

The Use of Badness:  
Extratextuality in Bad Movies and Citationality in the Realist Aesthetic

by

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## Abstract

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The Use of Badness: Extratextuality in Bad Movies and Citationality in the Realist Aesthetic

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In the judgments involved in evaluating bad movies, “bad” underscores the implicit assumption that movies should be aesthetically realistic. Where different counter-cinemas, such as the avant-garde or even self-conscious films, critique the dominant realist aesthetic from a point of distance, bad movies represent a critique from within realism, jolting the audience out of a state of passivity via their impossible-to-ignore failures to reproduce the codes of cinematic realism. Bad movies encourage attention to the extratextual elements of a film which helps viewers activate the entire film. Working within the realist aesthetic (instead of from its outside, as is the case with other counter-cinemas) demands a theoretical reformulation of realism instead of just simply expressing a formal, theoretical critique. To this end, the existing discourse on citationality as received from J.L. Austin and Jacques Derrida is a useful model for how the dominant realist aesthetic and bad movies both attempt to repeat iterable models of the real but only the former is successful at it. By couching realism in the terms of an iterable discourse, we can follow Fredric Jameson’s belief that the problems of realism are more epistemological than aesthetic, and this allows us to reengage classical realist film theory, such as the works of Andre Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer, in a productive way. If we place bad movies at the center of the realist discussion (instead of just censuring them as the negative half of a taste binary), then not only will the stalled scholarship on cinematic realism be jump started with new points of entry,

but we will also come to see bad movies as an instructional site for the demonstration of the limits of realism and the activation of the proverbially passive audience.

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“[The question is] how to escape from the image by means of the image?” -- Fredric Jameson, “The Existence of Italy”

## **Introduction**

In the judgments involved in evaluating bad movies, “bad” underscores the implicit assumption that movies should be aesthetically realistic. Noël Carroll writes that cinematic evaluation typically functions as either a consumer report or as an exercise in taste-making, and both cases are only concerned with bad movies as the opposite of a critic’s normative ideals. Carroll multiplies cinematic evaluation standards into a relative plurality dependent upon a film’s goals, accomplishments, and genre, instead of trying to establish one grand “essence” with which to hold all films accountable. This same kind of plurality can be applied to the evaluation of bad films. As many bad movie fan discourses and professional work from scholars like Jeffrey Sconce reveal, there is a significant overlap between bad movies and B-movies and paracinema. Carroll’s conception of evaluation helps us to define bad movies with respect to their genres (rather than by their genres, such as critics who have biases against horror movies, for example), and in this way, we may move away from a sense of bad movies being synonymous with B-movies and paracinema. What is instructive in the connection with B-movies and paracinema are the documented reading strategies that these films promote in common with bad movies. Bad movies encourage attention to the extratextual elements of a film which helps viewers activate the entire film. That is, instead of just receiving the movie’s story as the Benjaminian-defined distracted audience, viewers are actively – if not consciously -- engaged in seeing all of the “invisible parts” of movies: the sets, the acting, the cinematography, the editing, the special effects, etc. This total activation of the film-as-film, instead of as narrative artifice, recalls the effects of self-conscious films, which according to Bruce Kawin, engage the audience by

actively calling attention to themselves as films. Whereas self-conscious films *actively* engage their audiences, the operation of bad movies can be expressed best in the *passive voice*: audiences are engaged by the faults of the bad movies. Not only do the faults provoke the audiences, they are also instructive for helping us understand that we implicitly expect films to be aesthetically realistic. Every fault for which we discount a film's value translates into a lack of its apparent realism: bad acting, bad writing, bad sets, and every other kind of bad feature amounts to a greater knowledge that the fictional film world is not real. The realist aesthetic has roots in classical film theory and classical Hollywood filmmaking. In the theory, cinematic realism has largely been sidelined, due in part to the fallibility of much of that early realist theory by figures such as Andre Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer. In the movies themselves, the classical Hollywood story-driven realist aesthetic, as defined by David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, still carries the greatest influence. The qualities assigned to cinematic badness demonstrate just how deeply ingrained into the film-going consciousness the realist aesthetic truly is. Where different counter-cinemas, such as the avant-garde or even self-conscious films, critique the dominant realist aesthetic from a point of distance, bad movies represent a critique from within realism, jolting the audience out of a state of passivity via their impossible-to-ignore failures to reproduce the codes of cinematic realism. To this end, the existing discourse on citationality as received from J.L. Austin and Jacques Derrida is a useful model for how the dominant realist aesthetic and bad movies both attempt to repeat iterable models of the real but only the former is successful at it. By couching realism in the terms of an iterable discourse, we can follow Fredric Jameson's belief that the problems of realism are more epistemological than aesthetic, and this allows us to reengage Bazin and Kracauer in a productive way. Their redemptive projects can avoid the trappings of nostalgic metaphysics by

being reframed as epistemological or even hermeneutic in design. Thus, we are able to view a completely deplorable movie like *Mayhem* (1986) in conjunction with a far better movie such as *The Harder They Come* (1972) in a way that does far more than simply repress *Mayhem* as bad. Such a comparative reading emphasizes the continued importance of the cinematic realist aesthetic in the way we view movies, and it critiques that aesthetic by highlighting the otherwise “invisible” artifice at work in the better movie. Allowing bad movies to demonstrate the possibility of “bad realism” emphasizes the aestheticization at work in realist texts, the distance between realism and “the real.” There are many films that critique the aesthetic distance of screened reality, such as the different edits shown in Tim Asch, Patsy Asch, and Napoleon Chagnon’s anthropological *The Ax Fight* (1975), but bad movies add something new by existing completely within the realist aesthetic instead of external to it. Working within the realist aesthetic demands a reformulation of realism, such as my citational model, instead of just simply expressing a formal, theoretical critique. If we place bad movies at the center of the realist discussion (instead of just censuring them as the negative half of a taste binary), then not only will the stalled scholarship on cinematic realism be jump started with new points of entry, but we will also come to see bad movies as an instructional site for the demonstration of the limits of realism and the activation of the proverbially passive audience.

### **Plurality in Cinematic Evaluation**

“Bad” is a value judgment applied to movies that fail to meet the expectations of what movies should do or be, which requires one to have that rare privilege of knowing what movies should do or be. When Noël Carroll attempts to tackle the question of how we evaluate films in a chapter of *The Philosophy of Motion Pictures*, he turns his attention to the so-called “classical

film theory”<sup>1</sup> to see how earlier theorists attempted to pinpoint the essence of the cinematic as a foundation for evaluation. Contra these earlier approaches, Carroll develops a pluralistic film evaluation that acknowledges that the success of a film is contingent upon its achievements relative to its specific context (i.e., within a genre, filmmaking tradition, time period, etc.) rather than to any one “essential” nature of film. Throughout his argument, Carroll tries to distinguish between ways of figuring which films are better than others, only once using *Glen or Glenda* as an example of a unanimously bad movie. This leaves the field open for an exploration of what stakes are present when deciding what makes bad movies worse than others, or even what it means to call a movie bad. Also, continuing with his pluralistic approach, we must begin the discussion of bad movies by detangling them from questions of genre, since no one genre (e.g., *noir*, sci-fi, slasher movies, etc.) may be said to contain all of the badness or, to put it another way, to be intrinsically bad in and of itself.

A personal preference for a film genre (e.g., heist films), a film “mood” (e.g., escapist, “popcorn flicks”), or a film technique (e.g., long, deep-focus shots) is not an objective foundation for film evaluation. Carroll demonstrates how figures like Rudolf Arnheim and Sergei Eisenstein or Bazin and Kracauer or V.F. Perkins “allow[ed] their stylistic preferences to shape – indeed, to infect – their conception of the essence of cinema” (204). He takes Kracauer as a specific example:

Kracauer asserts that photography is *the* essential feature of cinema. But how does he know that photography rather than, say, editing is the essential property? The actual answer is because he already presumes that realist filmmaking demarcates the recognized body of achievement in the

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<sup>1</sup> “[T]hat is, roughly speaking, film theory before the advent of semiotics and post-structuralism” (Carroll 199).

medium which a theory, like his, needs to track. That is, his “data” have been gerrymandered to elicit his conclusion. But this, of course, begs the question, since Kracauer has already “selected” the “evidence” that *induces* his “conclusion” (204).

Carroll’s solution to the problem of forming a single criterion for the basis of film evaluation is elegantly simple: he doesn’t. rather, he uses preexisting film discourse to forge pluralistic evaluation standards. He writes that “We have lots of motion picture categories, indeed, many that are perfectly unobjectionable, such as suspense, horror, structural films, melodramas, mysteries, thrillers, trance films, action films, war films, platoon films, German expressionist films, science fiction films, neo-realist films, ninja films, fantasy films, musicals, surrealistic films, Bollywood films, costume films, new talkies, fluxus films, *animé*, and various New Waves” (208). He then spends several pages on the issue of how to categorize films correctly, but I will trust the reader to be able to tease out the differences between different film categories in the broadest sense.

A movie may be said to be successful (in the broadest evaluative sense) if it meets or exceeds the standards of its film type.<sup>2</sup> A movie will be a failure, then, if it does not live up to its generic standards. This is not as easy or decisive as it sounds. One may critique a horror movie for not being scary, but the movie may still succeed as horror by being sufficiently baroque or macabre or just plain menacing. Similarly, is a comedy that is more heartwarming than funny still a comedy? One could continue like this for pages. These degrees of distinction involve a

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<sup>2</sup> The difference between merely meeting expectations and exceeding them is often the difference between popular and critical successes. The popular success comfortably fits a mold whereas the critical success does something interesting with the conventions. Of course, this is not true for all cases. Choosing one or the other is usually a matter of taste.

knowledge and attention to all of the possible goals of a genre and the possibility of generic cross-pollination.

This schematic has a few immediate quirks. First, Carroll's pluralistic approach is valuable for acknowledging the fool's errand of constructing a grand film theory, but the problem of clear and consistent film evaluation is not solved. The assessment of film is exploded into dozens of seemingly more manageable categories. Though the question "what is the goal of a horror film?" is narrower than "what is the goal of film?" the answers are equally difficult to pinpoint definitively. Second, Carroll articulates a point that is at the heart of his (and other's) critique of the "classical film theorists": "For as a philosopher of a practice, one must go where the practice goes" (224). Kracauer's fault was not to praise realist film; it was to set it aside and elevate it at the cost of other extant styles. A true attempt to get at the essence of film would involve an aggregation of laudable qualities of a variety of film types. Carroll certainly follows "the practice" when he asserts "*Tokyo Story* and *Pather Panchali* number among the most excellent achievements in their class, while *The Big Broadcast of 1938* is at the bottom of its particular heap and *Glen or Glenda* is the worst of its lot" (219). He chooses these examples to demonstrate the relative ease and difficulty of comparing evaluations across categorical boundaries. In his example, *Glen or Glenda* is such a de facto bad movie that it requires no further elaboration. He is not wrong, but his lack of any expansion on the topic highlights at least two different critical issues. First, as philosophers of a practice, must we not occasionally follow the practice down some dark alleys where movies like *Glen or Glenda* dwell? Second, the fact that a film scholar such as Carroll can namedrop *Glen or Glenda* as an example of a terrible film without explanation shows that not only are we familiar with bad movies, we also have a working silent consensus about them.

### **“Your Stupid [Movies]! Stupid! Stupid!”**

Relative to generic conventions, the act of labeling a movie “bad” amounts to a critique of its lack of sufficient realism. Badness may be characterized in a broad sense by the following types of criticisms: wooden acting, overacting, unconvincing special effects, implausible scenarios, derivative stories, nonsensical dialogue, sloppy or one-dimensional characterization, and technical ineptitudes of every type, ranging from uninspired set design to lousy cinematography. The substance of each of these critiques is to suggest that the movie in question does not meet certain predetermined codes of verisimilitude. Bad movies display these mistakes openly for the audience to see, an important difference from “good” realist works that, by virtue of aiming for a sense of reality, attempt to hide any such indications of aestheticization. Aside from evaluative concerns, bad movies also constitute a category of films that shares some overlap with categories like B-movies or *Incredibly Strange Films*.<sup>3</sup> The connections between bad movies (which can be any kind of movie) and B-movies, to take one example, has more to do with a shared case of symptoms than any true synonymy: they often share budgetary constraints, sensational plots, non-formal training (of the cast and crew), etc. Nevertheless, recognizing this sense in which “bad movie” constitutes something like its own genre can be instructive for the easy recognition of just such properties, and as a type, no figure defines the bad movie quite like Edward D. Wood, Jr. His films are irrevocably tied to his biography and the stories of the making of his films, which demonstrates one way that bad movie viewing appeals to the extratextual. That the mistakes and eccentricities are as memorable as the plots themselves show another way that extratextuality informs viewings of bad movies. The ease of identifying the “bad realism” of movies in the Ed Wood vein has led to a number of

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<sup>3</sup> *RE/Search #10: Incredibly Strange Films*. Ed. Andrea Juno. RE/Search Pub: 1986.

nonprofessional bad movie critics and fans publishing their findings in “zines” and on the internet. Even though the reviews published on a site like Andrew Borntreger’s badmovies.org do not articulate the processes of extratextuality like I do here, they are really quite sophisticated. Scholar Jeffrey Sconce writes along a similar line in his essay “Trashing the Academy: Taste, Excess, and the Emerging Politics of Cinematic Style” in which he analyzes bad movie viewing strategies (or, for Sconce, “paracinematic”) alongside those found in the university. I will show how these extratextual bad movie viewing strategies work with examples from the well-known baddies *Troll 2* and *Samurai Cop*. Each of these movies has the effect of activating the entire film for the audience who must look beyond the narrative for a complete sense of the signification at work. This complete activation recalls the articulation of some movies by Bergman and Godard that Bruce Kawin makes in his book *Mindscreen: Bergman, Godard, and First-Person Film*. In it, he describes films that call attention to themselves as films by giving the audience shared perspectives (visually, mentally, reflexively). His ideas are useful here for contextualizing the effects of bad movie watching alongside a separate but similar preexisting discourse in film studies.

Just as Carroll suggests that “good” movies succeed at the particular aims of their idiosyncratic genres and styles, so too will “bad” movies fail within their delineated stylistic jurisdictions. On one hand, cinematic badness is completely relativistic, taken in a case-by-case basis within minute categories of genre, style, time period, etc. On the other hand, bad movies actually constitute their own kind of category of film that has several existing discourses and resources available for study. First, “bad” movies typically share the same headspace as B-movies. There is a historical critical bias against B-movies and genres commonly associated with B-movies (sci-fi, horror, exploitation, etc.). Periodically, one such genre is redeemed critically,

as when the *Cahiers du Cinema* critics originally championed *film noir*. The rest of the time, B-movies garner little respect outside of their circles of cult influence. Respectable or not, no film type (genre, style, school, etc.) is perfectly flawed or perfectly flawless. This is to say that “bad” movies and B-movies are able to be separated from one another. However, there is a curious tendency for “bad” movies to constitute a certain film type in a way that the label “good movies” does not, as is evinced by fan discourses such as badmovies.org, Joe Bob Briggs’ reviews and commentaries, and professional film critics like Mark Jordan Legan’s (segments on *NPR* and *Slate Video*) and Michael Adams (who wrote *Showgirls, Teen Wolves, and Astro Zombies: A Film Critic’s Year-Long Quest to Find the Worst Movie Ever Made*). The connection between “bad movies” and various B-movie genres and styles, such as the various exploitations, trash, and obscure films,<sup>4</sup> is strong enough that other sources such as the *Psychotronic Video Guide*, *Shock Cinema* magazine, *Paracinema* magazine, and the previously mentioned critics and websites are valuable sources as well. The “zine” culture surrounding bad and exploitation-oriented films provides some of the basis for Jeffrey Sconce’s trendsetting article “Trashing the Academy: Taste, Excess, and the Emerging Politics of Cinematic Style.” In that article, Sconce places “bad movies” under the roof of his term “paracinema,” where they share a similar but unequal relationship to their fellow tenants. Sconce describes paracinema as “‘badfilm’, splatterpunk, ‘mondo’ films, sword and sandal epics, Elvis flicks, government hygiene films, Japanese monster movies, beach-party musicals, and just about every other historical manifestation of exploitation cinema from juvenile delinquency documentaries to soft-core pornography” (“Trashing the Academy” 535). The scope and elasticity of his term affords him a

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<sup>4</sup> Including but not limited to: sexploitation, mondo, lsd films, hicksploitation, blaxploitation, women in prison movies, nunsploration, biker films, peplum (“sword and sandal epics”), juvenile delinquency films, lucha libre films, nazisploitation, etc.

great deal of freedom to develop his theories and a great range of influence among those of us who are interested in working on these topics. Here I just wanted to emphasize the overlap (true and false) between bad movies and B-movies, broadly speaking. I will discuss Sconce's ideas at greater length below.

So far, we have an image of bad movies as a fan/critical discourse at times associated with some paracinematic/*Psychotronic*/B-movies, but this is an incomplete picture of cinematic badness/failure. There are many bad movies that have little to nothing in common with B-movies, such as many major studio flops or an atrocious melodrama like *The Room* (2003). So, while some bad movies may be immediately damnable in their "being-B," there are other critical commonplaces to consider in a more general sense, some of which I will repeat here: wooden acting, overacting, unconvincing special effects, implausible scenarios, derivative stories, nonsensical dialogue, sloppy or one-dimensional characterization, and other failures. Each of these criticisms taken one-by-one is subordinate to some sense of realism, but this should not and cannot forego the pluralism forged by Carroll. In a broad sense, an unbelievable plot can sink a movie, but what constitutes believability is different for science-fiction, romantic comedy, action, and, indeed, every genre and style. The different qualities of badness, then, can be understood as universal or genre-specific, often activating beyond the usual degree of suspension of disbelief. Regardless of genre, the effect of the properties of badness is the same: a decrease in the apparent realism relative to the generic conventions and expectations.

One of the earliest heralded "auteurs" of bad cinema, and still one of its best known figures, is Edward D. Wood, Jr., director of such infamous cinematic train wrecks as *Glen or Glenda*, *Bride of the Monster*, and *Plan 9 from Outer Space*. His films and the conversations that exist around them mark an important starting point for an investigation of bad movies. The

first characteristic one will notice just glancing at the titles is that bad movies tend towards sensationalist B-movie or exploitation plots. This does not mean that there is an automatic overlap between bad movies, B-movies, and exploitation movies. It's possible, but it is also possible to have bad movies that play like straight dramas (*The Room*, 2003), B-movies that are wonderfully made (*Cat People*, 1942), and exploitation movies that transcend the basic cynicism of exploitation (*Inglourious Basterds*, 2009). Instead of getting hung up on genre distinctions, we should allow the tendency of bad movies to favor sensationalistic plots to remind us that movies are also an industry. Many bad movies are the result of trying to turn a profit with a minimal initial investment (intentionally or not), and this can mean everything from using stock footage in lieu of shooting a new, more cohesive scene (*Plan 9 from Outer Space*), to relying on cheap and unconvincing special effects (*Plan 9 from Outer Space*), to simply hiring an incompetent cast and crew who will work cheaply (*Plan 9 from Outer Space*). This is not to say that all bad movies are the result of projects made cheaply in one's garage. A movie like *Primer* (2004) shows that skill and care can result in a good movie with limited resources. But this also points to a certain kind of bad movie: the big-budget studio flop. There are several famous examples, such as *Waterworld* (1995), *Battlefield Earth* (2000), and *Gigli* (2003). An interview with *Mystery Science Theater 3000*'s Mike Nelson in Michael Adams' book *Showgirls, Teen Wolves, and Astro Zombies: A Film Critic's Year-Long Quest to Find the Worst Movie Ever Made* sums up the attitude towards studio flops nicely: "I know it's controversial, but *Star Wars Episode I & II* are just jaw-droppingly bad. I cannot endure them. They make me angry. They make me just want to fall asleep from the badness. You have literally every resource on the planet and *this* is the crap you come up with?" (179).

The frustration at the poor returns of some big-budget pictures highlights two other closely related characteristics of bad movies: interest in the extratextual and fan discourses surrounding these films. Once again, Ed Wood is the prototypical example of both of these qualities. For example, knowledge of his own transvestitism and relationships with figures like Béla Lugosi has intrigued viewers and enriched showings of his films for years. This enthusiasm for the extratextual eventually led to the Tim Burton biopic *Ed Wood* (1994). Of course, such extratextual information thrives and circulates via fan discourse. Everything from special midnight showings (in the few places they still exist) to the message boards for the movies that land in the *Internet Movie Database's* (IMdB) "Bottom 100" movies list to a number of zines and web sites all make up part of the spectrum of bad movie fan discourses. On one hand, the various discourses that surround film-going in general or bad movie-going in particular may be used as evidence for a sociological study of audience types and receptions. I am more interested in the naturalness with which bad movie audiences reach for the extratextual as an extension of watching a movie. In his book I mentioned above, Michael Adams provides as much biographical and production information as he can to accompany the capsule reviews for his bad movie quest, often finding such information even more rewarding than the films themselves (such as his interest in learning as much as possible about the diminutive Weng Weng of *For Y'ur Height Only* (1981) cult fame). It is essentially a guarantee that the commentators of *Mystery Science Theater 3000* and its current incarnation *RiffTrax* will infuse their comedic commentaries with jokes that are both internal and external to the film. For example, in the episode for the movie *Werewolf* (1996), they take on bad day-for-night shots ("Later, in the dead of blue-filtered night."), continuity errors ("Going back to my darker, shorter hair now."), and some non-sequitur pop culture references (one commentator sings a few lines of "Heart of Gold")

at the sight of a werewolf who bears a striking resemblance to the well-sideburned Neil Young). Aside from just being amusing, such cheeky jokes make light of films in a way that makes the audience pay close attention to the details of the filmmaking, that highlights the films as films.

This extratextuality shows that bad movie viewers have a stated emphasis on the totality of the art of filmmaking: whereas many film viewers and critics focus primarily on the narrative aspect of film, bad movies fans have a tendency to explore all of the dimensions of filmmaking in their analyses. For example, badmovies.org is a nonprofessional site run by Andrew Borntreger who describes his writing ability and education as having “improved from what [he] learned earning [his] PhD (Public High School Diploma)” (badmovies.org). A typical movie review on his site features a description of the cast of characters, a plot summary, a tongue-in-cheek “Things I Learned from Watching This Movie” section, a “Stuff to Watch For” minute-to-minute guide to each movie’s notable scenes, a list of noteworthy quotations, and then assorted media files that harness the power of the web to show films in ways that print media cannot. Here is the “Things I Learned” section from the bad movie classic *Santa Claus Conquers the Martians* (1964):

- There are worse Christmas songs than "Jingle Bells."
- Santa has a reindeer named "Nixon."
- Eating a hamburger in the shape of a pill is unappetizing.
- Saturn is clearly visible from Mars, appearing about the same size as our moon does to us.
- Ponderous B-52 bombers are scrambled to intercept UFOs.
- Santa would never make it as a stand up comic.
- Getting fat takes time.
- Even Martian guys stuff their pants.
- Four kids using ping-pong balls and soap bubbles can take on one grown man who is armed with a disintegration ray.

And the “Stuff to Watch For”:

- 6 mins - Why is the snow on that guy not melting?

- 13 mins - September? What sort of a goofy hybrid month?
- 20 mins - Paper towel tubes used as part of a radar array. (These guys were so broke.)
- 30 mins - You two kids are going to freeze to death; I am actually happy about this.
- 34 mins - Oh no! It's some guy dressed in a polar bear suit!
- 50 mins - They are going to escape the airlock via a duct?
- 57 mins - Some big guy who laughs insanely would not put me at ease, I'd run...
- 66 mins - These morons cannot tell the difference between Santa and Drogo in a red suit? (badmovies.org)

These items focus on the implausibility of the scenarios in the film (“These morons cannot tell the difference between Santa and Drogo in a red suit?”), lapses in intelligence (“Saturn is clearly visible from Mars, appearing about the same size as our moon does to us.”), budgetary constraints (“Paper towel tubes used as part of a radar array. (These guys were so broke.)”), and an unwillingness to suspend disbelief (“Oh no! It's some guy dressed in a polar bear suit!”). The lack of suspension of disbelief is symptomatic of bad movies and how they are generally received by audiences. Oftentimes the movies are not constructed well enough to seem like a cohesive, lived-in world. It is a distancing effect and alienation technique in the passive voice: the movies do not *take* the audience out of the narrative; rather, the audiences *are taken* out of it. The cast and crew are understood as part of the filmmaking process in bad movie analysis (“These guys were so broke.”), but their intentions are stripped from the viewing of the films since it is often assumed that they had no desire to make a bad movie that distances the audience.

Jeffrey Sconce is perhaps the most prominent professional academic to tackle bad movies in a general sense. In his article “Trashing the Academy: Taste, Excess, and the Emerging Politics of Cinematic Style” he coins the term “paracinema” which he takes to include “‘badfilm’, splatterpunk, ‘mondo’ films, sword and sandal epics, Elvis flicks, government hygiene films, Japanese monster movies, beach-party musicals, and just about every other

historical manifestation of exploitation cinema from juvenile delinquency documentaries to soft-core pornography” (“Trashing the Academy” 535). Sconce refers to paracinema and paracinematic fan discourses as an attempt to articulate a “pseudo-populist avant-garde” contra cinema proper (“Movies: A Century of Failure” 288). Like counter-cinematic discourses, which Sconce takes simply as “avant-garde,” the discourses of paracinema work to critique the conventional production codes of standardized filmmaking. Similarly, both rely on realist conventions for their own intelligibility – using them as a reference point for their more radical departures. The avant-garde pushes the envelope of what film is capable of doing or being, and the limits crossed may be understood to be set by the standardized filmmaking that produces feature length narrative fictions. Paracinema, on the other hand, actually works within the boundaries of those standardized conventions. Both of these strategies ultimately both serve to critique the dominant codes of filmmaking, albeit in totally different ways. Realist films act as a point of reference for the flights of the avant-garde. Paracinema is differentiated from standardized films by the way it exposes the cracks in the same source realist aesthetics, which is to say the way that realism is always ultimately an aestheticized representation instead of a transparent window to “the real.” The highly un-invisible paracinematic filmmaking is the mechanism that truly distinguishes it from conventional narrative features. Importantly, the agent of this self-consciousness is not the films themselves; rather, paracinematic films serve as the site of the activation of such viewing strategies for audiences. “Parcinema,” Sconce writes, “is thus less a distinct group of films than a particular reading protocol” (535). He gives more details about this “reading protocol” later in the same essay:

I would argue that the paracinematic audience is perhaps the one group of viewers that *does* concentrate exclusively on these ‘non-diegetic aspects of the image’

during the entire film, or at least attempts to do so. Like their counterparts in the academy, trash cinema fans, as active cinephiles practising an aesthetic founded on the recognition and subsequent rejection of Hollywood style, are extremely conscious of the cinema's characteristic narrative forms and stylistic strategies. ... In other words, by concentrating so intently on 'non-diegetic' elements in these films, be they unconvincing special effects, blatant anachronisms, or histrionic acting, the paracinematic reading attempts to activate the 'whole film' existing... alongside the narrative film we tend to think of ourselves as watching'. One could say that while academic attention to excess often foregrounds aesthetic strategies within the text as a closed formal system, paracinematic attention to excess, an excess that often manifests itself in a film's failure to conform to historically delimited codes of verisimilitude, calls attention to the text as a cultural and sociological document and thus dissolves the boundaries of the diegesis into profilmic and extratextual realms (548).

Where Sconce draws a line in the sand to indicate the strength of the difference afforded by paracinematic or bad movie <sup>5</sup> viewing strategies, I have attempted to set up my argument in order to bridge that divide, to find the shared value between movies bad and good. So whether bad movies amount to a new type of counter-cinema or a type of passive-voiced self-reflexive film, the effect is the same: a group of films categorically different from any other whose presentation pushes viewers beyond the diegetic film world into viewing strategies that emphasize the profilmic, extratextual, and the purely formal, textual qualities of a film.

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<sup>5</sup> For my argument, "paracinema" and "bad movie" are basically interchangeable, though they are certainly not always. I will continue to use "bad movie" unless dealing specifically with Sconce's argument.

The extratextual, non-diegetic information serves as the best solution for grappling with the excess of signification caused by bad movies' failure to adhere to standardized representational conventions. Let's take an exemplary scene from the 1990 bad movie classic *Troll 2* for an example of how cinematic badness directs viewers into the extratextual.<sup>6</sup> Late in the film, the protagonist Joshua and his family have discovered that the town of Nilbog ("Goblin" spelled backwards) in which they are staying as part of a very trusting houseswap between themselves and a family of strangers is inhabited by religiously fanatic vegetarian/carnivorous "goblins in disguise." (This will only make slightly more sense once you've seen the film.) The scene in question concerns one of (deep breath) Joshua's older sister's boyfriend's friends who tagged along in an RV parked just outside of town. The group of boyfriend's friends are in the movie to serve a weak narrative function (the boyfriend may either dump his friends or his girlfriend – he is not permitted to have both) and a highly practical narrative function as victims of the goblins. At this point late in the film, only one friend, Brent, is left in the RV, watching television alone. His program switches itself to footage of Creedence Leonore Gielgud (the suddenly, inexplicably sexy druid queen of the goblins) approaching his RV and addressing him directly via the TV. Bizarrely, she brings along a corncob. Brent figures out that this TV show reflects a real lusty druid queen outside his RV, and he invites her in (despite not knowing who she is or ever having seen her before) for one of the strangest love scenes in movie history. As they passionately bite the corncob together, the steaminess of their passion makes popcorn burst forth (curiously, as if thrown on them by people standing to the sides of the camera). At the end of this corny scene, the exhausted Brent exclaims "No more

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<sup>6</sup> Readers of digital copies of this essay can click the following link to access a YouTube clip of the scene discussed, still active as of 10/25/10: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gTZVvFn6rmo>. (In MS Word, hold the Ctrl Key and click the link to open it in your web browser.)

popcorn” before collapsing into what we must assume is his death since he will not appear in the movie again.

Even excusing the fantasy elements (seductive druid queens in contemporary rural Utah, sex so hot it literally cooks), this scene is totally implausible in its relation to the profilmic. Brent has no knowledge or skill that would threaten the goblins or their druid queen. There is also very little reason to believe that Creedence Leonore Gielgud would actively seek sexual relations with a teenage boy in an RV. The only narrative motivation imaginable is to provide closure to the Brent character, which is something that this scene does not do (is he dead or just very sleepy?) and which the audience could care less about since he is almost completely undeveloped as a character. He poses no threat to Creedence and her goblins, and even if he did, we are given no reason why he is given this “special treatment” over his friends who were turned into plants and devoured by the goblins. Further, the eroticism of corn-on-the-cob is a far cry from the sexuality of the food/love scene in *9 ½ Weeks* (1986) or the entirety of *Like Water for Chocolate* (1993), but these movies give us a clue as to where *Troll 2* gets its inspiration. The corn-love scene is one borne out of other movies, not the profilmic. Bad movies have a tendency of reproducing (unsuccessfully, of course) conventions from other movies. Many movies do this, as the winking, meta fun of the *Scream* series attests, but it is never as apparent as it is in bad movies where it threatens to bog down the films into total incomprehensibility. Importantly, incomprehensibility never totally wins out; there is always the opportunity to figure out *what they were trying to do*. In the case of *Troll 2*, they were clearly trying to add a family friendly sex scene that stems from the same food-erotica tradition as *9 ½ Weeks*. The fact that the scene is stilted, bizarre, and out-of-place was not enough to land it on the cutting room floor.

A different example of a movie projecting a “bad realism” that ejects viewers from the narrative comes from an early scene in *Samurai Cop* (1989).<sup>7</sup> First, the hair and the fashions should be all the evidence that one would need to see how realism is culturally and historically located. In this scene, the protagonist (the titular Japanophile) and his partner (“the black cop,” a type featured in buddy cop movies that ostensibly demonstrates the integration of two cultures though they tend to amount to little more than a feature’s length of racial and ethnic stereotyping) chase members of the villainous Katana Gang in their car. The thrill of the high-speed chase is hard to deny, and movies such as *Bullitt* (1968) and the updated *Fast and the Furious* series (2001-2009, so far) demonstrate the perennial rush of the chase. What gets the adrenaline pumping is the appearance of cars moving faster than is otherwise necessary (or legal) through some environment. What *Samurai Cop* gets wrong about the chase is that they achieve the effect of fast-moving cars by speeding up the footage. In Howard Hughes’ *Hell’s Angels* (1930), he was able to show the speed of the planes by juxtaposing them with clouds in the sky (a decision dramatized in the opening scenes of Martin Scorsese’s *The Aviator* (2004)). *Samurai Cop*’s apparent high-speed motion is effectively nullified by the immediate comparison of the other objects in the frame that were also sped up. When all of the cars drive quickly, the relative concept of speed is stripped of its meaning. Additionally, one need not be a physicist to see that the car does not behave (around turns, for example) the same way it would actually behave under high-speed conditions. It would be difficult not to see that this is an example of doctored footage. Further, it is inconsistently doctored. Whenever an actor is seen at all, they must necessarily shoot and edit at regular speeds. This causes objects in the background (i.e., the blur

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<sup>7</sup> Readers of digital copies of this essay can click the following link to access a YouTube clip of the scene discussed, still active as of 10/25/10: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rX9y0iNuCcM>. (In MS Word, hold the Ctrl Key and click the link to open it in your web browser.)

of apparent motion) to change from shot to shot. And when the partner takes shots at the Katana Gang, filmed from a low angle, it is the stationary clouds that betray the lack of motion and make the exaggerated shaking of the vehicle all the funnier.

### **Activating the Entire Film: Bad Movies and the Self-Conscious Film**

The bad movie viewer's attention to extratextuality activates the whole film in a way analogous to the way in which Bruce Kawin describes the effect of self-conscious films. The difference may be stated grammatically: self-conscious films *actively* call attention to themselves as films, but bad movies *passively* have attention called to them via their legion of faults. The effect of activating the entire film is the same, but the variable of authorial intention is removed, giving some credence to Sconce's notion of paracinema as a "pseudo-populist avant-garde."

Kawin comments on the ability of self-referentiality to allow the audience to "be present to" the reality of the film as film rather than as illusory fiction: "The exciting thing about self-conscious film in particular is that the work forthrightly incorporates an awareness of that distance into its own presentational structure, so that one has less suspending of disbelief to do and can deal with film as a film rather than pretend it is something else" (193). It is the narrative fiction that obscures the audience's relation to "physical reality" of the film as film, actors as actors, etc. Self-conscious films represent one specific subclass of films that *intentionally* try to close the distance between the fiction of film and the reality of film. Self-conscious films are no less "fictional" nor do other films possess any less of a disguised "reality;" rather, self-conscious films lend themselves to a more direct understanding of this duality of film. Kawin seems to offer some advice on how to proceed with the other type of non-self-conscious film:

Many ideological conventions have become imbedded not just in the particular signs, then (as Pasolini has argued), but in the way an audience interprets signs, or expects to interpret them: it wants to identify with a character, to have an emotional response to death- or love- or big-decision-scenes, and to be able to distinguish between documentary and fiction – in other words, to orient itself among conventions for the communication of situation and meaning – in order to understand and interpret what it is seeing. The first step in countering this tendency, then, is to address the latent self-consciousness of the audience by reminding it that it is seeing not “blood” but “red,” thereby opening to question (and allowing the audience to participate in) the mechanics and implications of signification. One does not have to be a Communist to be excited by the possibility of a new set of conventions – or anticonventions – that would educate the audience rather than simply manipulate it, and make possible a new realism” (151-2).

Awareness of filmic signification is an effect that can be caused, for example, by self-conscious or self-referential films. The point can be rearticulated grammatically. Constructing this operation *actively*, self-conscious films can cause audiences to become aware of cinematic signification. Since the goal is the audience awareness, however, one can construct this operation *passively*, where audiences are made aware of the aestheticization of film. Self-conscious films act as one potential agent of this action but not the only one. The effect of bad movies creates a similar awareness in viewers, though, importantly, by framing this operation in the passive voice, we are able to eliminate the concept of the intentionality of the film or filmmaker from consideration.

For Kawin, however, intentionality is important to the operation of self-conscious films, which – it is important to stress – are merely one kind of audience activating film. According to Kawin, “One of the few gestures available to the metaphysically self-conscious filmmaker is to create an intermediary consciousness between himself and the audience – one the work can struggle to become aware of, or to become, and which it can come to consider (giving up the quest) the limits of its world” (55). This “intermediary consciousness” manifests itself via a first-person subjective cinema. Kawin mentions a number of possibilities for such subjective filmmaking techniques, but he largely concerns himself with the various types of visual subjectivities which he nicely summarizes near the end of the book:<sup>8</sup>

1. Subjective camera (share my eyes). [Metz: “the truly subjective or analytical image”; example: *Lady in the Lake*.]
2. Point of view (share my perspective, my emphases). [Metz: “the semi-subjective or associational image”; example: *The 400 Blows*.]
3. Mindscreen (share my mind’s eye). [Metz: “the purely mental image,” “the imaginary,” and “the memory image”; example: *The Wizard of Oz*.]
4. Self-consciousness (share my reflexive perspective). [Example: *Persona*.] (190).

This list is incredibly useful insofar as it summarizes a variety of film techniques that have been used and that are available for use by future filmmakers (“and by calling attention to it in this book I hope to make more filmmakers aware of its possibilities” p. 189). The burden of a subjective cinema is placed in the hands of the films and filmmakers, but since all of the modes

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<sup>8</sup> I will leave intact his examples and references to Metz even though I will not be using them.

of first-person cinema involve the audience sharing perspectives with the film or characters in the film, then there must be a greater emphasis placed on the audience's role.

He takes his primary examples from the films of Bergman and Godard, but he also includes some more highly efficient samples, such as a close analysis of the Bugs Bunny short *Hair-Raising Hare*. When Bugs emerges at the start of the horror-spoof, he directly asks the audience "Did you ever have the feeling you were being watched?" But rather than continue a dialogue across the "fourth wall" (as Daffy Duck does in *Duck Amuck* with the malevolent artist, portrayed by Bugs Bunny), it is revealed to the audience that Bugs is, in fact, being watched by a mad scientist who will act as a primary antagonist in the picture. This playful demonstration of medium-awareness and convention (the relationship of the watching audience to the watched characters/actors in a film) is the first of many examples in *Hair-Raising Hare* that Kawin uses to argue that "to the extent that its 'potential linguistic focus' is aware of itself *as film* – an awareness that both includes and is alluded to by Bugs's own awareness—it projects the fictitious autonomy of mindscreen narration: it appears to imagine itself – or perhaps more precisely, includes an awareness of its being a visual narration" (53-4).

The "intermediary consciousness" Kawin writes of gives the audience an important point of identification that possesses a degree of medium awareness. For a study of films that include such intratextual consciousnesses, Kawin is definitive. There is, however, room to adapt his ideas or to use them to contextualize films that have similar operations. Bad movies feature some of the lower-order perspective sharing (point-of-view and mindscreen, primarily) insofar as they have become part of the standard filmmaking vernacular. They rarely, if ever, engage in any of the more sophisticated displays of medium awareness that self-reflexive movies do, but they still invest in their viewers an awareness of the medium. They do so not by including an

intermediary consciousness in the film itself but by bludgeoning the audience with evidence that the movie is an aestheticized version of the profilmic, thereby creating a second kind of consciousness within the audience itself. Audiences simultaneously see a movie story and the failure to tell competently that very story. The difference at hand between Kawin's self-conscious films that possess medium awareness and bad movies that bestow upon an audience an awareness of aestheticization harkens back to Carroll's plurality: bad movies show not the medium of film but its aesthetic conventions, not the essence of the medium but a dominant style within it. Bad movies certainly meet Kawin's assertion that self-conscious films include a presentational distance "so that one has less suspending of disbelief to do and can deal with film as a film rather than pretend it is something else," though instead of laying bare film-as-film, bad movies expose the realist aesthetic.

### **Perceptual Realism and Plausibility**

We have already seen how evaluating a movie as "bad" amounts to a critique of its lack of apparent realism, which emphasizes the role that realism continues to play in our reception of movies. In addition to simply highlighting realism as a dominant aesthetic, bad movies also give some clues about how to overcome the ideologies imbedded in realism, mainly via extratextual reading strategies. All of this would add up to a new way of thinking about bad movies as a new kind of counter-cinema if we stopped there, but if we continue to think about bad movies alongside realist theory, then we will have an opportunity to revise those theories of realism. Bad movies will be the first counter-cinema to exist entirely within the realist aesthetic, instead of simply against it, and this vantage point adds to realism a new sense of evaluation that deemphasizes a supposed ontological link with the profilmic that exists persistently and dogmatically in Bazin and Kracauer. In other words, bad movies prove that realism can be bad,

but this, of course, has no bearing on the quality or existence of a profilmic reality. Bazin and Kracauer have very important redemptive and humanitarian stakes in their theories, but their works have largely been supplanted by less near-sighted studies (such as Carroll's cinematic pluralism). Where bad movies drive a wedge into realist theory, there is an opportunity not only to critique realism (which other counter-cinemas have done) but also to revise it in a way that will allow us to salvage the projects of Bazin and Kracauer in a productive way. For example, Bazin and Kracauer both fall victim to some methodological traps (such as taking neorealism and photography as exemplary qualities of film, respectively), and they presume too much of film (a profound humanism associated with film's "essential" link to the ontology of some lost profilmic) in a way that is difficult to prove. Instead of just disregarding them for these noble errors, I think we can use bad movies as the corrective catalyst needed to change the course of their theories.

So, after introducing Bazin and Kracauer like that, it may seem odd to withhold them from further discussion for a few pages, but that's just what I'm going to do. My goal is to offer a corrective to their theories, but I also need to paint a more complete picture of this cinematic realism we are dealing with. Bazin and Kracauer have very dogmatic prescriptions of what realism means and what it should do. I find it necessary to engage a few key currents in cinematic realist theory that have emerged in more contemporary film scholarship. I begin with an overview of many of the central issues of realism written by Andrew Kania. He synthesizes the arguments of several academics into his chapter on realism in *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy and Film*, which he writes with philosophical rigor and precision. The social constructions of realism, including its history and ideologies, are beyond Kania's scope, so I look to *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* by David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson

and *Aesthetics of Film* by Jacques Aumont, Alain Bergala, Michel Marie, and Marc Vernet.

Both of these texts provide evidence to allow us to position Hollywood films centrally within discussions of realism, which – to my knowledge – has never been done formally. Explicitly naming Hollywood films realist is important because it identifies a new supply of films to include in the realist discussion, films which have easier-to-identify links to bad movies which are made in their image more so than, say, the neorealist films of Bazin. Lastly, we will explore the possibility of using a citational model of realism in order to treat realism as discursive and epistemological instead of ontological. Only after applying this citational model will we return to Bazin and Kracauer to understand the effects of this change.

In the chapter on realism in *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy and Film*, Andrew Kania synthesizes much of the philosophy of cinematic realism into a brief overview of the ideas and problems. His argument is broken into three primary sections: motion picture realism, photographic realism, and perceptual realism. I will skip the first because none of the theories he engages for the apparent reality of motion in movies is more convincing than the phenomenon and because they are too far removed from my focus. For photographic realism, Kania introduces a number of important concepts. The first is that photographs are said to be “counterfactually dependent” upon their subjects, which means that “if the subject of a photograph had looked different, then the photograph would have looked different, no matter whether the photographer noticed the difference” (240). A second key concept is the degree to which photographs may be said to be transparent, which is a question directly related to whether or not the audience “literally” sees the objects on the screen. To demonstrate this point, Kania begins with the idea of a window, which one certainly “literally” sees objects through, then he progresses through increasingly less literal forms of seeing like mirrors, telescopes, live

broadcast television, drawings, etc. (241). The point is that some frames allow for literal seeing while others do not, and the question becomes where to locate photography along that scale, or where to “draw the line,” so to speak. Just like Carroll ultimately appealed to a pluralistic and relativistic notion of film evaluation, Kania turns to a similarly splintered approach to the concept of seeing: “For if we can at least place film viewing with some precision on the spectrum between simply seeing and seeing painting (say), we can appeal to this *relative* immediacy in explaining one way in which photographic film is realistic” (243).

After photographic realism, Kania spends a little time with the theory of perceptual realism, which seems closer to what classical film theorists meant by “realism.” Perceptual realism relates to the way a viewer perceives the photographic subject similar to the way that subject would be perceived outside of the photograph in the profilmic reality. Since this theory is predicated upon the viewer far more than theories of photographic realism, Kania is able to explain that “[s]ince resemblance is a matter of degree, and perceptual realism appeals to resemblance, so is perceptual realism a matter of degree. For instance, the stylized appearance of a cartoon donkey may be less realistic than a photographic film of a donkey, but the cartoon is nonetheless perceptually realistic, as opposed to, say, the *word* ‘donkey’” (243). He spends the following page further explaining different ways a film could be perceptually realistic, such as temporally (duration and ordering of shots), spatially (lens focus or the immersion of IMAX or 3-D), sensibly (mostly with regard to sound but also occasionally smell and other senses), and finally through the correct matching of perceptually realistic components like sights and sounds (244).

Perceptual realism helps reinstate degrees of difference into the realist debate, which seems too often to slip into the misunderstanding that realist texts are as transparent as windows,

offering unobstructed views of reality rather than aestheticized resemblances of “reality,” whether it is understood metaphysically or discursively. Similarly, bad movies nullify any operative transparency, functioning entirely as aesthetic. Take, for example, this ludicrous scene from *The Room* (2003): Johnny (played by writer, director, producer Tommy Wiseau) buys flowers from a florist. It sounds simple enough, but the delivery of lines occurs with no attention to the natural rhythms of conversation. Unlike screwball comedies which deploy rapid-fire dialogue as well, there is no pretense at cleverness (“Hi, doggy.”) nor is there any logical reason for the unnaturalness.<sup>9</sup> It may not be the most temporally realistic depiction of a trip to a florist, but it may be understood perceptually as resembling the actual experience of purchasing a dozen red roses. Realism in this scene from *The Room* is clearly a matter of convention and degree. Johnny and the florist make minimal small talk, which is conventional, but the final result is several degrees less realistic than one would expect it should be.

The expectation that a film achieve a certain high degree of perceptual realism is itself a convention stemming from the largest producer of fictional narrative feature films: that is, Hollywood or at least what some have begun calling films in the Classical Hollywood style. Now, of course, “Hollywood” is far too large a term with too many potential implications to speak about generally without getting into trouble, so I will take my cues from Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson’s *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*. In it they attempt to provide the most accurate description of the properties of Hollywood cinema during its height from roughly 1917 to 1960. Early on they attempt to define the “group style” (roughly synonymous with the way

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<sup>9</sup> Readers of digital copies of this essay can click the following link to access a YouTube clip of the scene discussed, still active as of 11/19/10: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7S9Ew3TleVQ>. (In MS Word, hold the Ctrl Key and click the link to open it in your web browser.)

we label periods of art or literature) of Hollywood film by appealing to the discourses by which Hollywood represents itself to itself:

We could start with a description of the Hollywood style derived from Hollywood's own discourse, that enormous body of statements and assumptions to be found in trade journals, technical manuals, memoirs, and publicity handouts. We would find that the Hollywood cinema sees itself as bound by rules that set stringent limits on individual innovation; that telling a story is the basic formal concern, which makes the film studio resemble the monastery's *scriptorium*, the site of the transcription and transmission of countless narratives; that unity is a basic attribute of film form; that the Hollywood film purports to be 'realistic' in both an Aristotelian sense (truth to the probable) and a naturalistic one (truth to historical fact); that the Hollywood film strives to conceal its artifice through techniques of continuity and 'invisible' storytelling; that the film should be comprehensible and unambiguous; and that it possesses a fundamental emotional appeal that transcends class and nation. Reiterated tirelessly for at least seventy years, such precepts suggest that Hollywood practitioners recognized themselves as creating a distinct approach to film form and technique that we can justly label 'classical' (3).

Similarly, in *Aesthetics of Film*, Jacques Aumont, Alain Bergala, Michel Marie, and Marc Vernet give a far more succinct appraisal of Hollywood: "The Hollywood cinema may be considered to have three major flaws: first, it is American, and thus politically marked; second, it is narrative in the strictest nineteenth-century tradition; and finally, it is industrial, which is to say that its products are all tightly calibrated" (71-2). The authors openly show their biases when they state

that “the cinema was led astray in the following Hollywood model” in the introduction to their brief Hollywood section (71). They continue to explain how discussions of Hollywood often blur the distinction between industry and aesthetics: “As far as the cinema’s typical industrial production is concerned, standardization is admittedly quantitatively important and even dominant within the cinema. However, it is not certain that the standard industrial films are those being referred to when we speak of the analysis of film and cinematic language since these studies often draw their examples from *nonstandard* industrial films, such as *Citizen Kane*” (72-3). Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson’s study, by comparison, made a concerted effort to study *standard* Hollywood industrial films (“To construct a model of the ordinary film, we have selected in an unbiased fashion, 100 films from this period [1915-1960],” p. 10), and they still came to a similar conclusion as Aumont, et al., in that the Classical Hollywood style represents a mass-produced, widespread crop of narrative films primarily made in the aesthetic of nineteenth century narrative realism.

Aumont et al. separate the concept of cinematic realism into a few related but separate component parts, highlighting the fact that “the ‘realism’ of the cinematic materials of expression is merely the result of a large number of conventions and rules, all of which vary according to the specific period and culture in which the film is made” (109). In other words, cinematic realism is in a constant state of transition and revision, “improving” with each new step in technology and epistemology. The authors separate the subject matter of films from other concerns about realism, such as distinguishing between neorealist scenarios (e.g., a stolen bicycle in postwar Italy) and neorealist techniques (e.g., employing nonactors). Aumont et al. are wise to do this since there are a great number of films that deal with more-or-less neorealist scenarios that possess none of the other attributes attributed (correctly or not) to neorealist films. For

example, a film like Ron Howard's *Cinderella Man* (2005) is set during the Great Depression and deals with the impoverished former boxing champ James Braddock (Russell Crowe). It is, however, a well-funded, star-studded, Hollywood studio picture whose subject matter alone would not typically direct critics towards a discussion of its realistic qualities (if it may be said to possess any). Stories alone are clearly not the decisive factor in cinematic realism, though at times (as in the famous Italian neorealist films) the stories may highlight the production techniques. Aumont et al. find their own solution for working with cinematic stories. Much like Carroll's solution to the problem of cinematic evaluation, Aumont et al. turn to a pluralistic approach centered on "the plausible." One of their descriptions of this term is this: "The plausible simultaneously involves the relationship between a text and commonly held opinion, its relation to other texts, and also the internal functioning of the story being told" (114). Thus, a movie may be said to be plausible if it adheres to the conventions and logics of its genre (the hero saves the day, the couple falls in love, the villain gets his comeuppance, etc.) and "is also based upon the coherence of the diegetic universe constructed by the fiction" (123). Or, as Roger Corman puts it in an interview about his then newly produced film *Sharktopus*, given around the time he was awarded an Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Honorary Award:

*Sharktopus* presents a different problem because if I do *Dinocroc* or *Dinoshark* I can understand that at one time there was a prehistoric crocodile or prehistoric shark. There is no such thing as a half shark/half octopus. It was their title and I had to come up with some kind of explanation. So what I came up with is a company called Blue Water, which is under contract with the Navy. It is a bioengineering firm. Pirates or terrorists use small boats to attack different areas

where the Navy officially cannot go, so they commissioned Blue Water to design a half shark/half octopus. There's something implanted in its brain they can control. The tentacles can overturn the boat and then the shark eats the terrorists. People who tune in to see *Dinoshark* or *Sharktopus*, that is what they want to see. I ask them to accept this one fantastic explanation. Once we establish that, then we're completely logical. We don't ask them to accept anything that couldn't really happen (Shock Till You Drop.com interview).

Of course, no reasonable person would ever consider *Sharktopus* a realist film of any sort, but Corman's explanation for his approach to such a film highlights a central truth about cinematic plausibility: within the context of even the most outrageous film, characters must behave and events must unfold in a plausible way if the film is to achieve the kind of reality effect associated with films in the Classical Hollywood style. In a science fiction film, the audience expects, no, demands the fantastic as a starting point, but if there were not ultimately some limit or boundary to the sci-fi world, the film would spiral into unintelligibility or the realm of the surreal or the avant garde. In a monster movie, the audience knows that there is going to be a creature that is not of the regular profilmic world (or that is an exaggerated type), but that the characters in the film are going to oppose the creature as humans would were there ever to be a sharktopus epidemic. In all instances, there is an acceptance of the basic tenets of a film genre coupled with an understanding that, beyond that initial audience contract, the events will unfold in a familiarly human way.

Or cinematically human way. Here lies yet another paradox of film: though the camera's gaze is directed at some staged or unstaged reality and often the films work to disguise any sense of fiction or constructedness, the signification systems and conventions in films frequently

borrow from the history of film rather than any external, profilmic reality. This accounts for the critical discourses that would call a movie like *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* an anti-Western (contra other more traditional Western films) instead of a Western (contra other histories and myths of the American West). As Aumont et al. put it:

One may argue, therefore, that the plausible is established not as a function of reality, but as a function of already established texts (or films). It owes more to discourse than to the real, hence, it is an effect of the corpus. In this way the plausible is founded upon the reiteration of discourse, whether at the level of public opinion or of an ensemble of texts. It is for this reason that the plausible is always a form of censorship (117).

In the profilmic world, surprise, non-sequitur, confusion, and irrationality are natural. Be they objects of frustration or interest, they do not threaten to destabilize our conception of reality like they could were they to appear within the context of a film. The discourse of film that requires a sense of internal coherence shuns such detours unless they can be explained plausibly within the frame of a film or film genre.

Simply shifting the conversation from “realism” to “plausibility” or from “reality” to “discourse” does little to alleviate the basic problems of the narrative fiction film, namely that they are couched in systems of signification and ideologies about which the audience is frequently unaware. Earlier I discussed self-referential films as one possible solution to this problem, but they represent a relatively small subset of films overall. Then, I looked at how a confusing relationship between cinema’s ability to record images of the profilmic in a way that resembles our transparent perception of the profilmic has led to a number of different understandings of the concept “realism” (as technological innovation, as setting, as style, as

narrative logic, etc.) that may or may not always necessarily coincide with one another. Though there are many counter-cinemas that work to actively engage this other “primary” Classical Hollywood style cinema, I want to explore the idea that bad movies may potentially be a different class of counter cinema. In many ways, they are exemplary cases of conventional film discourses gone wrong whose impact rests with the audience reception instead of with authorial (i.e., directorial) intention. Then, I intend to retroactively apply any discoveries found in the realm of bad movies to the rest of cinema in as wide a way as possible. Of course, this won’t be a “grand theory” in the classical Bazin and Kracauer sense, and – lest we forget about them – I will also see how their ideas can work with these different accounts of cinematic realism.

### **The Citationality of Cinematic Realism**

Bad movies are set off from traditional realist films by their inability to transparently present the profilmic according to the expected conventions, but they are both subject to the same basic tenet that films be realistic. Now, many of the problems associated with Bazin and Kracauer’s theories are solved when Carroll knocks realism off its pedestal, so to speak, by advocating pluralism in film evaluation. Pluralism obviates the dogmatic notion that good films prescribe to any one “essential” nature of film, but this act of liberation is betrayed by the idea that bad films are taken as bad because of a failure to satisfy the conventions of realism. If we are to oppose realism as a dominant aesthetic, then we must develop a more transparent viewing strategy that will allow us to exorcize it from within. Bad movies are useful to this end because they exist entirely within the realist aesthetic, showing even uninformed viewers that there is such a thing as bad realism, which in turn has the effect of laying bare the artifice of realism. I want to emphasize that cinematic realism as a style (as Bordwell et al. suggest) or as a degree of perception (as Kania suggests) is subject to a sliding scale of success (as in Carroll’s pluralistic

evaluation), and that the discourse of citationality provides a useful model for understanding how something (for Austin and Derrida, the speech act; for me, movies) may either be a successful or unsuccessful repetition. Citationality ultimately has the effect of taking the extratextual readings of bad films and grafting those strategies back onto successful realist films.

Bad movies help codify the system of operations that every narrative film in the classical Hollywood style makes. The system of double signification of the filmed reality and the screened fiction build from conventions that have roots in the culturally and historically locatable profilmic and in the conventions of other narrative films and film genres. When a film succeeds at reproducing the codes of the profilmic and the filmic, it may be said to be “good” insofar as it does not call attention to itself as a film, which is one of the basic assumptions of standard filmmaking (and why an actor looking into the camera lens is usually understood as a mistake). Bad films fail at reproducing these codes. What is especially interesting, however, is that the failure to successfully enact a cinematic code is not the same thing as a failure to signify. In fact, bad movies achieve the same double identification that, while possible to find in all movies, is mostly only acknowledged in self-conscious cinema. One knows that the creators of *Samurai Cop* failed to present a convincing chase sequence, but one still knows that they tried to produce a chase sequence. In order to describe this phenomenon of enacting conventions that may either succeed or fail, I find it incredibly useful to look to the notion of *performativity* as articulated by J.L. Austin, as well as its elaboration by Jacques Derrida as the more general concept of *citationality*.

In *How to Do Things with Words* Austin rethinks language, not in terms of a classical true/false dichotomy, but based on the force of an utterance, its ability *to do*. A few of his most famous examples include the “I do” of a marriage or the christening of a boat – language whose

content is action. Notably, he excludes “non-serious” utterances such as poetry, theater, and joking (104). He also seems to have difficulty dealing with writing, particularly since it is not as clearly connected to its source of origin as the spoken word. He does allow for one to append a signature in order to clearly designate an origin (60-1). It is precisely in these cracks of non-seriousness and writing where Derrida picks up Austin’s project in his essay “Signature, Event, Context”:

For, ultimately, isn’t it true that what Austin excludes as anomaly, exception, “non-serious,” *citation* (on stage, in a poem, or a soliloquy) is the determined modification of a general citationality—or rather, a general iterability—without which there would not even be a “successful” performative? So that—a paradoxical but unavoidable conclusion—a successful performative is necessarily an “impure” performative, to adopt the word advanced later on by Austin when he acknowledges that there is no “pure” performative (17).

In other words, Derrida asks, “Could a performative utterance succeed if its formulation did not repeat a ‘coded’ or iterable utterance, or in other words, if the formula I pronounce in order to open a meeting, launch a ship or a marriage were not identifiable as *conforming* with an iterable model, if it were not identifiable in some way as a ‘citation’?” (18). Cinematic realism may also be defined by the bad movies that account for its most “impure” iterations of the profilmic. *Troll* 2’s corn scene fails to register as plausibly erotic, but it does not fail to register as an attempted love scene. From such failures, it is all too clear that bad movie failures effectively underscore a system of reproducible conventions that not only work as a semiotics of film signification but also as a “reading protocol” for understanding the profilmic. This approach circumvents the necessity of knowing or naming a profilmic reality before mounting an investigation of its

representation in realist cinema because citationality need only be the repetition of conventions, and these conventions can stem from other films as easily as they can the profilmic. Treating cinematic realism as the reproduction of simulacra rather than veridical mimesis is the only way to engage bad movies. Following the conclusions of Austin and Derrida, we should then be able to use this citational realism as the broadest possible category for all standard narrative feature films.

The crux of citational realism, and the deciding factor between good and bad movies, then, is the establishment of context. Speaking about traditional citation reveals what is at stake for cinematic iterability. If I quote Derrida here in such a way that supports this part of my discussion, then it may be said that I recontextualized his argument within my own in a successful way. If I quote Derrida here but I misquote his words, botch the understanding of his argument, or use some unauthorized translation, then the integrity of my essay is at stake. If, for whatever reason, I insert into the body of my essay a lengthy quotation from an automotive manual, I have recontextualized something so seemingly foreign to my topic so as to question both my essay and my good judgment. The smooth working citation is the goal of realist cinema in the Classical Hollywood style: recontextualize as cleanly as possible a conventional sense of the profilmic for the purpose of the narrative. The misquote is akin to the kinds of continuity errors and revealing mistakes recorded for each movie in the Internet Movie Database's "Goofs" section. The grossly inappropriate quotation is essentially the jarring juxtaposition of the totally dissimilar found in surrealist films, the completely inexplicable plot devices of bad films, and the winking playfulness of the pre-narrative cinema of attractions.

Following the logic of Derrida's general iterability, then, these problems of cinematic iterability actually serve to constitute the way we can understand even its best instances. So,

realist films go largely unchecked because they are able to duplicate the profilmic within a context that seems more-or-less like the context in which we encounter the profilmic (i.e., are the most perceptually realistic). A shot of an airplane landing on a runway strip is followed by a shot of a woman emerging from an airport terminal with her luggage. Our experiences with the progression of events at an airport inform our viewing of these shots, leading us to accept this continuity as essentially realistic. If a model airplane is used instead or if what we are supposed to understand as the airport terminal more closely resembles a strip mall then we may become suspicious of the film's realistic structure. We are "taken out" of the movie, so to speak, though this expression contains traces of just what is so important about being able to suspend one's belief in the realistic structure of the movie.

The citational property of cinematic realism bridges the divide between the various other realisms, placing the burden of proof exactly where it has always been: with the audience. One function of this is the erasure of the need to strongly identify the referents of filmic signification. Films and the profilmic alike work as discourses to be cited by subsequent films. Working with realism in this way recalls Fredric Jameson's idea that "realism is essentially an epistemological category framed and staged in aesthetic terms" ("A Note on Literary Realism in Conclusion" 261). In his essay, "The Existence of Italy" he argues that a successful aesthetics of the real, in its exactitude, would cease to be aesthetic at all. Similarly, were the aesthetic representation to overshadow the epistemic category of "the real" in a work of art, the quality of its "realism" would be severely undercut. Jameson is not put-off by this apparent paradox: "Yet no viable conception of realism is possible unless both these demands or claims are honored simultaneously, prolonging and preserving – rather than 'resolving' – this constitutive tension and incommensurability" (158). If cinematic realism is to be understood as an iterable model as

I have proposed, then Jameson's argument must take a turn into familiar postmodern territory. The film that borrows from the profilmic and other films indiscriminately is a film that already treats the profilmic as discursive. Whereas the postmodern concept of discursive regimes has been understood as dealing the death blow to the serious treatment of realist texts, it would seem that the opposite is true. Realism is not defeated by postmodern discourses, it is emblematic of them.

Of course, treating reality as an epistemological field is completely foreign to Bazin and Kracauer's realisms, but it doesn't have to be. They establish dogmatic realisms that presume the existence of the profilmic as a fixed external given. If we understand cinematic realism as "citing" iterable models of reality (inherited from the profilmic and other movies), which in turn means disregarding for now the question of the ontological existence of the profilmic, then we shall have a functional framework for the revision of Bazin and Kracauer for which bad movies work as test cases.

Bazin's realist film theory is famously wrapped in the death shroud of the medium. In his own "The Ontology of the Photographic Image" he argues that the photograph is nothing less than the mummy of its profilmic referent, the preservation of a fleeting point of space-time. The photograph is to enact this preservation of reality, according to Bazin, at a juncture in aesthetics, where painting is freed from its "original sin" of perspective and realist representation since the photograph is more adept at "lay[ing] bare the realities" (15). It is precisely photography's – and film's – affinity for technically reproducing images that correspond more directly to what we see with our eyes than any of the other arts that sets the foundation for Bazin's – and other's – theories of cinematic realism.

Though death is the stake involved in his argument, Bazin posits his theory as being “the preservation of life by a representation of life” (10), which should work to explain his championing of neorealism. In his essay “An Aesthetic of Reality: Neorealism” Bazin surveys the postwar Italian film and praises it for its adherence to a realism which he equates with a “revolutionary humanism” (21). The important qualities of this neorealism for Bazin are its historical specificity (a quality inherent to the photograph when not aestheticized) and its determination to “never forget that the world *is*, quite simply, before it is something to be condemned” (21). The positing of a profilmic ontology would seem to be the work of the documentary, if any film genre at all, and Bazin recognizes this when he excuses the neorealist narratives:

That is why, when one reads resués of them, the scenarios of many Italian films are open to ridicule. Reduced to their plots, they are often just moralizing melodramas, but on the screen everybody in the film is overwhelmingly real. Nobody is reduced to the condition of an object or a symbol that would allow one to hate them in comfort without having first to leap the hurdle of their humanity (21).

The narratives upon which Italian neorealist films hang their claims to realism are little more than vehicles to allow such presentations, or in his words, “realism in art can only be achieved in one way—through artifice” (26). This definition follows a comparison of film to poetry, painting, theater, and the novel in which realism is defined as the “illusion of reality” (26). Describing film as a new literary medium capable of presenting new illusions of reality is a vastly different theoretical enterprise than Bazin’s earlier project of emphasizing the photographic realism on the cinematic image. At stake in both theories is the attempt to

(re)connect to some profilmic ontology, one built upon an iconic resemblance of the world-at-large, the other built upon a shared symbolic understanding of profilmic life. Realism, then, is the name Bazin gives the political project of using film (or we might extend this reading to all of the literary arts that Bazin suggests) to reach out for the ungraspable ontology of the profilmic. Paying attention to the semiotics of realist representation, we might also understand realism not as an aesthetic strategy of the artist but as a hermeneutic strategy of the reader looking to (re)connect to the real. Bazin is clearly invested in the project of realism and its “revolutionary humanism.”

Siegfried Kracauer, the other key articulator of cinematic realism, is less interested in film’s potential humanism as he is in its role in human visibility. Like Bazin, Kracauer attempts to establish film as a bridge that connects us to some profilmic ontology, but he takes quite a different approach with different stakes set. Kracauer begins his chapter on the “Basic Concepts” in *Theory of Film* with a view towards film’s birth rather than its death: “Like the embryo in the womb, photographic film developed from distinctly separate components” (27). Film is not the singular child of any one development, technical or aesthetic, but Kracauer argues that it most resembles one parent in particular: photography. He begins his argument about the importance of a filmic-photographic realism in the preface:

Films come into their own when they record and reveal physical reality. Now this reality includes many phenomena which would hardly be perceived were it not for the motion picture camera’s ability to catch them on the wing. And since any medium is partial to the things it is uniquely equipped to render, the cinema is conceivably animated by a desire to picture transient material life, life at its most ephemeral. Street crowds, involuntary gestures, and other fleeting impressions

are its very meat. Significantly, the contemporaries of Lumière praised his films—the first ever to be made—for showing “the ripple of the leaves stirred by the wind” (ix).

Bazin’s “preservation of life by a representation of life” is given a decidedly more urgent twist in Kracauer for whom filmic realism is to “redeem physical reality.” When he writes of “phenomena which would hardly be perceived” he is entering into the discourses of visuality and modernity in which the pace and scope of the world become too crowded to see. For Kracauer, film is capable of showing us that which is plainly in front of us, yet we do not see. The margins of profilmic visuality are the “very meat” of filmic visuality.

Like Bazin, Kracauer allows for the “illusion of reality” when he describes the “cinematic approach” to filmmaking that combines the “realistic tendency” and the “formative” or aestheticized “tendency.” He sets some stakes for us:

But as with photographic reportage, newsreels and the like meet only the minimum requirement. What is of the essence in film no less than photography is the intervention of the film maker’s formative energies in all the dimensions which the medium has come to cover. He may feature his impressions of this or that segment of physical existence in documentary fashion, transfer hallucinations and mental images to the screen, indulge in the rendering of rhythmical patterns, narrate a human-interest story, etc. All these creative efforts are in keeping with the cinematic approach as long as they benefit, in some way or other, the medium’s substantive concern with our visible world (38-9).

This extension of the scope of cinematic realism seems intended to make his approach less dogmatic, but the “realism” that “transfer[s] hallucinations and mental images to the screen” is

an entirely different beast from “the cinema [that] is conceivably animated by a desire to picture transient material life.” Kracauer recognizes and attempts to circumvent the fact that newsreels record material life with far fewer obstacles than the more interesting narrative films that he tries to privilege. The primary obstacle is that, again like Bazin, Kracauer attempts to utilize different, irreconcilable concepts of realism to a singular end, though he does give this argument a twist in his final chapter. In it, Kracauer turns his attention away from the reality of hallucinations and mental images and back to the physical reality that lies on the surface of the photographic image and makes up the subtitle of his book. By appealing to thinkers such as Marx, Freud, Nietzsche, and Durkheim, he details what we would now refer to as the collapse of the grand narrative in which the ideologies that have traditionally structured our perception and experience have melted away leaving us at an important juncture. This gives us two primary options according to Kracauer: a regression into ideology or a new fragmentary, post-ideological existence. This fragmentation is not necessarily such a bad situation for Kracauer. The attention he advocates we pay to physical reality is not so much a picking-up –the-pieces after the collapse of ideology, rather it’s an opportunity to connect to what has existed all along behind the veil of these grand narratives. It is an opportunity to gain some common ground at the level of physical reality that does not fall victim to ideological borders. It is with these stakes in mind that Kracauer affords such primacy to film:

Film renders visible what we did not, or perhaps even could not, see before its advent. It effectively assists us in discovering the material world with its psychophysical correspondences. We literally redeem this world from its dormant state, its state of virtual nonexistence, by endeavoring to experience it through the camera. And we are free to experience it because we are

fragmentized. The cinema can be defined as a medium particularly equipped to promote the redemption of physical reality. Its imagery permits us, for the first time, to take away with us the objects and occurrences that comprise the flow of material life (300).

So, if Bazin and Kracauer both suggest that film renders some essential non-ideological ontology of physical reality, how does this process function and in what films is it allowed to come to fruition? Bazin very famously and explicitly advocates the revolution of Italian neorealism and its use of “image facts” that present “[a] fragment of concrete reality in itself multiple and full of ambiguity” (37). His major point of contention is with German expressionist films for their over-aestheticization. Kracauer gives us less dichotomous examples that represent varying degrees of realistic representation. The newsreel, for example, meets the bare minimum requirement for being cinematic in that it presents moving images of un-aestheticized objects present in the profilmic physical reality. Then, once again relying on his dual concept of film’s realistic and formative tendencies, he tackles the feature film. He lists “*Potemkin*, silent film comedy, *Greed*, several Westerns and gangster films, *La Grande Illusion*, the major productions of Italian neorealism, *Los Olvidados*, *Mr. Hulot’s Holiday*, *Pather Panchali*” as examples of films (and film genres) that emphasize the realistic tendency and therefore represent the strengths of the medium overall. Rather than stopping at this point and simply disregarding the massive body of films that do not fit into this framework, Kracauer asks, “Does the cinema gravitate towards films in this vein?” His solution to the fact that many, many films built upon theatrical conventions favor formative tendencies with little regard to the realistic is to argue that, by virtue of being cinema, these films will inadvertently reveal a “transient moment” that

takes away from the story long enough to give the viewer a touch of physical reality. He shoehorns the cinema into his theory.

That any film likely contains at least a fleeting glimpse at physical reality seems to support Kracauer's insight into cinema's power to exhibit the profilmic, but even he further qualifies the degree to which the physical reality presented in a film is effective for physical reality's redemption by introducing (briefly) the distinction between films that corroborate reality and films that debunk reality. The difference for Kracauer lies with the function of the film (or the individual shot in question). The corroborative image is one that is "intended to make you believe, not see" and that "serve to advertise a belief or uphold conformity" (306). The debunking image, conversely, is that which makes us see. This is the strategy of filmed social criticism and of gag images that deliberately foster some misconception only to debunk it later – Kracauer gives the example of the ship scene in Chaplin's *The Immigrant* where he appears to be seasick until a different angle reveals that he is fishing (307). This division reveals something fundamental about the theorizing of realism: it presupposes the quality and type of our relationship with some reality. That social criticism debunks some belief about reality to make us see requires that we did not already see. This is the problem of many specifically argumentative documentaries: they "preach to the choir," so to speak. Further, any film that would use realism as a tool "to advertise a belief or uphold conformity" presupposes that the audience holds a particular belief or set of beliefs. To separate films along this line is also to realize that realism as a representational order has very little to do with the work of the filmmaker or artist (one person's social critique is another's propaganda film); rather, realism is by and large an interpretive strategy of the viewer/reader. Realist theory, then, can be understood not as a serious attempt to establish the ontological foundation of the world but as an

attempt to develop a hermeneutics of the real. Making this simple twist towards understanding “the real” as discursive goes a long way to redeem the works of Bazin and Kracauer. But is it still possible to “[preserve] life through the representation of life” or to “redeem physical reality” if we are only working within different discursive regimes?

Not in the same way that Bazin and Kracauer intended. We have destabilized the concept of the profilmic (in all of its names), and attempting to “take it back” is an act of less significance than either of them intended. Instead, if we take a cue from Jameson and analyze realist films as epistemological, we should be able to come to terms with the discourses of “the real” via the way we represent them to ourselves. In other words, just because we now recognize the profilmic as discursive, that does not mean that we cannot still identify and analyze the operations of those discourses. If we enter discussions of “realism” having problems with the category of “the real” or with the way that a work of art could ever “get at” that reality, then by treating realism as citational, we short-circuit these initial trepidations. So, if fictional narrative films cite conventions from the profilmic and other films, and we know that there is a possibility that these citations may fail to perform as suitably plausible, then bad movies demonstrate a useful rupture in realist aesthetics, one that always exists *theoretically* but that is often invisible in practice. This process begins to work in film in largely the same way as Kawin’s analysis of self-conscious films: attention is brought to the films as systems of signification apart from the profilmic, which is the opposite operation of most conventional, “invisible” narrative films. Bad movies function in a similar manner, but they tend to eliminate the variable of authorial intention.

### Reading *Mayhem* as Citational Realism

By way of conclusion, allow me to demonstrate how analyzing the failed citations of bad movies can be retroactively applied to other movies in a way that exposes their selfsame manipulation of iterable models in the name of “realism.” The movie *Mayhem* (1986) may be called gritty, it may be called realistic, but most of all it may be called very, very bad.<sup>10</sup> Throughout the course of the film Dino and Ziggy embark on a series of assassinations-for-hire in the key of moral superiority (think the climax of *Taxi Driver*, but more matter-of-factly), they are haunted by relationship troubles brought about almost entirely by their brutish misogyny, and they eat their way across Los Angeles in a supposed search-and-rescue sequence that ultimately ends in the death of Ziggy. I want to focus on the final few scenes of the movie, but not because they are particularly bad. All of *Mayhem* is terrible. The final sequence is just a conveniently short example. After Ziggy is killed, his partner in crime Dino volunteers to drive Ziggy’s widowed girlfriend Misty across the country. They stop for a roadside picnic where Dino expresses a Romantic yearning for rural living. This sentiment seems to demonstrate the change Dino has undergone from killer and domestic abuser to a new man, ready to seek retribution in the countryside or on the open road. They stop off at a diner just a short while later, and Dino utters his nearly meta famous last words “I really feel this has all happened so you and I could wind up together.” He speaks, of course, about the events of the preceding film, but his comments bestow the movie (or, diegetically, the events he has endured) with a narrative heft and wholeness that will be shattered by what follows. Two police officers pull into the parking lot of the diner and see that Dino’s car still has its lights on. When they go to tell him, Dino pulls

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<sup>10</sup> It is also streaming for free in its entirety as of 10/25/10: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1YDmSSumzhw> (In MS Word, hold the CTRL key and click to open in your web browser. This link directs you to part one. The other parts are accessible as suggested links on the same screen.)

a gun on the officers, forcing them to gun him down in self-defense. The absurdity of this resolution and of the impotence of Dino's machismo is highlighted by one of the police officers commenting that Dino's gun "wasn't even loaded." Now, if the unloaded gun is not already the perfect metaphor or byline for a bad movie like *Mayhem*, then perhaps its final image will do the trick. The story is left with Misty as its only remaining character. Dino had recently taught her to drive, and she is in a position to pick up the pieces of her life after going through the trauma of witnessing the death of her two different verbally abusive sleazebag boyfriends. This ending is emphasized by her lying to the cops about Dino being just a hitchhiker. But, of all possible images, *Mayhem* ends with a freeze frame of a cop car accelerating after reversing out of a parking space.

The freeze frame is an interesting tool available to the filmmaker because it strips the film of its apparent motion, which is often considered the difference between film and photography (and, for some, the technological distinction that makes film one degree more realistic than photography). It has been used effectively in the film *La Jetée* (1962) and famously as the ending to *The 400 Blows* (1959). In *Mayhem*, it arrests the image in a moment of boredom: the police must head back to the station to file a report of Dino's death, now surely demoted to an "incident" in police jargon. Dino's life and death came and went without consequence. So, too, did the movie *Mayhem*: an unloaded gun. But this is precisely why a bad movie like *Mayhem* is useful. When put into conversations with other movies, ones that act as either referents to *Mayhem*'s citations or ones that cite from the same generic systems, *Mayhem*'s absurdities become instructive.

Consider the ending of a movie like *Detour* (1945). Boiled to its very essence, *Detour* concerns a series of misfortunes and accidental deaths that take a love sick pianist across the

country, from his smoky lounge to the big house. The pianist is positively ruined by the events of the film, and the final shot shows him walking alone down a darkened, empty street.

Thematically and narratively, that would be enough, but it was not enough to get by the Hays Code.<sup>11</sup> This is the extratextual explanation for the nearly non-sequitur arrival of the police to throw the pianist in jail, but one can make sense of why the police would pick up a solo drifter after a string of accidental murders. Police intervention in *Detour*, aside from just satisfying the Hays Code, adds weight and consequence to the events of the movie. The difference between the movies is how the image of the police is utilized. For *Detour*, the police appear briefly, acting as symbols of justice and punishment. Further, they appear because they are looking for the pianist; the movie is his story and the police are merely players in it. *Mayhem*, on the other hand, sets up a moment of absurdity by alluding to a more realistic truth: the police are going about their jobs with their own individual subjectivities completely independent of Dino's. If anything, Dino's egocentric confusion of the situation may be said to be responsible for his death. As protagonist, he has no conception of the Other. Curiously, the focus on the police at the very end seems to enact a transfer of the movie's attention from Dino to the police. This transference of identification would presumably lead into a whole new movie in which we follow one or more of the police officers (like the structure of Buñuel's *Phantom of Liberty*), but the movie simply freezes and ends. Dino's personality was not strong enough to be a point of interest nor to keep the movie centered, but it ends regardless because of the convention of stopping the movie once the (would-be) protagonist has died.

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<sup>11</sup> The Hays Code was a self-imposed censorship guideline that Hollywood followed from about 1934 to 1968 when the ratings system was adopted.

This is a rule repeated by a movie-goer in *The Harder They Come* (1972) when he assures himself that the Western hero on the screen will make it through the shootout by saying that “The hero can’t die till the last reel!” which works as foreshadowing for the fate of Ivan (Jimmy Cliff) in the primary movie. He moves to Kingston and is kicked out of different lifestyles one-by-one, usually due to some human flaw by his superior: the construction foreman will not suffer inexperience, the preacher is jealous of Ivan’s advances towards his daughter, and the record producer is greedy, plain and simple. Each of these setbacks only pushes Ivan towards the next lifestyle. Once he is ripped off by the record executive, he enters the ganja trade, where he is again set up as a troublemaker. Unfortunately for the other drug runners, Ivan makes it through their trap and proves just how troublesome he can be by killing everyone they send for him. His hubris begins to take over his former humble beginnings. This is best concretized by the scene where he holds a photographer hostage and forces him to take a series of promotional shots of Ivan the gangster-celebrity. Thus, the whole movie consists of Ivan’s escalation from nobody to celebrity most wanted. In the end, he misses his chance to grab the rope ladder on the boat that would take him to Cuba because that would be a parallel move beyond the narrative logic of ascent and descent. Given no other job to turn to and no chance of escape, Ivan must be gunned down by the police squad that pursues him, which is precisely where the movie ends.

Ivan’s death makes far more sense than Dino’s. It is foretold earlier in the film by the man watching the Western, and it is the result of police and gangsters alike pursuing him for the final third of the movie. *The Harder They Come* works from the traditions of “going out in a blaze of glory” inherited from Western and gangster movies. Consider this: would it have been any less realistic for Ivan to get on the boat bound for Cuba? Not as far as our understanding of

the profilmic is concerned, but our knowledge of the filmic and literary codes in *The Harder They Come* requires the logic of internal coherence. Reality unaestheticized tastes odd, as in the finale of *Mayhem*, which is unmotivated and inconsequential, like so much of the actual profilmic. In fact, Dino's death can be read as a perversion of the need for narrative closure and appropriate justice. There is no reason that he and Misty cannot live out their lives happily ever after other than the audience having the need to see bad deeds go punished. He must die not because *Mayhem* calls for it, but because other movies follow conventions of moralizing punishment and comeuppance. The unsuccessful attempt to contextualize the citation of this ending properly is what causes *Mayhem* to ring so falsely in that final scene. *Mayhem* is murdered, in the splendor of its greasy badness, by the collectivity of film in general: a victim with an unloaded gun.

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