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So ‘Foreign’ It’s Good: The Cultural Politics of Accented Cult Cinema

Abstract

While the canon of so-bad-it’s-good cinema has predominantly centred upon American films, it is notable that a significant number of recent entries – including *Miami Connection* (1987), *Troll 2* (1990), *Samurai Cop* (1991), *The Room* (2003) and *Birdemic: Shock and Terror* (2010) – were directed by non-American filmmakers working in America. Building on Hamid Naficy’s use of the concept ‘accented cinema’ to describe exilic and diasporic filmmakers working in the West, this article explores the cultural politics of accented cult cinema and investigates to what extent the celebration of these low-budget exploitation films as so-bad-it’s-good relies upon a (largely disguised) perception of foreignness.

In January 2009, Vietnamese film director James Nguyen took his self-financed film *Birdemic: Shock and Terror* (2010) to the Sundance Film Festival and proceeded to promote it himself with handmade signs in broken English that read ‘Why did the eagles and vultures attacked?’ [sic] and ‘Bidemic.com’ [sic] (Vice 2016). Despite, or perhaps more accurately *because*, of the shortcomings of his promotional strategy, Nguyen’s film soon built up interest amongst various established figures within the cult cinema community – with the co-founder of DraftHouse Films Evan Husney setting up a distribution deal with Severin Films, and cult icons Tim Heidecker and Eric Wareheim introducing the film at its Los Angeles premiere in February 2010. This amateurish tribute to Alfred Hitchcock’s *The Birds* (1963) that was shot on a budget of less than \$10,000 became the latest entry in the canon of so-bad-it’s-good cinema and quickly picked up mainstream media attention with *Variety* reporting on Nguyen’s ‘hilariously bad filmmaking’ (Scheib 2010), *The Huffington Post* describing it as ‘one of the worst films

ever made' (Periera 2010), and *Vice* declaring it the 'New Best Worst Movie Ever' (viceuk 2010). Six years later, Evan Husney reunited with Nguyen to profile him for the *Vice* documentary series *Outsider* (2016) and their episode together tracks the tensions between Nguyen's aspirations to become a successful Hollywood filmmaker on the back of the popularity of *Birdemic: Shock and Terror*, and the fact that the interest in his work is largely based on Nguyen's reputation for having naively directed 'the worst movie ever made' (Vice 2016).

The canon of so-bad-it's-good cinema is replete with similar examples of filmmakers who have struggled with the unexpected cult success of their film, although it is notable how US-centric that canon is. As Ernest Mathijs and Jamie Sexton observe, 'most of the films at the top of the canon of badness are American, an indication perhaps of that culture's perceived obsession with rankings of cultural achievements' (2011, 38) and there are only a handful of non-Western films such as the Hong Kong 'Brucesploitation' spy movie *Challenge of the Tiger* (1980), the Filipino Bond spoof *For Your Height Only* (1981), the Indonesian exploitation title *Lady Terminator* (1989) and the Ugandan action film *Who Killed Captain Alex?* (2010) that have broken into the largely West-centric canon. Moreover, it is significant that even within this grouping of non-Western titles there is still an emphasis upon reworking established American films and genres. As Gere LaDue observes, this kind of fan interest in non-Western cinema tends to rely upon 'not so much an encounter with a foreign culture as the twisting of something vaguely familiar into a new universe' (as quoted in Bordwell 2000, 93). Conversely, it is remarkable how many of the ostensibly 'American' films that populate these lists of so-bad-it's-good cinema were actually produced by non-American filmmakers – including Israeli director Menahem Golan's science-fiction musical *The Apple* (1980), Korean director Woo-sang Park's martial arts title *Miami Connection* (1987), Italian director Claudio Fragasso's

horror sequel *Troll 2* (1990), Iranian director Amir Shervan's direct-to-video action film *Samurai Cop* (1991), and Polish director Tommy Wiseau's domestic drama *The Room* (2003).

Elsewhere, in my research into the Anglo-American reception of non-Western cult cinema, I have used the term 'cult cosmopolitanism' to 'describe the cosmopolitan embrace of cultural difference through cult reception practices' (2017, 21) but I believe there is something quite distinct going on in the reception of these films produced by non-American filmmakers in the US. They more closely resemble what Hamid Naficy has described as 'accented cinema' given that, as he explains, 'if the dominant cinema is considered universal and without accent, the films that diasporic and exilic subjects make are accented' (2001, 4). What particularly resonates with this group of so-bad-it's-good texts is Naficy's claim that this 'accent emanates not so much from the accented speech of the diegetic characters as from the displacement of the filmmakers and their artisanal production modes' (2001, 4). Given that films such as *Troll 2* and *Birdemic: Shock and Terror* are not only set in America but also feature an almost-entirely white American cast, the engagement with cultural difference for a largely white Anglo-American fandom is not as palpable as with the Indonesian and Ugandan cult films that I cited earlier. Nevertheless, I would argue that the accented nature of these films is still a crucial part of their appeal for cult audiences, even if this 'accent' is not immediately evident within the diegesis of the film. Of course, as Melis Behlil has argued in her study of global filmmakers, Hollywood is a 'transnational industry that has attracted talent from around the world throughout its history' (2016, 14), so there is nothing particularly remarkable about non-American directors producing films in the US. However, as I will demonstrate, I do believe that there is something specific to the arena of low-budget exploitation cinema that lends itself to this reliance upon a (largely disguised) perception of foreignness. While Behlil primarily focuses on mainstream international directors working on Hollywood productions and Naficy focuses his attention on the more rarefied space of art cinema, my focus here is on low-budget

exploitation film production and a body of work that I am terming ‘accented cult cinema’ – by which I mean cult films that are marked by the displacement of their filmmakers from their home country – with the purpose of investigating the cultural politics of the simultaneous celebration and mockery of this work as so-bad-it’s-good.

In order to establish how this accented cult cinema relates to other prevailing forms of so-bad-it’s-good cinema, I will start by outlining the relationship between three forms of perceived distance that tend to underpin this notion of badness: (1) the *aesthetic* distance between the director’s intention and what they have actually produced, (2) the *temporal* distance between the current viewing context and the period in which the film was made, and (3) the *cultural* distance between a largely Anglo-American audience and a filmmaker who was born elsewhere. I will then focus my analysis on the fan and critical reception of *Birdemic: Shock and Terror*, *Troll 2* and *The Room*, paying particular attention to the ways in which constructions of foreignness structure this reception, especially in terms of the figure of the outsider and the alien. I will then conclude with an analysis of *The Room* and its related paratexts to explore how Tommy Wiseau negotiates his accented position as a Polish émigré to the US who refuses to discuss or even acknowledge his cultural heritage. Ultimately, by tracing the reception of this form of accented cult cinema, I will argue that it is not enough to treat these films as incompetent failures made by naïve filmmakers without first addressing the cultural and political contexts that helped shape these textual failings.

Cult Cinema and Distance: Aesthetic/Temporal/Cultural

Perhaps the most common explanation for the appeal of so-bad-it’s-good cinema rests on the aesthetic distance between what the director intended to produce and what they have actually produced. This is central to accounts of the genre within fan criticism such as Rob Hill’s book

The Bad Movie Bible where he argues that the core quality that makes a film ‘so-bad-it’s-good’ is ‘incompetence’ (2017, 8). The measure of competence here is the ability to follow the recognised (Hollywood) codes of cinematic language and Hill applies this test specifically to *The Room*, arguing that ‘cinema has a language, and when a movie seems to be speaking it phonetically or getting it wrong, we call it bad. *The Room* gets the language very wrong, absurdly wrong at times’ (2017, 183). By this criterion, a filmmaker that intentionally breaks these conventions would not be producing a bad film. Instead, the essential factor is that the director intends to follow the established codes of cinematic language and fails in their attempt. Meanwhile, academic scholarship on so-bad-it’s-good cinema has similarly identified the perception of failed intent to be key to this form of reception, with James MacDowell and James Zborowski positing that ‘our focus is specifically filmmaking that is valued, by fans or critics, for its *incompetence*’ (2013, 1) and that ‘*The Room* fails to achieve basic levels of coherence – in this case, logically, temporally and affectively – that thousands of examples of popular narrative filmmaking have taught us to take for granted’ (2013, 15). While MacDowell and Zborowski’s study is largely textual, there are clear correspondences with reception studies such as Christine Cornea’s work on the reception of 1950s so-bad-it’s-good films such as *Plan 9 from Outer Space* (1959), where she observes that reviews tend to foreground the ‘unintentional incongruity between a particular work, the classical paradigm, and the acceptable execution of generic codes and conventions’ (2013, 86). It is not simply that these films do not follow certain generic codes and utilise the established cinematic language, therefore, but rather that the director was naively attempting to follow those aesthetic codes and failed in their attempt.

Nevertheless, as the cult reception of a 1950s title like *Plan 9 from Outer Space* indicates, the perception of failed intention is not the only characteristic that helps shape so-bad-it’s-good reception. As Ernest Mathijs and Jamie Sexton have observed, the cult

surrounding a substantial proportion of so-bad-it's-good titles also relies upon a sense of 'temporal distance' (2011, 89) between the current viewership and the production context of the film itself. This is especially the case for the classic 1950s examples of so-bad-it's-good cinema such as *Plan 9 From Outer Space*, *Robot Monster* (1953) and *The Brain from Planet Arous* (1957) which all initially developed a cult following in the 1970s and 1980s through late-night film screenings and ironic accolades such as Harry and Michael Medved's 'Golden Turkey Awards' which famously awarded *Plan 9 from Outer Space* the prize for 'Worst Film of All Time' and proclaimed director Ed Wood to be the 'Worst Director of All Time' (Medved 1980). It is clear that, as Alison Graham has observed, the 'perceived distance... [between Ed Wood's] desire to create compelling narratives and his inability to do so' (1991, 109) is only one part of this form of cult film reception, with the 'perceived distance between the so-called fifties "innocence" and a contemporary cynicism' (1991, 110) also playing a role in shaping this pleasurable engagement with so-bad-it's-good cinema.

Significantly, however, this temporal distance is less evident in the cult reception of the group of 'accented' cult films that I am describing in this article. Films such as *Birdemic: Shock and Terror*, *Troll 2*, *The Apple*, *Samurai Cop* and *The Room* all established their cult reputation in the same decade that they were produced, and it is only *Miami Connection* which has a significant gap between the year of its production in 1987 and the year it started to build a cult reputation following its 'discovery' and subsequent release by Drafthouse Films in 2012.¹ Crucially, I would argue that these more recent entries in the so-bad-it's-good canon are less marked by temporal distance than they are by a form of cultural distance linked to foreignness, and while this functions in a similar distancing manner for audiences to facilitate their enjoyment of these texts as so-bad-it's-good, the politics of this position are quite distinct. Indeed, while scholarship on so-bad-it's-good cinema has tended to focus attention primarily on the aesthetic distance between what the director intended and what they achieved, or the

temporal distance between the film and its audience, there has been little attention paid to the cultural distance that underpins much of this so-bad-it's-good reception. This is despite one of the first scholarly accounts of the phenomenon of cult cinema raising exactly this issue, with Timothy Corrigan arguing that:

cult movies are always after a fashion foreign films: the images are especially exotic; the viewer uniquely touristic; and within that relationship viewers go to places, see things, and manipulate customs in a way that no indigenous member of that culture or mainstream filmgoer normally could. Why Jerry Lewis is so loved in France follows from the same reason that Lina Wertmüller, despite her mediocre reception at home, became so popular in the United States. Cultural distance allows for the textual transformation of cult audiences. (1991, 27)

For Corrigan, therefore, cultural distance is crucial to cult cinema as it allows audiences to transform the text through the process of reception. It is notable therefore that this particular conception of cultural distance has rarely been at the forefront of subsequent scholarship in this area – more often appearing in indirect allusions such as in I.Q. Hunter's argument that exploitation films 'can appear so beguilingly distant from the conventions of mainstream cinema as to represent an alternative universe of cinematic practice, an *exotic far shore* of incompetence and tastelessness' (2017, 484, emphasis added). While the cult reception of non-Western cinema is discussed in Leon Hunt's study of Hong Kong cult cinema (2003), Ekky Imanjaya's research into Indonesian exploitation cinema (2009), and Tessa Dwyer's work on the subtitling and dubbing of 'bad' foreign-language cinema (2014), it is clear that more work is needed to explore the role of cultural distance in cult reception more broadly – especially given that, as I will argue, it even plays a role in the Anglo-American reception of films

produced in the US itself. Of course, as Jamie Sexton reminds us, we should be wary of slipping into an ‘exoticist assumption’ (2017, 8) when we study these kinds of engagements with cultural difference. In other words, we should avoid assuming that fans engage with these texts through a lens of exoticism simply because there are markers of cultural difference present. This is particularly the case when these markers of cultural difference are not overt within the diegetic world of the film. Nonetheless, as I will now demonstrate, it is evident that in the case of films such as *The Room*, *Troll 2*, and *Birdemic: Shock and Terror*, these markers of cultural distance play a significant role within their fan reception under the banner of so-bad-it’s-good cinema.

Broken English and the Figure of the Outsider/Alien

Many of the fan accounts of these titles emphasise the broken English of the director and how this impacted the production (and especially the script) of their film. For example, when Jim Vorel compiles his list of ‘10 Essential Bad Movies for your Collection’ for *Paste Magazine*, he includes four titles that are American films made by non-American directors (*The Room*, *Birdemic: Shock and Terror*, *Troll 2*, and *Miami Connection*) and he highlights that *Troll 2* was made by a ‘director of Italian exploitation cinema with no English-speaking ability’ and that *Miami Connection* ‘was produced by yet another non-English speaker’ which he emphasises is ‘always a good sign’ (Vorel 2013). Furthermore, as Zack Schonfeld has argued, the production history of *Troll 2* is repeatedly used as a benchmark of so-bad-it’s-good film production within this fandom:

The origin story behind *Troll 2* is sacred scripture for bad movie devotees. The film was dreamed up by an eccentric Italian filmmaker, Claudio Fragasso, who wrote the

script in broken English and reportedly refused to let his English-speaking actors correct the awkward-sounding lines. (Schonfeld 2018)

In Ian Olney's comprehensive account of the production and reception of *Troll 2* in his book *Euro Horror: Classic European Horror Cinema in Contemporary American Culture*, he explains that producer Joe D'Amato (the Anglicised pseudonym of Aristide Massaccesi) asked director Claudio Fragasso to make the movie on location in rural Utah with a cast of locals, using a script that was translated from Italian, and that 'Fragasso apparently only gave them a few pages of the script at a time and insisted that they deliver its hopelessly unidiomatic English dialogue verbatim' (2013, 73). Details from this production history also appears in the fan reception with Rob Hill's review of the film explaining that 'all but one member of the crew only spoke Italian' (2017, 126) and that the 'key to *Troll 2*'s appeal is that it gets everything wrong; every single aspect of the filmmaking process is completely fucked up. And it was fucked up in Italian before being badly translated into English and fucked up again' (2017, 126). The perception of badness here rests upon a production context in which a non-English speaking film crew attempts to produce an English-language film and we should remember that it is the resultant 'failures' of translation that are subsequently being celebrated and mocked within this so-bad-it's-good fandom.

Similarly, accounts of the making of *Birdemic: Shock and Terror* repeatedly mention the fact that director James Nguyen was born in Vietnam and had an imperfect grasp of English while writing and directing the film. Rob Hill, for example, interviews star Whitney Moore who explains that 'the script was in broken English and we were only given one third of it at a time; presumably because he was still writing it' (2017, 196) and in his accompanying review of the film, Hill asserts that:

Nguyen's idiosyncrasies extend to every aspect of the movie but are particularly noticeable in the script. His command of English is sketchy and the actors weren't allowed to deviate from what he wrote. It seems that adopting his accent was the only way to make sense of his strange prose, which led to some bizarre line readings.

(2017, 195)

While references to poor English language skills are a regular feature of the criticism on these films, it is relatively rare for critics to reflect further on the implications that this perception of foreignness has for the reception of these films as so-bad-it's-good. One of the few accounts of this phenomenon that does attempt to engage directly with this issue, albeit briefly, comes in the *AV Club* article 'Shitty Miracles' where a group of critics discuss the phenomenon of so-bad-it's-good cinema, and Scott Tobias reflects that:

In the New Cult Canon entries I've written on so-bad-it's-good favorites like *The Room*, *Troll 2*, and *Birdemic: Shock And Terror*, the common thread is something I think of as 'cinema as a second language,' i.e. movies where the cultural differences between a foreign director and an American milieu wreck [sic] all sorts of havoc. (Rabin et al 2013)

This notion of 'cinema as a second language' is evocative as it implies more than the idea that the director was working in their second language on set but that cinema itself was a second language to them – with a lack of familiarity with cinematic language (linked implicitly with Hollywood and the American milieu more broadly) being the cause of the textual failures that are evident on screen. It is not surprising, therefore, that directors such as Claudio Fragasso, James Nguyen or Tommy Wiseau are often framed (and, it should be said, celebrated) as

outsider figures working on the fringes of American film production. I.Q. Hunter's description of *Birdemic*, for example, is as "“Outsider Art,” a work of beguiling naivety whose unwitting perpetrator, James Nguyen, seems oblivious to the “rules” of filmmaking' (2017, 490). Meanwhile, critic Jonah Weiner argues that

such films are typically helmed by outsiders, who seem untainted by excesses of competence, money, or irony. Despite the preposterousness of the movies these people make, their outsider status lends them an important aura of authenticity, a word that equates, in this context, with a lack of knowingness. We like our awesomely bad auteurs to be out on the joke, to believe themselves actually awesome. If we detect a wink in the film, it threatens the happy sense that we're experiencing something truly naïve, truly alien, truly weird. (2010)

What is interesting here is the linking of outsider status with the notion of producing something both naïve and alien. The celebration of the perceived naivety of these outsider figures harks back to the romanticised myth of the noble savage whose aura of authenticity is premised upon being uncorrupted by the trappings of modern civilisation. It is notable therefore that while direct acknowledgements of the role of foreignness and cultural distance within the pleasures of so-bad-it's-good cinema are relatively rare, there is a regular image that is often utilised in critical accounts that functions to allude to this spectre of foreignness – the alien. One of the most telling accounts of the phenomenon, in this respect, comes from Tom Bissell² who argues that the dialogue in *The Room* is 'interplanetary bizarre' (2012, 215) and that it 'is the movie an alien who has never seen a movie might make after having movies thoroughly explained to him' (2012, 218). Although directors Claudio Fragasso and James Nguyen do not appear on-screen themselves in *Troll 2* and *Birdemic*, so their perceived foreignness is only evident

through their roles in the film's production rather than their physical presence on screen, Tommy Wiseau is the exception as he is the director, writer and lead actor in *The Room*. His film is therefore not only marked by the ways in which his Eastern-European heritage shaped the production context, but is also explicitly marked by his own spoken accent on screen. It is no surprise therefore that this diegetic accent is a significant element within accounts of *The Room*'s badness. Tom Bissell, for example, observes that, 'Wiseau's osmium-dense, east-of-the-Carpathians accent... which falls somewhere between early Schwarzenegger and Vlad Dracul, makes for an incomprehensible leading man' (2012, 215). This distance between his intention to play the All-American hero in lead character Johnny and a reception that focuses on his failure is particularly resonant in the sequence where Tommy Wiseau recreates the famous James Dean dialogue in *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) and screams 'You're tearing me apart, Lisa!'

This sequence has already been analysed in detail by MacDowell and Zborowski so I do not intend to repeat their close analysis of the framing and performance style here. I largely agree with their analysis that 'what is being attempted is an exclamation and mode of performance designed to express the emotions of the unfairly-wronged Johnny so that we might be moved to sympathize with his plight' (2013, 13), and that Wiseau essentially fails in his attempt to successfully express these emotions and to elicit audience sympathy for Johnny. Where I diverge slightly from the MacDowell/Zborowski position is that they use this sequence as evidence for a proposed 'objective' reading of cinematic badness. As they explain, 'in measuring the film against its own intentions – which are construed in relation to these pertinent conventions – we are nonetheless able to advance a judgement of ineptitude, and badness, on grounds assuredly different from mere historical taste' (2013, 15). This final point is significant as MacDowell and Zborowski are not arguing that calling *The Room* a bad film is merely a subjective taste judgement but rather that it is close to being an 'objectively bad film' – a

concept coined by J. Hoberman to describe a film that ‘attempts to reproduce the institutional mode of representation, but its failure to do so deforms the simplest formulae and clichés so absolutely that you barely recognise them’ (1991, 14). In their analysis of *The Room*, therefore, MacDowell and Zborowski argue that ‘while we may not be in any doubt as to the sincerity or deeply felt nature of this writer/director/star’s emotions... we are able only to witness inarticulate tokens of them’ (2013, 15). Although they don’t go on to address the cultural implications of this lack of articulacy, it is my contention that this inarticulacy is intimately bound up with the accented nature of Wiseau’s work more generally and that this ostensibly ‘objective’ account of bad cinema neglects the ways in which perceptions of cultural difference play a crucial role in his apparent ineptness and incompetence.

This is not to say that critics have generally ignored Wiseau’s status as a Polish-born filmmaker working in the US. Nicholas Barber, for example, argues that ‘what distinguishes the cult of *The Room* from that of other midnight movies is its cruelty’ given that ‘we’re not laughing at a cynical Hollywood potboiler, but an immigrant film-maker’s misbegotten passion project’ (Barber 2016). It is this context of migration that complicates some of the ways in which Wiseau’s failings as a filmmaker have been framed – especially given that his relationship with America, and Americanness, are so tangled and complex. As Tom Bissell observes:

Americanness is also the central, and centrally unexamined, theme of *The Room*. Wiseau cast himself within the film as a hunk of Johnny Americana, with no corresponding recognition of how absurdly ill-fitting this role actually is. Whenever the film’s Johnny throws a football, you do not see Johnny. What you see is the ungainly shot put of an eastern European who did not grow up throwing footballs. This is the

most longingly human aspect of *The Room* and, not at all coincidentally, the hardest thing to laugh at. (Bissell 2012, 222)

Wiseau's imitation of James Dean in *Rebel Without a Cause* is therefore wrapped up in a desire to emulate an icon of Americana, and his failure in that attempt is therefore more than a mere failure to apply certain accepted codes of Hollywood cinematic language but is also the failure by a migrant to the US to lose his accent and become accepted as an American (filmmaker). Given that Wiseau is famously reluctant to reveal the nation of his birth, and proclaims in interviews that 'I'm an American... and I want to be treated as an American' (Bissell 2012, 222), it is important that we address the cultural dynamics at play when audiences are laughing at his cinematic failures.

Julian Stringer's work on the camp Anglo-American reception of Hong Kong cinema is particularly useful here as he notes that:

To partake of a camp aesthetic is to advertise the fact of one's own knowledge and cultural status... In terms of the Western look at Hong Kong film, however, this already complex act of reception is complicated by being shaped and penetrated by discourses of race and ethnicity – if the camp look here is a male heterosexual one, it is also a largely white look at a Chinese "Other." (1996, 55)

The situation in these examples of accented cult cinema produced in the US is, of course, quite distinct from the reception practices that Stringer describes – not least because a largely white Anglo-American audience watching films set in America with a predominantly white cast has very different dynamics in terms of race and ethnicity than that same audience viewing Hong Kong cinema – but I nevertheless agree with Stringer that there 'is a clear need to historicise

and problematise the camp look itself, especially when cross-national questions of cultural and ethnic power are involved' (1996, 62).

Of course, we should be wary of assuming that the camp laughter at Wiseau's film is inevitably cruel or that the cultural distance that underpins this fan engagement is by necessity based in a form of xenophobic impulse. As David Ray Carter has argued, the love of so-bad-it's-good cinema often indicates 'a preference for the flawed works of cinematic neophytes over the pristine results of Hollywood's artisans' (2011, 102) and the fan celebration of figures such as Tommy Wiseau and James Nguyen as auteurs is not entirely based in irony. This form of reception is closer to what Annalee Newitz describes as 'cheese' – describing fan engagement with genres such as blaxploitation, Mexican horror movies and Godzilla films – given that, as she explains, 'cheese is what animates our pleasure in ridiculously obvious racial stereotypes of whites and blacks in 1970s entertainment; and it's what makes the products of other nations seem hilariously "off"' (2000, 60-61). Importantly, Newitz does not frame this process negatively but instead she argues that 'the point of cheese... is to offer criticism of social norms, to relegate their power to the ash can of history through the "productive" use of derisive laughter' (2000, 59). The laughter at the broken English of James Nguyen's promotional campaign for *Birdemic: Shock and Terror* or the incomprehensible dialogue in Claudio Fragasso's *Troll 2* or, indeed, Tommy Wiseau's failed attempt to recreate an iconic moment from *Rebel Without A Cause*, could all arguably be reframed through this notion of productive derisive laughter, although it remains to be seen whether this derisive laughter is indeed associated with criticism of social norms and recognition of prevailing stereotypes or, as seems more likely, derives from a more problematic impulse to laugh at the failings of a marginal non-American filmmaker attempting to emulate the cinematic language of mainstream American cinema.

Conclusion

When James Franco won the award for ‘Best Actor – Motion Picture Musical or Comedy’ at the 2018 Golden Globes for his role as Tommy Wiseau in the biopic *The Disaster Artist*, he invited Wiseau on stage to accept the award with him. While Wiseau did not get to speak during Franco’s acceptance speech, he was later asked what he had been planning to say if he had been given that opportunity: ‘A simple thing: “American dream is alive. I am American and I am very proud. See *The Room*. Have fun”’ (Spata 2018). The background to this proud assertion of his Americanness is the legal battle that Wiseau had been fighting with filmmaker Rick Harper over his documentary *A Room Full of Spoons* (2016) in which it is revealed that Wiseau’s country of birth is Poland (Ritman 2017). To date, Wiseau’s legal action has prevented *A Room Full of Spoons* from any further screenings and this forms part of a broader attempt by Wiseau to evade questions surrounding his age, the source of his money and, most notably, his country of birth. According to Renee Middlemost, this is a deliberate strategy to maintain some level of mystique given that the ‘future of *The Room* as a cult text is bound to the maintenance of Wiseau’s persona, and his tight policing of paratexts threatening full disclosure is his method of maintaining this cult status’ (Middlemost 2018). Of course, this strategy of evasion is met with an ever-increasing number of articles and videos that profess to reveal the truth of Wiseau – as exemplified by features like *Vulture* magazine’s ‘Everything We Definitely Know About *The Room*’s Tommy Wiseau’ (Bramesco 2017). Nevertheless, Wiseau’s repeated claim to an uncomplicated American identity reminds us again of the ways in which so much of the reception of *The Room* as so-bad-it’s-good relies upon its (failed) presentation of a stereotypical Americanness.

It is dangerous, therefore, to simply treat this camp engagement with ‘so bad it’s good’ cinema as harmless laughter at failed intention, or to treat it ‘objectively’ as if these questions

of cultural and ethnic power are not involved. We should keep in mind that these forms of accented cult cinema are shaped by a tension between celebration and mockery of cultural difference. It is clear that we need to do more to address the underlying relations of power that structure these engagements with so-bad-it's-good cinema and we need to go beyond accounts of failed intention to consider more carefully how cultural power is embedded within this kind of fan reception.

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Notes

¹ The Drafthouse revival of *Miami Connection* is arguably shaped by a desire to rediscover a ‘lost’ so-bad-it’s-good title from the 1980s and plays into the contemporary nostalgia for that decade within fan culture more broadly.

² Tom Bissell would later co-author the book *The Disaster Artist: My Life Inside the Room, the Greatest Bad Movie Ever Made* with actor Greg Sestero and this would subsequently form of the basis of the James Franco film *The Disaster Artist* (2017).