

'Trashing' the academy: taste, excess, and an emerging politics of cinematic style

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*Nobody likes movies like Teenagers from Outer Space or Wrestling Women vs. the Aztec Mummy save any loon sane enough to realize that the whole concept of Good Taste is concocted to keep people from having a good time, from reveling in a crassness that passeth all understanding. . . . But fuck those people who'd rather be watching The Best Years of Our Lives or David and Lisa. We got our own good tastes. . . .*¹

Written five years before Pierre Bourdieu published his monumental study on the social construction of taste, Lester Bangs's diatribe against a nebulously defined group of cultural custodians epitomizes Bourdieu's contention that 'tastes are perhaps first and foremost distastes, disgust provoked by horror or visceral intolerance of the tastes of others'. 'It is no accident', writes Bourdieu, 'that when they have to be justified, they are asserted negatively, by the refusal of other tastes'.² Thus, in the spirit of Lester Bangs, the editors of *Zontar*, a Boston-based fanzine devoted primarily to the promotion of 'badfilm', note that their publication 'is *not* for the delicate tastebuds of the pseudo-genteel cultural illiterati who enjoy mind-rotting, soul-endangering pabulum like *Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth* and the other white-boy 'new-age' puke-shit served up from the bowels of PBS during pledge-week'.³ Meanwhile, a 1990 issue of *Subhuman*, a fanzine featuring articles on cinematic manifestations of

1 Lester Bangs, *Psychotic Reactions and Carburetor Dung* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988), pp. 122–3.

2 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 57.

3 *Zontar's Ejecto-Pod*, vol. 1, no. 1, n.p.

4 *Subhuman*, no. 15, front cover.

5 'Fanzines' are home-produced, photocopied magazines circulated among fans and devoted to an often narrow area of interest in popular culture.

6 *Temple of Schlock* is another fanzine dedicated to this cinema.

'necrophilia, 3-D surrealism, animal copulation, pregnant strippers, horror nerdism, and bovine flatulence', labels itself a journal of 'eccentric film and video kulture'.⁴

The stridently confrontational tastes espoused by Bangs, *Zontar* and *Subhuman* over this fifteen-year period describe the gradual emergence of a growing and increasingly articulate cinematic subculture, one organized around what are among the most critically disreputable films in cinematic history. Publications devoted to this 'trash' cinema include such magazines, fanzines and makeshift journals as *Psychotronic Video*, *Zontar*, *Subhuman*, *Trashola*, *Ungawa*, *Pandemonium*, and the RE/Search volume, *Incredibly Strange Films*.⁵ The most visible document of this film community is Michael Weldon's *Psychotronic Encyclopedia of Film*, a subterranean companion to Leonard Maltin's *Movies On TV*, which catalogues hundreds of bizarre titles culled from Weldon's late-night television viewing marathons in New York City. Taken together, the diverse body of films celebrated by these various fanzines and books might best be termed 'paracinema'. As a most elastic textual category, paracinema would include entries from such seemingly disparate subgenres 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. Paracinema is thus less a distinct group of films than a particular reading protocol, a counter-aesthetic turned subcultural sensibility devoted to all manner of cultural detritus. In short, the explicit manifesto of paracinematic culture is to valorize all forms of cinematic 'trash', whether such films have been either explicitly rejected or simply ignored by legitimate film culture. In doing so, paracinema represents the most developed and dedicated of cinephilic subcultures ever to worship at 'the temple of schlock'.⁶

The caustic rhetoric of paracinema suggests a pitched battle between a guerrilla band of cult film viewers and an elite cadre of would-be cinematic tastemakers. Certainly, the paracinematic audience likes to see itself as a disruptive force in the cultural and intellectual marketplace. As a short subject, this audience would be more inclined to watch a bootlegged McDonald's training film than *Man with a Movie Camera*, although, significantly, many in the paracinematic community would no doubt be familiar with this more respectable member of the avant-garde canon. Such calculated negation and refusal of 'elite' culture suggests that the politics of social stratification and taste in paracinema is more complex than a simple high-brow/low-brow split, and that the cultural politics of 'trash culture' are becoming ever more ambiguous as this 'aesthetic' grows in influence. In recent years, the paracinematic community has seen both the institutionalization and commercialization of their once

renegade, neo-camp aesthetic. Although paracinematic taste may have its roots in the world of 'low-brow' fan culture (fanzines, film conventions, memorabilia collections, and so on), the paracinematic sensibility has recently begun to infiltrate the avant garde, the academy, and even the mass culture on which paracinema's ironic reading strategies originally preyed. Art museums that once programmed only Italian Neo-Realism or German Neo-Expressionism now feature retrospectives of 1960s Biker films and career overviews of exploitation auteurs such as Herschell Gordon Lewis and Doris Wishman. No doubt to the dismay and befuddlement of cultural hygienists like Allan Bloom and James Twitchell, academic courses in film studies increasingly investigate 'sleazy' genres such as horror and pornography. Recently, the trash aesthetic has even made inroads into mainstream popular taste. The ironic reading strategies honed by the badfilm community through countless hours of derisive interaction with late-night science fiction are now prepackaged for cable in programmes such as *Mystery Science Theatre 3000*. Similarly, Turner Network Television now presents a weekly sampling of the paracinematic pantheon in Friday night, '100% Weird' triple features. Even Blockbuster video, America's corporate bastion of cinematic conservatism, features a 'le bad' section in many of their stores, where patrons can find the work of John Waters, William Castle and other 'disreputable' filmmakers. Perhaps most incredibly, *Batman*'s director Tim Burton recently directed a multi-million dollar biopic of Ed Wood Jr, the director of such paracinematic classics as *Plan 9 From Outer Space* (1959) and *Glen or Glenda* (1953), an artist who himself never spent over a few thousand dollars on any one picture.⁷ Clearly, in cinematic circles of all kinds, there has been a significant realignment on the social terrain of taste, a powerful response to what has been termed 'the siren song of crap'.

⁷ In a fittingly perverse tribute to Wood, Burton's film won widespread critical acclaim and yet bombed at the box office, making less than six million dollars on its initial release in the USA.

A key element in the paracinematic aesthetic is the 'gore' film, a genre that most fans argue debuts with Herschell Gordon Lewis's *Blood Feast* (1963). Lewis is often acclaimed for the decidedly 'unartful' presentation of his gore set pieces. Picture courtesy: The Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research



At first glance, the paracinematic sensibility, in all its current manifestations, would seem to be identical to the 'camp' aesthetic outlined by Susan Sontag some thirty years ago. Without a doubt, both sensibilities are highly ironic, infatuated with the artifice and excess of obsolescent cinema. What makes paracinema unique, however, is its aspiration to the status of a 'counter-cinema'. Whereas 'camp' was primarily a reading strategy that allowed gay men to rework the Hollywood cinema through a new and more expressive subcultural code, paracinematic culture seeks to promote an alternative vision of cinematic 'art', aggressively attacking the established canon of 'quality' cinema and questioning the legitimacy of reigning aesthete discourses on movie art. Camp was an aesthetic of ironic colonization and cohabitation. Paracinema, on the other hand, is an aesthetic of vocal confrontation.

Who, exactly, is the paracinematic audience at war with, and what is at stake in such a battle? Consider the following diatribe from *Zontar*:

Where the philosophical pygmies search the snob-ridden art galleries, flock to the false comfort of PBS-produced pseudo-gentility, WE look elsewhere. We seek the explanations for the decline of Hu-Manity in the most debased and misunderstood manifestations of the IDIOT CULTURE. Monster movies, comic books, cheap porn videos, TV preachers, of course!!! But we search ever deeper into the abyss. The Home Shopping Network. Late-Night Cable TV-Product Worship-Testimonial Shows. Tiffany Videos. We leave purity to those other assholes. The search for BADTRUTH is only for the brave few, like you, whose all-consuming HATE is powerful enough to resist the temptations of REFINEMENT, TASTE, and ESCAPISM – the miserable crumbs tossed from the table by the growing mass of REPUBLICAN THIRTYSOMETHING COUNTRY-CLUB CHRISTIAN ZOMBIES who now rule this wretched planet.⁸

The paracinematic audience promotes their tastes and textual proclivities in opposition to a loosely defined group of cultural and economic elites, those purveyors of the status quo who not only rule the world, but who are also responsible for making the contemporary cinema, in the paracinematic mind, so completely boring. Nor does the paracinematic community care much for the activities of film scholars and critics. For example, an editor of *Zontar's Ejecto-Pod*, a sister publication of *Zontar*, encourages readers to hone their knowledge of trash-culture classics ridiculed by the academy (in this case the sword and sandal epic, *The Silver Chalice* [Victor Saville, 1954]), thereby 'amazing your friends and embarrassing the jargon-slinging empty-headed official avatars of critical discourse'.⁹

At times, factions of the paracinematic audience have little patience even for one another. This rift is perhaps most pointedly embodied by

⁸ *Zontar*, no. 8, n.p.

⁹ *Zontar's Ejecto-Pod*, vol. 1, no. 1, n.p.

the competing agendas of *Film Threat* and *Psychotronic Video*, two fanzines turned magazines with international circulations that promote rival visions of the 'trash' aesthetic. While *Psychotronic* concentrates on the sizable segment of this community interested in uncovering and collecting long lost titles from the history of exploitation, *Film Threat* looks to transgressive aesthetics/genres of the past as avant-garde inspiration for contemporary independent filmmaking, championing such 'underground' auteurs as Nick Zedd and Richard Kern. In a particularly nasty swipe, a subscription form for *Film Threat* features a drawing of the 'typical' *Film Threat* reader, portrayed as a dynamic, rockabilly-quiffed hipster surrounded by admiring women. This is juxtaposed with a drawing of the 'typical' *Psychotronic* reader, depicted as passive, overweight and asexual, with a bad complexion.

Despite such efforts at generating counter-distinction within the shared cultural project of attacking 'high-brow' cinema, the discourses characteristically employed by paracinematic culture in its valorization of 'low-brow' artefacts indicate that this audience, like the film elite (academics, aesthetes, critics), is particularly rich with 'cultural capital' and thus possesses a level of textual/critical sophistication similar to the cineastes they construct as their nemesis. In terms of education and social position, in other words, the various factions of the paracinematic audience and the elite cineastes they commonly attack would appear to share what Bourdieu terms a 'cultural pedigree'.¹⁰ Employing the terminology of US sociologist Herbert Gans, these groups might be thought of as radically opposed 'taste publics' that are nevertheless involved in a common 'taste culture'. As Gans writes: 'Taste cultures are not cohesive value systems, and taste publics are not organized groups; the former are aggregates of similar values and usually but not always similar content, and the latter are aggregates of people with usually but not always similar values making similar choices from available offerings of culture'.¹¹

Whether thought of as a subculture, an aesthetic or a sensibility, the recent flourishing of paracinema represents not just a challenge to aesthete taste, but the larger fragmentation of a common taste culture, brought about by various disaffected segments of middle-class youth. Although it would be difficult to define the precise dimensions or identify the exact constituency of this particular taste public, I would argue that the paracinematic community, like the academy and the popular press, embodies primarily a male, white, middle-class, and 'educated' perspective on the cinema. Representations of this 'community' are rare, but can be glimpsed, among other places, at the fringes of Richard Linklater's ode to baby-buster anomie, *Slacker* (1991). Linklater documents the desultory activities of bored students, would-be bohemians and miscellaneous cranks, all of whom exist at the economic and cultural periphery of a typical college town.¹² In a more reflexive turn, a fanzine from San Francisco describes the world of 'low-life scum', disheveled men in their twenties manifesting 'a

¹⁰ For a more detailed discussion of the cultural pedigree, see Bourdieu, *Distinction*, p. 63.

¹¹ Herbert Gans, *Popular Culture and High Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), pp. 69–70.

¹² In the film's most explicit nod to the paracinematic mentality, one particularly deranged character bases his elaborate conspiracy theories on the 'truth' to be found in late-night, science-fiction movies.

13 *Murder Can Be Fun*, no. 5, n.p.

14 This particular struggle over cinematic taste also takes place in a variety of cultural contexts. For an account of the cultivation of a disreputable aesthetic in Swedish youth culture, see Göran Bolin, 'Beware! Rubbish! Popular culture and strategies of distinction', *Young: Nordic Journal of Youth Research*, vol. 2, no. 1 (1994), pp. 33–49.

15 Bourdieu, *Distinction*, p. 60.

16 *Ibid.*, pp. 56–7.

fascination with all things sleazy, bizarre, and macabre'.¹³ Paracinematic interests also often intersect with the more familiar subcultures of science-fiction fandom. Regardless of their individual interests and ultimate allegiances, however, the paracinematic audience cultivates an overall aesthetic of calculated disaffection, marking a deviant taste public disengaged from the cultural hierarchies of their overarching taste culture.

Such acrimonious battles within a single taste culture are not uncommon.¹⁴ As Bourdieu writes: 'Explicit aesthetic choices are in fact often constituted in opposition to the choices of the groups closest in social space, with whom the competition is most direct and most immediate, and more precisely, no doubt, in relation to those choices most clearly marked by the intention (perceived as pretension) of marking distinction vis-a-vis lower groups'.¹⁵ As the alienated faction of a social group high in cultural capital, the paracinematic audience generates distinction within its own social space by celebrating the cultural objects deemed most noxious (low-brow) by their taste culture as a whole. Paracinema thus presents a direct challenge to the values of aesthete film culture and a general affront to the 'refined' sensibility of the parent taste culture. It is a calculated strategy of shock and confrontation against fellow cultural elites, not unlike Duchamp's notorious unveiling of a urinal in an art gallery. As Bourdieu states: 'The most intolerable thing for those who regard themselves as the possessors of legitimate culture is the sacrilegious reuniting of tastes which taste dictates shall be separated'.¹⁶ By championing films like *2000 Maniacs* (Herschell Gordon Lewis, 1964), *Bad Girls Go to Hell* (Doris Wishman, 1965), and *The Incredibly Strange Creatures Who Stopped Living and Became Mixed-Up Zombies* (Ray Dennis Steckler, 1963), and by associating themselves with home shopping networks,

Histrionic acting is a hallmark of the paracinematic aesthetic. Here, having rolled a 'Yankee' down a hill in a barrel spiked with nails, two psychotic boysseeds admire their handiwork in Herschell Gordon Lewis's *2000 Maniacs* (1964). Picture courtesy: The Wisconsin Center for Film and Theatre Research



pornography and TV preachers, this community is, in effect, renouncing its 'cultural pedigree' and attempting to distance itself from what it perceives as elite (and elitist) taste.

Despite the paracinematic community's open hostility to the 'jargon-sliding avatars of critical discourse', many scholars see this trend towards the valorization of 'trash' at work in the academy itself, especially in the realm of media studies. In "'High culture" revisited', for example, Jostein Gripsrud argues that a major segment of contemporary media scholars routinely attacks all forms of high culture while indiscriminately valorizing mass culture in its place. As Gripsrud states somewhat sarcastically, 'Presenting oneself as a soap-fan in scholarly circles could be considered daring or provocative some ten years ago. Nowadays it is more of a prerequisite for legitimate entry into the academic discourse on soaps in some Anglo-American fora.'¹⁷ Gripsrud speculates that this proclivity among many contemporary scholars to condemn high culture and valorize mass culture is a function of their unique trajectory in social space. 'Such upwardly mobile subjects are placed in a sort of cultural limbo, not properly integrated in the lower-class culture they left, nor in the upper-class high culture they have formally entered. Since they are newcomers, they are faced with a need to make choices concerning what to do in and with their acquired position.'¹⁸ Gripsrud believes that the valorization of mass culture serves as a form of 'symbolic homecoming' that allows such scholars to 'strive for or pretend re-integration into the classes they once left, preferably as "leaders" in some sense, "voices" for the people'.¹⁹

Gripsrud's depiction of the intellectual in limbo is a particularly apt description of the contemporary graduate student, the figure within the institution of the academy who is perched the most precariously between the domains of cultural, educational and economic capital. Not surprisingly, paracinematic culture is a particularly active site of investment for many contemporary graduate students in film studies. Often, the connections between graduate film study and paracinematic culture are quite explicit, since many students now pursuing an advanced degree in film began as fans of exploitation genres such as horror and science fiction. Some students retain their interest in trash culture as a secret, guilty pleasure. Others, however, increasingly seek to focus their work on these previously marginalized and debased forms of cinema. Influenced by the importation of cultural studies to the USA during the 1980s, and writing in the wake of film scholars who were increasingly willing to address traditionally 'untouchable' cinematic genres such as horror and pornography, many students in media studies wish to continue pushing the limits of the traditional cinematic canon and the constraints of conventional academic enterprise. At stake is a sense of both institutional and cultural distinction. As John Fiske writes, 'Many young fans are successful at school and are steadily accumulating official cultural capital, but wish to differentiate themselves, along the axis of age at least, from the

17 Jostein Gripsrud, "'High culture" revisited', *Cultural Studies*, vol. 3, no. 2 (1989), p. 198.

18 *Ibid.*, pp. 196–7.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 197.

20 John Fiske, 'The cultural economy of fandom', in Lisa Lewis (ed.), *The Adoring Audience* (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 33–4.

social values and cultural tastes (or habitus) of those who currently possess the cultural and economic capital they are still working to acquire'.²⁰ As paracinematic texts and concerns increasingly infiltrate film studies, however, many graduate students find themselves caught between the institutional discourses (and agendas) of the film elite as represented by the academy, and the 'fan' activities of the paracinematic community with which they feel a previous affinity. Raised in mass culture, such students are not always willing to give up the excesses of the drive-in for the discipline of Dreyer. The question is what to do with such textual experience and expertise.

Debate within the academy over the politics of the canon is not new. Nor is it unusual for 'fan' cultures to make themselves heard within the academy (most film scholars, one would assume, study the cinema because they were a fan first). What is unusual in paracinematic culture's gradual infiltration of the academy is the manner in which this group so explicitly foregrounds the cultural politics of taste and aesthetics, not just in society at large, but within the academy itself. Graduate students with an interest in 'trash' cinema often find themselves in the ironic position of challenging the legitimacy of the very institution they are attending in order to obtain cultural validation and authority over issues of politics and taste. Such students are struggling to make the transition from a mere fan to an accredited scholar. Though both fan and scholar may be equally dedicated (and even knowledgeable) in their involvement with a particular cultural form, they differ tremendously in terms of their respective status within society as a whole. In a hierarchical social system marked by the differential circulation of cultural and economic capital, graduate students seeking to make this crucial transition of accreditation must submit themselves, quite literally, to the *discipline* of film studies in both its institutional and punitive forms. In doing so, the discipline works to shape both knowledge and taste, linking them in a process that is every bit as political in the academy as it is in the culture the academy seeks to study. As Bourdieu notes, 'At stake in every struggle over art there is also the imposition of an art of living, that is, the transmutation of an arbitrary way of living into the legitimate way of life which casts every other way of living into arbitrariness'.²¹ In this way, the legitimizing function of the academy in issues of knowledge, taste and aesthetics works to conceal relations of power and control, both within the institution itself and the society that sanctions that institution's cultural authority.

By challenging this disciplinary authority, the paracinematic audience, both academic and non-academic, epitomizes what Bourdieu terms the 'new style autodidact'. As described by Bourdieu, the autodidact is a figure alienated from the legitimate mode of educational and cultural acquisition. Estranged or excluded from legitimate modes of acquisition, autodidacts invest in alternative forms of cultural capital, those not fully recognized by the educational

21 Bourdieu, *Distinction*, pp. 57–8.

system and the cultural elite. Bourdieu describes two backgrounds typical of this new style autodidact:

'middle-ground' arts such as cinema, jazz, and, even more, strip cartoons, science-fiction or detective stories are predisposed to attract the investments either of those who have entirely succeeded in converting their cultural capital into educational capital or those who, not having acquired legitimate culture in the legitimate manner (i.e., through early familiarization), maintain an uneasy relationship with it, subjectively or objectively, or both. These arts, not yet fully legitimate, which are disdained or neglected by the big holders of educational capital, offer a refuge or a revenge to those who, by appropriating them, secure the best return on their cultural capital (especially if it is not fully recognized scholastically) while at the same time taking credit for contesting the established hierarchy of legitimacies and profits.²²

22 Ibid., p. 87.

The autodidact is a person who invests in unsanctioned culture either because he or she can 'afford' to, having already made a successful conversion of legitimate cultural and educational capital into economic capital, or who feel, because of their tentative and at times alienated relationship with 'legitimate culture', that such disreputable investments are more durable and potentially more 'rewarding'.

It should not be surprising, then, that paracinematic fans, as exiles from the legitimizing functions of the academy, and many graduate students, as the most disempowered faction within the academy itself, both look to trash culture as a site of 'refuge and revenge'. Such autodidacticism constitutes, for Bourdieu, a form of 'counterculture', one working to free itself from 'the constraints of the scholastic market'. 'They strive to do so by producing another market with its own consecrating agencies', writes Bourdieu, 'capable of challenging the pretension of the educational system to impose the principles of evaluation of competencies and manners which reign in the scholastic market.'²³ For its audience, paracinema represents a final textual frontier that exists beyond the colonizing powers of the academy, and thus serves as a staging ground for strategic raids on legitimate culture and its institutions by those (temporarily) lower in educational, cultural and/or economic capital. Such a struggle demonstrates that battles over the canon, in any discipline, are as much conflicts over the processes and politics by which an entire academic field validates its very existence and charts its own future, fought by groups within the academy as stratified in their institutional power as society at large is stratified in terms of cultural and economic power.

23 Ibid., p. 96.

On one hand, it would be easy to explain the turn towards trash cinema as yet another example of the generational politics of the canon in the academy, a struggle that legitimated cinema in the face of literature, Hollywood in the face of art cinema and, most recently, television in the face of Hollywood. But there is more here than a

struggle over the canon and the politics of object choice. The study of trash cinema suggests a struggle over the task of cinema scholarship as a whole, especially in terms of defining the relationship between aesthetics and cultural criticism. Whether attacking traditional cultural markets and intellectual institutions as a fan, or attempting to bridge the two worlds as a student, the paracinematic audience presents in its often explicit opposition to the agendas of the academy a dispute over *how* to approach the cinema as much as a conflict over *what* cinema to approach. At issue is not only which films get to be studied, but which questions are to be asked about the cinema in the first place. What I am interested in exploring in the remainder of this essay is the relationship between paracinematic culture and the aesthete culture this group associates with the academy, as well as the place of the contemporary graduate film student in bridging these two often antagonistic sensibilities. How are these groups similar, how do they differ and, perhaps most importantly, how might the trash aesthetic ultimately impact the academy? I am particularly interested in how the two communities approach issues of cinematic 'style' and 'excess'. I will argue that paracinema hinges on an aesthetic of excess, and that this paracinematic interest in excess represents an explicitly political challenge to reigning aesthete discourses in the academy. The cultural politics involved in this struggle, however, can be clarified by first examining similarities between aesthete and paracinematic discourses on cinema.

Counter-cinemas

Throughout the history of cinema studies as a discipline, the cultivation of various counter-cinemas, exclusive cinematic canons that do not easily admit the textual pleasures of more 'commonplace' audiences, has been a crucial strategy in maintaining a sense of cultural distinction for film scholars. Frequently, the promotion of such counter-cinemas has been organized around what has become a dominant theme in academic film culture: namely, the sense of loss over the medium's unrealized artistic and political potential. From this perspective, the cinema once held the promise of a revolutionary popular art form when, as Annette Michelson writes, 'a certain euphoria enveloped . . . early filmmaking and theory'. '[T]here was', she continues, 'a very real sense in which the revolutionary aspirations of the modernist movement in literature and arts, on the one hand, and of a Marxist or Utopian tradition, on the other hand, could converge in the hopes and promises, as yet undefined, of the new medium'.²⁴ Instead, these hopes were dashed by the domination of the public taste and mind by Hollywood cinema. And while there has never been a shortage of critical interest in the classical Hollywood cinema, championing counter-cinemas that break with the conventions of

²⁴ Annette Michelson, 'Film and the radical aspiration', in Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen (eds), *Film Theory and Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 472.

Hollywood production and representation remains a central project of film aesthetes and academics. This critical programme proceeds both artistically, by valorizing a body of 'art' films over the mainstream, commercial cinema, and politically, by celebrating those filmmakers who seem to disrupt the conventional narrative machinery of Hollywood.²⁵

In cultivating a counter-cinema from the dregs of exploitation films, paracinematic fans, like the academy, explicitly situate themselves in opposition to Hollywood cinema and the mainstream US culture it represents. United with the film elite in their dislike of Hollywood banality and yet frequently excluded from the circles of academic film culture, the paracinematic community nonetheless often adopts the conventions of 'legitimate' cinematic discourse in discussing its own cinema. As Fiske notes, fan groups are often 'aware that their object of fandom [is] devalued by the criteria of official culture and [go] to great pains to argue against this misevaluation. They frequently [use] official cultural criteria such as 'complexity' or 'subtlety' to argue that their preferred texts [are] as 'good' as the canonized ones and constantly [evoke] legitimate culture . . . as points of comparison.'²⁶ Elite discourse often appears either earnestly or parodically in discussions of paracinematic films. A fanzine review of the obscure 1964 film, *The Dungeons of Harrow*, is typical. The fanzine describes the film as 'a twisted surreal marvel, a triumph of spirit and vision over technical incompetence and abysmal production values. The film can be seen as a form of art brut – crude, naive, pathetic – but lacking the poetry and humor often associated with this style. Perhaps art brutarian would better serve to describe this almost indescribable work.'²⁷

As in the academic film community, the paracinematic audience recognizes Hollywood as an economic and artistic institution that represents not just a body of films, but a particular mode of film production and its accompanying signifying practices. Furthermore, the narrative form produced by this institution is seen as somehow 'manipulative' and 'repressive', and linked to dominant interests as a form of cultural coercion. In their introduction to *Incredibly Strange Films*, V. Vale and Andrea Juno, two of the most visible cultural brokers in the realm of paracinema, describe why low-budget films helmed by idiosyncratic visionaries are so often superior to mainstream, Hollywood cinema.

The value of low-budget films is: they can be transcendent expressions of a single person's individual vision and quirky originality. When a corporation decides to invest \$20 million in a film, a chain of command regulates each step, and no one person is allowed free rein. Meetings with lawyers, accountants, and corporate boards are what films in Hollywood are all about. . . . Often [low-budget] films are eccentric – even extreme – presentations by

²⁵ For an influential account of such an agenda, see Peter Wollen's 'Godard and counter-cinema: *Vent d'Est*', in Philip Rosen (ed.), *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 120–29.

²⁶ Fiske, 'The cultural economy of fandom', p. 36.

²⁷ *Subhuman*, no. 16, p. 3.

²⁸ V. Vale, Andrea Juno and Jim Morton (eds), *Incredibly Strange Films* (San Francisco: RE/search Publications, 1986), p. 5.

²⁹ *Zontar*, no. 8, n.p.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² For examples of work on exploitation cinema produced within an academic context, see Thomas Doherty, *Teenagers and Teenpics: the Juvenilization of American Movies in the 1950s* (Boston: Umwin Hyman, 1988); and Eric Schaefer, "Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!": a history of exploitation films, 1919–1959" (Dissertation: University of Texas at Austin, 1994).

individuals freely expressing their imaginations, who throughout the filmmaking process improvise creative solutions to problems posed by either circumstance or budget – mostly the latter. Secondly, they often present unpopular – even radical – views addressing social, political, racial or sexual inequities, hypocrisy in religion or government; or, in other ways they assault taboos related to the presentation of sexuality, violence, and other mores.²⁸

Such rhetoric could just as easily be at home in an elite discussion of the French New Wave or the American New Cinema. Products of a shared taste culture, paracinematic cinephiles, like the scholars and critics of the academy, continue to search for unrecognized talent and long forgotten masterpieces, producing a pantheon that celebrates a certain stylistic unity and/or validates the diverse artistic visions of unheralded 'auteurs'.

Zontar, for example, devotes almost all of its attention to the work of Larry Buchanan, who is celebrated as 'the greatest director of all time' and as a maker of films that must be regarded as 'absolute and unquestionable holy writ'.²⁹ Elsewhere, *Zontar* hails Buchanan as 'a prophet of transcendental banality . . . who eclipses Bergman in evoking a sense of alienation, despair and existential angst'.³⁰ As this rather tongue-in-cheek hyperbole suggests, paracinematic culture, like that of the academy, continues to generate its own forms of internal distinction by continually redefining its vanguard, thereby thwarting unsophisticated dilettantes and moving its audience as a whole on to increasingly demanding and exclusive paracinematic films. In its contemporary and most sophisticated form, paracinema is an aggressive, esoteric and often painfully ascetic counter-aesthetic, one that produces, in its most extreme manifestations, an ironic form of reverse elitism. 'The fine art of great badfilm is not a laughing matter to everybody', says one fan. 'Its adherents are small in number, but fanatical in pickiness. Badness appreciation is the most acquired taste, the most refined.'³¹

Invoking Larry Buchanan, the mastermind of films like *Mars Needs Women* (1966) and *Zontar the Thing from Venus* (1966), as a greater director than Ingmar Bergman, however, reaffirms that the paracinematic community defines itself in opposition not only to mainstream Hollywood cinema, but to the (perceived) counter-cinema of aesthetes and the cinematic academy. Again, as with any taste public, this elite cadre of 'aesthetes' cannot be definitively located in a particular author, methodology, or school of academic/journalistic criticism. Paracinematic vitriol also often ignores the fact that low-budget exploitation films have increasingly become legitimized as a field of study within the academy.³² For purposes of distinction, however, all that is required is a nebulous body of those who do not actively advance a paracinematic aesthetic. As Vale and Juno state broadly in their introduction to *Incredibly Strange Films*:

This is a functional guide to territory largely neglected by the film-criticism establishment. . . . Most of the films discussed test the limits of contemporary (middle-class) cultural acceptability, mainly because in varying ways they don't meet certain 'standards' utilized in evaluating direction, acting, dialogue, sets, continuity, technical cinematography, etc. Many of the films are overtly 'lower-class' or 'low-brow' in content and art direction.³³

³³ Vale, Juno and Morton (eds), *Incredibly Strange Films*, p. 4.

Vale and Juno go on to celebrate this cinema for its vitality and then identify what is at stake in this battle over the status of these films within the critical community. In a passage reminiscent of Bangs and Bourdieu, they state, 'At issue is the notion of 'good taste', which functions as a filter to block out entire areas of experience judged – and damned – as unworthy of investigation'.³⁴

³⁴ *Ibid.*

Style and excess

Graduate students entering the academy with an interest in trash cinema often wish to question why these 'areas of experience' have been 'judged and damned' by earlier scholars. But though they may attempt to disguise or renounce their cultural pedigree by aggrandizing such scandalous cultural artefacts, their heritage in a 'higher' taste public necessarily informs their textual and critical-engagement of even the most abject 'low culture' forms. Gripsrud argues that 'egalitarian' attempts on the part of the culturally privileged to collapse differences between 'high' and 'low' culture, as noble as they might be, often ignore issues of 'access' to these two cultural realms. As Gripsrud writes, 'Some people have access to both high and low culture, but the majority has only access to the low one'.³⁵ Gripsrud describes high culture audiences that also consume popular cultural artefacts as having 'double access', and notes that this ability to participate in both cultural realms is not randomly distributed through society. As Gripsrud observes, 'The double access to the codes and practices of both high and low culture is a *class privilege*'.³⁶

³⁵ Gripsrud, 'High culture revisited', p. 199.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

The phenomenon of double access raises a number of interesting political issues concerning the trash aesthetic. For example, when Vale and Juno write that these films address 'unpopular – even radical – views' and 'assault taboos related to the presentation of sexuality [and] violence', this does not mean that paracinema is a uniformly 'progressive' body of cinema. In fact, in subgenres ranging from the often rabidly xenophobic travelogues of the 'mondo' documentaries to the library of 1950s sex-loop star Betty Page, many paracinematic texts would run foul of academic film culture's political orthodoxy. But, of course, this is precisely why such films are so vociferously championed by certain segments of the paracinematic audience, which then attempts to 'redeem' the often suspect pleasures of these films

37 Such debates, in turn, should not instantly assume that there only exists an impoverished, 'single access' reading of these films within 'low culture', suggesting formations that are without irony. It is difficult to imagine, for example, that an audience of any historical moment or cinematic habitus ever watched Russ Meyer's odes to castration anxiety and breast fetishism with a 'straight' face.

through appeals to ironic detachment. Double access, then, foregrounds one of the central riddles of postmodern textuality: is the 'ironic' reading of a 'reactionary' text necessarily a 'progressive' act?³⁷

As pivotal as double access is in considering conventional debates over representational politics, the influence of high cultural capital is equally foregrounded in how the academy, the paracinematic audience, and the students who claim membership in both realms attend to the question of cinematic style. Of course, the ability to attend critically to a concept such as style, whether it manifests itself in Eisenstein or a Godzilla movie, is a class privilege, requiring a certain textual sophistication in issues of technique, form and structure. Though paracinematic viewers may explicitly reject the pretensions of high-brow cinema, their often sophisticated rhetoric on the issue of style can transform low-brow cinema into an object every bit as obtuse and inaccessible to the mainstream viewer as some of the most demanding works of the conventional avant garde. Both within the academy and the paracinematic community, viewers address the complex relationship between cinematic 'form' and 'content', often addressing style for style's sake. This is not to say, however, that the paracinematic community simply approaches trash cinema in the same terms that aesthetes and academics engage art cinema. There is, I would argue, a major political distinction between aesthete and paracinematic discourses on cinematic style, a distinction that is crucial to the paracinematic project of championing a counter-cinema of trash over that of the academy. In other words, though the paracinematic community may share with academic aesthetes an interest in counter-cinema as technical execution, their respective agendas and approaches in attending to questions of style and technique vary tremendously.

For example, film aesthetes, both in the academy and in the popular press, frequently discuss counter-cinematic style as a strategic intervention. In this scenario, the film artist self-consciously employs stylistic innovations to differentiate his or her (usually his) films from the cultural mainstream. James Monaco's discussion of the French New Wave is typical in this regard. 'It is this fascination with the forms and structures of the film medium . . . that sets their films apart from those that preceded them and marks a turning point in film history'.³⁸ Similarly, according to David Bordwell's concept of parametric narration, a filmmaker may systematically manipulate a certain stylistic parameter independent of the demands of the plot. Such films are rare and are typically produced by figures associated with 'art cinema' (Bordwell identifies Ozu, Bresson and Godard as among those having produced parametric films). The emphasis here is on applied manipulation of style as a form of systematic artistic experimentation and technical virtuosity. 'In parametric narration, style is organized across the film according to distinct principles, just as a

38 James Monaco, *The New Wave* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 9.

39 David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), p. 275.

40 Vale, Juno and Morton (eds), *Incredibly Strange Films*, p. 11.

41 *Ibid.*

narrative poem exhibits prosodic patterning or an operatic scene fulfills a musical logic.³⁹

Paracinematic films such as *The Corpse Grinders* (Ted V. Mikels, 1972) and *She Devils on Wheels* (Herschell Gordon Lewis, 1968) rarely exhibit such pronounced stylistic virtuosity as the result of a 'conscious' artistic agenda. But this is not to say that issues of style and authorship are unimportant to the paracinematic community. However, rather than explore the systematic application of style as the elite techniques of a cinematic artist, paracinematic culture celebrates the systematic 'failure' or 'distortion' of conventional cinematic style by 'autuers' who are valued more as 'eccentrics' than as artists, who work within the impoverished and clandestine production conditions typical of exploitation cinema. These films deviate from Hollywood classicism not necessarily by artistic intentionality, but by the effects of material poverty and technical ineptitude. As director Frank Henenlotter (of the *Basket Case* series) comments, 'Often, through bad direction, misdirection, inept direction, a film starts assuming surrealistic overtones, taking a dreadfully cliched story into new frontiers – you're sitting there shaking your head, totally excited, totally unable to guess where this is going to head next, or what the next loony line out of somebody's mouth is going to be. Just as long as it isn't stuff you regularly see.'⁴⁰ Importantly, paracinematic films are not ridiculed for this deviation but are instead celebrated as unique, courageous and ultimately subversive cinematic experiences. For this audience, paracinema thus constitutes a true counter-cinema in as much as 'it isn't stuff you regularly see', both in terms of form and content. Henenlotter continues, 'I'll never be satisfied until I see every sleazy film ever made – as long as it's different, as long as it's breaking a taboo (whether deliberately or by misdirection). There's a thousand reasons to like these films.'⁴¹

While the academy prizes conscious transgression of conventions by a filmmaker looking to critique the medium aesthetically and/or politically, paracinematic viewers value a stylistic and thematic deviance born, more often than not, from the systematic failure of a film aspiring to *obey* dominant codes of cinematic representation. For this audience, the 'bad' is as aesthetically defamiliarizing and politically invigorating as the 'brilliant'. A manifesto on acting from *Zontar* further illustrates the aesthetic appeal of such stylistic deviation among this audience:

Transparent play-acting; mumbling incompetence; passionate scenery-chewing; frigid woodenness; barely disguised drunkenness or contempt for the script; – these are the secrets of Zontarian acting at its best. Rondo Hatton's exploited acromegalic condition; Acquanetta's immobile dialogue readings; the drunken John Agar frozen to his chair in *Curse of the Swamp Creature*; – these great performances loom massively as the ultimate classics of

ZONTARISM. These are not so much performances as revelations of Human truth. We are not 'entertained,' we rather sympathize with our suffering soul-mates on screen. These performances are not escapist fantasy, but a heavy injection of BADTRUTH.⁴²

43 For an example of this literature, see Ado Kyrou, 'The popular is marvelous', in Paul Hammond (ed.), *The Shadow and Its Shadow* (London: British Film Institute, 1978).

The Zontarian moment of the 'badtruth' is not unlike the Surrealist notion of the 'marvellous' (and indeed, the Surrealists were perhaps the first cinephiles with an interest in bad cinema).⁴³ As with the marvellous, the badtruth, as a nodal point of paracinematic style, provides a defamiliarized view of the world by merging the transcendently weird and the catastrophically awful. Thus, rather than witness the Surrealists' vision of the exquisite chance meetings of umbrellas and sewing machines on a dissecting table, the paracinematic viewer thrills instead to such equally fantastic fabrications as women forced to duel in a syringe fight in the basement of a schizophrenic vaudevillian who has only moments earlier eaten his cat's left eyeball (*Maniac!* [Dwain Esper, 1934]), Colonial era witches and warlocks crushed to death by men in Levis corduroys who hurl bouncing Styrofoam boulders (*Blood-Orgy of the She-Devils* [Ted V. Mikels, 1973]), a down and out Bela Lugosi training a mutant bat to attack people wearing a certain type of shaving lotion (*The Devil Bat* [Jean Yarborough, 1941]), and leaping, pulsating brains that use their prehensile spinal cords to strangle unwary soldiers and citizens on a Canadian rocket base (*Fiend Without a Face* [Arthur Crabtree, 1958]).

Paracinematic taste involves a reading strategy that renders the bad into the sublime, the deviant into the defamiliarized, and in so doing, calls attention to the aesthetic aberrance and stylistic variety evident but routinely dismissed in the many subgenres of trash cinema. By concentrating on a film's formal bizarreness and stylistic eccentricity, the paracinematic audience, much like the viewer attuned to the innovations of Godard or capable of attending to the patterns of parametric narration described by Bordwell, foregrounds structures of cinematic discourse and artifice so that the material identity of the film ceases to be a structure made invisible in service of the diegesis, but becomes instead the primary focus of textual attention. It is in this respect that the paracinematic aesthetic is closely linked to the concept of 'excess'.

Kristin Thompson describes excess as a value that exists beyond a cinematic signifier's 'motivated' use, or, as 'those aspects of the work which are not contained by its unifying forces'.⁴⁴ 'At the point where motivation ends', Thompson writes, 'excess begins'.⁴⁵ '[T]he minute the viewer begins to notice style for its own sake or watch works which do not provide such thorough motivation, excess comes forward and must affect narrative meaning. . . . Excess does not equal style, but the two are closely linked because they both involve the material aspects of the film.'⁴⁶ Thompson writes of excess as an intermittent

44 Kristin Thompson, 'The concept of cinematic excess', in Rosen (ed.), *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology*, p. 130.

45 Thompson, 'The concept of cinematic excess', p. 135.

46 *Ibid.*, p. 132.

47 *Ibid.*, pp. 132–3.

textual phenomenon, a brief moment of self-conscious materiality that interrupts an otherwise conventional, ‘non-excessive’ film: ‘Probably no one ever watches only these non-diegetic aspects of the image through an entire film.’ But, Thompson writes further, these non-diegetic aspects are nevertheless always present, ‘a whole “film” existing in some sense alongside the narrative film we tend to think of ourselves as watching’.⁴⁷

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. But, importantly, while cinematic aesthetes attend to style and excess as moments of artistic bravado in relation to the creation of an overall diegesis, paracinematic viewers instead use excess as a gateway to exploring profilmic and extratextual aspects of the filmic object itself. 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. It is here that the paracinematic audience most dramatically parts company with the aesthetes of academia. Whereas aesthete interest in style and excess always returns the viewer to the frame, paracinematic attention to excess seeks to push the viewer beyond the formal boundaries of the text.

Paracinematic excess: Ed Wood, Jr and Larry Buchanan

Ed Wood, Jr’s status has long been high in the paracinematic community. Wood was an independent filmmaker in Hollywood during the 1950s, known primarily for his work with Bela Lugosi. His films are remarkably incompetent from a conventional perspective. Wood’s dialogue was often awful, his actors alternately wooden and histrionic, and his sets pathetic and threadbare. Throughout his long career as a filmmaker, Wood was unable (or unwilling) to master the basics of continuity, screen direction or the construction of cinematic space. His *Plan 9 From Outer Space* is perhaps the most famous

Obscenescence as defamiliarization: an encounter with 'aliens' in *Plan 9 from Outer Space* (Ed Wood, Jr. 1959). Picture courtesy: The Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research



'badfilm' of all, having become badfilm's equivalent of *Citizen Kane* as an inventory of characteristically paracinematic stylistic devices. Though Wood's films were initially read as camp, the critical discourse within paracinematic literature surrounding Wood has since shifted from bemused derision to active celebration. No longer regarded as a hack, Wood is now seen, like Godard, as a unique talent improvising outside the constrictive environment of traditional Hollywood production and representation. As one fanzine comments, 'Wood's films are now appreciated less as models of incompetence, and more as the products of a uniquely personal and obsessive sensibility that best expresses itself through madly deconstructed narratives enacted by a gallery of grotesque castoffs from the fringes of Hollywood bohemia'.⁴⁸ This is certainly the perspective that dominates Tim Burton's cinematic treatment of Wood's career, *Ed Wood* (1994).

Wood's most notorious film and the movie that is central to his status as a paracinematic filmmaker is *Glen or Glenda*. As detailed extensively in Burton's biopic, Wood shot *Glen or Glenda* in 1953 to capitalize on the public hysteria surrounding the Christine Jorgenson sex-change operation. Also released under the titles *I Led Two Lives* and *I Changed My Sex*, the film purports to be an investigative examination of the sex-change issue. Instead, the film is an odd plea for public tolerance of transvestitism. The film's protagonist is a young man named Glen, a transvestite struggling with the decision of whether or not to tell his fiancée of his secret before their marriage. From this central conflict, Wood fashions a vertiginous film that in a bizarre and at times hallucinatory manner argues the virtues of transvestitism, giddily shifting from documentary to horror film, from police drama to sexploitation picture. In the midst of this generic turmoil, Bela Lugosi appears from time to time as a metanarrational

⁴⁸ Zontar, no. 8, n.p.

figure who punctuates the diegetic action with incomprehensible comments and bizarre non sequiturs.

A casebook example of stylistic deviation as the result of the unique conditions of production in exploitation cinema, *Glen or Glenda* is of particular interest for paracinematic viewers because of the extratextual identity of Ed Wood, Jr: Wood was himself a transvestite. He not only wrote and directed *Glen or Glenda*, but also starred as the troubled young transvestite, Glen. Fan legends (based on interviews with surviving crew members) have it that Wood directed most of the film while wearing his favourite chiffon housecoat and that he had an obsession with cashmere sweaters (a fetish dramatically enacted in the film's final scene). After his movie career ended in the 1960s, Wood went on to write a number of adult novels with transvestite storylines.⁴⁹

This extratextual information about Wood is key to the paracinematic positioning of his films as a form of counter-cinema. Knowing this information allows the paracinematic fan to more fully appreciate the complexity of the cultural codes at work in a film like *Glen or Glenda*. John Fiske argues that the cultural elite 'use information about the artist to enhance or enrich the appreciation of the work'. Within fan culture, on the other hand, 'such knowledge increases the power of the fan to "see through" to the production processes normally hidden by the text and thus inaccessible to the non-fan'.⁵⁰ In the case of Ed Wood, Jr, the paracinematic aesthetic combines an elite interest in 'enriched appreciation' with a popular interest in seeing through 'production processes'. Paracinematic fans use their knowledge of Wood's real life to 'enhance or enrich' their engagement in his films, much as elites use their knowledge of Godard's various positions in relation to Marxism to inform their viewings. Vital to paracinematic pleasure, however, is this process of 'seeing through' the diegesis. For a sophisticated paracinematic viewer, *Glen or Glenda* is compelling because it seemingly presents both the textual and extratextual struggles of a man set against the repressive constraints of 1950s sexuality, encoded in a style that also challenges the period's conventions of representation. Paracinematic fans appreciate films such as *Glen or Glenda* not only as bizarre works of art, but as intriguing cultural documents, as socially and historically specific instances of artifice and commentary. Set against the bland cultural miasma of the Eisenhower years, Wood and his film stand out as truly remarkable figures.

This interest in collapsing the textual and the extratextual, the filmic and the profilmic, is especially pronounced in Zontarian interest in Larry Buchanan, a Dallas filmmaker who made a number of AIP films for television in the mid sixties. Buchanan's films rank among the most low-budget productions ever attempted in commercial filmmaking. Often following scripts from old black and white features, these films were reshot in colour for the television market in two or

⁴⁹ For a more complete biography of Wood, see Rudolph Grey, *Nightmare of Ecstasy: the Life and Art of Edward D. Wood, Jr* (Los Angeles: Feral House, 1992).

⁵⁰ Fiske, 'The cultural economy of fandom', p. 24.

three days for often less than a few thousand dollars. The finished products are a test of even the most dedicated paracinematic viewer's patience. With no money or time to reshoot, mistakes in dialogue, camera movement and sound recording remain in each film. The films are unwatchable for most mainstream viewers, and consequently have assumed an exalted status among the 'hardcore' badfilm faction of paracinematic culture.

As with the other visionary stylists in paracinema's shadow realm of auterism, Buchanan is valorized for his unique artistic vision. *Zontar* positions Buchanan as a poor man's Carl Dreyer, celebrating his particularly bleak and sombre approach. Importantly, however, this bleak and sombre tone is as much a function of the conditions of production as the product of Buchanan's 'genius'. A common strategy when discussing Buchanan is to transform his films into profilmic parables of artistic tragedy. Differentiating Buchanan from the more accessible Ed Wood, Jr, for example, *Zontar's* editors write, 'where Ed Wood's films ultimately reassure the comfortably "hip" viewer of the dynamic force of even the most downtrodden and despised corners of human experience, the films of Larry Buchanan can only induce a profound feeling of desperation, anxiety and terminal boredom. The texture is not that of a tatty side-show, but that of the endless despair and futility of human existence as reflected on the concrete pavement of a Dallas parking lot.'⁵¹ The Zontarian transformation of Buchanan's work thus shifts the diegetic frame so that the action on the screen becomes but the trace of an isolated moment of desperate human activity, a farcical attempt at 'art' taking place on a particular day many years ago in someone's garage, on a Dallas parking lot.

A contributor to *Zontar* describes this moment of profilmic nausea as personally experienced in the climatic revelation of the monster in the concluding scenes of Buchanan's *Curse of the Swamp Creature*:

Seldom, if ever, has a more disappointing final monster revelation scene been filmed. . . . The monster is unbelievably, spectacularly cheap. . . . 'It' appears dressed in a white hospital smock, with rubber monster-gloves and a minimal mask-piece consisting of two painted PING-PONG BALL EYES set into a rubber bow. A skin-head wig and a couple of cruddy fangs complete the 'monster suit' . . . which is more embarrassing than scary . . . the CREATURE itself must be the least convincing creation in monster movie history. This is, of course, a subjective area, but I would rate it far worse than the ROBOT MONSTER and at least as bad as the CREEPING TERROR . . . though of a different order, naturally. THE MASTER DIRECTOR actually compounds the failure of his creature by withholding it for so long. By building to his epic anti-climax Buchanan makes the SWAMP CREATURE itself the essence of disappointment and failure . . . translated into cheap

51 *Zontar*, no. 8, n.p.

rubber and ping-pong ball eyes. The SWAMP CREATURE'S scaly rubber fright-mask is composed of the very substance of despair.⁵²

The swamp creature, intended to be a startling and menacing cinematic revelation, is, in the last analysis, simply an overweight actor standing in weeds with ping-pong balls attached to his eyes on a hot day in Dallas in 1966. For the paracinematic community, such moments of impoverished excess are a means toward collapsing cinema's fourth wall, allowing the profilmic and the extratextual to mesh with the diegetic drama. The 'surface' diegesis becomes precisely that, the thin and final veil that is the indexical mark of a more interesting drama, that of the film's construction and sociohistorical context.

The politics of excess

Thompson argues that the importance of excess is that it renews 'the perceptual freshness of the work' and 'suggests a different way of watching and listening to a film'.

The viewer is no longer caught in the bind of mistaking the causal structure of the narrative for some sort of inevitable, true, or natural set of events which is beyond questioning or criticism. . . . Once narrative is recognized as arbitrary rather than logical, the viewer is free to ask why individual events within its structures are as they are. The viewer is no longer constrained by conventions of reading to find a meaning or theme within the work as the solution to a sort of puzzle which has a right answer.⁵³

⁵³ Thompson, 'The concept of cinematic excess', pp. 140–1.

Excess provides a freedom from constraint, an opportunity to approach a film with a fresh and slightly defamiliarized perspective. As Thompson argues, through excess 'the work becomes a perceptual field of structures which the viewer is free to study at length, going beyond the strictly functional aspects'.⁵⁴ What the critical viewer does with this newfound freedom provided by the phenomenon of excess is, I would argue, a political question, and one that lies at the heart of the conflict between the counter-cinema of the academy and that promoted by paracinematic culture. The very concept of excess, after all, as a relativistic term that posits a self-evident 'norm', is an inherently political evaluation. Exploring these politics of excess presents a key area where students who possess a trash aesthetic may impact the academic institutions to which they belong by questioning the goals, strategies and techniques of academically enshrined versions of 'art' cinema and the 'avant garde'.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

Specifically, the trash aesthetic offers a potential critique of two highly influential methodologies in film studies: neoformalist analysis and theories of 'radical' textuality. Paracinema suggests that the

neoformalist emphasis on art as defamiliarization might be more complicated than the cataloguing of innovative, text-bound 'devices'. If the paracinematic community celebrates a film, either earnestly or parodically, as an invigorating artistic experience precisely because of its utter banality, does that constitute a form of defamiliarization? For whom and under what circumstances is any film defamiliarizing? Since any notion of aesthetics is inextricably linked to historical issues of representation and reception, what are the politics of a neoformalist analysis that ultimately constructs a hierarchy of 'skilled' and 'unskilled' audiences, artistic and non-artistic films? (Do we really want to claim that *Last Year at Marienbad* is somehow more 'artistic' than *Sweet Badass's Badass Song* or even *E.T.*? What exactly is the purpose of such aesthetic valuations other than to empower a certain critic or a certain cinema?) If nothing else, the trash aesthetic serves as a reminder that all forms of poetics and aesthetic criticism are ultimately linked to issues of taste; and taste, in turn, is a social construct with profoundly political implications.

Paracinema also offers a critique of the 'radical' aesthetic that seeks to liberate, or at least politically agitate, audiences through the application of disruptive textual devices, a project that coalesced in theoretical and critical writings in film studies during the 1970s and which continues to inform much work on avant-garde textuality. In many respects, paracinematic discourses on excess greatly resemble the symptomatic criticism so central to film studies during this formative period. As with the devotees of Sirk, Minnelli and Lewis, paracinematic viewers are interested in reading films 'against the grain', ever on the alert for the trash film equivalents of Comolli and Narboni's celebrated 'category e' films.⁵⁵ And, as in the counter-cinemas explicitly designed by Godard or covertly implanted by Sirk, paracinema's retrospective reconstruction of an avant garde through the ironic engagement of exploitation cinema's history is a 'politicized' cinema to the extent that it demonstrates the limitations and interests of dominant cinematic style by providing a striking counter-example of deviation.⁵⁶

But while segments of academic film culture often appeal to a refined code of aesthetics to apprehend and explain the potentially disruptive forces of style and excess (an aesthetics most often intentionally applied by an 'artist' to be successfully decoded by an elite cinephile in a rarefied and exclusive circuit of textual exchange), paracinematic culture celebrates excess as a product of cultural as well as aesthetic deviance. Once excess cues the elite viewer to the arbitrary structure of a narrative, he or she can then study the 'perceptual field of structures' in the work itself in appreciation of artistic craftsmanship within a closed formal system. The paracinematic viewer's recognition of a narrative's artifice, however, is the first step in examining a field of structures within the culture as a whole, a passageway into engaging a larger field of contextual issues

⁵⁵ See Jean-Luc Comolli and Jean Narboni, 'Cinema/Ideology/criticism, Part I', *Screen*, vol. 12, no. 1 (1971), pp. 27–36.

⁵⁶ In Wollen's account of Godard's significance as a radical filmmaker, he identifies 'seven cardinal virtues' of Godard's aesthetic that oppose the 'seven deadly sins' of orthodox cinema. Godard's counter-cinema is thus argued to feature 'narrative intransitivity' rather than 'narrative transitivity' – 'estrangement vs identification, foregrounding vs transparency, multiple diegesis vs single diegesis, aperture vs closure, un-pleasure vs pleasure, and reality vs fiction'. One cannot help but be struck by how certain paracinematic titles, especially genre hybrids like *Glen or Glenda*, match Wollen's criteria point by point. For a more complete account of these distinctions, see Wollen, 'Godard and counter-cinema: *Vent d'Est*'.

surrounding the film as a socially and historically specific document. As a consequence, paracinema might be said to succeed where earlier more 'radical' avant gardes have failed. It is doubtful that *Tout Va Bien* (Jean-Luc Godard / Jean-Pierre Gorin, 1973), or *Written on the Wind* (Douglas Sirk, 1956) for that matter, ever 'radicalized' anyone other than fellow academy aesthetes. Perhaps paracinema has the potential, at long last, to answer Brecht's famous call for an anti-illusionist aesthetic by presenting a cinema so histrionic, anachronistic and excessive that it compels even the most casual viewer to engage it ironically, producing a relatively detached textual space in which to consider, if only superficially, the cultural, historical and aesthetic politics that shape cinematic representation. In this respect, one might argue that while academy icons such as Godard and Sirk may have employed complex aesthetic strategies to problematize issues such as the construction of gender, Ed Wood Jr, by his own admission, actually fought in the Pacific during World War II with a pink bra and knickers worn underneath his combat fatigues. As to which form of political engagement and subsequent critical promotion by the academy will prove more provocative and productive, it is open for debate.