams argues that the circumscription of a mass is a project of mutual othering: we both "mass," and "are all the time being massed by others" (319). "Massification" is mobilized, in part, through the process of delineating "high" contra "low" culture,[16] and privileging the former over the latter; the "mass," is, thus, that cluster which fails to recognize and/or appreciate "legitimate" cultural content. Bird observes that some audiences internalize and sanction these high/low bifurcations. Participants on *One Life to Live* fan forums tended to be "self-conscious about over-intellectualizing" the soap, "and often [flagged] such analysis with somewhat defensive comments" and "self-depreciating" remarks (130).

Williams wonders if "massification" is countervailed by "adopting a different attitude to transmission, one which will ensure that its origins are genuinely multiple, [and] that all the sources have access to the common channels. This is not possible until it is realized that a transmission is always an offering..."[17] This pivot shifts the onus from production to consumption and contexts of reception. Transmission is "not an attempt to dominate, but to communicate, to achieve *reception and response*. Active reception, and living response, depend...on an effective *community of experience*" (330, emphasis added). Ironic cinephilia, in terms of public, participatory screenings, is

[16] Bird invokes Frith (invoking Bourdieu) to elucidate "different discourses that seem to operate when discussing the ways in which people make cultural judgements. The sharpest contrast is between an art discourse and a pop discourse." Art discourses evaluate texts according to an "ideal of transcendence," whereas a pop discourse "values fun, routinized pleasures and desires, and legitimized emotional gratification" (124).

[17] I would not argue that *Showgirls* and *The Room* epitomize the ideal of multiple origins of transmission. Regardless of budgetary disparities, both films were expensive. Personal computers and the internet may facilitate increasingly affordable/accessible apparatuses of production and channels of distribution, but the costs associated with "mainstream" filmmaking remain prohibitive. However, the redefinition of transmission as offering, the interpretable flexibility of bad movie texts, and the foregrounding of reception and response are congruent with Williams' context of experiential communities represented by/through participatory screenings. Ironic cinephilia circumvents the "traditional" hallmarks of success, while simultaneously venerating and upending traditional modes of consumption.

a quintessentially *communal* practice. Williams worries that "we lack a genuinely common experience," and posits that "solidarity is potentially the real basis of a society" (353). Ironic cinephilia is an act of self-massification: communities that congeal by virtue of the appropriation, transmutation, and recirculation enacted in *direct contravention* of common "legitimating" standards (market worthiness, critical acceptance, authorial purpose). It is both an act of rebellion and a plea for attention that revels in being "both a declaration of independence, of otherness, of alien intent, a refusal of anonymity, of subordinate status. ... And...a confirmation of the fact of powerlessness, a celebration of impotence" (Hebige 34), an impotence shared by creators, critics, and audiences alike. But a celebration nonetheless, and a celebration that galvanizes a community. "Any real theory of communication is a theory of community" (Williams 332).

In the midst of present-day convergence, as all extant media collapse into the Internet, scholars such as Henry Jenkins accord issues of "originating authorship" new urgency. Not only are consumers afforded unprecedented access to the (mainly corporate-owned/-controlled) content that constitutes contemporary culture, but new and improved means by which to (collectively) acquire, repurpose, remix, and (re-)distribute that content. For Jenkins, this signals the dawn of a primarily participatory age wherein "the roles between producers and consumers are shifting," and the latter "are fighting for the right to participate more fully in their culture" (13, 18). Convergence culture, in fact, represents the "application of folk culture practices to mass culture content" (257), by which Jenkins means tales circulated by nameless, itinerant bards; tales told to, and re-told by, audience after audience, *ad infinitum.* "From an audience point of view, the best stories are those that leave room for speculation, for debate, and for a degree of audience 'participation'" (Bird 40).

Public, vocal, embodied, and active participation is a, if not *the*, crucial component of ironic cinephilia. On the one hand, audience participation transgresses a key tenet of moviegoing etiquette:

silence. Perhaps these declamatory practices are sanctioned because the "bad" movie is already agreed-upon as "broken" and, thus, a cacophonous, fragmented viewing cannot impinge upon its appreciation. More importantly, however, silence privileges internal and individuated evaluation and contemplation; an extension of "authorial" encoding/decoding hegemony. Authors speak, audiences listen. In broad terms, the context of film reception is both collective and segregated; we assemble, but engage with the text individually, an atomization further facilitated by darkness.[18] (Kittler archly opines that this severance of the visual performer/audience feedback loop originated with Wagner, and implies a fraught private/public hybrid: "A cinema in Mannheim...advertised with the slogan: 'Come in, our cinema is the darkest in the entire city!' My task here is not to present a lecture on the social history of petting..." (178).) We may still congregate in relative darkness, but speaking -- much less hooting, heckling, screaming, throwing spoons, running through the theatre -- represents a communally agreed-upon subversive act (commensurate with the transgressive power of embracing "low" culture). Actions and/or declarations -- individual or in tandem, scripted (call and response) or spontaneous -- are indicative of more than a mode of public and participatory reception and interpretation; rather it is interpretation *as* reception. Ironic cinephilia exposes moviedom's miscreants -- undeserving of introspective, silent analysis -- to immediate, explicit, and collective analysis; meaning-making embodied, enacted, and circulated *in situ*. This analysis, in all its diffuse and manifest forms, *is* the experience. In Bourdieu's terms, ironic cinephilia could represent an anomalous practice whereby "form" becomes, or is repurposed as, "function."

Public screenings of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and *The Room*; or the *Showgirls* box set (which includes drinking games to be played while watching the film) constitute evolving "relational

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[18] Scholars often delineate consumption of the televisual and cinematic as (potentially) solitary contra communal reception. Ironic cinephilia's various, shared, interactive, and enhanced forms of participation, often devised by audiences themselves, buttress, extend, enrich, and valorize public screenings as a complex, multivalent -- but principally *collective* -- practice.

contexts" (Bird 2) predicated on, and that actively encourage, audience participation as an essential and necessary component of consumption that is neither entirely passive nor wholly active but rather (to borrow de Certeau's term) tactical.[19] Ironic cineastes appropriate vastly unstable and, thus, preeminently de-authorizable and interpretable texts, then scribble on them, probe the fissures, and make "use of cracks" by devising and lodging their own contributions into the schisms. They both select and *create* "fragments from the vast ensembles of production in order to compose new stories with them" (de Certeau 37, 35). These independently-devised practices are then disseminated, sifted, sorted, edited, altered, enhanced, and combined. Subsequently, audiences assemble and -- eschewing the dictates of patronage -- indulge in preexisting practices, attempt new (or newly revised) additions/combinations, experiment, and improvise. The film has become the bedrock of, and launching pad for, a collaborative-creation project emancipated from the demands of the market (or, for Wiseau, a significant personal investment), studio executives, elite celebrity (or pseudo-celebrity) artists, critics, awards recognition, and the originating author(s) him/her/themselves.[20] *The Room* evokes a certain egalitarian ideal: anyone (with six million dollars) can make and distribute a movie; *Showgirls* reminds us (on behalf of Goldman) that even the mighty don't know what they're doing. At some stage, ironic cinephilia transcends textual consumption. In discussing the Mayfair screening with a colleague, I realized that as much as he had enjoyed the experience, he really hadn't seen *The Room* at all. He couldn't hear the dialogue, couldn't follow the story (to the extent that its story can

[19] The cardinal edict of BMN is that vocal engagement is not only allowed, but encouraged. Commentary tends to take three forms: open mockery, outright confusion, or protestations of undue anguish/misery/tribulation/grief/woe/angst/deep and profound sadness. There is a rare fourth form, which is sincere distress/dissent. These latter interpellations tend to arise when a bad movie crosses a social or cultural boundary that demands immediate attention and discussion, as with the lighthearted near-rape of Madonna in the Guy Ritchie travesty *Swept Away* (2002).

[20] In terms of the market, however, the texts I have discussed here have to some extent been re-appropriated and re-mobilized in the interest of profit. MGM repackaged *Showgirls* for retail sale, and Wiseau is paid to appear at screenings, and sells merchandise and DVDs. Furthermore, this was the largest audience I had ever seen in attendance at the Mayfair; decent (if sporadic) business for an independent repertory theatre.

be followed), and couldn't keep track of the characters. His enjoyment was vicarious: the audience was so excited to be there that he couldn't help but be excited to. These participatory screenings instantiate "an art of combination which cannot be dissociated from an art of using" (de Certeau xv).

This is the point at which some scholars would attempt to extrapolate possibilities for (small "r"?) revolution from these practices and social formations. Can ironic cinephilia serve as a potential site of resistance? I don't know. Maybe these patrons simply have no interest in aesthetic and diegetic criteria -- art, after all, is subjective. Alternately, some people don't like sitting still and silently, and would much prefer to watch a film as if it were a wrestling match, sporting event, or sermon. These practices certainly endorse de Certeau's conception of "consumption" as both productive and tactical; as manifest "through its *ways of using* the products imposed by a dominant economic order" (xiii, emphasis in original). As a result, the "imposed knowledge and symbolisms become objects manipulated by practitioners who have not produced them" (32). Christopher Kelty identifies "recursive publics" that agglomerate through discussion, debate, and the ability to modify the conditions of [their] formation" (qtd. in Coleman 68-69). If ironic cinephilia represents one such public, then what possibilities might they prefigure? Halberstam notes that knowledge practices that "refuse both the form and the content of traditional canons may lead to *unbounded forms of speculation*, modes of thinking that ally not with rigor and order but with inspiration and unpredictability" (10, emphasis added). Though Halberstam examines "queering" by way of children's animation (Pixar in particular) her observations resonate with the ideals one might ascribe to ironic cinephilia: participatory public screenings as gateways "to intricate stories, anticapitalist critique, group bonding, and alternative imaginings of community, space, embodiment, and responsibility" (43-44). Turning to Williams' musings on community as essential to communication: yes, participatory consumption invigorates audiences to assert power over an ostensibly "passive"

medium by neither individually/introspectively consuming a text, nor impotently attempting to interact with a static, inert screen. These audience are, instead, interacting with one another *through* the screen; performing with one another, entering into an ongoing and dynamic dialectic, both fixed and fluid, instigated by, but not beholden to, the text. There is no debate as to whether or not these movies are "good" or "bad"; no subjective discussion applies.[21] Rather, as Rabin attests, the *worst of the worst* exemplify the extraordinary, retrograde, *the stars aligned / the Gods of cinema wept* failures, and failure is intrinsically self-reflexive. Rabin's essays are empathetic, calls to stand in "solidarity with misfits, outsiders and underachievers" (xv). *Flops* is part art critique, and part redemption narrative.[22] The "worst" texts reflect our own flaws and imperfections, our misdeeds and mistakes, the unpredictability of our futures, and our persistent fear(s) of (sometimes very public) failure. This is an old Grecian trope: catharsis. By laughing at failure, we laugh *with* failure; we laugh at and with ourselves and each other. So much hard work and effort -- in vain! So much money -- squandered! To my mind, the symbolic value is: "So it is with life." At some point, our own failure might be just as dense. Ironic cinephilia is to claim control over the terms and conditions by which we make meaning through our media, and ownership over the vicissitudes of existence.

By the end of *Best Worst Movie,* director Fragrasso seems to be coming to terms with the immense (if ironic) enjoyment audiences seem to derive from *Troll 2.* "Being considered the worst movie is almost as much a compliment as being considered the best. It means I've made an impression" (Stephenson 2009). Being the very worst of the worst also means being the best of the worst, and can being the best of something, even it's the worst, be an entirely "bad" thing?

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[21] BMN's double bill format provides an opportunity to compare and contrast "badness." To wit: What are the distinguishing or characteristic failures of a bad comedy versus a bad horror movie, or of a Nicholas Cage performance contra a...uh...hmmm......? Okay, no other performer compares to Cage.

[22] Rabin rates the films as a Failure, Fiasco, or Secret Success, and I have discovered some remarkable films, such as Tom Tykwer's *Perfume: the Story of a Murderer* (2006), through the Secret Success category.

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