



Why It's OK to Love Bad Movies by Matthew Strohl

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BOOK REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

A book review of Matthew Strohl, *Why It's OK to Love Bad Movies*. New York: Routledge, 2022, 206 pp. ISBN 9780367407650.

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Strohl deems it OK to love bad movies. Not because it is OK to love making fun of them. Nor is it OK to love bad movies because one makes believe they are better than they really are. Not all movies are loveable; some are 'plain bad'. Strohl believes, however, that there are many loveable, 'good-bad' movies.¹ Is that a contradiction? Strohl thinks not: 'We obviously don't mean that a movie is good in the exact same way it is bad' (pp. 3–4).

To understand Strohl's apology for Bad Movie Love, we have to grasp some distinctions he draws (p. 181). He distinguishes between a work's being good or bad 'conventionally' and its being good or bad in what he calls 'the final sense'. A work is conventionally good if it 'accords with mainstream norms and standards' and it is conventionally bad if it violates such norms in a way that is perceived as 'artistically unserious'. Avant-garde films violate mainstream norms as part of a serious artistic project. Not so with conventionally bad films. Strohl says that a work is good *in the final sense* if it 'enables valuable activities of engagement', or, in other words, if it occasions appreciation consistent with the conclusion that the work is 'worthwhile'. The aesthetic value of a work is its power to occasion or support appreciative experiences that are themselves valuable, either intrinsically or because they contribute positively to other goods, such as well-being or the good life.

Strohl's primary goal in this book is to explain how it is appropriate to love good-bad movies without ridicule or condescension. He proposes that a work is 'good-bad' on three conditions:

1. it is good in the final sense (that is, worthy of positive appreciation);
2. it is conventionally bad (that is, violates norms without being artistically serious); and
3. it satisfies condition (1) *partly* by virtue of the way it satisfies condition (2) (that is, the way it violates norms and standards accepted in mainstream film-critical discourse).

The third condition is motivated by the thought that Bad Movie Love has to be more than simply liking or loving a film *in spite of* its imperfections or violations. Instead, a good-bad film is loveable *partly* due to its violations, be they intentional or not. Note that, given the way condition (3) is couched, the implication is that the work must also be good 'partly' for other reasons as well. Strohl offers no general characterization of these other reasons, which leaves the specification of conditions on good-bad status incomplete. The missing condition (4) could read: 'it also satisfies condition (1) partly by virtue of x, y, z', where these variables are filled by artistic, aesthetic, or other desiderata. Another option would be to amend (3) to read '*at least partially*', and so on.

Strohl builds his case for good-bad movie love by reporting at length on his appreciation of various works in his rather capacious personal counter-canon of belovedly flawed films. That collection includes *Freddy Got Fingered*, *Grand Isle*, other films featuring Nicolas Cage, *Batman & Robin*, the *Twilight* movies, *The Room*, *Troll 2*, and many others. Strohl evokes the social benefits of sharing one's Bad Movie Love. He compares his brand of cinephilia to other relevant critical approaches, such as Susan Sontag on camp, and John Dyck and Matt Johnson's account of how artistic failure

1 The expression 'good-bad movie' appears in J. Hoberman, 'Bad Movies', *Film Comment* 16, no. 4 (1980): 8. Cited by Strohl, p. 39.

can contribute to a work's aesthetic value. Strohl also responds to some possible objections to his approach. He argues that, even if we allow that the supply of great films is inexhaustible, on some occasions there is sufficient reason to prefer watching a good-bad film. 'There is nothing wrong with the mainstream, it's just that it doesn't have a monopoly on cinematic value; there are unique and distinctive values attached to categories that fall outside it' (p. 183).

As I remain puzzled about the unique and distinctive values that make some movies good-bad ones, I shall conclude this review by raising some questions about Strohl's treatment of one of his examples. I suspect these remarks will be relevant to other cases as well.

Strohl praises Ed Wood's *Plan 9 from Outer Space* and reports that it is often cited as being one of the 'best-worst' movies of all time. It is less than obvious how it satisfies the stated conditions on being a good-bad movie. If it does meet those conditions, that could be taken as indicating that they are insufficient and do not successfully track the Bad Movie Lover's affections.

Plan 9 is no doubt 'conventionally bad' in Strohl's sense. It abounds with violations of mainstream critical norms, such as: if you are attempting verisimilitude, do not use props that are obviously fake. But we must also ask whether these violations 'partly' make this a film that is good 'in the final sense', and to know that we must know what aesthetic merits are due to the film-maker's particular manner of violating mainstream norms. Terms that come to mind when one reports on the film's relevant aesthetic properties include 'clumsy', 'awkward', 'brazen', 'inept', 'confusing', 'jarring', 'cringeworthy', 'pathetic', 'pointless', 'incoherent', 'irritating', 'hapless', 'astounding', 'laughable', 'ridiculous', and 'absurd'. What Strohl singles out, however, is what he calls 'the sincere absurdity of Ed Wood', which he 'can admire'; he adds that '[w]hen we celebrate the absurdity of Wood's point of view we celebrate qualities that the movie really does have' (pp. 46-47). This, however, does not strike me as an adequate appraisal of the film's aesthetic character. In what sense is Wood's manner of violating norms both 'sincere' and 'admirable'? I think the way the film's violations reveal the director's odd combination of ambition and incompetence is more careless and brazen than sincere. If there is something frank, 'out front', and incautious about Wood's directorial blunders, how does that give the film sufficient aesthetic merit to be a good-bad film?

Setting aside the prospects for a positive *aesthetic* assessment of *Plan 9*, we might instead ask whether the manner in which Wood made his mistakes and exhibited his eccentricity counts as an *artistic* merit that could tip the balance in favour of this being a good-bad movie. That too strikes me as highly implausible. In loving Wood's directorial performance on these grounds, we would be neglecting what Strohl correctly recognizes as a crucial element of art appreciation – namely, 'discriminating artistic achievement' (p. 46). That kind of discrimination requires the recognition and admiration of manifestations of skill, which is not what we find in *Plan 9*. The upshot, perhaps, is that the counter-canon of Bad Movie Love is selected by affect and sensibility more than critical reasoning; it is the kind of love Stendhal described as 'crystallisation'.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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