

“You made me look bad. And that’s not good”: the millennial cultification of *Fatal Deviation*, Ireland’s only martial arts film

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Introduction

Fatal Deviation (1998) is a landmark work of Irish ‘badfilm’. Its singularity as Ireland’s only martial arts action film is further enhanced by its internet-driven cult following, rendered most visible by a *Cracked* article hailing it as ‘the worst film ever made’ (McKinney 2010). Ultra-low-budget and shot on video, it includes familiar tropes associated with global martial arts and action cinemas, such as masculine displays of skilled fighting, a revenge narrative, and a quasi-spiritual training regime. Yet its remarkable formal ineptness, its provincial Irish setting, and the earnest naivety of its writer/star Jimmy Bennett, are features that render *Fatal Deviation* as both an object of derision and of cult celebration and affection. It can be understood as what Jeffrey Sconce terms “paracinema”, a reading or viewing protocol which celebrates “trash” and inverts traditional taste hierarchies, in opposition to Hollywood conventions of verisimilitude, widely accepted technical standards, or film critics’ notions of quality (Sconce 1995). Responding to Sconce, Mark Jancovich has problematised paracinematic tastes as a simple inversion, or Hollywood as an oppositional ‘bad other’ to paracinema, and emphasises the historical development of processes of cultification in tandem with changes in the market and in academia (Jancovich 2002). Moving beyond Sconce’s and Jancovich’s now classic articles, it is my contention that *Fatal Deviation*’s cult status is indeed historically contingent – its transnational cult status would have been impossible without a particular set of millennial technological developments and changes that enabled its making, its circulation, and its cultification, as well as broader cultural understandings of such changes, which are themselves historically contingent.

Mathijs and Mendick argue that cult cinema can be analysed not only at the ontological level, focussing on the film ‘text’ and its aesthetics; but also at the phenomenological level, in which attention is given to aspects of a film’s reception (2008: 15), and my analysis will similarly consider both levels, as well as ways in which they interact. At the ontological level, there are requisite narrative elements associated with the martial arts and action genres, which

will be considered; but in addition, the soundtrack of martial arts cinema is an important element of its aesthetic appreciation/opprobrium, with Hong Kong martial arts cinema being strongly associated with the stereotype of sloppy post-production sound dubbing (Needham 2009). The first section of this article will therefore consider the extent that *Fatal Deviation* fulfils (or not) the syntactic and semantic expectations of martial arts action films, whereas the second section will analyse *Fatal Deviation*'s sound and sound-image relations to better comprehend its perceived formal ineptness and help account (in part) for its cult following. Moreover, this formal analysis will demonstrate how the interplay of sonic taste hierarchies and generic expectations contributes to *Fatal Deviation*'s badfilm status, uncovering the typically neglected topic of cult film sound.

Beyond the film text, this article will also take a phenomenological approach to understanding its cultification, in terms of aspects of its reception. This is methodologically distinct from Stadler's phenomenological analysis of badfilm (2010), which applies theoretical frameworks associated with Merleau-Ponty, and instead focuses on critics and audience responses. As well as its formal and informal channels of circulation, evidence of *Fatal Deviation*'s reception can be gleaned by considering online paratexts and extratexts that have contributed to its cultification over the past two decades. These include the aforementioned *Cracked* article, and similar comedic works of film criticism associated with bloggers and fan sites such as Dreamvirus, Den of Geek, and Bride of Crapula; YouTubers such as Obscure Lupa, Good Bad or Bad Bad, and We R Dinosaurs; and the *Fatal Deviation* page on *TV Tropes*; which form a corpus of evaluative non-academic, non-mainstream film criticism, and which reiterate and consolidate the film's status as 'so bad it's good'. They are referenced ahistorically throughout the article to demonstrate noteworthy paracinematic responses to aspects of the film text under discussion.

The corpus of responses also include more dynamic, user-generated texts, including discussion boards such as the Irish-based *Boards.ie*, *Thumped.com*, *Reddit*, IMDb user reviews, and YouTube comments, which function as an evolving 'cultifying' conversation, and which are particularly noteworthy for featuring specifically Irish contributions. Unlike the evaluative article-length criticism sites, what is striking about the discussion boards, in particular *Boards.ie* is how they demonstrate a particularly localised discourse of cultification, with a particular fixation on specific shooting locations in Ireland and individuals involved with the making of the film and the posters' personal knowledge of them. The transnational dimensions of martial arts fandom have been investigated in academic literature on the topic, including the problematic "tourist gaze" associated with Anglo-American fandom of Hong Kong martial arts

films (Hunt 2003: 19), which this article acknowledges in the second section, in terms of an apparent othering of Irishness by American responses. However, the third section can be understood as exploring a ‘local gaze’ - Irish viewers watching an Irish film - in a historically contingent context of transnational circulation, articulated through online discussions. All of these user-generated texts have been researched online via simple online searches (using the search term “Fatal Deviation”) and are publicly available, but any directly quoted are cited using the name of the forum rather than the username, and the year in order to demonstrate the historical specificity of each response. The link for each discussion thread is included in the bibliography. This approach has been adopted as a way to strike a balance between disguising online sources because of ethical concerns around the privacy of online users, as well as a desire to credit those same users with authorship of their responses. All of the usernames appear to be aliases rather than real names, and I have not directly quoted any responses I found which could imply the identity of the user, for example, through making hyper-local references to specific individuals.

Badfilm and genre – the origins of an Irish martial arts action film

Fatal Deviation was shot in the small town of Trim, Co. Meath, Ireland in the late 1990s by local farmer and martial arts enthusiast Jimmy Bennett, with the aid of local wedding video maker Shay Casserley on directorial and camera duties. Casting himself in the lead role, doing all his own stunts, and playing a character also named Jimmy Bennett, Bennett additionally credits himself in a number of roles, including producer, writer, and cinematographer. The film never received a theatrical release and was made commercially available only on region 1 US DVD, via a now-defunct specialist martial arts imprint, Rising Sun Productions. However, as it slowly built up a cult following through circulation via the internet, and an appearance on the RTÉ late night programme *The Blizzard of Odd* (2001-5), it has quietly disappeared from official distribution channels, with Rising Sun deleting it from their catalogue prior to their acquisition by another martial arts imprint Warrener Entertainment. It is now available to watch in its entirety on YouTube, or via illegal download sites. In addition, clips of it are included in home-authored cult movie review shows by ‘producer’ fan-critics, such as the aforementioned YouTubers Obscurus Lupa, Good Bad or Bad Bad, Shitcase Cinema, as well as Imevil23, and We R Dinosaurs. Thus, it circulates paracinematically entirely through non-mainstream, illegitimate channels; or to use a term that more specifically refers to cinema digitally

distributed in this way, it circulates as “subcinema” (Lobato 2009). With reference to Lobato’s work, Denison argues that fans “seeking out texts to which they have no legitimate access [...] are forced into informal, subaltern positions within a largely unrecognized shadow economy” (2015: 60). As a result, subcinematic distribution contributes to *Fatal Deviation*’s cultification and paracinematic status in a particularly millennial context which I will discuss in more detail in the third section of this article.

However, it is crucial to recognise its status as a work of badfilm, a subsection of cult cinema primarily valued for its incompetence (Bartlett, forthcoming; MacDowell and Zborowski 2013). Like other notable works of badfilm, such as *The Room* (2003), as analysed by MacDowell and Zborowski, *Fatal Deviation* has problems with cinematic storytelling conventions and incoherence. Two moments in particular stand out – in one scene, Bennett and his love interest Nicola enjoy a romantic picnic in a verdant rural location, as indicated by an establishing long shot and a medium close up, but a subsequent mid-shot reveals their location to be picnicking on a grass verge adjacent to a busy road; and a much later extended chase scene crosscuts to a man, naked apart from a cowboy hat, as he takes a bath outdoors. This character never appears at any other point in the film and his presence is never explained. Aesthetically, the film’s low budget is very apparent – shot on what appears to be consumer grade VHS, or possibly S-VHS, its dull low-contrast visual appearance is described by Obscurus Lupa as making everything look like it is filmed through a “thin layer of moss”, an attribute she associates with a “supremely shitty movie” (Obscurus Lupa 2011).

As Bartlett argues, the ontology of badfilm hinges upon such elements of apparently “unintentional badness” in which a film fails to achieve particular accepted standards: “These moments are unsupported by the other filmic elements, limiting the narrative’s immersive potential and drawing attention to the film’s construction instead” (Bartlett, forthcoming). Art direction in *Fatal Deviation* clumsy, for example an initial scene of Bennett leaving reform school shows a building’s exterior with what is visibly a homemade paper sign taped over an existing plaque; and casting is unconvincing, with the gang boss played by a decidedly unthreatening and slightly bewildered elderly man, and a pair of delinquent ‘youths’ deliriously trashing a supermarket are played by two men visibly in their thirties. Alongside these aesthetic issues, the film’s status as a work of ‘badfilm’ is consolidated by Jimmy Bennett’s decision to star and credit himself in multiple roles, which is suggestive of a level of auteurist control and self-aggrandizement comparable to that of Ed Wood, the quintessential cult auteur widely celebrated and mocked for his “inability/unwillingness to conform” to “standards of good taste” (Jancovich 2002: 313). Indeed, one *Boards.ie* contributor likens the film to iconic badfilm

director Ed Wood directing the Jean-Claude Van Damme vehicle *Bloodsport* (1988) (*Boards.ie* 2008), and in a contemporaneous interview on Ireland's state broadcaster RTÉ, Bennett speaks sincerely and earnestly about his movie-making aspirations, explaining that he wants to be the next Jean-Claude Van Damme (*Nationwide* 1998). Hence, Bennett's failed aspirations are articulated through the fan response as situating his work in a 'cult auteur' tradition.

Fatal Deviation is described in a tagline printed on its DVD cover as: "a classic good versus evil action flick, mixed with kicks, guns, and a hot babe!", a tagline widely mocked but which demonstrates a clear sense of its aspirations and intentions. It shares many tropes with American martial arts films of the 1980s and early 1990s, as delineated by Desser (2000), a genre that borrows heavily from Hong Kong martial arts films. Typically lower budget, niche, and aimed at pay TV and straight to video markets, it is a genre that continues to be "critically reviled and trivialized" and regarded as particularly ideologically suspect in academic circles (Barrowman 2013). The film can be also understood to follow the conventions of the overlapping yet more mainstream 1980s/1990s 'hardbody' action genre (Ayers 2008; see also Tasker 1993 and Jeffords 1994), a cycle of usually violent action films in which the athletically skilled lone male protagonist "is charged with 'saving the day'" (Ayers 2008: 42). The plot of *Fatal Deviation*, such as it is, involves Bennett returning to his home town after spending time at reform school to find out the truth about who killed his father, coming into conflict and overthrowing the gang that controls the town. It has a particular focus on "the body of the male hero, a body that is fetishized for its hard and sculpted muscularity and/or its athletic skill and physical prowess" (Ayers 2008: 42). In his meta-analysis of multiple 'hardbody' films, Ayers identifies sub-cycles that all share the same basic plot, which *Fatal Deviation* also shares, that is: "the training and development of the hardbodied hero" and "culminat[ing] with an exhibition of hero's newfound physical prowess (examples include *Rocky*, 1976; *Above the Law*, 1988; *The Beastmaster* 1982; *Red Sonja*, 1985; *Bloodsport*. 1988; *Kickboxer*, 1989; *Robocop*, 1987; *Solo*, 1996; *Universal Soldier*, 1992)" (Ayers 2008: 46). Motifs he identifies include the display of the male hardbody, scenes of training, jungle and industrial settings, fetishization of weapons and vehicles, individuality and liminality, a final showdown, and reflexive humour (Ayers 2008: 51-56).

Almost as though engaged in a tick box exercise, *Fatal Deviation* meets the above plot conventions and motifs, for the most part. However, many of the fulfilments are accompanied by a 'but', and this 'but' is what feeds into its excessive, incongruous badness. Bennett's impressively pumped-up muscular 'hardbody' is displayed extensively, but his short stature, skimpy vest, and high waisted trousers render it slightly comic; the scenes of training include

some bizarre exercises described evocatively by blogger Dreamvirus as “a lot of running around in the bushes and Jimmy jumping over a campfire and trying to punch and kick a couple of sticks with burning rags on them” (Dreamvirus 2008); it lacks jungle or industrial settings, the dull small town lacking much in the way of obstacles, rendering the action somewhat spurious; furthermore this setting renders the weapons incongruous and the very ordinary vehicles banal. Exotic vaguely-defined Asian settings are another feature common to American martial-arts films (Desser 2000: 94), acknowledging the genre’s major debt to Hong Kong cinema (Desser 2000: 81), whereas *Fatal Deviation*’s provincial Irish setting substitutes Eastern mysticism for Celtic mysticism. The final showdown is the Bealtaine festival, a name referring to the ancient Gaelic festival of fire celebrated at the beginning of May (as well as the Irish Gaelic word for the month of May), but which in the film is a rather unruly set of fights in a dank stone building; and Bennett’s trainer, rather than an Asian *sensei* is an Irish monk (who, as Dreamvirus alleges has “large, watery eyes that gave him a mystical look. In fact, the actor was a local alcoholic who drank himself to death within a couple of years of the completion of this film, and for all of his scenes he is completely pickled” [Dreamvirus 2008]).

It is this excess that is key to the film’s status as ‘so bad it’s good’, rather than merely bad. As Bartlett argues:

individual elements fail to convince and fail to support one another, indicating the films contain so *many different kinds* of badness. Badfilms most likely to be championed as “so bad they’re good” are those in which badness is excessive, obvious, and varied. Films that are “just bad,” in contrast, are often characterised by a leaden pace and lack of excess, which can be interpreted as absence of effort or ambition” (Bartlett, forthcoming).

Or, as Dreamvirus puts it: “I’ve never seen a film with such a combination of continuity errors, awful dubbing, brain-dead dialogue, laughable attempts at acting, dire special effects and ridiculous plot. I laughed most of the way through it. It was fantastic” (Dreamvirus 2008). Similarly, MacDowell and Zborowski qualify ‘so bad it’s good’, as supplementing ‘bad’ rather than supplanting it:

A more accurate inflection might be, then: ‘so bad it’s pleasurable’ – a distinction which does justice to the fact that no claim is being advanced for a text’s *intrinsic* aesthetic value (which is necessarily minimal) but rather its potential instrumental value as an object of fascination or fun (which may be considerable) (2013: 17).

The pleasure of *Fatal Deviation*’s excessive badness has been demonstrated in this section through delineating its aspirations as a martial arts action film and its multiple failures to meet those aspirations, as well as the responses by bloggers, vloggers and forum contributors

articulating their pleasure in its apparent failure. Beyond the typical focus on the visual aspects of cult cinema's ontology, the next section will take a closer look at the film's sound, highlighting the sonic potentials of cult cinema and its paracinematic pleasures..

“Awful dubbing, brain-dead dialogue”: ‘bad’ sound and sonic taste frameworks

Fatal Deviation (1997) is a bad film with bad sound; like other celebrated works of badfilm, its leaden dialogue (which includes lines such as: “You made me look bad. And that’s not good”), and technical ineptness, are defining characteristics, and are celebrated as such by fans. Along with bad editing, bad art direction, bad camerawork, and bad acting, bad sound betrays a lack of film-making skill attracting the fascination and derision of fans and pundits. For example, *Cracked.com*'s review of *Fatal Deviation* makes the following pronouncement:

There are so many things about making a movie that [director] Jimmy [Bennet, director] doesn't know, that you could replace film school with this movie alone-- just screening it once for students and asking them to list all the things it did wrong. Anyone who doesn't write "everything" instantly fails. (McKinney 2010)

I have argued elsewhere that, rather than merely dismissing technically inept soundtracks of low-budget films as ‘bad’ with no further comment, bad soundtracks can be just as worthy of critical investigation as landmark ‘good’ or ‘exceptional’ soundtracks (Johnston 2014), such as the widely acclaimed and discussed work credited to Walter Murch on Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979), to give one example. We may concede that Jimmy Bennett “got everything wrong”, however, it is constructive to consider *in what ways* he got the sound wrong, what we mean by “wrong”, and what that means for fans’ enjoyment of the film. Given the cult celebration and circulation of *Fatal Deviation*, how does this sound work at the level of reception? What does ‘bad sound’ do for a film that is regarded as ‘so bad it’s good’? In this section I will argue that pronouncements regarding ‘bad sound’ indicate taste hierarchies at play with regard to different kinds of film soundtracks.

A scene in *Fatal Deviation* which attracts particular opprobrium involves Jimmy going for a drink in the local pub, which is controlled by the local gangsters, in which someone makes a provocative comment and an inevitable fight ensues. The barman threatens Jimmy with a shotgun, which Jimmy grabs and points back at him, then throws it down, uttering the line "Fuck you and yer gun, ya prick!" before walking out. The sound in this action sequence is characterized by a number of ‘bad’ technical attributes. These include a lack of clarity, including noisy background sound, poorly recorded dialogue articulated in strong regional

accents rendering some lines unintelligible; distorted sound (most apparent during the combatants' loud battle cries); poor synchronization (both of the dialogue and of punch/kick impact sounds); and an incongruous choice of tinny library music more suggestive of knockabout farce than of action.

Poor synchronization is mocked in Obscurus Lupa's review, commenting upon one clip with the remark: "I was always made fun of for wanting to be a ventriloquist" (Obscurus Lupa, 2011). At first glance, poor sound-image synchronization can appear to be merely a technical issue, and a sign of technical ineptness. Yet given that Bennett is a martial arts enthusiast, this technical sloppiness unwittingly imitates the genre he most strongly references. Needham argues that Anglo-American audiences tend to associate Hong Kong martial arts films "with a particular dimension of sound, bad and inappropriate sound at that, which has consequently over-shadowed any ability to take the films seriously [...] So common is the stereotype of bad dubbing that it has even been used for comic effect in several Hollywood films" (Needham 2009: 363). Needham cites a scene in the comedy *Wayne's World 2*, in which the eponymous character clashes with his Asian-American girlfriend's father, which imitates the Hong Kong martial arts genre, adopting "inappropriate voice acting and poor lip synchronization", suggesting the genre is regarded as "trashy, cheap and inferior" (Needham 2009: 363).

Providing further context, Needham explains that using only post-synched sound and no location sound is typical of Hong Kong industry practice, as this approach is quicker, cheaper and easier, as well as making alternate regional language versions easier to manage. It is worth noting that this practice is not unique to Hong Kong either. However, the 'bad' sound that has become the mocked convention is actually associated with the exported English-language versions of Hong Kong films encountered by Anglo-American fans (Needham 2009: 365). Unfortunately, these versions have less well-crafted soundtracks, with a reduction in volume or absence of ambient sound elements, and an increase in the volume of action sound effects. Overall, this creates a soundtrack Needham describes as "artificial, empty and 'tinny' and ultimately connotes through sound ideas of inferiority and cheapness in relation to English language cinemas" (Needham 2009: 365).

In light of Needham's work, it is noteworthy that fan-critics and internet reviewers attribute *Fatal Deviation's* characteristic 'bad' sound as working within a martial arts generic framework. For example, *TV Tropes* describes it as utilizing a trope it terms "Kung-Foley", exclaiming that: "The punches and kicks are louder than the gunshots in this movie" (*TV Tropes*, n.d.). Dreamvirus goes so far as to declare *Fatal Deviation's* soundtrack not merely bad, but redundant: "Most low-budget martial arts movies can be watched with the sound off, or without

subtitles, with no loss of information” (Dreamvirus 2008). Hence, these are not merely technical issues that are ‘objectively’ bad; rather the badness ascribed takes place at the reception level – it is a reading protocol that demonstrates quite subjective and culturally specific sonic taste hierarchies, or taste frameworks, at play. Beyond the Hong Kong martial arts context, poor synchronization of dialogue is not necessarily a universally derided feature of the soundtrack. Referring to Italian cinema’s typical industry practice of post-synchronizing all its sound, the influential film sound theorist Michel Chion describes in positive terms what he regards as its “vitality” and “generous approximation [...] far removed from any obsessive fixation with the matching of voices to mouths.” According to Chion, the French-language version of Fellini’s *Casanova* (1976) is more tightly synced than the original Italian version, suggesting that French sound personnel are inclined to want to “fix” a soundtrack they consider riddled with technical errors. What is striking about Chion’s thoughts on the matter is how he ascribes what is regarded by some as technical sloppiness to Fellini’s directorial vision, funnelling loose post-synched dialogue into an auteurist take on sound style. Chion is willing to contextualize lip-flap within notions of creative license, as well of cultural specificity.

This wider context suggests that cultural specificity is at issue with the ‘bad’ sound of this ‘bad’ Irish film. Several web reviewers allude to a sense of *Fatal Deviation* as somehow being out of place by virtue of its uniqueness, indeed its singularity. For example: “It’s Ireland’s first martial arts movie! And, uh...it should have been its last” (Obscurus Lupa 2011). Or “Ireland’s Only Kung Fu Movie (Is The Worst Film Ever Made)” (*Cracked.com*, 2010). This singularity is further marked out in the soundtrack by heavily accented dialogue, such as the aforementioned: “Fuck you and your gun, ye prick”, which is further commented upon by reviewers, for example, Obscurus Lupa comments: “That’s Irish for ‘suck, it douchebag’, I believe” (2011). The perceived mismatch of clichéd action cinema dialogue delivered in strong Irish accents, mocked by reviewers, contributes to an ‘othering’ of rural Irishness and a perceived mismatch of setting (Ireland) and genre (Hollywood action movies and Asian martial arts movies).

Its uniqueness within its genre is further marked out by the use of music, often deemed inappropriate by internet reviewers, especially in the case of pop songs and jaunty library music (though interestingly the music that features signifiers of Irishness, such as uilleann pipes, most noticeably used during the training montages, is not singled out for the same criticism). Good Bad or Bad Bad single out for mockery the use of bland 1990s pop throughout the film (2018), with *Bride of Crapula* mocking it as “madly upbeat [...] hilarious, and troublingly, bafflingly incongruous” (2014). The casting of Mikey Graham from 1990s Irish boyband Boyzone is a

significant source of mirth, providing ammunition for further derision. Bennett's final fight with Graham's gangster character is described in terms that allude to a clash of pop culture masculinities – the Irish 'hardbody' versus the more soft masculinity of the Irish boyband pin-up (both equally lacking in genuine cult cool): "[Bennett] snaps Mikey from Boyzone's neck like a lazily produced pop CD. Something all true music fans have probably fantasised about doing at one time or another" (Bride of Crapula 2014). One YouTube reviewer, Imevil23, cuts his own trailer for *Fatal Deviation*, slowing down a clip from it and replacing its original sound with the score from *Inception* (2012). This simultaneously comments upon the perceived inappropriateness of music used in *Fatal Deviation*, attempting to sonically 'fix' the film; however, this also acts as a means to mock the film by othering its visuals and its original soundtrack in relation to Hollywood sound.

This further articulates through sound its status as badfilm in an oppositional mode to Hollywood, the soundtracks of which, and their associated technical standards of accomplishment, act as a means of differentiating Hollywood from 'other' cinemas and vice versa. Gianluca Sergi argues that:

contemporary sound is one of the leading Hollywood exports in technological, aesthetic and financial terms. Since the coming of sound in the late 1920s, the history of film sound has been firmly located within American industry. The greatest beneficiaries in aesthetic and financial terms have been American filmmakers (Spielberg, Coppola, Scorsese, Lucas, Kaufman, etc.), and American companies have established a virtual domination of the world market insofar as sound technology is concerned. Thus there is little doubt that Hollywood ought to be identified as the home of contemporary sound [...] (Sergi 2004: 5).

If we consider the pleasures of the Hollywood soundtrack, versus the pleasures of the badfilm soundtrack, we can think of it in terms of the transparency of the badfilm soundtrack, in which the work of the soundtrack is writ large through its sheer artlessness and audible ineptness, which becomes 'so bad it's good'. In contrast, pleasure derived from Hollywood soundtrack is usually derived from its opacity and our immersion in it via a sense of its perceptual verisimilitude. In the case of *Fatal Deviation*, poor quality sound such as dialogue synch issues, distortion, noise and unconvincing sound effects signal technical sloppiness, as well as creating an oscillation between two generic taste frameworks of 'bad' sound, namely 'home video' sound versus Hong Kong martial arts cinema sound. Having demonstrated how online paracinematic producer critics have responded to noteworthy aesthetic aspects of the film, the section that follows shall consider the historically and culturally contingent nature of its cultification as demonstrated by online responses.

The phenomenology of a millennial Irish cult movie

The analysis above explores the complexities and tensions concerning the ontology of badness in badfilm, and of ‘so bad it’s good’. In part, *Fatal Deviation*’s badness tends to be equated with its uniqueness as an *Irish* martial arts film, and the dynamics by which it simultaneously meets and fails to meet expectations associated with the genre. However, its badness cannot be reductively attributed to its uniqueness per se. Film genre after all functions as a combination of repetition and difference (Neale 1980: 48); also, consider the case of *A Girl Walks Home Alone At Night* (2014), which has the distinction of being the only Iranian vampire film, yet is a critically acclaimed arthouse film rather than somehow automatically designated ‘bad’. As well as its uniqueness within wider generic contexts, and in contrast with *A Girl...* *Fatal Deviation* is celebrated for its incongruity, and its perceived failure to meet its apparent aspirations or intentions. MacDowell and Zborowski define the badness of a film text as “the ways its intentions as a text remain unfulfilled” (2013: 10), delineating a longstanding academic and critical conversation concerning the aesthetics of failure, which tend to be wrapped up in artistic intention and the extent to which the artist does not appear to fulfil their original intention: “A film or filmmaker seems to attempt to achieve something, seems to fail, and yet is valued for this seeming failure” (2013: 3). They argue that the pleasures of ‘so bad it’s good’ rely upon how the viewer perceives or infers the apparent intentions of the filmmaker, in which badfilm appreciation “requires an act of reinterpretation which cannot take place without a presumption that a text’s original intentions have been correctly discerned” (2013: 5). Here I will argue that the appreciation of *Fatal Deviation* takes place in a wider context in which paratexts circulate from which fans infer Jimmy Bennett’s sincerity and commitment, contributing to the film’s cult appeal. Furthermore, this process of cultification is historically and culturally contingent, as the following delineation of technological developments in filmmaking and distribution, and the related role of Irish-based online forums, will demonstrate.

Fatal Deviation was shot on video in the 1990s, released on DVD, then circulated in the 2000s up to the present day via unofficial online channels. The VHS aesthetics mentioned earlier mark it as very specifically twentieth century, fittingly arising from a wedding video business which is itself a phenomenon associated with technological changes in the 1980s and 1990s – the rise of affordable portable video cameras. In tandem with this is the fact that the ‘hardbody’ film effectively died out in the 1990s (Ayers 2008: 56), superseded by action films with more elements of sci-fi and fantasy, hence *Fatal Deviation* already felt a bit dated (hence,

incongruous) by the time it was completed. Its release on a martial arts DVD label might have kept it buried within a highly specialised niche. However, the process of cultification that took place in the early 2000s notably revolved around discussion boards and illegal downloads, an online culture very different to the now ubiquitous Web 2.0 social media platforms and their emphasis upon shareable audiovisual content. Jamie Sexton argues that technological change has had a significant role to play in processes of cult appreciation:

A particularly significant development has been the increased availability of films, especially films which were once difficult to view. Home viewing platforms – first the VCR and then DVD and Blu-ray players – were crucial here in that each format saw an increased amount of film content spill onto the market. Networked technologies have further contributed to the availability of such films, and have led to a rise in the informal distribution of streaming video sites such as YouTube now host a huge array of films, including a number of cult and exploitation titles, whilst specialist sharing sites such as Cinemageddon and Karagaarga also enable the sharing of titles, some of which have never been officially released. (Sexton 2015: 13-14)

Cult appreciation tends to initially revolve around scarcity and rarity, which can seem anachronistic in an era of digital plenitude. Yet *Fatal Deviation* for a long time had an aura of rarity associated with it, which can be seen in 2000s posts to *Thumped.com* and *Boards.ie* by people trying to find a copy of it, claiming to own a copy of it used for private screenings, or trying to find out the name of “that Irish kung fu movie”, prior to it eventually being uploaded to YouTube (*Thumped.com* 2002 (1 and 2), *Boards.ie* 2008).

The full movie link of *Fatal Deviation* was added to YouTube in 2012; prior to that it was uploaded in fragments in 2007. If a viewer wished to watch the film in full, and did not have a rare physical copy, they would have to obtain it through a download from a members-only file-sharing site, or a private link. Now, *Fatal Deviation* is easily searchable and can be readily streamed via YouTube in full and is therefore more readily available than at any other time in its history, and a viewer with a smart TV and a broadband internet connection can now access the film as easily as mainstream broadcast content. We can therefore identify ways in which *Fatal Deviation*'s cultification took place in a (now historicised) context which actually required the navigation of structures of gatekeeping and the accessing of obscure niche information, associated with the discussion boards, peer to peer filesharing and cyberlockers of the 2000s, which is quite a different context to the digital realm of the late teens. Lobato and Tang's work on cyberlockers such as Megaupload and Rapidshare (wildly popular in the 2000s but vastly diminished in this decade) is instructive here: “The lack of search functions and the inability to preview or index content contributes to the perception that cyberlockers are closed,

secretive and shifty – a quality that contrasts with the purported (if phantasmatic) openness and transparency of the social web” (Lobato and Tang 2014: 431). Hence, so many posts to *Thumped.com* and *Boards.ie* are simply by people searching for a copy, or even short sound samples (*Thumped.com* 2002), or sharing what little knowledge they have of it, which adds to its obscure cult aura.

However, an intriguing additional dimension to these discussion board posts is how they form a very conversational set of comments preoccupied with sharing gossip concerning *Fatal Deviation*’s origins and the people involved by users (posting mainly under pseudonyms) familiar with Co. Meath. Some of the more animated discussion threads on *Boards.ie* concerning the film involve users from Co. Meath mentioning their personal connections to various people involved with the making of the film, which seems to further add to other users’ fascination (*Boards.ie* 2008). Unverifiable stories of Bennett’s eccentricity and obsession with martial arts films proliferate (*Boards.ie* 2006), alongside rumours regarding the production, such as that the car crash was actually an accident kept in the finished film, highlighting Bennett’s incompetence (*Boards.ie* 2007, *Twitter* 2018); that the unconvincing gang boss was in fact a local solicitor who financed the film (*Boards.ie* 2008); or (in contradiction) the aforementioned naked man in the bath financed the film (*Boards.ie* 2006); or that Mikey Graham of Boyzone went on to purchase every available DVD of the film out of sheer embarrassment so that nobody else could obtain it (*Boards.ie* 2005). In other pertinent examples, at the end of his detailed blogpost on *Fatal Deviation*, Dreamvirus lists his sources as “IMDB, the *Fatal Deviation* DVD and extras, and anecdotes from my sister’s boyfriend, who is from Trim” (2008); and the clip of *Nationwide* uploaded to YouTube to which I referred earlier was uploaded by a user called “petefromtrim”.

These comments constitute a corpus of paratexts and extratexts that allows viewers of *Fatal Deviation* to infer, speculate and theorise the intentions of Jimmy Bennett *et al*, and assess the gap between the “unattainable intention of the author”, which fulfils another potential of badfilm appreciation, that is, the “continual blurring of lines between the extratextual and the diegetic drama can allow for an increased sense of closeness between spectator and filmmaker” (MacDowell and Zborowski 2013: 22). This gap continues to be articulated in terms of Irishness, for example a recent Twitter thread responds to a particular scene in which Mikey Graham appears to cut up a line of cocaine with a Dunnes Stores Value Club card (Dunnes Stores being a prominent Irish supermarket chain), described by approving contributions to the thread as “about as Irish as it gets” (*Twitter* 2018). This approval helps to

mitigate any potential charge of internalised prejudice, demonstrating a ‘local gaze’ rather than the ‘tourist gaze’ typically associated with transnational cult media fandom.

Conclusion

Fatal Deviation provides an instructive case of more recent types of cultification, which I have argued are historically and culturally contingent. Its cultification took place in a very internet-driven, digital context, and the cult is further sustained in a similar, evolving context. Typically, this type of digital plenitude tends to be contrasted with an earlier era of cult cinema. Loosely speaking, the ‘midnight movie’ era of the 1970s invited repeated viewing but only in the context of the grindhouse, fleapit, or college screening (and all the associated access required to niche urban and university scenes and the gatekeeping that it might entail). Moving into the 1980s and early 1990s, the ritualistic repeated viewing revolved around home video, and later Laserdisc and DVD. The requirement of physical media engaged a particular collector sensibility, requiring obscure, insider knowledge, and subcultural capital. While *Fatal Deviation*’s now deleted VHS and DVD have become rare collector’s items, it is now easily available to stream via YouTube (with some fans seeking a physical copy despite its availability on YouTube [*Reddit.com* 2018]). However, the process of its cultification, via online discussion boards and unsearchable download links, maintained a subaltern cult aura of rarity throughout the early 2000s, and cultification processes will continue to evolve in the era of Web 2.0 and beyond.

An analysis of *Fatal Deviation* as a work of badfilm, at the ontological and phenomenological levels, and in terms of the interaction between those levels, allows for consideration of the pleasures of spectatorship beyond the realm of quality films and traditional film criticism. An understanding of sonic taste frameworks, operating in a badfilm context, helps further clarify our understanding of all film soundtracks, above and beyond discussing films with good sound, and sticking only to excellent examples of the craft. An attempt to theorise what ‘bad’ sound does helps us better understand the aesthetics of badfilm – how sound contributes to films being ‘so bad they’re good’ and their associated pleasures. Furthermore, investigating how a film as unique as *Fatal Deviation*, by virtue of its status as Ireland’s only martial arts film, broadens understanding of genre and cultification at a transnational level, which is not simply pejorative. As this article demonstrates, while some non-Irish commentators mock or ‘other’ the film’s Irish tone, for Irish commentators the film’s Irishness is articulated in terms of community closeness. While this could arguably be interpreted as

internalised prejudice, the admiration articulated by many commentators suggests a more complex engagement with questions concerning transnational genre, artistic value, and cultification.

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