The Aesthetics of 'So Bad it's Good': Value, Intention, and *The Room*

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Abstract

A cult film valued for being 'so bad it's good' – in Jeffrey Sconce's terminology, 'badfilm' – is championed via a form of interpretative competence which values incompetence. Scholarship addressing the terms 'bad' and 'good' in relation to such films has unsurprisingly tended to focus on the important issue of reception. What we suggest in this paper, however, is that the badfilm is also capable of prompting a reconsideration of two very old, but vital, questions for aesthetics. Discussions of evaluation and badfilm regularly argue that such films confirm the inherently unstable, discursive, and/or socially-determined nature of aesthetic value. Relatedly, it has been claimed that the cult fan practice of conscious counter-interpretation demonstrates the 'intentions' of readers or taste communities prevailing over the intentions of filmmakers. We suggest, however, that (1) badfilms offer a robust challenge to the assertion that intrinsic aesthetic value should be regarded in all cases as nothing but an irreducibly fluid socio-historical illusion of taste, and (2) they highlight in an especially stark fashion how fundamental assumptions about artistic intention are to the interpretation of any aesthetic object. Through an analysis of the contemporary badfilm *The Room* (2003), we argue that one may judge a badfilm 'bad' on more stable grounds than mere taste, and that this badness is dependent in such cases upon the demonstrable nature of (failed) artistic intentions. Finally, we suggest some reasons why, even if possessing little intrinsic aesthetic value, badfilms might still nonetheless offer significant instrumental value.

'So bad it's good' is a familiar enough concept in film culture. It has often been invoked by critics (Schrader 1972/3: 41), fans (McCulloch 2011: 1) and academics (Carter 2011: 105) in connection with certain kinds of movies and certain kinds of reception, being associated especially with cult film and 'paracinema' (Sconce 1995). As Mathijs and Sexton note, 'many cult reception contexts explicitly refer to [...] films as "bad"' whilst championing them nonetheless' (2011: 18). Yet 'bad' can carry a multitude of meanings in relation to cult cinema, only some of which this article is concerned with. In what follows we will not be approaching 'bad' in terms of culturally 'illegitimate' genres, cycles, or modes of filmmaking situated as 'critically disreputable' (Sconce 1995: 372) because diverging from 'mainstream tastes' (Smith 2004: 253). Instead, our focus is specifically filmmaking that is valued, by fans or critics, for its *incompetence*: what is often called 'badfilm' (Sconce 1995).[1]

The study of cult film has opened up many productive avenues for the discussion of fan practices, cinematic taste economies, historical reception contexts, and has, as Mark Jancovich suggests, 'much to tell us about the politics of cultural consumption and its relation to issues of economic and educational capital' (2002: 320). It is fitting that the field should have made matters of reception, exchange and consumption so central to its investigations, given that the very definition of cult is predicated on audiences, viewing communities, socially-formed distinctions of value, niche distribution channels, and so on. What we want to suggest here, however, is that badfilm in particular is also a category capable of challenging us to revisit and revitalise several very old, but still fundamental and troublesome, questions for aesthetics – and not necessarily in the manner one might imagine.

Badfilm and value

The commonplace cult aphorism 'so bad it's good' is frequently viewed through the lens of familiar, relatively recent, turns in intellectual debates concerning artistic evaluation more generally. Mathijs, for example, suggests that the rise of scholarly interest in 'bad' cinema coincides with 'a change in film discourse, in which issues of aesthetic quality have become less absolutist' (2005: 471). In particular, many writers have examined cult cinema via theoretical frameworks which assume, very broadly speaking, that 'contextual factors, more than textual ones, account for the experiences that spectators have watching films' (Staiger 2000: 1). One of the most important academic articles on cult film, Jeffrey Sconce's '"Trashing" the Academy', for instance, draws heavily upon the work of Pierre Bourdieu in order to argue that 'trash' cinema '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' (1995: 392). Thus concerned primarily with reception (though by no means always with audience research), we regularly find claims within writing on cult cinema to the effect that 'which side of the line between "good" and "bad" cinema any [film] might fall depends largely on the spectator' (Mills 2010: 669), and furthermore that 'when bad films are hailed – tongue in cheek or not – as masterpieces [...], notions of what counts as "good" are problematised' (Mathijs 2009: 366). Such arguments are apt to suggest or imply that 'one's sense of what is good or

bad is inherently linked to one's storehouses of cultural and educational capital,' and that these evaluative terms 'are only understood within the constellations of particular cultural formations, rendering them signifiers drained of meaning' (Semley 2009: 6).

Needless to say, the quest for 'objective' aesthetic evaluation has often been dismissed as futile. Twenty-seven years before Bourdieu's *Distinction* (1984) appeared in English, Northrop Frye wrote that 'the demonstrable value-judgement is the donkey's carrot of literary criticism', and that each new claim to it 'always turns out to be an illusion of the history of taste' (1957: 20). This article will not be so foolish as to pretend to have finally caught up to this carrot. However, it is our contention that, far from problematising 'what counts as "good"', the category of badfilm does in fact have the potential to illuminate what counts as demonstrably aesthetically *bad* within certain delineated parameters*.* One thing we will suggest in what follows is that badfilms do not tend to invert, blur, or otherwise problematise traditional frameworks of aesthetic value. Quite the contrary: they in fact offer a robust and useful challenge to the proposition that we should conceptualise aesthetic value as nothing other than a historical illusion of taste.

Badfilm and intention

Another well-established issue for aesthetics that is intimately bound up with badfilm is intention. Those who champion badfilm practice a form of interpretative competence that values incompetence. That is to say, as Jancovich puts it, that badfilms 'are not praised for their inherent artistry, but rather for […] their remarkable lack of artistry' (2002: 317). A film or filmmaker seems to attempt to achieve something, seems to fail, and yet is valued *for* this seeming failure. While by no means pertinent to all cult fandom, an assumption of something like this process is nevertheless key to the 'reading protocol' (Sconce 1995: 372) associated with badfilm. Calling this method of appreciation 'cinemasochism', David Ray Carter writes that 'the bad cinema fan finds enjoyment in these films in spite of – or as is often the case, *because* of – their technical limitations' (2011: 102) – that is, usually, their inability to attain that towards which they appear to be

striving.

Indeed, the matter of intention has often been crucial – even if sometimes implicitly – to understandings of cult appreciation, and particularly those associated with badfilm. Susan Sontag's canonical 'Notes on "Camp"' suggests that 'one must distinguish between naïve and deliberate Camp. Pure Camp is always naïve. Camp which knows itself to be Camp ("camping") is usually less satisfying' (1966: 282). [2] Speaking of *Casablanca* (Curtiz, 1942) as a cult film in another landmark essay, Umberto Eco argues that 'nobody would have been able to achieve such a cosmic result intentionally' (1985: 11). J. Hoberman points to Oscar Michaeux as a filmmaker whose work 'defines objective badness', and suggests that his films 'open up a chasm between intent and actualization almost unprecedented in the history of film' (1980: 12). In 'Trashing the Academy', Sconce describes the pleasure that he as a paracinematic fan takes in a scene from *The Curse of the Swamp Creature* (Buchanan, 1966): the monster, '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' (1995: 391). Having touched upon intentionality, however, such accounts tend not to make it a central term in their debates, but will instead take its workings largely as read. Moreover, when cult critics *have* explicitly discussed intention, they have usually again (as in the case of aesthetic value) approached it using theoretical frameworks which emphasise the *reader's* intentions over the author's or film's. Mathijs and Mendik, for instance, argue that, while 'traditional fandom remains largely respectful to a film's interpretive integrity', many forms of cult fandom 'involve challenges to its interpretation, either by robbing it of its meaning, or replacing it with one that may counter its intentions' (2008: 5).

The act of appreciating a film as 'so bad it's good' might indeed initially seem to be one which – crudely put – grants more power to the interpreting reader than to the interpreted text. Assuming such a hierarchy can take us a certain distance towards understanding such films. We can of course agree that the phenomenon of audiences consciously enjoying films for their seeming failings demonstrates their ability to appreciate texts in 'unintended' ways. Yet we should also acknowledge what the

phenomenon makes equally clear: how fundamental initial assumptions about intention clearly are to this very process. If we cannot assume that a film intended to achieve certain aims, then we cannot deem it 'bad' for failing in those aims, and cannot then recast this badness as 'so bad it's good'.

Few approaches to reception go so far as to claim that intention, in its broadest sense, plays no role in interpretation. Important to certain strands of ethnographic research into popular culture, for instance, has been 'the concept of "preferred readings"', which, as David Morley puts it, 'suggests that a text [...] *does* privilege or prefer a certain reading' (1980: 167). That is to say: no matter what reinterpretations might be applied by individual readers, texts can nevertheless be assumed to encourage some interpretations and discourage others. Badfilm appreciation brings this issue into especially sharp relief, since it requires an act of reinterpretation which cannot take place without a presumption that a text's original intentions have been correctly discerned. As Allison Graham says, speaking of Ed Wood's films: 'It is the appearance of Wood's intentions that so engages cult audiences – the perceived distance [...] between his desire to create compelling narratives and his inability to do so' (1991: 109). Thus, just as an aesthetic approach to badfilm all but forces us to re-examine debates around evaluation, so should it require that we revisit another related and equally fundamental issue for aesthetics: on what basis can we presume to infer artistic intention, given that we (and particularly, we might say, aficionados of badfilm) clearly and necessarily *do* so regularly?[3] We shall now address this question, before linking it, firstly, with the related issue of value, and finally with the matter of what kinds of pleasure badfilms might afford.

Identifying intention

The problem of artistic intention, like that of value, is a notoriously slippery one. Yet, if we wish to talk with any degree of rigor about the aesthetic issues raised by badfilm, it becomes necessary to traverse some of the key points in this debate and stake out

positions in relation to them. Since this article is one of the first to explicitly address this kind of cinema in terms of these aesthetic debates, let us begin this process, as it were, at the beginning.

In 'The Intentional Fallacy', *the* seminal anti-intentionalist statement in literary studies (the details of whose argument are less well-known than its title), Wimsatt and Beardsley argue that the 'intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging […] a work of literary art':

> One must ask how a critic expects to get an answer to the question about intention. How is he [*sic*] to find out what the poet tried to do? If the poet succeeded in doing it, then the poem itself shows what he [*sic*] was trying to do. And if the poet did not succeed, then the poem is not adequate evidence, and the critic must go outside the poem – for evidence of an intention that did not become effective in the poem. (1954: 3-4)

Notwithstanding the numerous objections made against 'The Intentional Fallacy' on other grounds, it has become generally accepted that the intentions of actual poets/authors/artists are likely always to remain beyond our grasp, and it is therefore advisable to look elsewhere for answers about intention. One reason for this is that even to interrogate a living author about a text's genesis is merely to invite into being yet another text – one which, if offered in full earnest, could still capture only (a) what an author *remembers* intending, (b) what s/he intended *consciously,* and (c) what s/he is capable of *articulating* about his or her conscious intentions. Any artwork, furthermore, is the product of both an overall design and a countless series of local decisions, often made by a large number of contributors and with varying degrees of conscious awareness – a fact particularly relevant, of course, for film.

The question thus becomes: how do we advance from an acknowledgement of the fragmented, overlapping, and sometimes contradictory impulses involved in the making of an artefact, towards a useable critical framework that manages to honour the undeniable fact that artworks are nonetheless created intentionally by humans, for

humans? George M. Wilson expresses this familiar problem in relation to film as follows:

> We often have a need to say something about our sense of the peculiar
> sensibility and intelligence that we find manifested in the way the narration has
> been crafted [...] No doubt, we frequently suspect that the flesh-and-blood
> author or filmmaker had, in reality, the personal qualities that we find thus
> manifested, but we are cognizant of the various ways in which these suspicions
> may be historically false and thus require a terminology that permits us to
> articulate the character of the relevant impressions and experience without
> incurring any direct commitment about the artist's psychic biography (1986:
> 134-5).

If we wish to argue, as seems logically necessary, that a film and its 'peculiar sensibility' have been brought into existence intentionally – yet are also sceptical of appeals to the conscious intentions of flesh-and-blood authors – to whom or what should this intention be ascribed, using what terminology? It should be obvious that this question is made all the more pressing in the case of badfilm, since badness (in the sense relevant here: incompetence) presupposes unachieved aesthetic aims, and aims presuppose intentions.

We referred above to Morley's model of a 'preferred reading'. This reading may or may not be aligned with those experienced by actual, individual readers; yet it nonetheless exists, and can often be discerned. Wayne C. Booth has approached this matter by suggesting that there are different kinds of questions we may ask of a text, including 'those that the object seems to *invite* [...] and those that *violate* its own interests or effort to be a given kind of thing in the world' (1988: 90). Badfilm appreciation specialises in this last kind of relationship with a text. Yet it also, crucially (unlike a '*mis*reading'), presupposes that the first stage will have been undertaken already – that is: the reading which a text 'invites' will have already been deduced. Describing a *text* as preferring or inviting certain readings comes close to ascribing intentions not to an actual author – nor even an 'implied author' (Booth's alternative model for sidestepping problems of

authorial biography, etc. (1961: 74))[4] – but rather to the text itself. This proposal has been made explicit by some, perhaps most notably Eco, who argues that, 'between the unattainable intention of the author and the arguable intention of the reader there is the [...] intention of the *text*' (1992: 78). The model of the 'intention of the text' is one of the most useful contributions to debates on the subject of aesthetic intention because it both avoids the 'unattainable' flesh-and-blood author's intentions, and qualifies the centrality of the endlessly 'arguable' intentions of individual readers, whilst also simultaneously acknowledging readers' active roles in interpretation. The intention of the text is, in Eco's words, 'the result of a conjecture on the part of the reader' (1992: 64). Making such a conjecture is essential for the viewer undertaking to appreciate a film on the grounds that it is 'so bad it's good'.

So, on what basis might viewers, or critics, make this conjecture? Eco acknowledges that a decision about how to proceed is 'a kind of interpretive bet' – but immediately adds that 'the contexts allow us to make this bet less uncertain than a bet on the red or the black of a roulette wheel' (ibid: 63). Part of what Eco means by 'contexts' can be related to Booth's notion of a text's seeming 'effort to be a given kind of thing in the world'; Eco writes: 'to recognize the [intention of the text] is to recognize a semiotic strategy. Sometimes the semiotic strategy is detectable on the grounds of established stylistic conventions. If a story starts with "Once upon a time", there is a good probability that it is a fairy tale' (ibid: 64-5). We might extend Eco's logic here by saying that, if a story begins in this way, then there is a good probability that it *intends* to be a fairy tale (or at least to invoke that mode), and is thus inviting us to approach (and importantly, evaluate) it as such. Something that will often guide our sense of the intention of the text, then, is a text's relationship with pre-existing cultural forms and genres, and their attendant conventions. Such a relationship will often facilitate identification of, at a minimum, a text's *categorical* intentions.[5] (This fact offers a powerful challenge to Wimsatt and Beardsley's assertion that if a poet is not successful then the poem itself cannot constitute adequate evidence of intention.) One film scholar who has similarly argued that categorisation is '[f]undamental to the task of criticism' (and therefore evaluation) is Noël Carroll:

> once we know the category (or categories) to which the artwork belongs, we
> have a sense of the kind of expectations that it is appropriate to bring to the work
> – which knowledge, in turn, provides us with a basis for determining whether the
> work has succeeded or failed, at least on its own terms (2009: 93/4).

Badfilms, of course, are regularly approached in terms of their failure to successfully inhabit the categories they intend to. As Sconce writes, 'While the academy prizes conscious transgression of conventions [...] 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' (1995: 385). J. Hoberman, invoking the critical vocabulary of Noel Burch, similarly observes: 'The objectively bad film attempts to reproduce the institutional mode of representation, but [fails] to do so' (1980: 8).

To help us expand on this proposition, we shall now turn to an analysis of a recent movie that seems absolutely to belong to the category of badfilm: *The Room* (Wiseau, 2003). To begin discussing a movie like *The Room* as a badfilm it is first necessary to make conjectures about its intentions as a text, which in turn involves determining the aesthetic categories to which it aspires to belong. Following this, we can suggest it fails to inhabit these categories, and thus fails to achieve its (at least, categorical) intentions. Doing so clearly requires careful attention to the text's construction – or, in Morley and Brunsdon's words, 'textual analysis designed to identify the preferred reading of the text', since it is this preferred reading 'with which most audience members enter into some kind of negotiation' (1999: 15). If appreciating a film as 'so bad it's good', that negotiation will be of a very particular sort, as we will discuss subsequently.

The Room

The Room is an independently financed 2003 male melodrama which stars, and is both written and directed by, Tommy Wiseau. Its plot concerns Johnny (Wiseau), a San

Franciscan banker, whose life unravels when his fiancée, Lisa (Juliette Daniel), begins an affair with his best friend, Mark (Greg Sestero). Around this central premise, the film also constructs an array of elliptical secondary sub-plots, characters, and apparently superfluous scenes. The self-distributed film was initially released into just two cinemas in Los Angeles on 27 June 2003. At this time it was accompanied by a promotional campaign that promised a drama possessing 'the passion of Tennessee Williams' (Collis 2011: 1).[6] Due partly to Wiseau's persistence in organising monthly screenings around the city, the film slowly gained a cult following – firstly in Los Angeles, then in other U.S. cities, before finally spreading abroad (Bissell 2010: 59). The fandom and press coverage that has grown to surround *The Room* is typical of badfilm, turning upon characterisations of the film as 'the worst movie ever made' (Rose 2009: 1), and presumptions that it is 'failing at what it intended to do' (Rinaldi 2011: 1). As Richard McCulloch's audience research into sectors of the film's British fan base confirms, 'the "so bad it's good" tag dominates its [...] reception to the point of being all but inescapable' (2011: 201). As with many such cult movies, *The Room*'s fan screenings have famously developed various participatory rituals designed to draw attention to the text's shortcomings: a cry of 'Who the fuck *are* you?!' upon the introduction of a new character whom we are seemingly expected to recognise; chants of 'Go! Go! Go!' when a very long establishing shot pans exceedingly slowly from one end of the Golden Gate Bridge to the other, and so on.[7]

We can begin to explore the badness of *The Room* – that is, the ways its intentions as a text remain unfulfilled – by highlighting some of its key features: its many moments of narrative superfluity, its trouble with dialogue, and its incoherent handling of diegetic time. These features are important partly because they alert us to the film's intention to deploy well-established narrative conventions at the same time as they testify to its failure to do so. Furthermore, while these failures in themselves have consequences for the film's coherence, what is crucial is that this incoherence also fatally undermines *The Room*'s ability to successfully inhabit the melodramatic mode to which it seems to aspire – a minimal requirement of which is the construction of comprehensible narrative worlds and central characters.

Narrative superfluity – the inclusion of significant portions of material that has no discernable place in any overall narrative scheme – is a major feature of *The Room.* In one early scene, Lisa's mother, Claudette (Carolyn Minnott), casually tells her daughter 'I *definitely* have breast cancer'. After a few battings away by both parties of what would in almost any other narrative film be a grave topic ('I'm sure I'll be alright…'), the subject is changed, and Claudette's illness is not returned to again for the remainder of the film. At another moment, Denny (Philip Haldiman) (a young man to whom Johnny acts as something of a guardian figure) is threatened violently at gunpoint by drug dealer (Dan Janjigian) on the roof of the building in which most of the film's action takes place. Johnny and Mark appear during the fray, disarm the assailant, and drag him away ('Let's take him to the police!' we hear Johnny say). In the second half of this scene (following the jarringly sudden appearance of Lisa and Claudette in the field of action) we learn that Denny had bought drugs from this dealer, and – tantalisingly – that he 'needed some money to pay off some stuff'. Like Claudette's declaration that she has cancer, however, this scene is entirely self-contained. Neither the violent incident, nor Denny's money problems, nor his apparent drug habit, is ever mentioned again.

It is a recurring tendency of the dialogue in *The Room* that characters' conversational moves are only loosely related to preceding utterances. For example, in one scene Johnny, responding to a vicious rumour Lisa has spread, objects that, 'I never hit you'. However, he immediately drops this pressing topic in favour of another train of thought: 'You shouldn't have any secrets from me – I am your *future husband*.' (It is an idiosyncrasy of the film that at no point are the terms fiancé or fiancée ever used, only ever 'future husband/wife'. We will return to the importance of such idiosyncrasies). A little later, however, when the exchange has become more heated and Lisa is trying to extricate herself from the conversation, Johnny lurches, unprompted, back into his earlier train of thought: 'You are *lying*! I *never hit* you!' Accompanying the ostentatiously awkward way topics are introduced into and dropped from conversation are the recurrent attempts by *The Room*'s characters to cut short discussions with out-of-place

banalities. In the same scene, Lisa responds to an outburst of Johnny's by claiming, 'I can't talk right now' – an expression more appropriate to telephone conversations or unexpected run-ins than face-to-face exchanges between domestic couples at rest. The phrases 'Don't worry about it', 'I don't want to talk about it', and 'I'll talk to you later', serve a similar function, and recur frequently throughout the film. The seeming difficulties *The Room* has with ending conversations go hand in hand with its difficulties in ending scenes. We rarely cut away from a scene which has run its course dramatically; instead, characters are usually required to exit the space where the scene has occurred. Thus, as well as the ubiquitous 'Oh, hi,' which regularly begins sequences, 'I gotta go' is one of the most repeated phrases of the film.

The Room's narrative momentum and coherence are repeatedly compromised by its approach to temporal organisation. The scene between Johnny and Lisa discussed in the above paragraph, for instance, ends with Lisa going upstairs to 'wash up and go to bed', despite a preceding shot having established that it is broad daylight outside. In another scene, set in Lisa and Johnny's apartment in either the morning or afternoon, a surfeit of details establish that a planned surprise birthday party for Johnny will be occurring later today: while cleaning the apartment and preparing snacks with the help of a friend, Lisa comments that 'People are going to be getting here soon', and a little later she says 'All I have to do is put on my party dress'. However, after this scene there follows: i) a panning long-shot of the Golden Gate Bridge; ii) a sequence of Johnny and Mark jogging in a park; iii) a shot of Johnny and Mark returning by car to the apartment building; iv) a brief night-time shot of the city; v) a brief exterior daylight shot; vi) a scene in the apartment in which Johnny kisses Lisa as he heads out of the door, dressed for work; vii) a sequence showing Johnny walking through the night-time city. Then, at long last – that is, after a digressive passage depicting a miscellaneous set of moments from a dramatically inert 24 hours – we have the party scene.

Our discussion has thus far been largely focused upon matters of convention and coherence. These are things that most films encourage us to take for granted; they are, we might say, means rather than ends. As well as aiding narrative comprehension, however, the conventions and coherence of popular filmmaking are also important

because they can facilitate bridging the affective gap between film and viewer. Richard Maltby offers a version of this argument in the course of his challenge to Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson's (1985) view of the classical Hollywood cinema: 'Story construction and "realism" in character consistency or setting are vehicles by which [the generation of audience emotion] is achieved' (1995: 36). Reflecting upon emotional affect might thus offer another way into thinking both about how a film such as *The Room* fails to achieve its intentions.

Recent work in cognitive film theory has addressed the issue of how films are constructed to, if not infallibly then in many cases reliably, elicit emotional responses. One scholar who has pursued this issue in some detail is Greg M. Smith. Smith argues that the primary emotive effect of narrative film is to create *mood*:

> Because it is difficult to generate brief, intense emotions, filmic structures attempt to create a *disposition toward* experiencing emotion. [...] In order to sustain a mood, we must experience occasional moments of emotion. A mood makes it more likely that we will experience such moments, since mood predisposes us to treat stimuli as possible emotion elicitors. (1999: 115; original italics)

Let's think about these ideas in relation to what is perhaps *The Room*'s most famous moment: when Johnny, distraught by Lisa's continued callous treatment of him, exclaims 'You are *tearing me apart,* Lisa!'[8] Moving somewhat awkwardly, and slightly too late, up and in to his medium close-up from the bottom-right of the frame, Wiseau delivers the line in a raised voice, with closed eyes, face turned heavenwards, and two clenched fists being thrust up in the sentence's first half and down again for emphasis in the second. The playing of this moment, and its contexts, make it virtually unavoidable that we should conjecture that the outburst can only be intended to be taken as a sincere expression of pained emotion – and one which will ideally generate, in Smith's terms, a brief, intense emotion for the spectator. We might infer this partly because the moment alludes to a famous scene from the canonical melodrama *Rebel Without a Cause*

(Nicholas Ray, 1955) in which James Dean utters the same words (minus 'Lisa') with a similar intonation. [9] Even if we do not know this, though, a minimal knowledge of 'mainstream' cinematic and melodramatic convention (including an assumption of encouragement towards 'identification with the victimized' (Wood 2002: 306) and our sense of the film's intended 'locus of positive moral value' (Smith 1995: 213)) will ensure that the intention of the text at this moment is clear: what is being attempted is an exclamation and mode of performance designed to express the emotions of the unfairly-wronged Johnny so that we might be moved to sympathise with his plight.

We can account for this moment's failure by going beyond the moment itself. A major part of the problem is that the film has failed to establish by this point a context – by which we mean, in part, a mood – in which we are likely to be sufficiently emotionally engaged in the dramatic, or even diegetic, integrity of the scene to take seriously its affective inducements. This is an important consequence of what is by now likely to be our *extreme* consciousness of the film's – inept – narrative technique (on which more shortly). All the manifest aesthetic failures of the film thus far are more than likely to have ensured that, rather than being invested in *The Room's* fictional world, we are at this moment instead in a state of unintentionally heightened awareness of, as Sconce puts it, all the '*non*-diegetic aspects of the image' (Sconce 1995: 387) (for instance, its awkward framing), or as Vassilieva and Verevis put it, 'the profilmic' over 'the filmic' (2010: 645). Equally, as the discussion of dialogue above suggested, the film has consistently failed to provide effective emotional 'cueing'. When a character tells her friend 'You could learn something from me,' offers a detailed account of her philosophy on relationships, then inexplicably declares that, 'I don't want to talk about it', we can conclude we are watching a film whose viewers are not being placed in a position to share or even understand characters' psychology or emotions. Discussing *Showgirls* (Paul Verhoeven, 1995), Ara Osterweil argues that, 'although its dramatic and narrative conventions participate in the melodramatic tradition, the film ultimately fails to move its audience to pathos or sympathy,' because it merely and ultimately 'delivers a series of empty cues' (2003: 39). Similarly, what we often have on display in *The Room* is the spectacle of a film failing to find a form capable of soliciting in the viewer an intended emotional response. It seems clear that Wiseau desired to make a film with 'the passion

of Tennessee Williams'. Yet, while we may not be in any doubt as to the sincerity or deeply felt nature of this writer/director/star's emotions (to which we shall return), we are able only to witness inarticulate tokens of them.

Intention, convention, and evaluation

It has been said that badfilm appreciation, such as that celebrated by the television programme *Mystery Science Theater 3000* (1988-99), actually involves 're-evaluating [...] films' (Carter 2011: 108). But is this quite accurate? Though we have only begun such a process, it is to be hoped our brief analysis above has helped demonstrate that we can establish *The Room* fails to achieve basic levels of coherence – in this case, logically, temporally and affectively – that thousands of examples of popular narrative filmmaking have taught us to take for granted. Moreover, until evidence is brought forth to suggest that there is something in the film which would warrant the inference that the intention of the text is to eschew the relevant storytelling conventions purposefully (that is, while possessing the *ability* to deploy them), our best conjecture must be that the film's failures are precisely that. Using the intention of the text as our framework, then, is it the case that we can indeed agree – with the film's many fans, for whom this point is crucial (McCulloch 2011: 1) – that, in point of fact, *The Room* is demonstrably bad?

We encountered earlier Northrop Frye's statement that claims to 'the demonstrable value-judgement […] always [turn] out to be an illusion of the history of taste' (1957: 20). Without any doubt, aesthetic evaluations are in an important sense historically contingent.[10] Certainly, we can pronounce *The Room* bad on the grounds discussed only if we possess particular storehouses of (relatively) historically-specific cultural capital; that is, knowledge of the conventions we intuit to be beyond the film's grasp: for instance, those of 'mainstream' melodramatic cinema circa 2003. Yet, in measuring the film against its own intentions – which are construed in relation to these pertinent conventions – we are nonetheless able to advance a judgement of ineptitude, and badness, on grounds assuredly different from mere historical taste. There are two main

reasons for saying this.

Firstly, concerning history: while cinematic conventions do change with the decades, certain very general aesthetic principles regarding the perceived (temporal, spatial, narrative, affective) 'coherence' of storytelling have maintained a central place in the mainstream of American filmmaking (however often they may be *intentionally* avoided or modified) since the earliest years of the feature-length Hollywood film.[11] When *The Room* comes noticeably close to observing these principles, yet repeatedly misses them by equally noticeable margins, we can reasonably conclude that it appears to display both an intention and an inability to successfully inhabit a broad category of filmmaking with an approximately one hundred-year history. Taking this point further, in theory it may not even be necessary for arguments about *The Room*'s ineptitude to draw upon film-specific, let alone film studies-specific, terminology (though the deployment of such frameworks can refine and deepen the examination). Variations on the mode of temporally, spatially and affectively coherent narrative cut across media and all known human cultures, and for a viewer to measure *The Room* against a majority of intentionally-constructed fictions produced in virtually any time, place or medium is at least to begin to reveal its incoherence in these terms – an incoherence which, again, nothing suggests it was this text's intention to achieve.

Secondly, on the matter of taste: in order to make the above argument it is not necessary to come down on either side of the debate about whether badfilm appreciation casts its fans as either in opposition to, or tacitly in league with, 'dominant' cinematic and aesthetic practices. In response to Sconce's assertion that most 'paracinematic fans [...] explicitly situate themselves in opposition to Hollywood cinema' (1995: 381), Mark Jancovich has contested that to prize films for their 'ludicrous ineptness' is 'to presuppose and endorse the legitimacy of a norm from which they are claimed to differ' (2002: 313-4). However, we can agree that such a reading strategy presupposes the *existence* of a norm without supposing it also endorses it. One need by no means attach the value of 'good' to conventions in order to make a judgement of 'bad' when they appear to be being striven for and missed. According to the evaluative framework we have been employing, one could be critical of the poetic merits of, say,

limericks while deeming 'bad' a poem that both attempted and failed to exhibit the form's requisite meter. This is because in order to make the value judgement on these terms one must merely demonstrate that the intention of a text has not been achieved.

We may, then, be able to conclude that *The Room* is in fact bad – without, furthermore, recourse to the 'scare quotes' which usually accompany this term in scholarly discourse. If so, this raises the question: should the phrase 'so bad it's good' be taken literally? The ironic aura that tends to surround such texts can lead us to overlook the fascinating problem inherent in this formulation. Does a badfilm judgement of 'good' really supplant an original value judgement of 'bad'? Or does it not, rather, *supplement* the original judgement? We suggest that to appreciate a badfilm for its failings is to say: 'It is demonstrably bad, but *nevertheless...*'. A more accurate inflection might be, then: 'so bad it's pleasurable'[12] – a distinction which does justice to the fact that no claim is being advanced for a text's *intrinsic* aesthetic value (which is necessarily minimal), but rather its potential *instrumental* value as an object of fascination or fun (which may be considerable).[13] Taking the underlying aesthetic imperatives of badfilm appreciation seriously makes such a distinction possible – indeed, necessary – and also helps lay a path through the conceptual frameworks that facilitate it.

It should be briefly reiterated that we are concerned here only with one particular species of badness. A film or other artwork could of course legitimately be argued to be bad for many other reasons, and ineptitude is almost certainly a kind of badness that can be more confidently demonstrated than other types.[14] Yet this nonetheless is indeed a species of badness, and one which, we claim – in the case of a film like *The Room* – is also indeed demonstrable. The potential usefulness of badfilm for discussions of cinematic aesthetics is thus already made clear simply by the fact that it may admit the opportunity for a value judgement *sans* quotation marks (a rarity!). Yet we are still only half way through the formulation: what, we must ask, might be the supplementary considerations that can allow badfilm fans to value intrinsic aesthetic badness, instrumentally, as 'so bad it's good' – or at least 'so bad it's pleasurable'?

Instrumental pleasures: critique and closeness

In the case of *The Room,* one answer may lie partly in the sheer number of things being failed at. So many of the textual intentions of this film appear to be misfiring so much of the time: coherent temporal organisation; scenes that act as building blocks in the unfolding of a story; dialogue that develops logically and reveals credible character psychology, and so on. 'Attempting to index everything wrong with *The Room*,' writes John Semley, would involve constructing 'a sort of stretched-out Borgesian map which is substantially larger than its territory' (2009: 7). This, however, is precisely what many fans of the film take so much pleasure in: writing about, sharing, and constructing rituals around all that is wrong.[15] As we might expect, then, one answer to why the film is 'so bad it's good' lies in the word 'so'. Perhaps because it is unusual to have the opportunity to do so, it can be strange, entertaining, and perversely thrilling simply to experience such an overwhelming quantity of failed intentions. The kind of thrill one can take from such an experience thus necessarily begins with critique, and is in this sense ironic – irony being, of course, another issue which cannot be divorced from intention. Writing of identifying and interpreting ironic literature, Booth suggests that one way of doing so is by making 'an inference about the implied author's intentions: "if the author did not intend irony it would be odd, or outlandish, or stupid, or inept of him [*sic*] to do things in this way"' (1974: 53). The badfilm enthusiast, of course, can believe all these things and more about a text's author (more on this in a moment) and still appreciate a film greatly for its instrumental worth. Needless to say, this is an ironic reading strategy rather than an ironic textual strategy – but it also, crucially, fundamentally relies upon the assumption that the text itself does not intend and invite ironic engagement.

The 'so' in 'so bad it's good', as well as pointing to volume, may also point towards what we might either call depth, or obviousness. In his article 'Esper, the Renunciator: Teaching "Bad" Movies to Good Students', Sconce discusses the film *Maniac* (Esper, 1934) in order to argue that badfilm can serve as an excellent pedagogical tool:

> [W]hen the codes of Hollywood realism are working successfully, even the most

critical viewer can find it difficult to resist the illusion of immersion into a seemingly real and plausible world. [...] '[F]aulty' narratives may be more valuable teaching tools than 'complex' ones, especially in introducing students to the basics of narrative construction (2003: 23-5).

We agree with Sconce that badfilms can be useful pedagogical tools, and extremely helpful in illuminating broader methodological issues.[16] Furthermore, what makes them so useful for this purpose (how *obviously* 'faulty' they are) may also be one of the main things that can make them pleasurable. A key outcome of *The Room*'s extreme degree of ineptitude is that it virtually guarantees that any viewer possessing even a passing familiarity with 'mainstream' cinematic conventions becomes able to notice and critique stylistic and storytelling choices (whether or not they also regard as pleasurable this experience of 'defamiliarisation').[17] We might say that the way this film unintentionally but emphatically raises narrative technique to the level of conscious registration makes available something like a democratisation of the pleasures involved in being a critic.[18]

Still, there is something else pleasurable at stake in appreciating *The Room* as being 'so bad it's good'. It will likely have been noticed earlier that, despite having previously taken pains to move the matter of intention away from the author and towards the text, our discussion above of the moment at which Johnny exclaims, 'You are *tearing me apart*, Lisa!' led us to invoke the figure of Tommy Wiseau himself, and *his* seeming inability to successfully elicit sympathy. Such recourse in fact often seems unavoidable when discussing badfilm. Sconce writes of paracinematic appreciation not only making us aware of the extratextual features of a film, but also 'allowing the […] extratextual to mesh with the diegetic drama' (1995: 391). One outcome of this in our case is certainly a continual awareness of the unenviable fate of cinematic conventions under the filmmaking economy of *The Room*, and a consequent inability to take seriously its affective invitations. Another, though, is the way in which this process – at the same time as it is likely to create an affective 'distance' between us and the fiction – also allows for a sense of *closeness* to the extratextual, and specifically to the film's writer, director and star, Wiseau. One potent example of the potential for this is to be found immediately

after 'You are tearing me *apart*, Lisa!' Following that infamous line, a pained and disbelieving Johnny lowers himself to Lisa's eye-level, fixes her intently with his gaze, and demands to know of her: 'Do you *understand life*? …*Do* you?!'

Every possible appeal of *The Room* we have so far discussed could broadly be characterised as relying on taking (ironic) pleasure from the film's failure to convincingly embody intended conventions and/or its consequent failure to create intended effects. It may be that *The Room* possesses more instances of moments which make available such critical pleasure than do most films, but this is still simply a matter of enjoying moments which fall short of effects which we can intuit to have been their aims. 'Do you *understand life*?' however, seems to offer something different, and may point towards another possible level of pleasure afforded by this film. The line is one of many moments in *The Room* that seem to constitute not merely failures to embody a convention, but something more strange and indefinable. We might say that it is unsuccessful in achieving something like a convincing representation of a protagonist railing against a loved one, but this doesn't seem to do justice to all the responses this moment makes available. The line goes beyond ineptitude – or, rather, its ineptitude is not its most significant characteristic. Rather, what seems most important about it is that it is so intensely idiosyncratic that it offers the possibility of imagining that only *this* writer/director, Wiseau, would or could write such an inscrutable line, with its simultaneous apparently deep feeling and utterly nonsensical content: a question at once bafflingly weighty, inappropriate to the conversation at hand, and yet indicative of a *kind* of fraught emotional logic. Furthermore – especially because this writer/director is also the star – we are permitted to imagine that this logic is peculiar not just to Tommy Wiseau as a director (or, say, 'Tommy Wiseau' as an implied author), but also indeed Tommy Wiseau the flesh-and-blood man. Whereas a failure to establish whether a scene takes place at day or night is a conventional failure we can readily understand and critique, this 'failure' is far more mysterious, because it isn't quite clear that it intends to conform to any recognisable convention of dialogue; it can prompt, instead, an irresistible urge to imagine that it might offer a small insight into the peculiar way that Tommy Wiseau himself 'understand[s] life'.

In fact, one of the things that makes *The Room* special is that it permits this possibility not merely at isolated moments, but virtually throughout. All the examples of failed conventions and incoherence we have cited are significant not only because they allow us to evaluate the film as bad or distance us from the diegetic drama, but also because their sheer, inescapable volume creates a strangely consistent narrational inconsistency. Especially when taken alongside the many moments which are not only inept, but also intensely unusual (such as 'Do you *understand life?*'), this confounding narrational inconsistency feels quite unique to *The Room*; and when global uniqueness of this kind is sensed, it often creates an accompanying impulse to attribute the effects of the narration to an equally unique controlling presence. This may be especially true when that uniqueness seems to express a very distinctive point of view – specifically, in Wiseau's case, one 'so detached from the believable operations of the social world' (Semley 2009: 8). As Wilson puts it in his aforementioned discussion of intention, we can frequently experience 'a need to say something about our sense of the peculiar sensibility and intelligence that we find manifested in the way the narration has been crafted' (1986: 134). In the case of *The Room,* most of the effects created by the narration may be unintentional (making a recourse to 'intelligence' seem inappropriate), but 'our sense of the peculiar sensibility' of the movie is nonetheless absolutely central to its appeal. In search of an avatar for this sensibility, a scholar of aesthetics may be likely to attribute it to an 'implied author' or intending text, while an appreciative spectator seems more likely (appropriately or otherwise) to alight upon the film's writer, director and star, and to 'suspect that the flesh-and-blood author or filmmaker had, in reality, the personal qualities that we find thus manifested' (ibid: 135).

It is thus perhaps unsurprising that what Sconce calls 'paracinema's shadow realm of auteurism' (1995: 389) offers a common framework in the appreciation of badfilms, which are regularly viewed as 'transcendent expressions of a single person's individual vision and quirky originality' (Vale and Juno 1986: 5). Equally unsurprisingly, *The Room* too is often described in terms of its 'misguided authorial honesty' (Semley 2009: 7), its fans supposing it offers an 'exploration of life through the eyes of an incompetent

mentor' (Walmart 2011), and thus 'a tantalizing glimpse into Wiseau's mind' (Miss Media 2011); as Greg Sestero and Tom Bissell put it in their introduction to *The Disaster Artist: My Life Inside* The Room*, the Greatest Bad Movie Ever Made*: 'the magic of *The Room* derives from one thing: no one interprets the world the way Tommy Wiseau does' (2013: xv). The pleasure involved in this seductive (and plausible) supposition, while still ironic at base, is nonetheless supplemented by something other than critique alone. This seems to be another potential appeal of badfilm: its continual blurring of lines between the extratextual and the diegetic drama can allow for an increased sense of closeness between spectator and filmmaker. The fact that these films permit us to presume we can see filmmakers doing their jobs, and doing them artlessly, can permit us to believe we have an even greater degree of unfiltered access to the inner workings of filmmakers' minds than might be afforded by a more controlled mode of cinema.[19] The imagined closeness this provides can contribute immeasurably to the intellectual and affective attraction of a film deemed 'so bad it's good'. This process thus serves as yet another reminder that badfilm appreciation, while in some ways having the appearance of a radical reading protocol, is in other ways surprisingly traditional.

Conclusion

Attempting an aesthetic account of badfilm seems necessarily to lead towards unexpected conclusions. Earlier we encountered two claims: firstly, that 'when bad films are hailed – tongue in cheek or not – as masterpieces [...] notions of what counts as "good" are problematized' (Mathijs 2009: 366), and, secondly, that reading a film in this way '[involves] challenges to its interpretation, either by robbing it of its meaning, or replacing it with one that may counter its intentions' (Mathijs and Mendik 2008: 5). We are now, however, in a position to suggest two rather different provisional theses – the first a flat repudiation of the former claim above, the second an important qualification of the latter.

(1) Since the whole process of taking pleasure in a film like *The Room* relies upon the certainty that it is indeed intrinsically bad, far from problematising the matter of evaluation, badfilm rather seems to *clarify* it; any instrumental pronouncement of such a

film as a 'masterpiece' by a viewer conversant with the reading protocol can, in this sense, only *ever* be on some level 'tongue in cheek', and, thus, scarcely threatening to even the most traditional standards of aesthetic evaluation. [20] (2) Although giving pleasure through its failings can by definition only ever be an unintended consequence of a film's making, in order for a reader to feel sure that this is what it is doing, s/he must first feel sure that the film's original intentions have been divined; thus, while the process might pose a 'challenge' of sorts to the film itself, it cannot be said to do the same for traditional understandings of the ways inferences about intention govern responses to works of art.

This is not by any means to suggest that the instrumental pleasures afforded to cult fans by such films do not raise further fascinating issues, a few potential permutations of which we began to explore in the later stages of this article. Here too, though, it seems very possible that interpretive processes central to badfilm appreciation are frequently not only in significant ways fundamentally traditional, but even in interesting senses positively *Romantic* – relying, for instance, on an imagined closeness to the mental processes of flesh-and-blood authors. Of course, this should not prompt scholars of badfilm merely to reinstate a perverse version of the auteur theory, wherein the (inept) author is viewed as (unwittingly) responsible for all a film contains and means; nor, however, should it prompt us simply to accuse badfilm readers of naïveté. Instead, it should suggest to us that, while badfilm may be a relatively new area of study, the aesthetic frameworks needed to understand it may sometimes be considerably less so.

In the course of critiquing various claims made about paracinematic fandom's 'oppositional' nature, Mark Jancovich concludes that such fandom constitutes 'a species of bourgeois aesthetics, not a challenge to it' (2002: 311-2). To the extent that 'bourgeois aesthetics' could be taken to include certain critically outmoded assumptions – for example, the assumption that discerning intention must play an important role in the process of interpretation, and that aesthetic value is not an entirely meaningless or purely relative concept – we would agree. For us, however, this continuum between

badfilm fandom and traditional precepts of 'bourgeois aesthetics' serves to delegitimise neither the significance of this form of fandom, nor those precepts. On the contrary, far from functioning as one more encouragement to leave behind what might sometimes seem old-fashioned critical concepts, one of the benefits of studying badfilm and its reception is that doing so forces us to return with renewed vigour and evidence to still-vital issues for aesthetics that we can often complacently presume we have moved beyond.

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Notes

[1]   It is worth noting, of course, that there is certainly great potential for overlap between films deemed 'bad' because belonging to 'culturally illegitimate' genres/cycles and the sort of badfilm (i.e.: the inept) with which we are concerned: many of Ed Wood's, for instance, or, more recently, *Troll 2* (Claudio Fragasso, 1990) (see also the film about *Troll 2*'s cult fandom, *The Best Worst Movie* [Michael Stephenson, 2009]).

[2]   Sontag's clear emphasis on the naïveté of 'pure camp' means it is strange that some should have attempted to distinguish between camp art and art which is 'so bad it's good' on the grounds that examples of the former are 'self-conscious' (Semley 2009: 7), or that 'camp winks, where SOBIG ["so bad it's good"] cannot' (Douglas Wolk, 'Notes On Art So Bad It's Good', *The Believer,* vol. 2, no. 2 [March 2004], quoted in Semley 2009: 7). This may, however, be the result of a blurring of the important distinction between camp texts and camp reading strategies.

[3]   Over the last few decades, the importance of inferred intention for the conscious and unconscious mental processes involved in understanding artworks (and communication in general) has been suggested through a great deal of research in the cognitive sciences (also taking in the fields of psychology, linguistics, computer science, and neuroscience). See Gibbs (1999) for an overview of such research, as well as a sustained treatise on the central premise that 'the recovery of communicative intentions is an essential part of the cognitive processes that operate when we understand human action of any sort' (3-4).

[4]   Eco, in his turn, seems to view the implied author's intentions as indistinguishable from the text's intention, writing of 'a model author that is not the empirical one and that, in the end, coincides with the intention of the text.' (1992: 64). On the issue of the implied author see also Chatman (1990) and Currie (1995).

[5]   For a useful discussion of the importance of discerning 'categorical intentions' (as distinct from 'semantic intentions'), see Levinson (2004); Nannicelli (2012) has recently productively brought these terms and concepts to bear upon issues of television aesthetics.

[6]   For an insider's account of the production of *The Room*, see the film's male co-star's (co-written) book on the subject (Sestero and Bissell 2013).

[7]   See House of Qwesi (2009: 1).

[8]   A Youtube clip of this moment ('You're Tearing Me Apart, Lisa!', <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Plz-bhcHryc> [accessed 27 June 2011]), for instance, currently has the highest number of user 'views' of any clip from the film.

[9]   Wiseau has stated his admiration for Dean in many interviews; see, for example, Heisler (2009).

10   Canonical reception studies like Klinger (1994) have categorically demonstrated this fact in relation to film; see too Mathijs (2005) on *Daughters of Darkness* (Harry Kümel, 1971) for a discussion of this specifically in terms of cult cinema.

11   While one may wish to argue with many of its details, Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson (1985) still offers the most complete overview of such aesthetic principles.

12   Hoberman comes very close to such a formulation when he suggests of the list of bad films proposed by the Medved brothers that 'few are bad enough to be pleasurable' (1980: 9).

13   The distinction between intrinsic and instrumental value is of course key in the philosophy of aesthetics; see, for instance, Budd (1995), or, for a useful overview of debates concerning these concepts, Kieran (2001).

14   It is probably also the case that it is easier to confidently identify badness in general, and sometimes even to construct criteria for it, than it is to do the same for 'goodness', or excellence.

15   See McCulloch (2011) for an account of fans sharing video clips and engaging in participatory rituals at screenings.

16   For more recent discussion of this topic, see Part IV of the special issue of *Continuum* edited by Vassilieva and Verevis (2010).

17   On the notion of 'defamiliarisation', anti-illusionism and other forms of 'distance' in the critical work on paracinema, see Jancovich (2002: 310).

18   Again, cf. Hoberman: 'the Medved aesthetic is an affirmation of the American Way: "Absolutely anyone can recognize a lousy film when he sees one"' (1980: 9). Sconce makes the more ambitious claim that a badfilm 'compels even the most casual viewer to engage with it ironically' (1995: 393) – an assertion perhaps less sustainable because of its assumption that the badness of a film like *The Room* will *guarantee* spectators' ironic engagement (rather than simply, say, uninterested bemusement, boredom or other forms of *dis*engagement).

19   In the case of *The Room*, this is notwithstanding the existence of a mini-controversy involving Sandy Schklair, a script supervisor on the film. In February 2011 Schklair claimed publicly that he in fact directed large chunks of the movie himself, and that he intentionally played up its badness (all of which has been denied by Wiseau); see Snierson (2011). Whatever the truth of Schklair's claims, it is one indication of the extent to which fans' investment in *The Room* relies upon the image of Wiseau as an incompetent auteur that online articles covering this story are invariably bombarded by commenters denying the charges – protesting, for instance, 'I don't think there's a human mind so singularly warped as Tommy Wiseau's, and is capable of making something like *The Room*' (Lussier 2011: 1).

20   See, for example, Walmart Goth writing on 'Why *The Room* is a Masterpiece' while also acknowledging that its qualities stem from 'blind drive and enthusiasm paired with inconceivable incompetence and bad luck' (2001: 1).