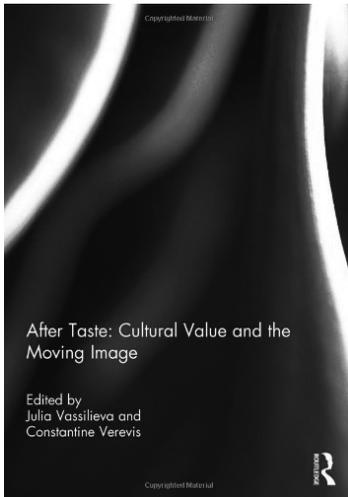


Jeremy Heilman

## Book Review: Julia Vassilieva and Constantine Verevis, *After Taste: Cultural Value and the Moving Image*



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Originally published as an issue of *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, *After Taste: Cultural Value and the Moving Image* finds its roots in an April 2009 conference at Monash University, Melbourne entitled “B for Bad Cinema: Aesthetics, Politics and Cultural Value.” Held thirty years after the first publication of Pierre Bourdieu’s landmark *Distinction*, the conference, like the book it inspired, asked us to reconsider relationships between culture and class. Co-edited by Julia Vassilieva and Constantine Verevis, who are a Lecturer and Senior Lecturer, respectively, in Film and Television Studies at Monash University, the volume argues that the rise of onscreen trash, in forms such as exploitation cinema, amateur filmmaking and reality television, has rendered the issue of taste largely academic.

This varied collection of essays suggests that Bourdieu’s central claim that “art and cultural consumption are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfill a social function of legitimating social differences”<sup>1</sup> has somewhat weakened as hierarchies of taste have collapsed over the last three decades due to the free-for-all that

is postmodern pop culture. *After Taste* therefore stands as an attempt to assess the state of cultural value in a debased cultural landscape. Rather than redeeming or valorizing marginal objects, the collection largely strives for “understanding and interrogation of the uniqueness of artworks drawn from either the ‘center’ or the ‘fringes’ of cultural production, whether this be a Sergei Eisenstein classic or Takashi Miike spaghetti western, a Hollywood blockbuster or a home movie.”<sup>2</sup> “Bad cinema,” then, is very loosely classified throughout the book, leaving the text less in a position to define what qualifies as bad taste than in a position to provide examples of how to approach disreputable film objects productively as scholars.

*After Taste* is divided into four broadly thematic sections, each of which sees contributors tackling the question of taste in contemporary media from a different angle. The first of these sections, “Critical Methods and Approaches,” is comprised of four essays that work to undo the stigma that trash cinema is fundamentally “other” than quality (i.e. Hollywood) cinema. Jane Mills, for example, makes her case using examples such as the

infamous bedpost scene from *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). She examines Griffith's phallic intimations of female masturbation to demonstrate that paracinema does not exist in a binary opposition with quality cinema, but rather courses throughout it, suggesting that the two categories are more often hybrid than oppositional. Paracinema's relationship to mainstream cinema is complicated here, much as David James characterizes avant-garde cinema, as "a constant presence, one that enticed as often as it repelled its would-be other and inspired as often as it inhibited it."<sup>3</sup> Coming at the same issue from an opposite angle is Adrian Martin's essay on Australian filmmaker Paul Cox's biopics of artists, which interrogates another "outside" cinema, namely the historical institution of art cinema. Martin suggests that art cinema is rhetorically defined by its tendency to distill from itself the sorts of vulgar, pleasurable impulses that Mills describes. Terming Cox's films exercises in "impulsivism,"<sup>4</sup> however, Martin claims that their tendency toward experimental directorial gestures (i.e. their artistic expression) renders them too personal and vulgar to be fit snugly within the formulaic constraints of institutional art cinema. So, Cox's films, which lean heavily upon the trappings of recognized great art, at the same time contradictorily stand outside the mode, somehow too expressive to join their ranks.

The book's second section, "Taste and Value," is perhaps the most conventional in its approach. Here, two essays study filmic bad objects, while two turn their gaze toward trash television. To some degree, two of these articles can be accused of simply valorizing objects thought to be marginal, which is a tendency that most of the volume resists. Simon Sellars' piece for example, examines how the horror films *The Man With X-ray Eyes* (1963) and *They Live* (1988) use their outsider, B-movie status to radically critique dominant culture and mass mediation, while Tom Steward's auteur study of producer Jerry Bruckheimer's television procedurals insists that their rampant commercialism, which consistently rankles critics, is comprised of a set of consistent aesthetic principles. More forward-thinking is Lisa Bode's reception study of the 2008 film *Twilight*. Bode is less interested in the textual qualities of the adaptation of Stephenie Meyer's novel than

how the film's release served as opportunity for cultural critics to characterize teenaged girls as "swarming indiscriminate mallrats."<sup>5</sup> Here, Bode follows Bourdieu, arguing that judgments of taste continue to actively construct audiences and make hierarchical social distinctions, especially when applied to disreputable cultural objects.

In the two essays that comprise "Feeling and Affect," the volume's third section, the sensation of boredom dominates. Using the genre of the home movie, Minette Hillyer studies the labor of movie spectatorship. Drawing upon Jeffrey Sconce's suggestion that paracinema is first and foremost a mode of spectatorship, Hillyer describes how marginal cinemas "engage spectators in the work of making meaning."<sup>6</sup> Home movies are theorized as a means of upending the enthusiast's passive relationship to cinema at the level of the everyday. Through its failures as good cinema, the home movie both transforms prosaic experiences into something perceived and insists upon active world-making on the part of viewers, each of which upsets the boredom of modern life. In his article, Richard Misek also examines spectatorship, focusing on the phenomenology of boredom. First drawing upon Heidegger's metaphysical conception of boringness, Misek argues that most cinema that successfully entertains kills time, squelching an audience's awareness of time's passage. Looking toward art films, such as those directed by filmmakers such as Andrei Tarkovsky and Abbas Kiarostami, Misek finds an alternate model of cinema that engages with temporality to create a sensation of "dead time" that engages viewers' boredom more productively and politically.

The final section of the book, entitled "Teaching Bad Objects," is perhaps the most pragmatic. It offers a print symposium that over the course of three short articles seeks to explore the relationship between pedagogical value and cultural value. Here the volume's Australian focus becomes most pronounced, as some of the country's media scholars attempt to draw out the specific challenges that face the introduction of bad cinema into the Australian classroom. Through these brief position papers, a culturally specific impression of Australian bad cinema emerges, begging for greater explication in future work.

While *After Taste's* title suggests that we live

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in a time past dominant conceptions of taste, the very existence of the tome shows that taste remains a potent determinant of cultural value. The collection is more a survey of the various forms of bad visual media than an attempt to concretize the bad object as a theoretical construct. At times the connective tissue between objects as variable as Eisenstein's unfinished opus *¡Qué viva México!* and television's *Fear Factor* (NBC, 2001 – 2006) becomes difficult to discern, lending the collection a somewhat scattershot nature that will limit its

ability to serve as a primer for media studies. It is much better suited as a supplementary text that will enable instructors to pick and choose articles based on specific class needs. Nonetheless, the book is a useful contribution to the field, offering several articles with unique methodological approaches and arguments. *After Taste* is not an endpoint, then, but instead an excellent place to begin a study of so-called bad media objects. It covers a wide range of subfields while retaining an engaging and accessible style.

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**Jeremy Heilman** is a doctoral student in the Critical Studies program at the University of Southern California's School of Cinematic Arts. He holds an M.A. in Film Studies from Columbia University. His main research interests include exploitation films, media institutions and industries, Asian cinema, cinematic representations of time, softcore pornography, and the snuff film.

### End Notes

1 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 7.

2 Julia Vassilieva and Constantine Verevis, "Introduction," In *After Taste: Cultural Value and the Moving Image* (London: Routledge, 2012), 2.

3 David E. James, *The Most Typical Avant-Garde: History and Geography of Minor Cinemas in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 4.

4 Adrian Martin, "An Idleness Bordering on the Wacky?: Paul Cox and the Contradictions of an Australian Art Cinema," In *After Taste: Cultural Value and the Moving Image* (London: Routledge, 2012), 20.

5 Lisa Bode, "Transitional Tastes: Teen Girls and Genre in the Critical Reception of *Twilight*," In *After Taste: Cultural Value and the Moving Image* (London: Routledge, 2012), 69.

6 Minette Hillyer, "Labours of Love: Home Movies, Paracinema, and the Modern Work of Cinema Spectatorship," In *After Taste: Cultural Value and the Moving Image* (London: Routledge, 2012), 120.