Have bad movies edged out good?

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

So have ‘bad’ movies like these edged out ‘good’ movies?

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

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

The essays in Sleaze Artists are diverse, as is typical for an academic collection, with contributions covering gay military films, boredom as a motif in the Italian underground, the quasi documentary elements of the postwar nudie film, and an account of the production and distribution of a gothic horror movie that couldn’t find an obvious market. The authors are an assortment of professors and cultural studies academics from the United States; if they were Australians, our first reaction would be to decry a university system that redistributes taxpayers’ money to tenured lecturers just so that they can watch all eleven Friday the 13th films, but as they are Americans we can just marvel in amusement. So it is easy to write that many of the essays in Sleaze Artists are fascinating. After all, it’s not our taxes.

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

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

For Modeleski, that a female director produced the most misogynistic films of the genre is a distinct challenge. Most of the essays in Sleaze Politics seek to normalise their films and their audiences—to make the unusual seem pedestrian. Furthermore, a focus of the cultural studies movement over the last few decades has been not just to make marginalia the focus of legitimate academic study; it has been a conscious effort to detect ‘transgressive’ artistry and politics in the cultural underground. Movies are carefully parsed and examined to discover ironic visions worthy of the twenty-first century arts faculty in even the most forgettable cookie cutter exploitation genres. If you pick up a copy of any schlock horror film in a bargain DVD bin, the advertising on its case will proclaim its ‘subversive’ nature. In most cases, this subversiveness is absent and rarely more than wishful thinking. After all, modern audiences, trained on Quentin Tarantino-esque postmodernism, like to think everyday life is always too flat to maintain our interest. And so, the pleasure of unexpectedly finding an inexplicably bizarre film on late night SBS or buried at the rental store becomes a far greater thrill than can be provided by the majority of material produced in the Hollywood machine. The frustration with ‘bad’ cinema became a search for ‘so bad it’s good’ cinema.

But, as Sconce writes, disappointment is never too far away, even if we are actively searching out movies that are cringe-inducing sub-par. After all, how could a film with the title of Satan’s Cheerleaders (the poster for which is a copy of any schlock horror film in a bargain DVD bin) ever be as good as it sounds? It would be easy to conclude that film going is, at least for those who ask for great things from the movies, almost always one of disappointment—rarely do movies live up to their expectations. Films are always too formulaic, characters are always too poorly drawn, and direction is always too flat to maintain our interest. And so, the pleasure of unexpectedly finding an inexplicably bizarre film on late night SBS or buried at the rental store becomes a far greater thrill than can be provided by the majority of material produced in the Hollywood machine. The frustration with ‘bad’ cinema became a search for ‘so bad it’s good’ cinema.

Another surprised victim of Death Bed: The Bed That Eats (1977)
And our relationship with underground films has even changed in the meantime. In the early 1990s, the American television show *Mystery Science Theater 3000* specialised in uncovering some of these B-grade science fiction films and subjecting them to relentless ridicule. Nearly two decades later, our response to yesterday’s cultural leftovers is less likely to be ridicule than ironic respect. Not just the high-profile self-conscious mimicking of Tarantino, but scores of films are released each year that resurrect themes and techniques of the underground. The famously dated zoom shot was once an amusing anachronism, but it now appears in many contemporary productions with barely a hint of irony.

Contemporary horror franchises like *Saw* and *Hostel* which feature extended torture scenes are nearly indistinguishable from the video nasties popular two decades ago, although more professionally produced.

The English Conservative MP Charles Walker described 2007’s *Hostel II* not inaccurately when he said that ‘from beginning to end, it depicts obscene, misogynistic acts of brutality against women—an hour and a half of brutality; a description which could just as easily apply to a Doris Wishman film. Grindhouse cinemas may have closed down and videos been replaced by DVDs and internet file-sharing, but movies whose first priority is to shock are shown in chain theatres across the globe, not in small off-Broadway adults only theatres.

But standards have changed. Modern audiences may accept—it would be inaccurate to write ‘are comfort­able with’—special effects depictions of sadistic violence at the cinema but they would not accept the very real slaughter of a very real turtle, as occurs in *Cannibal Holocaust*. Similarly the masochistic brutality seen in the video nasties are absent in modern homages to exploitation. Even the semi-pornographic undressing scenes which were awkwardly squeezed into the typical underground 1970s horror film have no contemporary equivalent.

The moral content of mainstream exploitation in the twenty-first century and postwar underground exploitation may seem superficially similar, but there are major differences; there are new ethical and moral lines which modern filmmakers do not cross.

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

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

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