Enjoying trash films: Underlying features, viewing stances, and experiential response dimensions

Keyvan Sarkhosh*, Winfried Menninghaus

Max Planck Institute for Empirical Aesthetics, Frankfurt, Germany

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ABSTRACT

By means of an explorative online survey, the present study identifies key characteristics of ‘trash films’ from the perspective of their regular consumers. It focuses on how these characteristics support the evaluative turnaround underlying the positive use of the label, i.e., on how something can be identified as cheap and worthless ‘trash’ and still be embraced and (re-)evaluated as providing positive enjoyment. The data reveal that trash films are, indeed, identified as ‘cheap’ and hence as a variety of low-budget films. At the same time, viewers attribute to trash films not just amusing/entertaining qualities, but also a positive, transgressive deviance from the cinematic mainstream, and their appreciation of these films is coupled with marked preferences for art cinema. The majority of trash film fans appear to be well-educated cultural ‘omnivores’, and they conceive of their preference for trash films in terms of an ironic viewing stance.

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1. Introduction

The label ‘trash’ is no longer used with an exclusive reference to certain subcultural trends and products; it is also applied in contexts of mainstream media and culture, including literature, theatre and the visual arts. Still, ‘trash’ is primarily associated with the domain of audio-visual media, especially film and TV. The concept has been the topic of an increasing number of theoretical essays and film-historical studies since the 1990s. Yet little effort has been made to empirically investigate how trash films can be appreciated and enjoyed. Among the few exceptions is a study by McCulloch (2011) which reports the results of participant observations and guided interviews about audience reactions in public screenings of Tommy Wiseau’s allegedly worst-ever-made film, The Room (2003). This study is, however, very limited in scope given its exclusive focus on a single film. Another study (McCoy & Scarbrough, 2014) investigated the consumption strategies television viewers apply to programmes ranging from TV talk shows to made-for-television films assessed as bad and ‘trash’; however, trash films stricto sensu were not the object of this study.

Drawing on theories about trash films and their audiences that have been developed in film and media studies as well as in the social sciences, the present study aims to establish a new empirical and conceptual basis for the study of fiction films labelled ‘trash’. Our aim is to consolidate the distinct notion and scope of ‘trash’ from the perspective of habitual trash film consumers and to investigate the underlying principles and mechanisms contributing to the re-evaluation and subsequent appreciation and enjoyment of these films. Oliver and Bartsch (2011) point out that enjoyment—which is closely associated with the experience of fun and amusement—is but one aspect of the multidimensionality of film entertainment, while

* Corresponding author at: Max Planck Institute for Empirical Aesthetics, Grüneburgweg 14, 60322 Frankfurt am Main, Germany.
E-mail address: keyvan.sarkhosh@aesthetics.mpg.de (K. Sarkhosh).

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appreciation is another. Like these authors, we do not consider enjoyment and appreciation to be mutually exclusive. Nor do we limit appreciation to the perception of ‘meaningfulness’ in the sense of eliciting thoughts about human virtue and life’s purpose. Rather, we draw on a broader understanding of appreciation as ‘aesthetic appreciation’, which is not limited to morally and metaphorically uplifting processing dimensions but more generally refers to the experience and evaluation of works of art and involves both cognitive and affective judgments, an acknowledgement of the artistic form and, importantly, interest (cf. Leder, Belker, Oeberst, & Augustin, 2004).

2. Theoretical framework and research questions

2.1. The label ‘trash’: its conceptual implications and its relation to other, partially overlapping terms

Despite a substantial academic debate on trash films, the label ‘trash’ is still far from well-defined. It competes with a number of other labels, such as ‘kitsch’ (Roller, 2002), ‘camp’ (Kleinhans, 1994), ‘sleaze’ (Hawkins, 1999), ‘cult’ (Mathijs & Sexton, 2011) and ‘paracinema’ (Sconce, 1995), which all refer to low forms of mass culture and/or the viewing practices and attitudes associated with them.

‘Trash’ commonly serves as an umbrella term for amateurishly produced, low-budget films which are incompatible with the standards of mainstream filmmaking (Hunter, 2014; Kulle, 2012; Medved & Medved, 1980). Accordingly, trash is often identified with so-called ‘exploitation’ films (Hunter, 2013a, 2014), i.e. with sensational low-budget films which ‘exploit’ contents featuring highly explicit sex and violence (Schaefer, 2007; Williams, 2007). Exploitation is typically assumed to serve a predominantly male and undereducated audience’s hunger for sensationalism and to elicit a visceral rather than an emotional response in the viewer (Cook, 2005; Kovács, 1982; Mathijs & Sexton, 2011). In this sense, exploitation appears to be another instance of “sensational ‘body’ genres” as described by Williams (1991, p. 4). Some filmic genres stand out as being particularly exploitation-prone: science fiction and, most of all, horror films (Hunter, 2014; Roller, 2002). Horror films are often transgressive at the level of explicit violence, depicting scenes of extreme violence and disgusting horror (Brottman, 1997; Sarkhosh, 2011), and such depictions might be regarded as a special case of excess (cf. Thompson, 1977). Similar to the ‘cinema of attractions’ (Gunning, 1986), exploitation films privilege spectacle over narrative and thus do not conform to the routines of narrative-driven classical Hollywood film-making (Cook, 2005; Schaefer, 2007).

To be sure, by no means are all trash films exploitation films. However, the labels share an important feature: for a long time, the films assigned to either of these labels received no critical attention or were readily dismissed as ‘bad films’ (e.g. Canby, 1975). In an effort to redefine the notion of ‘bad film’, Hoberman (1980) distinguished between a broader group of films that are believed to be ‘bad’ solely by virtue of having been critically dismissed and a more narrowly defined group of films that are ‘objectively’ bad in the sense that badness can be understood as an intrinsic quality of these films. Besides lousy acting, ludicrous dialogue and cheap sets and props, it is mainly the incoherence of these films, their deformation of the standard mainstream formulae and their anti-illusionist excess which are supposed to produce a total cinematic and aesthetic failure—and it is precisely this failure which allegedly renders a film objectively bad, and thus trash (Hoberman, 1980; Hunter, 2014).

However, such a definition of trash films leaves many questions open. Specifically, it does not include any features which might explain how and why ‘objectively bad’ trash films can still be positively appreciated (see e.g. Egan, 2007). Obviously, regular consumers of trash films do attribute qualities other than ‘objective badness’ to these films. Our first research question is therefore:

RQ1: What features and attributes do regular consumers of films which they consider to be ‘trash films’ associate with this label?

2.2. The positive appeal of trash films and viewing stances which support their enjoyment

As Hoberman (1980, p. 7) suggested, “it is possible for a movie to succeed because it has failed.” In line with this semantic turnaround, the usage of the expression ‘bad film’ and of the correlative notion of ‘trash’ appears to have undergone a positive transformation (Mathijs, 2005). What was once meant as a purely dismissive term acquired a positive, if not celebratory, meaning (Stevenson, 2003). As a cipher for this reappraisal and reversal, ‘trash’ can be applied to a great variety of films rather than to specific genres only. To the extent that it is dependent on a turnaround in perception and evaluation, the positive use of the label is tied to specific viewing stances which enable a re-evaluation and, subsequently, a joyful and gratifying consumption of these films.

Recently, McCoy and Scarborough (2014) have provided evidence that television audiences take different viewing stances regarding ‘trashy’ programmes. Traditional viewers evaluate both the media content and its experience as plainly bad and simply switch off the TV. Yet although they clearly assess the media content as bad and unpleasurable, some viewers cannot stop watching—which puts them in a state of stress and anxiety. Such viewers feel ashamed for taking pleasure in watching ‘bad’ TV, so the authors refer to this viewing stance as ‘guilty pleasure’. However, nothing in the academic and critical debate on trash films seems to suggest that the habitual consumption of cinematic trash gives rise to a feeling of shame. On the contrary, the pleasure taken in the consumption of trash films is typically thought to be ‘subversive’. As Hunter (2013b)
claims, the trash aficionado is protected from negative affect by means of irony, and—what is more—not only enjoys watching ‘bad films’ but also willingly admits doing so without a guilty conscience.

From this perspective, the consumption of cinematic trash appears much closer to the other two viewing styles identified by McCoy and Scarborough (2014). One of these viewing styles is ironic TV consumption. Ironic viewers do not take the media content at face value (cf. Colebrook, 2004), thereby creating a gap between ‘saying’ and meaning, and they take delight in the sheer badness of the content in question. According to McCoy and Scarborough (2014), ironic viewers do not laugh with, but rather at, the programme. Indeed, the existing literature suggests that such a viewing style is adopted not only in regard to TV shows, soap operas and cheap serials, for example, but also to fiction films which are assessed as trash. The anti-canonical book *The Golden Turkey Awards* (Medved & Medved, 1980) is a famous instance of such a mocking viewing style. The authors’ ‘election’ of the film *Plan 9 from Outer Space* (1959) and its director Edward D. Wood as the worst of all time reflect the impression that seeing a film so clumsily made as Wood’s makes almost any viewer feel that he or she could have done better, and that an ironic anti-award may be an appropriate response.

Irony can also be considered a key constituent of the second consumption strategy identified by McCoy and Scarborough (2014). Following Sontag (1964), the authors refer to a viewing stance which involves a form of admiration for the cultural object regardless of its assumed badness as a ‘camp sensibility’. As Sontag argued, a camp sensibility involves an inversion in which a bad or aesthetically failed object is cherished as good precisely because it is bad. The camp sensibility can be described as a counter-purposive viewing stance. Stevenson (2003) conjectures that this stance requires three functional characteristics—a double meaning, a passionate intent and an escape into artifice—and he argues that these characteristics enable a distinction between ‘pure camp’ and ‘deliberate camp’.

Pure camp gives rise to an ironic stance, because the viewer is aware of the artist’s ambition to create something truly great, while simultaneously perceiving the outcome’s artistic ineptness. Accordingly, the works of Ed Wood, who had the desire to tell compelling stories and make great films but was unable to do so, are typically thought to provoke an ironic camp viewing (Kulle, 2012; Stevenson, 2003). This implies that contextual expertise is a prerequisite for ironic consumption (Sconce, 1995), because unless viewers know about Wood’s aspirations, they will not be able to grasp the ironic tension between intention and act.

On the other hand, as Stevenson (2003) argues, deliberate camp is almost always self-aware of its own status as purposefully ‘bad art’. Because it exposes generic formulae and dominant aesthetic, cultural and social norms—often by means of exaggerated artifice and excess (Stevenson, 2003)—‘deliberate camp’ can be conceived of as a subform of parody (cf. Kleinhans, 1994). However, whereas pure camp crucially depends on adopting a specific viewing stance, deliberate camp as parody applies to the artwork and its style independently of any viewing stance that might be adopted. Nevertheless, like pure camp, deliberate camp requires expertise if the parodistic nature of an artwork is to be grasped. Parody can only work if readers or viewers are familiar with the schemata and hidden subtexts of an original that become the object of parody (cf. Chatman, 2001).

Circumventing the possible confusion regarding whether camp refers to a style or a stance—a dichotomy Sontag (1964) already hints at—scholars often use the notion of ‘paracinema’ (Sconce, 1995) in order to highlight a subcultural counteraesthetics that involves an ironic re-evaluation. The ‘paracinema sensibility’ aims at creating an opposition to the standard formulae and ideological norms of the cinematic mainstream. In other words, it is Hollywood that is conceived of as bad cinema’s ‘bad other’ (Mills, 2010)—and not art cinema, which rather appears in close proximity to trash (GorfinkeI, 2008; Hawkins, 1999). Hence the appreciation and enjoyment of trash essentially stem from a consciously intended rejection of the dominant modes of the cinematic mainstream which are perceived as predictable and boring (Hunter, 2014; Mills, 2010).

In sum, a joyful and gratifying consumption of trash films appears to be the result of particular modes of reception that involve specific conceptualisations of these films. This gives rise to our second research question:

**RQ2: What viewing stance do trash film habitués adopt when consuming these films?**

And, in light of the assumption that different viewing stances are related to different experiential responses, such as pleasure and shame, we ask:

**RQ3: What are the experiential response dimensions which contribute to a joyful and gratifying consumption of trash films?**

### 2.3. The attribution of trash film viewing to social class, cultural tastes and fan practices

The ‘paracinematic’ nature of trash films has also played a role in discussions of these films as ‘cult films’. The term ‘cult film’ refers to an eclectic group of films which are commonly—yet by no means exclusively—oppositional to mainstream taste (Telotte, 1991). Such films are believed to acquire a ‘cult status’ in virtue of the modes of consumption employed by devoted film enthusiasts who engage in practices of repeat viewing, active celebration, performative interaction and fandom (Mathijs & Sexton, 2011; Telotte, 1991). A cult film is thus “a film with an active and lively communal following” (Mathijs & Mendik, 2008, p. 11).

The term ‘cult’ as applied in the context of cult films strongly resonates with the traditional notion of cult, which refers to religious rituals and worship practices (cf. Campbell, 1998). Notably, scholars largely agree that the cult film experience is essentially linked to quasi-religious practices. In this context, the cinema as a public space is specifically conceived of as...
providing an opportunity for strangers to temporarily form a community and jointly engage in active participation such as shouting, singing and other forms of live interaction (Austin, 1981; McCulloch, 2011).

Moreover, the cult film experience has been assigned a crucial role for the process of self-affirmation and, in particular, the development of a masculine identity. Thus, Hollows (2003) claims that the practice of collecting (as opposed to merely consuming) films with a ‘cult status’ is crucial for distinguishing the male cult fan from the supposedly feminised cinematic mainstream. The same can be said of fan writing as a form of engagement that exceeds passive consumption. Such practices are believed to be major sources of pleasure in fan cultures (Duffett, 2013; Sanjek, 1990). And, what is more, fans are believed to produce their own cultural capital by means of such practices, which distinguishes fan culture from the official culture (Fiske, 1992).

The concept of the cult film audience resonates with the model of active fandom as promoted in the works of Fiske (1992) and Jenkins (1992). Fan
dom of this type involves the appropriation of cultural objects which at first glance seem to possess little or no cultural (skills), symbolic (prestige) and—at least in the case of trash films—economic capital in the field of cultural production (cf. Bourdieu, 1996; 124). In Bourdieu’s model, high art—specifically literature—typically has low economic value, yet enjoys high cultural value and symbolic prestige. Inversely, products of mass culture are of high economic value, yet are low in cultural and symbolic capital. In recent decades, two other combinations of economic, cultural and symbolic capital have become increasingly important, combinations that cannot be accounted for along this classical distinction of high and low art which largely converges with differences in both social class and education (cf. Bourdieu, 1984). On the one hand, a small segment of artworks (particularly paintings) is both highly prized economically and enjoys high cultural and symbolic capital not only within the museum scene and among connoisseurs, but partly also in a larger public. On the other hand, trash films are an excellent example how active fandom invests products that are neither of high economic nor of high cultural and symbolic capital (i.e. from the perspective of the society at large) with high symbolic capital for a devoted in-group. Importantly, this counter-evaluation relies on classical ‘avant-gardist’ standards for high cultural value—as prevalent in the predominant culture—rather than on simply reversing these standards or establishing a mere counter-canon.

In the existing literature, this ‘paracinematic’ reappraisal is predominantly associated with a highly educated, almost exclusively male and white upper-middle-class audience which has detailed knowledge about the films in question and thus commands, in Bourdieu’s (1984) terms, a high amount of cultural capital (Austin, 1981; Jancovich, 2002; Sconce, 1995). Because the films that typically serve as the objects of a paracinematic cult experience mostly stem from the ‘lowest’ end of popular culture (see Mathijs & Sexton, 2011), this type of fandom is at odds with the argument that cultural capital is linked to ‘legitimate’, elitist art forms such as poetry and opera (cf. Bourdieu, 1984). In other words, what happens is that trash films are attributed a genuine avant-gardist, ‘pure’ artistic status. Bourdieu’s (1996) model of the cultural field does not entail provisions for this specific case.

Importantly for our context, the assumption of an insoluble bond between socioeconomic position, cultural competence and taste boundaries (cf. Bourdieu, 1984) has already been challenged by the concept of the ‘cultural omnivore’. As Peterson (2005) argues, omnivorousness has superseded a ‘univore’ highbrow cultural snobbery which despises and excludes all forms of popular culture, and has become the new standard of good taste. At the same time, omnivorousness does not mean indiscriminate consumption of everything. Rather, it refers to a discerning approach that prefers certain genres and art forms across the alleged ‘high’ vs. ‘low’ spectrum (Warde, Wright, & Gayo-Cal, 2007). However, Bourdieu’s model of social classes and cultural tastes and the concept of cultural omnivorousness are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Suggesting a reformulation of Bourdieu, Holt (1998) has found evidence that it is not so much the cultural goods themselves but rather the practices of their consumption that play a vital role in the emergence of distinctive taste patterns. According to Holt, these practices vary with consumers’ cultural capital and thus contribute to the production of social stratification.

Putting all of this together, it can be assumed that the enjoyment and appreciation of trash films are closely linked to viewers’ broader cultural tastes and their social and educational status, as well as to certain practices of consumption which in turn are framed by the social, technical and institutional context of viewing. All this adds up to our final two research questions:

RQ4: What are the social predispositions and broader aesthetic preferences of trash film habitués?
RQ5: What are the specific manners and practices of trash film consumption among habitués?

3. Study type and sample description

To address the five research questions, we performed an exploratory online survey. The aim of the survey was to identify key characteristics of trash films from the perspective of their regular consumers and to identify the viewers’ practices and preferences which support the evaluative turnaround that underlies a positive use of the label ‘trash film’.

The survey was accessible online between 30 July and 30 August 2014. Data were collected using EFS Survey (v. 10.3). All procedures were approved by the Ethics Council of the Max Planck Society. No personal data other than age, gender, level of education and first language were collected. Participation was fully voluntary, and participants could end their participation at any time. To ensure high participation, participants were invited to take part in a gift card drawing.

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The survey was primarily disseminated in online forums with a focus on trash films and via the Facebook sites of video distribution companies specialising in trash. Additionally, colleagues from the literature, film and media departments of selected universities were contacted and asked to advertise the survey to their students. The underlying rationale for specifically addressing online forums with a focus on trash films was that exposure to art and media products is typically self-sought (regardless of the importance of suggestions made by friends, peers and professional critics) and that many art genres target a fairly specific constituency rather than the general public at large. This applies specifically, although by no means exclusively, to non-mainstream art genres and audiences. Attracting primarily customers of cinematic trash allows capturing the perspective of self-motivated recipients while not giving up a focus on a specific group of specific artworks (trash films), as opposed to dealing with the full variety of idiosyncratic preferences.

The survey comprised free association tasks and forced-choice questions. Where participants had to give ratings, different scales were employed in order to best match the possible scope of responses to the items in question. All items included in the rating tasks were experimenter-selected, based on an extensive, theory-driven interpretation of the literature on trash films and discussions with experts in empirical aesthetics.

Data were obtained from 372 individuals who completed the survey. Thirty individuals were excluded from the sample for obviously giving deliberately wrong answers (e.g. entering nonsense words in the free association task) or for being under-age. The remaining sample (N = 342) included 300 males (87.7%) and 42 females (12.3%), and the mean age was 34.6 years (SD = 8.7, min = 18, max = 63). Three hundred thirty-six participants were native German speakers (98.2%), and six were non-native German speakers (1.8%). With regard to their highest level of education, 148 participants (43.3%) held a university degree, 110 (32.2%) had a higher education entrance qualification, 61 (17.8%) had a general certificate of secondary education, and 15 (4.4%) had only completed mandatory basic secondary schooling. Finally, 4 participants (1.2%) had no educational diplomas, and another 4 (1.2%) reported having a degree which was not included in the list.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Attributes, features and films associated with trash (RQ1)

The survey opened with two free association tasks which we expected to yield useful insights regarding RQ1. In a first step, participants were asked to list up to 20 words which they spontaneously associate with trash films. These entries were processed as follows. The total number of terms each participant listed was calculated. In the case of spelling mistakes, words were recoded. Different forms of the same German word (noun or adjective) were grouped together, with the less frequently
listed term subsumed under the predominant one (e.g., Blut [blood] was recoded as blutig [bloody]). Recoding and grouping of the data were performed by the first author. In total, 3099 entries, amounting to 1173 different words, were produced. The number of entries per participant ranged between 1 and 20 (1 entry was compulsory), with a mean of 9.06 (SD = 5.17). To reduce variability stemming from idiosyncratic uses, terms mentioned by fewer than 5% of the participants were excluded from further analysis (for a similar procedure, see Van Goozen & Frijda, 1993). Application of the cut-off resulted in a final set of 22 different words, accounting for 849 entries. Next, we calculated the Cognitive Salience Index (CSI; Sutrop, 2001) by dividing the absolute frequency ($F$) of the terms mentioned by the product of the number of participants ($N$) and the mean list position (MLR) of the terms: $CSI = \frac{F}{N \times MLR}$. The CSI is bounded between 0 and 1, with higher values reflecting higher salience of words for a conceptual domain. A full overview is given in Table S1.

As Fig. 1 shows, cheap (billig) turned out to be by far the most salient term. This confirms that cheapness is perceived as the single most distinctive attribute of trash films. Like the English word cheap, the German adjective billig comprises a broad range of meanings far beyond designating low price. Both billig and cheap serve as derogatory terms for objects and actions considered to be of low quality, dumb or clumsily executed and even for modes of behaviour which are indecent, evasive and morally dubious. This fits well with the idea of trash as poorly made, aesthetically inferior films characterised by the ineptness of their creators and actors, low cultural value and morally offensive stances, and hence with the notion of trash as a ‘bad film’. Notably, the adjective bad was also among the terms listed. On the other hand, it is quite possible that cheap primarily, if not exclusively, referred to the films’ budgets. Given that low budget also features among the most salient terms, this supports the identification of cinematic trash with cheaply made films in terms of finances as compared to the Hollywood mainstream standard.

The humorous, entertaining and transgressive aspects of trash films also come to the fore in the data. Eight of the 22 terms which made it past the cut-off refer to these aspects: amusing, entertaining, involuntarily funny, funny, humour, fun, humorous and ironic. A second group of terms reflects the dimension of violence and horror: bloody, violence, horror, splatter and monster. Furthermore, we also found the adjective exaggerated, supporting the notion that trash is associated with a certain degree of excess (the German adjective übertrieben can be translated as both exaggerated and excessive).

Given the fact that excess is often considered a key feature of exploitation and cult films, it is interesting that both cult and exploitation likewise show up in the list. This strongly confirms a perceived affinity of the labels. At the same time, the aspect of sexual depictions that some authors (see Cook, 2005; Schaefer, 2007) regard as no less crucial for exploitation than violence was represented by only one term: sex. All other terms with sexual meanings failed to pass the 5% cut-off. Although we cannot rule out a social desirability effect, it is quite possible that our participants did not assign great importance to sexual depictions in trash films.

Fig. 2. Titles of films associated with the notion of trash mentioned by at least 5% of the participants, sorted by CSI rank.
These findings are further corroborated by the film titles that were provided. Participants were asked to list up to ten trash film titles which spontaneously came to mind. The list of film titles was processed analogously to the aforementioned procedure. Moreover, the notation of all film titles was standardised by the first author according to the entries in the Internet Movie Database (www.imdb.com). In cases where the IMDb did not provide any information, other online databases and film discussion forums were consulted. In total, 2536 entries, amounting to 991 film titles, were produced. The number of entries per participant ranged between 1 and 10 (1 entry was mandatory). The mean number of entries was 7.44 (SD = 2.82). Again, only the titles mentioned by at least 5% of the participants were retained, resulting in a final set of 11 film titles accounting for 472 entries, and the CSI was calculated (Table S2).

Regarding the prototypicality of the films included in the list (Fig. 2), we advise caution when it comes to the two highest-ranked films. On the one hand, the top score for Sharknado is probably largely due to the media frenzy it evoked in the year our data were collected. On the other, ever since the satirical book The Golden Turkey Awards (Medved & Medved, 1980) appeared, it has become commonplace to declare the film Plan 9 from Outer Space as well as its director the worst of all time. Thus the high rank of Plan 9 may at least partly be due to this film’s quasi-canonical status. Therefore, we assume that the other films mentioned are likely to be no less representative of trash than these two special cases.

We gathered additional information on the 11 films, such as director, year of production, genre attribution and budget (see Table S3). To be sure, given the limited availability of information, it is almost impossible to provide an accurate account of the average budget for a mainstream film. Still, the website The Numbers (www.the-numbers.com)—which specialises in providing revenue estimates and film sale projections—offers a list of the 20 films with the highest budgets and a list of the 20 films with the lowest budgets. These lists once again support the notion that the label ‘trash’ predominantly seems to be closely associated with cheap films in terms of budget.

Furthermore, according to the genre tags on the IMDb, with the exception of Sharknado, all films listed can be assigned to multiple genres. While trash does not feature as a genre on its own, comedy, action, horror and science fiction clearly stand out as the genres most often referred to. This suggests that these genres are predominantly prone to produce films that invite a trash labelling. Reservations regarding their prototypicality notwithstanding, the two films with the highest salience index seem to confirm that horror and science fiction in particular are perceived as core genres of trash.

Moreover, the almost identical salience of Sharknado and Plan 9 is revealing in yet another regard. While the former is undoubtedly a film intentionally made for ironic consumption and meets the criteria for parody or ‘deliberate camp’, the latter can be regarded as the prime example of failed art or ‘pure camp’. Thus, in our sample, the label ‘trash’ is applied to both types of films. This gives rise to the question of whether and how habitués differentiate modes of trash similar to camp from those that are not. However, as we did not specifically collect data regarding how participants conceive of the notion of camp, we cannot draw robust conclusions about the perceived difference between the labels.

![Fig. 3. Mean ratings for each of the five dimensions of the conceptualisation of trash films. Error bars indicate the standard error of the mean. Means with different letters are significantly different.](image-url)
4.2. Conceptualisations of the viewing stance (RQ2)

In a next step, we aimed to investigate the viewing stance adopted by trash habitués. To this end, participants were asked to rate on a 4-point scale (1 = disagree, 4 = agree) the extent to which each of the 33 experimenter-selected adjectives adequately describes possible features and attributions regarding trash films (see Table S4 for details). While the free associations reported in Section 4.1 shed light on the participants’ conceptualisation of trash films proper and their essential features, the forced-choice scales employed here primarily aimed at unveiling conceptualisations which reflect the predominant viewing stance among trash habitués.

Based on the ratings, we performed a Principle Component Analysis (PCA) with oblique rotation—a statistical procedure which reduces the number of variables to a smaller set of dimensions. This PCA resulted in five dimensions explaining 45% of the variance of the initial item set (Table S5). Judging from the items which contribute to each dimension, dimension 1 can be interpreted as transgression; in line with concepts of transgression (cf. Jenks, 2003), this dimension includes items such as excess and deviance from an accepted norm. Dimension 2 represents aspects contributing to an ironic viewing stance; it comprises items referring to ironic and amusing elements of trash films, their evaluation as enjoyable and good, and their ‘cult’ status. Dimension 3 covers items referring to the perception of the films as artistically complex, progressive, and political, and hence to features which can be interpreted as typical for an avant-garde film tradition that is often termed art cinema (cf. e.g. Ndalianis, 2007). Dimension 4 mostly comprises items representing low cultural value or esteem. Finally, dimension 5 includes attributions which classify trash films as commercial, schematic and conservative and may thus be interpreted as representing mainstream proximity.

Based on the averaged means of the individual items loading on the components, an ironic viewing stance emerged as the most important dimension (Fig. 3). This viewing stance involves ironic consumption and implies a positive re-evaluation of the films in question as ‘good’. Although trash films are primarily associated with cheapness, as discussed in Section 4.1, this does not translate into an equal importance of the attributions constituting the dimension of low cultural value. In fact, this dimension appears only as the least important of the five dimensions extracted through PCA. By contrast, transgression turned out to be of preeminent importance for the conceptualisation of trash. Critics and scholars often take the aspects associated with transgression as characteristic of the European tradition of art cinema (cf. Gorfinkel, 2008; Hawkins, 1999). From this perspective, it appears noteworthy that the mean ratings for transgression and art cinema do not significantly differ, whereas the mean rating for mainstream proximity is significantly lower compared to these two. This may indicate that trash films are perceived to bear greater resemblance to art cinema than to mainstream films.

Taken together, these findings support the notion that trash films are predominantly consumed with an ironic viewing stance and that the films are primarily conceptualised in terms of their deviance from Hollywood-dominated cinematic mainstream.

Fig. 4. Mean ratings for the principal emotional response dimensions elicited by trash films. Error bars indicate the standard error of the mean. Means with different letters are significantly different.

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4.3. Experiential dimensions of trash film viewing (RQ3)

Our survey also aimed at assessing the experiential dimension of trash films. Therefore, we investigated the key emotional responses elicited by trash films and explored whether and how the emotional response dimensions are related to the dimensions of trash film conceptualisation and viewing stance. An investigation of the experiential dimension sheds light on the question of why trash films appear enjoyable for their regular consumers.

To this end, participants were asked to rate on a 7-point scale (1 = never; 7 = always) how often, when watching trash films, they felt the emotional responses designated by 34 listed adjectives describing potential emotional states elicited by trash films (Table S6). Based on the ratings, we computed a PCA with oblique rotation which produced four components explaining 46% of the variance (Table S7). Based on the items that cluster together, dimension 1 predominantly comprises responses of negative affect, such as feeling shocked, disgusted or ashamed, and dimension 2, which is made up of items referring to attention, curiosity and surprise, can be interpreted as interest. With items such as feeling safe, protected, strong, masculine and cool, dimension 3 represents emotional control. Finally, with items referring to feeling exhilarated, amused and relaxed, dimension 4 can readily be interpreted as amusement.

Based on the averaged means of the individual items loading on the components, amusement unequivocally emerged as the predominant response to trash films (Fig. 4). The results reinforce the finding obtained in the free association task, namely, that trash films are particularly experienced in terms of their potential to elicit amusement. Amusement can thus be seen as the most important dimension contributing to the enjoyment of trash. At the same time, our data strongly support the assumption that positive consumption of trash films involves a multidimensional entertainment experience, as interest clearly emerged as the second most important emotional response dimension. Recent empirical research suggests that interest involves appraisals of novelty and complexity, on the one hand, and the ability to master these on the basis of expertise, on the other (Silvia & Berg, 2011). Given the close affiliation between trash films and art cinema, we hypothesise that the feeling of interest may at least partly be due to the viewers’ ability to recognise features which remind them of the avant-gardist art cinema tradition of filmmaking, a tradition that requires broad cinematic expertise and a sustained involvement with the films in question. In any event, besides fun-related enjoyment, interest-driven appreciation also plays an important part in habitués’ experience of trash films.

Notably, our participants attributed the least importance to negative affect as an emotional response dimension. It seems that the ‘guilty pleasure’ which McCoy and Scarborough (2014) hypothesised to involve viewers of trash TV in substantial levels of negative affect holds little, if any, importance for viewers of trash fiction films. Rather, the consumption of trash films appears to involve a sustained and deliberate hedonic habituate devoid of guilt feelings. Asked how often they watch trash films, 1.8% of the participants reported that they watch trash films every day, 16.1% several times a week, 10.2% once a week, 36.3% several times per month, 21.6% once a month and 14.0% less than once a month. Assuming that watching a trash film at least once a month amounts to a regular habit, 86.0% of the participants are regular trash film viewers. Additional data collected on the motivations for watching trash films (Table S8) and the duration of watching trash films (Table S9) corroborate this assumption.

In order to test whether and how the emotional response dimensions are related to the dimensions of trash film conceptualisation and viewing stance, multiple linear regression analyses were performed with the five dimensions of conceptualisation as predictors and the four response dimensions as dependent variables. The results are reported in Table 1.

Amusement—and thus enjoyment of trash films—turns out to be mostly associated with higher levels of an ironic viewing stance and, to a lesser degree, transgression and with lower levels of art cinema proximity and low cultural value. Our results thus firmly establish amusement as the main outcome of trash film consumption in terms of an ironic viewing stance. On the other hand, interest—and thus appreciation of these films—is only to a lesser degree associated with an ironic viewing stance.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictors</th>
<th>Outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Amusement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transgression</td>
<td>0.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ironic viewing stance</td>
<td>1.33***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Art cinema proximity</td>
<td>-0.32**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low cultural value</td>
<td>-0.38***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainstream proximity</td>
<td>0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R^2$</td>
<td>0.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$F$ ($S$, 336)</td>
<td>0.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p</td>
<td>&lt; 0.001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$B$: unstandardised regression coefficient; $SE(B)$: standard error of the unstandardised regression coefficient.

**p < 0.05.
***p < 0.001.

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but is mostly associated with high levels of art cinema proximity. We read this finding as a strong confirmation of the hypothesis that the feeling of interest in the experience of trash films does indeed mostly stem from a close association of these films with art cinema. Furthermore, emotional control is predicted by high levels of art cinema proximity and an ironic viewing stance and moderately high levels of transgression and mainstream proximity, whereas negative affect is predicted by high levels of low cultural value and transgression.

Interestingly, the transgressive elements which are often named as a key feature of trash films in the literature obviously have the potential to trigger both amusement and negative affect. We take this as a confirmation of the necessity and relevance of particular viewing stances for the positive re-evaluation of ‘bad films’. While a viewing stance which links transgression to an ironic viewing may produce amusement, a stance linking transgression to low cultural value appears prone to elicit negative affect.

4.4. Social predispositions and aesthetic preferences (RQ4)

Our data show that habitués conceive of trash films in terms of their deviation from mainstream cinema and their association with art cinema. According to Austin (1984), art films are films which fit into the category of ‘high culture’, with the typical art film audience consisting mainly of highly educated, enthusiastic filmgoers with an interest in learning something about the films they see. With all due caution regarding the sampling procedure, our sample suggests a similar profile for trash film habitués. Whereas Kovács (1982) claimed that the target audience for exploitation films is an uneducated lower class, our findings suggest quite the opposite regarding trash films. A vast majority of the participants reported holding a university diploma or higher education entrance qualification. According to the data provided by the Federal Statistical Office (www.destatis.de), this is well above the average education level in Germany. This not only supports that ‘paracinema’ is essentially a phenomenon related to a male, white and educated middle-class audience (Sconce, 1995), but also challenges Bourdieu’s (1984) notion of a social distinction in terms of cultural and educational elitism. Despite the fact that, regarding their educational level, our participants would seem to fit the idea of bearers of ‘cultural capital’, their marked liking of films commonly thought low in terms of their cultural value and prestige clearly runs counter to Bourdieu’s concept linking cultural capital and ‘legitimate’ taste to a predilection for highbrow cultural objects.

This impression is further strengthened when we look at the general aesthetic preference profile of our sample. To acquire this profile, we asked participants to rate their art and media preferences on 5-point scales (1 = never, 5 = very often). Notably, popular music and quality films were ranked highest, while commercial TV, theatre and opera were rated lowest. In general, Table S10 shows above-midpoint scores for very different art and media forms. Based on these ratings, we carried out a PCA with oblique rotation to achieve more robust results. This procedure produced four components, explaining 55% of the

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1 We are extremely grateful to one of our reviewers for calling attention to the midpoint scores in our participants’ art, media and genre preferences.
variance (Table S11). Judging from the items that load together, the four components reflect the commercial vs. non-commercial background of the respective groups of artworks and media products and their adherence to commercial vs. highbrow culture, with these two sets of oppositions usually closely associated. Component 1 comprises mainly subsidised forms of highbrow culture such as theatre plays, operas and exhibitions. Component 2 represents commercial audio-visual media, e.g. blockbuster films, TV series and popular music. Component 3 comprises subsidised TV channels and cinema and covers not only culture and public broadcasting TV but also quality films. Finally, with comics and popular literature, component 4 represents commercial print media.

When considering the averaged means of the individual items loading on the components (Fig. 5), it becomes obvious that the participants do not unequivocally prefer either commercial or non-commercial art and media forms. The mean ratings for subsidised TV channels and cinema and commercial audio-visual media are almost identical, as are the mean ratings for subsidised forms of highbrow culture and commercial print media. On the one hand, the trash film habitués in our sample clearly favour quality films and TV channels such as the Franco-German network Arte and the cooperative Franco-Swiss-German network 3sat, both known for programmes promoting culture and the arts and for regularly showing films typically regarded as art cinema. This accords well with the notion of high ‘cultural capital’. On the other hand, the equally strong preferences for non-commercial highbrow films and TV channels and for commercial media—including mainstream films—indicate that our participants’ aesthetics preferences are far from being homogeneous. What is more, the significant difference between the two highest and the remaining components clearly shows that participants prefer audio-visual media irrespective of their commercial or non-commercial nature and that their interest in other ‘elite’ forms of highbrow culture is significantly smaller.

Our data thus demonstrate that the audience for cultural forms of supposedly low standing does indeed not consist of only low-educated individuals, but rather that it also attracts highly educated persons who tend to be ‘omnivorous’ in Peterson’s (2005) sense. The broad art and media preferences reported by our participants clearly support the notion that trash habitués are cultural omnivores rather than elitist univores. Their tendency to omnivorosity is further highlighted by the participants’ film genre preferences. The results reported in Table S12 indicate above-midpoint scores for very different mainstream genres, ranging from horror to drama to biopics.

4.5. Manners and practices of trash film viewing (RQ5)

If the habitual consumption of non-prestigious art forms such as trash films reflects a form of cultural taste, then Holt’s (1998) finding regarding the importance of how something is consumed as opposed to what is consumed seems particularly relevant. This may apply not only to specific viewing stances adopted during trash film viewing, but potentially also to

![Fig. 6. Mean ratings for each of the conditions of social context (left) and location (right) of trash film viewing. Error bars indicate the standard error of the mean. Means with different letters are significantly different.](image-url)
specific habitual manners and practices of such viewing. To address this question, we collected data on the typical context of trash film consumption. Participants were asked to indicate the social context of their trash film consumption, i.e. with whom they usually watch trash films, the location of the viewing and the technical equipment used. In all three questionnaires, ratings were given on 5-point scales (1 = never, 5 = always). Watching trash films either alone or with friends and at home clearly stand out as the prevailing conditions (Fig. 6; for detailed results see Tables S13 and S14).

Moreover, our participants reported that they predominantly watch trash films on DVD and flat screen TVs (Table S15). The next item, Blu-ray/HD-DVD players, is conspicuously less highly rated, and the scores for the obsolete technologies VHS video and CRT TVs are far below the scales’ midpoint. The practices of our trash habitué sample thus clearly differ from established concepts regarding cult films, despite the strategy of ironic consumption shared in the two cases. While we did not specifically gather data on collecting habits, our findings suggest that a recreation or retro-appeal of past forms of distribution and technology, particularly in terms of VHS collecting (Hills & Sexton, 2015), is not specifically sought.

In a similar vein, our findings also show a marked difference between trash film consumption and concepts linking cult films to cinema as a temporal community of ritualistic participation (Austin, 1981; McCulloch, 2011). In contrast to the latter findings, our participants did not assign great importance to interactions and exchanges during the film viewing. However, sharing their experiences did indeed matter for our sample. Asked whether they engage in any form of exchange about the trash films they watch, 273 participants (79.8%) gave an affirmative answer. However, in contrast to established notions regarding cult films, in the case of trash films, sharing experiences happens predominantly either in form of real-life conversations before or after the film or in the form of writing in Internet forums (Table S16). Interestingly, our data provide evidence for the interrelation of exchanges and the enjoyment and appreciation of trash (Table 2). T-tests show that participants who reportedly engage in such exchanges gave significantly higher ratings to amusement, interest and emotional control, while those who reported that they do not engage in exchanges tended to give higher ratings to negative affect.

In light of these findings, habitual and affirmative trash film consumption can be interpreted as a special case of fan culture practices. As pointed out in Section 2.3, the sharing of experiences and, in particular, writing have been assigned a crucial role as sources of pleasure in fan cultures (Duffett, 2013; Sanjek, 1990) and are related to group-specific cultural tastes (Fiske, 1992).

5. Limitations

Although our findings are generally consistent with the expectations based on existing literature on trash films and their audience, some caution is advised regarding potential biases produced by our sampling method. Under the assumption that it would have made little sense to collect data from participants who are unable to make sense of the notion ‘trash’ and that it is a distinctive feature of art and media consumption that they are self-sought and self-motivated, we aimed at specifically recruiting participants who habitually watch, enjoy and appreciate trash films. To this end, the survey was mainly disseminated through websites dedicated to the discussion of trash films. As a result, we cannot rule out the possibility that we may to a certain degree have favoured participants with a specific understanding of trash films. However, we took care not to give any prior definition of ‘trash’ in our survey. Additionally, we recruited further participants from universities. We did this in light of the fact that we expected a relatively strong familiarity with trash films among graduate students and undergraduates. However, doing this may have introduced a bias in the sample towards the well-educated. Also, it must be born in mind that our data were collected almost exclusively among German-speaking participants; different results may arise in other socio-linguistic contexts. Accordingly, future studies could employ a more diverse sample of languages, cultures, gender and educational level to overcome possible restrictions on the generalisability of our findings and to allow comparative findings.

6. Conclusion and outlook

By means of an online survey presented to regular consumers of trash films, we uncovered (1) conceptualisations of essential features associated with a positive use of the label ‘trash’, as well as (2) associated viewing stances and (3) experiential response dimensions. Our study contributes to a better understanding of how particular audiences express a distinctive cultural taste by enjoying and appreciating specific cultural objects which deviate from the mainstream standard.

Table 2

<p>| Differences in mean ratings for the principal emotional response dimensions elicited by trash films dependent on engagement in exchanges. |
|-------------------------------------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exchanges</th>
<th>No exchanges</th>
<th>t (df)</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>Cohen’s d</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amusement</td>
<td>5.22</td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td>4.67</td>
<td>1.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interest</td>
<td>3.90</td>
<td>0.64</td>
<td>3.64</td>
<td>0.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional control</td>
<td>2.99</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>2.45</td>
<td>0.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative affect</td>
<td>2.36</td>
<td>0.74</td>
<td>2.54</td>
<td>0.77</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Moreover, our research provides an empirical basis for the predominantly theoretical debate on trash films, and by focussing on fiction films it serves to amend previous empirical studies on ‘trashy’ audio-visual media and their audiences. Last, but not least, our findings on the habitual audience of trash films may prove useful in current sociological debates on class, cultural capital and distinction by offering further evidence for the need to expand Bourdieu’s (1984) theory of tastes by including the model of cultural omnivorosity.

While we confirmed several of the existing scholarly assumptions concerning trash films, we were also able to show clear differences between trash films and other supposedly similar or close concepts, such as exploitation and cult films. Overall, our data indicate that trash does not constitute a genre of its own. Rather, it serves as a label which can be attributed to films of very different genres—in particular, the notion of trash specifically refers to films which are overwhelmingly evaluated as cheap. In their great majority, the films which our participants associated with the label ‘trash’ were low-budget horror films. The data confirm an overlap with the concept of exploitation films in terms of excessive violence and overtly sexualised depictions. Yet in the case of trash films, the sexual dimension appears to be of little relevance. However, future research is needed to investigate the importance of sexual attraction for the enjoyment of trash films in more detail. We cannot rule out the possibility that the relative low ratings for items relating to sexual arousal were due to social desirability effects.

Despite their reported cheapness and a marked tendency of the films listed to present shocking material, we found solid evidence that trash film habitué seeks and find various dimensions of enjoyment and appreciation in watching these films. On the one hand, the enjoyment of trash films turned out to be primarily driven by filmic aspects perceived as amusing, funny and comical, and to depend mainly on an ironic viewing stance. However, further research is necessary regarding the exact nature of the ironic viewing stance. Our findings suggest an overlap with existing concepts of camp. Clearly, this calls for a comparative investigation of the concepts and stances associated with both labels, and in particular, the distinction between ‘pure’ and ‘deliberate’ camp.

On the other hand, the appreciation of trash films appears to reflect a perceived deviance of these films from the cinematic mainstream. This deviance underlies the intellectual interest taken in trash films and their perceived affinity with an avant-gardist art cinema tradition of filmmaking. This would confirm the idea that, in line with Sconce’s (1995) notion of ‘paracinema’, trash films are ‘anti-establishment films’.

To a large extent, our findings support Sconce’s hypothesis that trash films mainly appeal to a male and highly educated audience. In our sample, a liking for trash films is paralleled by (4) the participants’ broad preferences for diverse art and media forms across the boundaries of class and taste assumed by Bourdieu (1984). Thus, our sample suggests that the trash habitué meets the profile of a highly educated cultural ‘omnivore’ (Peterson, 2005). This finding strongly contests assumptions which indiscriminately relate the consumption of lowbrow cultural forms to a predominantly uneducated audience. Instead, our data suggest that to a large degree, a predilection for trash films reflects a cultural taste which is based on substantial levels of ‘cultural capital’.

In line with Holt (1998), we found good evidence that such a taste is related to (5) specific manners and practices of consumption. Our data partially confirm the proximity of trash and cult films, as suggested in the literature. However, contrary to prevailing assumptions about cult films, we could not confirm a ‘retro culture’ nostalgia in terms of VHS. Moreover, our data strongly suggest that exchanges and expertise play an important role in the practices of trash film consumption. Sharing information within a community indeed seems to have a strong influence on the experience and evaluation of trash films. However, unlike the assumed typical cult-film setting, real-time participation with strangers and active interaction only play a minor role in the case of trash films. Certainly, the role of shared experiences and the precise forms of exchange among trash fans require closer examination. Finally, in order to delimit the precise aesthetic ‘signature’ of trash films, further research is needed regarding the recognition and evaluation of the specific features that render a film ‘trashy’.

The exploratory findings presented here provide a firm empirical and conceptual basis for future theory-driven investigations into the cultural, sociological and psychological mechanisms underlying specific audiences’ enjoyment and appreciation of trash films and related purportedly ‘bad’ media.

Author note

Data acquisition, data analysis and writing of the paper were conducted at the Max Planck Institute for Empirical Aesthetics.

Conflict of interest

The authors do not have any conflicts of interest, financial or otherwise, to disclose.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2016.04.002.

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**Keyvan Sarkhosh** obtained his PhD in Comparative Literature from the University of Vienna, with a thesis on the films of Nicolas Roeg. He is currently a postdoctoral research fellow at the Max Planck Institute for Empirical Aesthetics. The main focus of his recent research is on the history and aesthetics of film and the relationship between high and popular culture.

**Winfried Menninghaus** is Director of the Department of Language and Literature of the Max Planck Institute for Empirical Aesthetics (Frankfurt am Main). His fields of research are classical rhetoric and poetics; philosophical, evolutionary and empirical aesthetics; literature from 1750 to the present.