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The Good, The Bad, The Ugly, and the Satirical: An Exploration of Bad Movies

"There is no light without darkness" -Mark Frost

Frost was the co-creator of T*win Peaks* and the writer of "Fantastic Four" (2005), his mastery of cinema emphasizes the importance of this idea; without terrible shows such as *Bevis and Butthead* we would never know how great TV shows such as *Twin Peaks* are. This idea has become greatly apparent in the history of cinema as there are over 500,000 movies that have been created since the creation of movies in 1888 and not every one of these movies is going to be a masterpiece. However, in the plethora of terrible movies that exist a few are so terrible that they have become beloved by many and granted the title ---so bad its good--- an idea that a movie is so bad that people cannot help but enjoy the film for being so bad. This cultural phenomenon is fascinating as objectively bad movies can become even more beloved than movies that are better funded or directed and continue to become wildly successful. But what makes Good Bad Movies (GBMs) enjoyable to watch? And how can these phenomena be recreated? GBMs are enjoyable because they haphazardly break cinematic norms while continuing to create a unique aesthetic of poor filmmaking. By doing this, these movies

accidentally create comedic masterpieces despite their desire to be taken seriously and people can enjoy a meta-dramatic irony by snarking at the obvious mistakes by the film's creators.

Background:

Samurai Cop was directed by Amri Shervan in 1991 and starred Matt Hannon as the protagonist Joe Marshall in his adventure to stop evil Katana Gang from selling drugs in San Diego, alongside his expressive sidekick Frank (Mark Frazer) they take down the gang's leader Yamashita (Robert Z'Dar) and end the rule of the Katana Gang. Unsurprisingly this *Lethal Weapon* copycat did not start off well as it was initially refused by the industry to be released in theatres until 2004 when it was released on DVD by Media Blasters. Despite its lackluster start this movie's mix of poorly translated dialogue, whiplash inducing cuts, and cringy flirtation quickly gave the movie a cult following as people could not help but watch the dumpster fire that is *Samurai Cop* unfurl in front of them.

VelociPastor is directed by Brendan Steere whose previous works include *Rules* (2014) and *Animosity* (2014). He claimed to get the idea when his "phone autocorrected 'velociraptor' to 'veloci pastor'" (Millican) and thus this film was created. The story revolves around Pastor Doug Jones (Gregory James Cohan) as his family is murdered and he takes a reprieve to China before finding an artifact that turns him into a velociraptor. Alongside a newly found love, a prostitute named Carol (Alyssa Kempinski), he manages to take down an evil cabal of ninjas who murdered his parents before moving on to become a vigilante against evil. This movie cost a mere 34,000 dollars to film and edit and was a smash hit even being bought by Amazon for its streaming service.

The Disaster Artist was directed by James Franco who also played the main role of Tommy Wiseau as he and his friend Greg Sestero (Dave Franco) navigate the world of Hollywood before the sporadic Wiseau finally gives up an decides to make his own movie, thus creating the cult classic film *The Room* (2003). This film about a film covers the strange journey behind the creation of *The Room* as well as the background of the iconic scenes the film is often quoted for. This film not only is a great story of Wiseau's strange climb to infamy but also gives great insight into how Wiseau is in fact the Van Gogh of GBMs, insane yet capable of creating great art.

What Makes Good Bad Movies Enjoyable?

Aesthetic:

A GBM does not fit into the normal types of movies we see and creates its own unique aesthetic from its seemingly messy creation. This idea cannot be more highlighted than a 5-minute sequence in *Samurai Cop* as this short portion of the movie cannot be expressed other than jarring. The sequence starts off as Marshall is in an intense firefight with bad guys in intensely 80's outfits, but when our protagonist jumps off a dumpster the scene immediately changes to a redheaded woman starting the strip. The next scene is a 1:07 long sex scene with zero dialogue and two actors messily struggling to kiss as the camera zooms so close to the woman's thigh that you can count the pores on her skin. Then comes 5 quick cuts from a church bell, then to Marshall standing next to a tree, to the outside of a church, then to a chauffeur next to his car, then to a neighborhood where Marshall talks to the main love interest Jennifer in the span of less than 30 seconds.

These five minutes perfectly highlight the aesthetic of a bad movie with the most obvious being the jarringly quick cuts from one take to another that are then spliced together with little idea of how the viewer will understand these cuts. You start to feel whiplash as you are taken from no less than 7 different sets in 5 minutes with no clear connection between them. Bad cuts can make or break a movie, but with GBMs they are so terribly done that they start to become enjoyable as the viewer is on the edge of their seat of what stupid thing will randomly appear next. Almost recreating the thrill of a horror movie when a person does not know when the killer will spring out while combing the comedy of *Dumb and Dumber* where the viewer wants to know what incredibly silly thing will happen next.

Another part of the aesthetic that is demonstrated is the garishly long and badly directed sex and action scenes. As the viewer is shown nigh porn levels of nudity for minutes at a time without end, people cannot help but laugh with others at the uncomfortably of it all and the unrealism of two people quite literally slobbering over each other. Additionally, action sequences contain little more than people pointing guns at each other with the gang members having Stormtrooper levels of inaccuracy and getting shot with zero effects showing the wound. The garishly horrible action scenes are also a staple of GBMs as intense moments have no weight to them as effects are lacking and the scenes are nothing less than a farce.

Bad acting and dialogue are also an essential part of the aesthetic of a GBM. Hoberman argues that “The objectively bad film attempts to reproduce the institutional mode of representation, but its failure to do so deforms the simplest formulae and cliches so absolutely that you barely recognize them” (519). By failing to replicate dialogue of other action movies *Samurai Cop* differentiates itself as a GBM and becomes an entirely new genre altogether. This combined with shoddy performances from unknown actors creates a unique dialogue throughout

the movie that is not only distinguishable from other media but hilarious as no normal human or character would speak in that way. This becomes especially clear when Tommy Wiseau had to do 32 takes over 3 hours to say the line "It's bullshit, I did not hit her. I did not. Oh hi, Mark!" (*The Disaster Artist*) demonstrated in a scene by Franco. This dialogue, albeit okay at first glance, does not fully replicate the rhythm and normal speech patterns that you or I may say creating an air of unrealism around the character and film. Additionally, the unprofessionalism of Wiseau is astonishingly clear on screen as he is an objectively terrible actor. However, both aspects are thoroughly enjoyed by the viewer as it is hilarious to see such a terrible character continually be nearly an alien despite the want for a serious tone throughout the movie.

Finally, this scene demonstrates the clearest aesthetic of GBMs, the ineptitude of the director with both moviemaking and American society. Sconce argues that "*The Disaster Artist* hinges on Seth Rogen's performance as the film's astonished D.P. turned default director" (670). Because Wiseau was such a terrible director someone else with little experience had to nearly take over for him making the movie a directing hell as you have both a realist and a nutjob trying to put a film together. This ineptitude (or appearance of it) is essential to a GBM as it allows the audience to snark at the creators of the film and leads on to create a meta-dramatic irony explained later in this essay. Additionally, ineptitude also takes the form of a lack of knowledge of societal standards and rules that are invisible yet essential to our media. One form of this takes place at the very end of samurai cop as our main Caucasian protagonist faces off against the leading Caucasian samurai of the katana gang in a sword fight to the death. However, history has shown us that only a few white men have been given the name of samurai with the most notable being William Adams who died in 1620. This complete lack of research into the ethnic background of your characters and historical references leads the film an additional air of

incompetency as the directors and writers do not have enough forethought or care to properly research their script.

Humor:

Another principal of GBMs is the simplistic and low-brow humor that the film creates, whether ironically or on purpose. Lowbrow humor is crass and farce comedic bits that are easy to laugh at as they usually need little background knowledge to understand. Only by having low-brow humor can the viewer not only enjoy the meta-dramatic irony (see Dramatic Irony) for the writer's simplicity but also does not take the viewer away from the simple experience of laughing at a GBM. Throughout *Samurai Cop*, *The Velocipastor,* and *The Room* not once is the movie interrupted to have a smartly placed joke nor a scene that inspires deeper thought. Even though the director may have meant for a scene to be serious the lack of high-brow humor or content becomes an essential part in making a bad movie good. This is because by having a moment of thought it takes the audience away from the humor of the GBM and encourages them to think deeper about a movie with no real meaning. Only by having simplistic and lowbrow humor can the movie hope to maintain an audience's engagement in the movie's horribleness.

Dramatic Irony:

The final tenet of GBMs is meta-dramatic irony that allows the reader to snark at the mess of a movie they are watching. Dramatic irony is commonly used in films to help the audience understand the full plot of the story and maintain interest in the film as the audience knows something the characters do not. Strangely though, GBMs use this same concept except it applies to the creation of the film rather than the fictional characters themselves. This meta-dramatic irony is a key part of the enjoyment of GBMs as people quickly learn that the GBM

they are watching is nothing close to a cinematic masterpiece and is not to be taken as a serious movie. This knowledge leads to people being able to snark at the movie and laugh at the numerous mistakes that they notice while the director is stupidly unaware. This idea is demonstrated with the infamous line from *Samurai Cop*, "you son of a bitches" as actor Matt Hannon explained that despite his recommendation to change the line to "these sons of bitches" (Azevedo) the director was adamant that they stick to the poorly translated script. This mistake by the director is something that people can look down on as most English speakers understand this difference in speaking, this allows people to look down on the director and feel a sense of pride as they understand that they could be better than the director. Even though many of us do not admit we enjoy looking down at others it is a key part of human nature to want feel superiority and GBMs allow us to enjoy this feeling in a unique way. This idea is supported by MacDowell and McColloch as they argue "[viewers] must first assume that the film was not made with the parodic intention of appearing to be badly made" (645). If viewers did assume that the movie was supposed to be ironic the movie would lose its meta-dramatic irony as viewers could no longer get that feeling of snark from watching a GBM. This idea creates the main issue with trying to recreate a GBM as this fine line between irony and seriousness is difficult to follow unless you are completely oblivious. This also explains why GBMs are almost always created by foreign or unknown directors as only by having such a little idea of the inner workings of Hollywood could you unironically break these tropes and allow the viewer to laugh at your ineptitude. However, I disagree with MacDowell and McColloch as you can still create a GBM while being ironic. *The VelociPastor* illustrates this incredibly well with its first scene opens with a pastor giving a speech before going outside to see his parents blown up, except with no CGI only the words "VFX: Car on fire" followed by an over dramatic

"NOOOOOOOOOOOO" (1:37) by the pastor. At first glance this scene is a simple slapstick moment of forgetting CGI and funny screaming, but in fact this moment is a masterfully directed acceptance of his GBM. Steere not only laughs at this moment but invites you to laugh with him as he takes you through the enjoyable mess of a movie, he has laid in front of you. The only difference to other GBMs is that instead of laughing at the director you are laughing with him creating a whole new subsection of this meta-dramatic irony as the viewer can still feel snark at the movie while the movie is still an ironic interpretation of GBMs. This demonstrated that you still need to have meta-dramatic irony to enjoy a GBM, but you can create the irony in several different ways.

What is the Formula?

The three tenets of GBMs not only explain the phenomenon of GBMs but also allow us to gain intuition into how to recreate a GBM. Many of these movie's inceptions came about in strange ways, giving the idea that these movies are distinct outliers in cinema rather than a new genre. However, with the creation of *The VelociPastor* and other GBMs we can start to define the genre that GBMs may become. As previously stated, *The VelociPastor* was created as both a satire on GBM as well as a GBM within itself with a mere $34,000 production budget Steere forced himself to take many of the shortcuts previous directors took. By using this small budget Steere managed to complete the first tenet of GBMs, the aesthetic, and he continued to complete each other tenet marvelously. The script only included lowbrow humor even going as far to have the main love interest be a hooker-doctor-lawyer, an idea fabulously ridiculous and equally hilarious. And as previously stated Steere managed to redefine meta-dramatic irony by allowing a serious director to create a bad movie ironically with the hope of adding to the small genre. *The VelociPastor* is not just a great movie but part of a redefining of GBMs, no longer will movies

become GBMs by happenstance but can be purposefully created by observing the distinct characteristics of a GBM.

Conclusion:

Good Bad Movies are a strange outlier in the film industry but by dissecting how people enjoy these films we can uncover the formula of how these movies are created. The aesthetic of a GBM is both simplistic and difficult to achieve as the (seemingly) low budget production value must be clearly seen to the audience yet has to be in a delicate balance to be humorous rather than confusing. Lowbrow humor must be maintained throughout the movie to avoid breaking the aesthetic of the GBM and to maintain the audience's involvement in the film. Finally, the meta-dramatic irony of the absolute clusterfuck that is managing to unfurl before you creates the staple enjoyment of GBMs: being able to laugh at others mistakes. By adding all these tenets together, we can start to understand how strangely formulaic these movies are and how their enjoyment can be recreated in future cinema. With this knowledge we can start to understand the future of this distinct genre of film as GBMs can and should be created on a low-budget and are a lowbrow form of humor that can be popular to the masses. Just as viewers are lured to see the newest action movie or thriller people will also be lured to see what crazy concoction a director has created with each new GBM adding onto the genre. Even now *Samurai Cop 2* was released in 2015 (albeit to a lackluster launch compared to the first) showing that there is both money and entertainment to be found in the lack of goodness in a movie. Despite the name, Good Bad Movies may end up becoming very good.

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