Enjoying trash films: Underlying features, viewing stances, and experiential response dimensions

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ABSTRACT

By means of an explorative online survey, the present study identifies key characteristics of 'trash films' from the perspective of their regular consumers. It focuses on how these characteristics support the evaluative turnaround underlying the positive use of the label, i.e. on how something can be identified as cheap and worthless 'trash' and still be embraced and (re-)evaluated as providing positive enjoyment. The data reveal that trash films are, indeed, identified as 'cheap' and hence as a variety of low-budget films. At the same time, viewers attribute to trash films not just amusing/entertaining qualities, but also a positive, transgressive deviance from the cinematic mainstream, and their appreciation of these films is coupled with marked preferences for art cinema. The majority of trash film fans appear to be well-educated cultural 'omnivores', and they conceive of their preference for trash films in terms of an ironic viewing stance.

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1. Introduction

The label 'trash' is no longer used with an exclusive reference to certain subcultural trends and products; it is also applied in contexts of mainstream media and culture, including literature, theatre and the visual arts. Still, 'trash' is primarily associated with the domain of audio-visual media, especially film and TV. The concept has been the topic of an increasing number of theoretical essays and film-historical studies since the 1990s. Yet little effort has been made to empirically investigate how trash films can be appreciated and enjoyed. Among the few exceptions is a study by McCulloch (2011) which reports the results of participant observations and guided interviews about audience reactions in public screenings of Tommy Wiseau's allegedly worst-ever-made film, *The Room* (2003). This study is, however, very limited in scope given its exclusive focus on a single film. Another study (McCoy & Scarborough, 2014) investigated the consumption strategies television viewers apply to programmes ranging from TV talk shows to made-for-television films assessed as bad and 'trash'; however, trash films stricto sensu were not the object of this study.

Drawing on theories about trash films and their audiences that have been developed in film and media studies as well as in the social sciences, the present study aims to establish a new empirical and conceptual basis for the study of fiction films labelled 'trash'. Our aim is to consolidate the distinct notion and scope of 'trash' from the perspective of habitual trash film consumers and to investigate the underlying principles and mechanisms contributing to the re-evaluation and subsequent appreciation and enjoyment of these films. Oliver and Bartsch (2011) point out that enjoyment—which is closely associated with the experience of fun and amusement—is but one aspect of the multidimensionality of film entertainment, while

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appreciation is another. Like these authors, we do not consider enjoyment and appreciation to be mutually exclusive. Nor do we limit appreciation to the perception of 'meaningfulness' in the sense of eliciting thoughts about human virtue and life's purpose. Rather, we draw on a broader understanding of appreciation as 'aesthetic appreciation', which is not limited to morally and metaphysically uplifting processing dimensions but more generally refers to the experience and evaluation of works of art and involves both cognitive and affective judgments, an acknowledgement of the artistic form and, importantly, interest (cf. Leder, Belker, Oeberst, & Augustin, 2004).

2. Theoretical framework and research questions

2.1. The label 'trash': its conceptual implications and its relation to other, partially overlapping terms

Despite a substantial academic debate on trash films, the label 'trash' is still far from well-defined. It competes with a number of other labels, such as 'kitsch' (Roller, 2002), 'camp' (Kleinhans, 1994), 'sleaze' (Hawkins, 1999), 'cult' (Mathijs & Sexton, 2011) and 'paracinema' (Sconce, 1995), which all refer to low forms of mass culture and/or the viewing practices and attitudes associated with them.

'Trash' commonly serves as an umbrella term for amateurishly produced, low-budget films which are incompatible with the standards of mainstream filmmaking (Hunter, 2014; Kulle, 2012; Medved & Medved, 1980). Accordingly, trash is often identified with so-called 'exploitation' films (Hunter, 2013a, 2014), i.e. with sensational low-budget films which 'exploit' contents featuring highly explicit sex and violence (Schaefer, 2007; Williams, 2007). Exploitation is typically assumed to serve a predominantly male and undereducated audience's hunger for sensationalism and to elicit a visceral rather than an emotional response in the viewer (Cook, 2005; Kovács, 1982; Mathijs & Sexton, 2011). In this sense, exploitation appears to be another instance of "sensational 'body' genres" as described by Williams (1991, p. 4). Some filmic genres stand out as being particularly exploitation-prone: science fiction and, most of all, horror films (Hunter, 2014; Roller, 2002). Horror films are often transgressive at the level of explicit violence, depicting scenes of extreme violence and disgusting horror (Brottman, 1997; Sarkhosh, 2011), and such depictions might be regarded as a special case of excess (cf. Thompson, 1977). Similar to the 'cinema of attractions' (Gunning, 1986), exploitation films privilege spectacle over narrative and thus do not conform to the routines of narrative-driven classical Hollywood film-making (Cook, 2005; Schaefer, 2007).

To be sure, by no means are all trash films exploitation films. However, the labels share an important feature: for a long time, the films assigned to either of these labels received no critical attention or were readily dismissed as 'bad films' (e.g. Canby, 1975). In an effort to redefine the notion of 'bad film', Hoberman (1980) distinguished between a broader group of films that are believed to be 'bad' solely by virtue of having been critically dismissed and a more narrowly defined group of films that are 'objectively' bad in the sense that badness can be understood as an intrinsic quality of these films. Besides lousy acting, ludicrous dialogue and cheap sets and props, it is mainly the incoherence of these films, their deformation of the standard mainstream formulae and their anti-illusionist excess which are supposed to produce a total cinematic and aesthetic failure—and it is precisely this failure which allegedly renders a film objectively bad, and thus trash (Hoberman, 1980; Hunter, 2014).

However, such a definition of trash films leaves many questions open. Specifically, it does not include any features which might explain how and why 'objectively bad' trash films can still be positively appreciated (see e.g. Egan, 2007). Obviously, regular consumers of trash films do attribute qualities other than 'objective badness' to these films. Our first research question is therefore:

RQ1: What features and attributes do regular consumers of films which they consider to be 'trash films' associate with this label?

2.2. The positive appeal of trash films and viewing stances which support their enjoyment

As Hoberman (1980, p. 7) suggested, "it is possible for a movie to succeed *because* it has failed." In line with this semantic turnaround, the usage of the expression 'bad film' and of the correlative notion of 'trash' appears to have undergone a positive transformation (Mathijs, 2005). What was once meant as a purely dismissive term acquired a positive, if not celebratory, meaning (Stevenson, 2003). As a cipher for this reappraisal and reversal, 'trash' can be applied to a great variety of films rather than to specific genres only. To the extent that it is dependent on a turnaround in perception and evaluation, the positive use of the label is tied to specific viewing stances which enable a re-evaluation and, subsequently, a joyful and gratifying consumption of these films.

Recently, McCoy and Scarborough (2014) have provided evidence that television audiences take different viewing stances regarding 'trashy' programmes. Traditional viewers evaluate both the media content and its experience as plainly bad and simply switch off the TV. Yet although they clearly assess the media content as bad and unpleasurable, some viewers cannot stop watching—which puts them in a state of stress and anxiety. Such viewers feel ashamed for taking pleasure in watching 'bad' TV, so the authors refer to this viewing stance as 'guilty pleasure'. However, nothing in the academic and critical debate on trash films seems to suggest that the habitual consumption of cinematic trash gives rise to a feeling of shame. On the contrary, the pleasure taken in the consumption of trash films is typically thought to be 'subversive'. As Hunter (2013b)