



Matthew Strohl, *Why it's OK to Love Bad Movies*. New York, Routledge, 2022. ISBN: 0367407655. Paperback \$24.95

Alexander Middleton¹ · Mi Rae Ryu¹ · Travis Timmerman¹

Accepted: 23 May 2022

© The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Nature B.V. 2022

Matthew Strohl's "Why it's OK to Love Bad Movies" is a very welcome addition to Routledge's "Why It's OK" popular philosophy series, which offers robust, yet accessible, defenses of *at least* semi-stigmatized philosophical positions. Strohl's book gives an insightful exploration of prejudice surrounding the (ironic or not) aesthetic appreciation of "bad" movies and offers a compelling defense of non-ironically appreciating "bad" movies, as well as a sort of best practices guide for engaging with such art.

The first chapter kicks off with an introduction to the cheesy sci-fi epic *The Core*, a movie about a team of scientists who must set off nuclear bombs in the core of the earth in order to restart its spinning. There are layers of absurdity in the film. The "silliness of the premise clashes with the dire seriousness of the drama" and the lead (Aaron Eckhart) turns in a purely dramatic performance out of step with his co-stars, all of whom realize they're in a fun disaster flick (p. 2). *The Core* is one of those films that's described as "so bad it's good." This presents a puzzle. Taken at face value, this is a contradictory, and incoherent, description of a work of art.

Different philosophers have given different accounts of how to interpret this turn of phrase (see Dyck, J. and M. Johnson. 2017. "Appreciating Bad Art," *Journal of Value Inquiry* 51 (2): 279-292. and Algander, P. 2018. "Bad Art and Good Taste," *Journal of Value Inquiry* 53 (1): 145-154. for a reply). Strohl offers two distinct readings, each of which captures a common usage. On one reading, the movie is bad in the "final sense" which is to say that it's *aesthetically disvaluable* (or does not enable valuable activities of engagements), yet "good" in some other sense, such as being fun to mock (p. 4, p. 181). On the other reading, the movie is good in the "final sense" and so, *aesthetically valuable* (or, does enable valuable activities of engagement), yet it's "bad" in some limited sense by, for instance, violating received film norms. Strohl names these readings *Bad Movie Ridicule* and *Bad Movie Love* respectively.

✉ Travis Timmerman
travis.timmerman@shu.edu

¹ Department of Philosophy, Seton Hall University, 400 W S Orange Ave, South Orange, NJ 07079, USA

Bad Movie Ridicule: “Bad” is being used in the final sense, while “good” has a special meaning. “Good” means something like *ripe for mockery*. “So bad it’s good” means that an artwork is bad in the final sense but that one still enjoys watching it, not because one judges that it’s aesthetically valuable, but because one enjoys making fun of it” (p. 4).

Paradigmatic examples of *Bad Movie Ridicule* are supposed to include *Mystery Science Theater 3000* and its descendants, such as *RiffTrax*.

Bad Movie Love: “Good” is being used in the final sense, while “bad” has a special meaning. “So bad it’s good” means that one recognizes that there is some limited sense in which the movie is bad, but that one ultimately judges it to be aesthetically valuable, in part *because* it’s bad in this limited sense” (p. 4).

Strohl later offers a descriptive sense of badness, *conventional badness*, which can be understood simply as “violating received mainstream norms in a way that is not perceived as artistically serious” (p. 16, p. 181). Of course, just because some violations of norms are not *perceived* as artistically serious doesn’t mean that they’re not, *in fact*, artistically serious. When it was released, Alfred Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* was not well-received by critics, described as being too unrealistic and having too dark a plot. But though it was “conventionally bad,” it was still good in the final sense because it’s aesthetically valuable. A movie is good-bad if it is good in the final sense partly in virtue of being bad in the conventional sense (p. 181). Strohl then begins his “plea,” made throughout the book (but mainly in chapters one and six) for viewers to engage in art in the mode of love rather than ridicule. He goes on to argue that the “so bad they’re good” films should be seen as instances of *Bad Movie Love* rather than *Bad Movie Ridicule*. Conventionally bad movies, such as *Freddy Got Fingered*, violate received norms, yet it’s argued that they are nevertheless aesthetically valuable and so ought to be engaged with in those terms rather than mocked.

Here we want to raise a worry. It’s not clear to us that ridicule always aims to enforce received norms, always precludes recognizing aesthetic value in what’s being mocked, or even necessarily conveys negative attitudes towards the object of ridicule. With respect to concerns Strohl later raises, ridicule doesn’t even necessarily function as a means of distancing oneself from its object. These are surprising claims, to be sure. But we believe the nuances of language and humor leave ample room to toe this line.

These claims are less surprising once we consider a few analogue examples. One of us frequently enjoys ridiculing her older brothers as a means of expressing familial love, while also pointing to their genuine foibles. This mockery may or may not be used to enforce certain norms, but is done out of respect for them and completely devoid of malice. For a more public example, consider the role of ridicule in comedy roasts. The roasters want to be associated with the roastee, are often their good friends, and yet mercilessly mock them for their genuine and/or perceived shortcomings. If they do it right (which is admittedly tricky), they ridicule the roastee without condescension, without elevating themselves above

the roastee, and crucially while still appreciating the aesthetic value in whatever is being ridiculed (e.g. Bruce Willis' acting).

Mystery Science Theater 3000 engages in *Bad Movie Ridicule* without question. Here we agree with Strohl. But we think there's a case to be made that it at least often does so in a way analogous to lovingly ridiculing a friend or to a good comedy roast. We think such instances of *Bad Movie Ridicule* are arguably free from the objectionable features and damaging effects Strohl identifies in the specific cases of *Bad Movie Ridicule* he discusses.

A recent interview (which came out after Strohl's book) with the current host of *Mystery Science Theater 3000* suggests that this is how they see themselves too. Cancelled by Netflix, the latest season was funded via crowdsourcing and is now made on a shoestring budget, akin to its public access television roots. On this move, host Jonah Ray said the following.

Big productions and budgets are “antithetical to what the show is. We're not too dissimilar from the movies we're watching. We're just some scrappy people trying to make some entertainment, trying to make some people happy. And we're no better than the movies we're watching. We're just having fun with them. And we should embrace what they embraced, which is, a lack of major resources. And just swinging for the fences” (Seibold, W. 2022. Felicia Day And Jonah Ray On Returning Mystery Science Theater 3000 To Its Scrappy Roots [Interview]. *Slashfilm*. https://www.slashfilm.com/849789/felicia-day-and-jonah-ray-on-returning-mystery-science-theater-3000-to-its-scrappy-roots-interview/?utm_campaign=clip).

Our objection notwithstanding, this narrative is complicated by the fact that different jokes in different seasons made by different writers, actors, directors, and showrunners have had different tones. Per Strohl's concerns, there are definitely mean streaks that can be found in some episodes and plenty of noxious instances of *Bad Movie Ridicule* to be found. We agree with him here. Our claim is that not all instances of *Bad Movie Ridicule* are problematic. Interestingly, some artists agree and have been delighted to have been ridiculed by the show (e.g. David Harbour) while others understandably aren't. It would, however, be interesting to see how the offended artists would feel if they viewed the ridicule as the current host intends, through a cultural frame of reference where respect, affection, and even loving attitudes are being expressed via the ridicule.

If we're right, *Bad Movie Love* may typically be preferable to *Bad Movie Ridicule*, but with notable exceptions. There may be a narrow space for *Bad Movie Ridicule* done right. We return to this issue, from a different angle, in our discussion of chapter six.

Strohl uses chapter 2 to examine, and answer, the question of whether there is anything objectionable with an audience appreciating a film in a different fashion than the creators intended. His answer is not necessarily. Strohl considers this question through examining three of the most infamously enjoyable good-bad movies, viz. *Plan 9 from Outer Space*, *Troll 2*, and *The Room*.

Maybe the answer “not necessarily” seems obvious, but it isn’t. Consider Ed Wood’s *Plan 9 from Outer Space*, which follows the story of aliens being concerned with the destruction of the entire universe due to a bomb that was being created by humans to launch into the sun. After being ignored by the United States government, these aliens chose to use a futuristic weapon to resurrect dead bodies in a small town in order to send a message to the government. There are many of the movie’s aspects that are inherently flawed. The plot does not explain why the aliens terrorize a small town, rather than a popular metropolis, to make their statement. There was also erratic editing and continuity errors throughout. The props looked like they came from a pop-up Halloween shop, the dialogue was clunky, and the acting oscillated between chewing the scenery and being oddly deadpan.

Wood was trying to emulate the Hollywood horror films he loved so much as a kid, but failed in no small part because of the limited resources available to him. How should the audience view the film? Here are but two options. They could view it relative to the standards of classic Hollywood horror films (the standards Wood was aiming at) or relative to the standards of avant-garde films (which Wood was not aiming at). The film arguably successfully meets avant-garde standards, but decidedly not Hollywood standards.

So why not interpret it as an avant-garde film? Well, in his (2001) Noël Carroll has argued that engaging with film is akin to engaging in a *conversation* with the filmmakers. He worries that if one adopts an anti-intentionalist stance (roughly, giving priority to aesthetic satisfaction over any other considerations in aesthetic judgment), then one will fail to be a good conversationalist (*Beyond Aesthetics: Philosophical Essays*. New York: Cambridge University Press).

Conversations require that people “seek to interpret the other person’s utterances in light of what we think they intend to convey” (p. 41). In deliberately ignoring the filmmakers’ intentions, one supposedly fails to engage in a productive conversation and runs the risk of being incapable of distinguishing genuinely good art from bad art. After all, for any good-bad move like *Plan 9 from Outer Space*, there are literally an infinite number of esoteric readings that would offer a veneer of high art to films that are not displays of significant artistic achievement. The merits of “bad art” ought not be conflated with those of “good art.”

Strohl claims that Carroll presents us with a false dilemma, arguing for a third way that involves earnestly engaging with art while still allowing for discriminating artistic achievement. With respect to *Plan 9 from Outer Space*, this involves genuinely appreciating Wood’s absurd worldview that comes across on screen while recognizing its unique features that generate *aesthetic enjoyment* are different from the unique features that make, say, *Citizen Kane* an *artistic achievement*. Just like we shouldn’t aim to purely maximize aesthetic enjoyment, we shouldn’t aim to purely maximize our engagement with artistic achievement. A healthy cinematic diet will include a balance of both. This claim is convincingly defended in detail at the end of chapter six.

Chapter three serves the dual role of a “bad movie memoir” and an argument for expanding our perception of good-bad films beyond the mainstream kinds of good-bad films offered in the previous chapter. Strohl is worried that audiences accept an alternative, comparably pernicious, orthodoxy when demanding that all

good-bad movies must be “authentically bad,” by which they mean “badness that emerges from a genuine lack of facility with the conventions of mainstream filmmaking” (p. 63).

However, while rarer, there are plenty of examples of big-budget good-bad films that don't meet this criteria, yet are just as (and uniquely) aesthetically valuable. Strohl first makes the case that *Battlefield Earth* and *Batman and Robin* fit into this category, nicely explaining what can be appreciated with each. *Battlefield Earth* was made by seasoned pros, like John Travolta, who are intimately familiar with the norms of conventional filmmaking. Yet, it still subverts those norms, in part, by having a dry narrative about bureaucratic aliens juxtaposed with bombastic stylistic choices, such as overuse of Dutch angles. *Batman and Robin*, by contrast, was deliberately campy and director Joel Schumacher managed to integrate a great deal of gay imagery in his films and did so at a time when homophobia was even more rampant in America.

At this point, Strohl segues into a discussion on The Cannon Group production company who solely produced exploitation films until it was purchased by Israeli cousins Menah Clona and Yoram Globus. Clona and Globus quickly churned out seemingly endless low budget films of a variety of different genres (mostly action) in the hopes that one of them would be a hit. They gave their artists an atypical amount of control over their work, thereby allowing them to take risks other more cautious studios, with more money invested their pictures, wouldn't take. The low budget direct-to-video market allowed directors to cater to more niche audiences. This strategy generated a wide array of films that varied in nearly every respect, ranging from *Breakin' 2: Electric Boogalo* to Jean Luc Godard's *King Lear* to *Ninja 3: The Domination*. The approach that The Cannon Group took to make “bad” movies was necessary to also make the boundary-breaking artistic achievements.

Finally, in this discussion, Strohl makes an interesting case for appreciating individually good-bad movies as part of a larger subgenre. Consider, *Ninja 3: The Domination*. The film is impressive in terms of various technical aspects related to the fight scenes even though the premise is absurd. Still, its technical aspects are an important point of appreciation. More intriguingly, other seemingly bad features of the film (e.g. it is over the top, shoddy, cheaply made, formulaic, derivative, and lacking in three dimensional characters) can be appealing when viewed in this systemic context. These sorts of features prevalent in this subgenre certainly exclude some standard good-making features of films, but are also a necessary means for a distinct way of sustaining “activities of valuable engagement,” which is where Strohl believes the ultimate value of artwork lies (p.87).

Strohl uses Chapter 4 to confess his love for *The Twilight Saga* and, in so doing, examines two questions: How does taste function as a form of self-expression? and Is it possible to genuinely like a movie *because* it's bad without engaging in *Bad Movie Ridicule*? For those unfamiliar, *The Twilight* saga follows the love story between a human girl, Bella, and a vampire boy, Edward, and all the issues that come with such an unconventional pairing. This film series maintains a strong following of people who loathe the film, but also (at least) an equally large group of fans who primarily consist of tween girls.

Many of Strohl's friends cannot fathom his genuine enjoyment for films that are intended for adolescent girls. Were he to casually admit he was a fan, he'd be faced with derision or the assumption that he likes them ironically. This points to a few interesting features about how taste functions in our lives. First, our attitudes and expectations prior to experiencing some work of art can prime us to like or dislike it (p. 104). Second, taste functions as a tool of distinction amongst ourselves. Taste is how we group ourselves with people we want to be associated with and differentiate ourselves from those with whom we do not want to be associated. Many people who are vocal about their absolute disdain for the *Twilight* films may have thoughts that are deeply rooted in not wanting to be associated and grouped in with adolescent girls. Despite people having different tastes, Strohl has found that the beauty of films in general is their ability to unify people who don't share many similar interests. Strohl's love for good-bad movies allows him to connect with people whom he may not be able to connect with on another level. With respect to the *The Twilight Saga* specifically, it has allowed him to connect with his niece, even if they (non-ironically) love the film series for distinct reasons.

The fifth Chapter is an ode to Nicolas Cage (Coppola) that identifies a common artistic approach Cage has taken throughout his career, one that connects all his seemingly disparate performances in films that vary widely in genre, tone, content, and quality. Strohl argues that the critical imagination of the audience is limited by the perpetuation of received norms and popular perception of actors, which (in Cage's case) have been unfairly influenced by his memeification. Cage's performances have been typically lumped into two broad categories, the serious product of an Academy Award winning actor or the money-driven outgrowth of someone off their rocker (e.g. of someone who buys dinosaur skulls and searches for the Holy Grail).

What Strohl (who's seen 88 Nicolas Cage films!) shows is that Cage seeks to make every role he takes interesting and does so by drawing from a wide array of influences out of sync with contemporary received norms. A prime example is *Vampire's Kiss*, where Cage gives a deliberately over the top, expressionistic, performance, inspired by the silent 1927 film *Metropolis*. More niche direct-to-video films allowed Cage to take more experimental risks and, regardless of whether he had to take the job for financial reasons, he used each role as an opportunity to try something new and risky. This is also roughly how Cage views himself (Hibberd, J. 2022. Nicolas Cage on Playing Nicolas Cage. *The Hollywood Reporter*. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-features/nicolas-cage-interview-unbearable-weight-of-massive-talent-1235104433/>). The complexities of Cage's performances are lost in out of context supercuts of the most dramatic scenes in his filmography. Such supercuts turn Cage into a caricature and give the misleading impression of someone who constantly chews the scenery. However, a careful viewing of his body of work reveals a much more nuanced and interesting picture of an artist who never phones it in, never repeats himself, and strives to take creative risks whenever possible.

The final chapter ties the threads of the previous chapters together and allows Strohl to offer his final considered statements on the central issues in the text. He first draws an important distinction, often overlooked in the public debate,

between an artwork having value *in its own right* and value *for a person* (pp. 171–172). These can, of course, come apart. An avant-garde film such as Tsai Ming-liang’s *Days* is valuable in its own right, but might not be valuable for people who don’t appreciate it. These considerations lead into Strohl’s ultimate proposal, which we quote in full.

- “An activity of engagement is one that engages with an artwork *as* an artwork in the mode of appreciation, such as watching it, discussing it, writing about it, or curating it. Using a copy of *Don Quixote* as a dart board is not an activity of engagement in this sense, neither is reading it out loud to make fun of the way it’s written.
- The value that art has *in its own right* consists in its capacity to enable valuable activities of engagement.
- The value that art has *for a person* consists in its capacity to enable valuable activities of engagement *for that person* (pp. 176–177).

Whether something is a valuable activity for a person depends upon whether it makes them better-off and activities of engagement that people value, but make them worse off are not valuable for a person (p. 179). The example Strohl uses is that white supremacists who like white supremacist comics aren’t engaging in an activity that is valuable for them because reading those comics actually makes their lives worse, whether they realize it or not (p. 179).

This raises a host of interesting questions. One question is what, exactly, does Strohl mean by “worse”? Does he mean to suggest that such activity typically reduces one’s well-being? That would be surprising. On two of the most popular and plausible accounts of well-being (i.e. hedonism and desire-satisfactionism), people can actually enhance their well-being by engaging in immoral art, though doing so could be grossly immoral and will typically be indicative of a vicious moral character. Strohl presumably wouldn’t think that engaging with immoral art in this way enables valuable activities of engagement, but then “valuable activities of engagement” has to be understood as distinct from issues of well-being. Perhaps engaging in such art has prudential value for a person insofar as it enhances their well-being, but isn’t valuable in other senses.

We think a plausible and charitable reading is that such engagement with immoral art (typically) makes one’s *moral character* worse, even if it improves one’s *well-being*. This reading allows art to have *prudential* value for a person, while holding that they (in these cases) ought not sacrifice prudential value for moral value. Still, this requires admitting that this kind of engagement with immoral art can have a kind of value for a person, even if it also precludes other types of more important value.

These considerations raise another question. What, exactly, does Strohl mean by stipulating that valuable art for a person must enable “valuable activities of engagement” for that person? Shouldn’t enhancing one’s well-being be considered valuable? If so, that would require allowing that white supremacists reading white supremacist comics could be valuable for them. We suggest a disjunctive reading. In order for art to meet this criteria, it must not require a vicious moral character to

be appreciated or reduce a person's well-being. Violating either condition would be sufficient to make it such that the art isn't valuable for a person in the relevant sense.

One final question this raises is what sorts of immoral art can have value for a person. Strohl allows that engaging in *Bad Movie Love* for *The Room* can have value for a person in spite of the exploitative on-set working conditions. Depending on the details, individual instances of engagement with either *The Room* or white supremacist comics could be equally (un)likely to cause further harm (e.g. watching a used DVD of the Room alone isn't going to put money in Wiseau's pocket or make him more likely to make another movie, though paying for a ticket for a midnight screening might).

That noted, we suspect the relevant difference between *The Room* and the white supremacist comic example is that the kind of artistic engagement with the latter Strohl has in mind necessitates adopting morally heinous attitudes. We agree. But what about other types of ironic and non-ironic engagement? For instance, we wonder what Strohl's view would say about appreciating the non-moral components of grossly immoral films, such as Leni Riefenstahl's Nazi propaganda film *Triumph of the Will*, which is studied in films schools for its innovative filmmaking techniques.

We also wonder whether one possible valuable activity of engagement involves mocking art that promotes immoral views. Strohl's unqualified plea to engage in *Bad Movie Love* rather than *Bad Movie Ridicule* seemingly rules this out. Yet, we can think of cases where it at least seems *prima facie* valuable to mock such art for a variety of reasons, including as a means of combat, to rob it of its force, or even because it could be cathartic to do so. Unlike morally neutral good-bad art, it seems fitting to mock bad art that endorses some grossly immoral view, or at least "the parts" of the art that do. To take a less charged example, philosophers might mock the film *God's Not Dead* for its stereotypical, wildly inaccurate, portrayal of philosophy professors as lazy dogmatists, wholly uninterested in the philosophical arguments for God's existence or in doing their job, yet endlessly obsessive about turning each of their students into atheists. The film ends by having the philosopher hit and killed by a car, but not before a deathbed conversion. Stereotypes about philosophers aren't especially pernicious, but they nevertheless seem ripe for mockery. Other works of art that implicitly or explicitly endorse much more pernicious views seem far more deserving of mockery, scorn, disdain, or something else depending on the context. Here *Bad Movie Ridicule*, or something like it, might be an important tool for combating evil.

To be sure, it would be unreasonable to expect Strohl to address each of these questions in detail in this text. Fully working out the answers to them could be another book project in itself. While we think these questions do put some pressure on Strohl's view as we understand it, we primarily raise them to illustrate just how rich and interesting Strohl's view is at the end of the day. It's a view that merits further exploration, especially at the intersection of ethics and aesthetics.

One important upshot about Strohl's proposal is that it makes sense of how people have reasonable differing opinions about art without falling prey to a naïve subjectivism about art's value. This is but one important contribution of the book. One might recognize that a film, say *Phantom Thread*, has value in its own right even if they don't enjoy it. Likewise, Strohl's view can make sense of how some people

genuinely enjoy work that doesn't have any kind of value, while allowing that a wide range of (morally permissible) works of good-bad art have genuine value in their own right for a wide array of people and for distinct reasons.

As should be clear from this review, there is a lot of substance packed into *Why It's OK to Love Bad Movies*. It manages to be a quick and accessible read that is also filled to the brim with original insights and thought-provoking arguments. Strohl's lively, conversational, writing style also makes it a delight to peruse. It's also had the practical effect of getting us to view a number of good-bad movies in a different light. Overall, this is a wonderful book for philosophers and cinephiles alike.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.