

Have bad movies edged out good?

Chris Berg reviews

Sleaze Artists: Cinema at the Margins of Taste, Style, and Politics

by Jeffrey Sconce (ed.)
(Duke University Press,
2007, 340 pages)



It may not come as a surprise that *Hostel: Part II*, the 2007 movie which depicts nearly an hour and a half of brutal, explicit and uninterrupted torture, is part of a rich cultural lineage. *Hostel II* is part of a new movement of neo-exploitation cinema, and its direct artistic ancestors date back nearly half a century.

So have 'bad' movies like these edged out 'good' movies?

Few cultural fields illustrate the blurring between 'highbrow' art and 'low-brow' craft more than the movies. As Jeffrey Sconce points out in the new edited collection of essays on trash cinema *Sleaze Artists: Cinema at the Margins of Taste, Style and Politics*, movies were never an elite art; condemned to be practiced and enjoyed only by the cultured few. Instead, movies have always existed only to entertain, and as such, have always been a 'vulgar medium' designed to appeal to the unwashed masses.

But there is vulgar, and then there is *vulgar*. *Sleaze Artists* explores the depths of trash, exploitation and grindhouse cinema of the last forty years. Not only do the films discussed in *Sleaze Artists* have no artistic pretensions; they barely even have entertainment pretensions. For the cinema underground, the first priority is to titillate.

The essays in *Sleaze Artists* are diverse, as is typical for an academic collection, with contributions covering gay military films, boredom as a motif in the Italian underground, the quasi documentary elements of the postwar nudie

film, and an account of the production and distribution of a gothic horror movie that couldn't find an obvious market. The authors are an assortment of professors and cultural studies academics from the United States; if they were Australians, our first reaction would be to decry a university system that redistributes taxpayers' money to tenured lecturers just so that they can watch all eleven *Friday the 13th* films, but as they are Americans we can just marvel in amusement. So it is easy to write that many of the essays in

Sleaze Artists are fascinating. After all, it's not our taxes.

As an example, an interesting chapter by Kay Dickinson looks at the strange partnership between Italian horror of the 1970s and early 1980s and the often very beautiful soundtracks which accompanied them. In this, the archetypal example is the infamous 1980 film *Cannibal Holocaust*. The gruesome violence of this film—the director, Ruggero Deodato, was forced to prove in an Italian court that he had not actually killed anybody during filming, and the film shows the actual slaughter of half a dozen live animals—is matched with an unpredictably lush synthesizer jazz score by the composer Riz Ortolani. Dickinson nominates the dissociative and unnatural quality of the synthesiser itself as a conscious artistic decision by the filmmaker to unnerve the viewer—as if seeing a live turtle dissected on screen was not unnerving enough.

Tania Modeleski's chapter on the 1960s director Doris Wishman is one of the few in *Sleaze Artists* that shows the necessarily ambiguous relationship modern audiences have with exploitation cinema. Modeleski, a Californian academic with an interest in feminist film criticism, is deeply ambivalent about her subject. Doris Wishman produced some *brutal* films. Her female protagonists get raped, abused and forced to murder. Every



Tura Satana in Russ Meyer's 1965 film *Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill!*, which was a major inspiration for Quentin Tarantino's *Death Proof* (2007)

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Another surprised victim of *Death Bed: The Bed That Eats* (1977)

bruise is carefully fetishistically recorded for the silent male audience.

For Modeleski, that a female director produced the most misogynistic films of the genre is a distinct challenge. Most of the essays in *Sleaze Politics* seek to normalise their films and their audiences—to make the unusual seem pedestrian. Furthermore, a focus of the cultural studies movement over the last few decades has been not just to make marginalia the focus of legitimate academic study; it has been a conscious effort to detect ‘transgressive’ artistry and politics in the cultural underground. Movies are carefully parsed and examined to discover ironic visions worthy of the twenty-first century arts faculty in even the most forgettable cookie cutter exploitation genres. If you pick up a copy of any schlock horror film in a bargain DVD bin, the advertising on its case will proclaim its ‘subversive’ nature. In most cases, this subversiveness is absent and rarely more than wishful thinking. After all, modern audiences, trained on Quentin Tarantino-esque postmodernism, like to think everything is ironic.

But Wishman’s ‘roughie’ films are too grotesque to support such a reading; there is no self-conscious and knowing winks in her depictions of female abuse. Her protagonists may have lesbian encounters, but Modeleski is unable to interpret these as in any way ‘feminist’—instead, they are shown as

just more abusive relationships down the rabbit hole of female degradation. Some of Wishman’s films simply cannot be reformed under the banner irony and subversiveness—they are too repulsive to be squeezed into the feminist narrative, despite Wishman’s gender. (This has not, however, stopped some critics from trying.) Modeleski concludes mundanely that Wishman needed the money, and simply adhered to the conventions of the genre she worked in.

The American movie critic Pauline Kael once provocatively wrote that she found *Wild in the Streets*, an unassuming and cheaply made film about hippy teens taking over the American government, far more interesting than Stanley Kubrick’s achingly important and serious *2001: A Space Odyssey*, made in the same year. The final essay, ‘Movies: A Century of Failure’ takes this observation as its jumping off point, and tries to work out just what the appeal of underground or otherwise unsuccessful films is. How have embarrassingly bad movies—like Jennifer Lopez and Ben Affleck’s wildly unpopular 2002 romantic comedy *Gigli*, or 2004’s *Catwoman*, which reduced the Oscar winner Halle Berry to a lifeless, latex wearing sex object—managed to ascend the cultural ladder and gained cult status? How has the 1950s director Ed Wood, whose films are barely able to sustain a timeline, let alone a plot, become a modern

film legend? Whenever Wood’s *Plan 9 From Outer Space* is again nominated as the worst film ever made, it assures that he will be watched and discussed for far longer than some of the middle of the road directors today. And it is likely that *Showgirls*, the 1995 film that was little more than an excuse to display the former teen actress Elizabeth Berkley naked, will, having now achieved cult status, be seen for decades.

Jeffrey Sconce argues that film going is, at least for those who ask for great things from the movies, almost always one of disappointment—rarely do movies live up to their expectations. Films are always too formulaic, characters are always too poorly drawn, and direction is always too flat to maintain our interest. And so, the pleasure of unexpectedly finding an inexplicably bizarre film on late night SBS or buried at the rental store becomes a far greater thrill than can be provided by the majority of material produced in the Hollywood machine. The frustration with ‘bad’ cinema became a search for ‘so bad it’s good’ cinema.

But, as Sconce writes, disappointment is never too far away, even if we are actively searching out movies that are cringe-inducing sub-par. After all, how could a film with the title of *Satan’s Cheerleaders* (the poster for which adorns the cover of *Sleaze Artists*) ever live up to the expectations encouraged by its title? Ditto for *Zombie Holocaust*; *Santa Claus Conquers the Martians*; *Two Thousand Maniacs!* or *Nude for Satan*. Could *Death Bed: The Bed That Eats* ever be as good as it sounds?

It would be easy to conclude that the cinema described in *Sleaze Artists* is no longer on the cultural margins, but has now firmly entered the mainstream. Quentin Tarantino and Robert Rodriguez self-consciously replicated the underground aesthetic in *Grindhouse*—their double billed feature which included a road revenge flick *Death Proof* and the Texas zombie homage *Planet Terror*. The video store clerk, proudly schooled in the most obscure exploitation and horror films, is a nearly extinct cliché; displaced by online forums dedicated to bad cinema and the steady archiving of cinema’s miscellany onto DVD.



A typically horrific operation in the *Horror Hospital* (1973)

And our relationship with underground films has even changed in the meantime. In the early 1990s, the American television show *Mystery Science Theater 3000* specialised in uncovering some of these B-grade science fiction films and subjecting them to relentless ridicule. Nearly two decades later, our response to yesterday's cultural leftovers is less likely to be ridicule than ironic respect. Not just the high-profile self-conscious mimicking of Tarantino, but scores of films are released each year that resurrect themes and techniques of the underground. The famously dated zoom shot was once an amusing anachronism, but it now appears in many contemporary productions with barely a hint of irony. Contemporary horror franchises like *Saw* and *Hostel* which feature extended torture scenes are nearly indistinguishable from the video nasties popular two decades ago, although more professionally produced.

The English Conservative MP Charles Walker described 2007's *Hostel II* not inaccurately when he said that 'from beginning to end, it depicts obscene, misogynistic acts of brutality against women—an hour and a half of brutality'; a description which could

just as easily apply to a Doris Wishman film. Grindhouse cinemas may have closed down and videos been replaced by DVDs and internet file-sharing, but movies whose first priority is to shock are shown in chain theatres across the globe, not in small off-Broadway adults only theatres.

But standards have changed. Modern audiences may accept—it would be inaccurate to write 'are comfortable with'—special effects depictions of sadistic violence at the cinema but they would not accept the very real slaughter of a very real turtle, as occurs in *Cannibal Holocaust*. Similarly the masochistic brutality seen in the video nasties are absent in modern homages to exploitation. Even the semi-pornographic undressing scenes which were awkwardly squeezed into the typical underground 1970s horror film have no contemporary equivalent. The moral content of mainstream exploitation in the twenty-first century and postwar underground exploitation may seem superficially similar, but there are major differences; there are new ethical and moral lines which modern filmmakers do not cross.

For these reasons, it is important to avoid the typical conservative reaction

to seemingly immoral—or disconcertingly amoral—culture. It is certainly not clear that the mainstreaming of trash is a sign of a cultural decay. Highbrow cultural production exists comfortably beside trash, and more often than not they share the same audiences. Furthermore, there exists no convincing argument that immorality and criminality at the movies transposes to immorality and criminality in the real world. For the most part, violent crime is in decline across the western world.

Filmgoers are not that easily influenced. Individuals who watch the movies invariably apply their own moral standards to the movies, rather than the movies imposing morality upon viewers.

Jeffrey Sconce's final essay may be melancholic, but it is not uniformly negative about the film industry. And the dominant emotion after having read *Sleaze Artists* isn't one of regret for the decline of moral standards. The underground can certainly be ugly, but it is vibrant. For every Oscar winner, there are one hundred middle brow romantic comedies, and ten *Nude for Satans*. If we ignore our cultural trash, we ignore a large part of our culture.

