

CINEMATIC SCHLOCK AS AN AESTHETIC
FORM: DEFINITIONS AND DEFENSE

by

Zachary K. Paul

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FORM: DEFINITIONS AND DEFENSE

Project Approved:

Kylo-Patrick Hart, Ph.D.
Department of Film, Television, and Digital Media
(Supervising Professor)

David Whillock, Ph.D.
Department of Film, Television, and Digital Media

Jeffrey Todd, Ph.D.
Department of Modern Language Studies

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INTRODUCTION

How does one categorize a thriller about a racist dog? Can a film which includes scenes of this dog crashing a motorized street cleaner into a department store in glorious slow motion possibly be considered art? And what should one make of a film concerning a deranged, slit-mouthed Yakuza's search for the most perfectly delicious pain he can find? These films are just two examples of the strange cinematic world of schlock. This world of schlock contains many such bizarre curiosities: films of such excessive style and strange subject matter, films that refuse to carry themselves with dignity, films whose only explicit purpose is to entertain (although they may be capable of much more). This great, rich world of schlock is, at the moment, fairly unexplored academically, but the singular strangeness of schlock promises far more of value than it currently gets credit for. With that in mind, I hope to begin an academic inquiry into this strange, fascinating filmic world, but in order to do so, some fairly basic elements of understanding will have to be established.

The State of Schlock

Since there is currently very little academic work on schlock, at the moment it is generally used as a colloquial term without strictly understood standards or definitions as to what makes schlock different from anything else. As a term, schlock is most often found in the less formal forms of film criticism such as film review shows, online blogs, and some print criticism. These usages of schlock as a term tend to be equally dismissive and vague both here and in

the few examples in academic work. Because of this, a major part of this project will be the task of taking the vague, colloquially understood term and creating a well defined, usable concept out of it through a comparison with similar, more thoroughly researched categories of cinema.

Schlock, as well as the other categories of cinema which will be examined, exist in the general field of art which can be termed *consumer art*. Consumer art's primary purpose is to be consumed by a wide range of audiences and thereby make as much money as possible. Because of this, consumer art is not often intended for the elite, as much of the artistic canon of the past has been. Consumer art generally finds its home with the middle and lower classes, aims for broad appeal, and often lacks significant cultural capital, and what cultural capital it does command generally fades very quickly as the piece loses relevance. In the world of painting for example, one could say that consumer art refers neither to an avant-garde piece nor to a great classic such as Michaelangelo, but instead could be applied to a Thomas Kinkade painting, something which remains safe, simple, and easily consumable to a wide audience. Placing schlock into this category allows one to establish some of the most basic goals and attitudes that schlock carries with it. This attempt at broad appeal is as much a defining feature of schlock as any other type of consumer art, therefore schlock requires comparison with other forms in order to establish what makes it truly unique.

In his essay covering the history of camp, Andrew Ross examines the category of consumer art, providing a three-part view that roughly forms a sort of

class structure of taste. Camp, deriving from the French *se camper*, meaning to portray or pose (which was historically used by the English upper class), represents the highest class of poor taste (62). Kitsch, deriving from the German verb *kitschen* (meaning to collect and repurpose garbage on the street), lies in the middle, with the petty bourgeoisie (62). Finally, schlock deriving (according to Ross) from a Yiddish term meaning damaged goods at a cheap price, constitutes the lowest form of bad art (62). This paper will proceed by noting what elements schlock has in common with camp and kitsch, and especially noting what it is that separates schlock from either of those categories. Additionally, it will examine the idea of schlock in relation to the genre of exploitation film in order to establish what schlock's relationship this particular film form. As well as fixing a defined concept for schlock, this paper will also concern itself with possible usages of Schlock in film, or possible advantages to cultivating a schlocky aesthetic in order to achieve a specific effect.

Purposeful usage of schlock aesthetics is already somewhat familiar to the filmic world, some directors, like Quentin Tarantino and Robert Rodriguez, have built entire careers on appropriating schlock style in self-referential, campy ways. For that reason, this definition and defense of schlock will be supported by close readings of both Samuel Fuller's anti-racist parable *White Dog* (1982) and Takashi Miike's wild yakuza trip *Ichi the Killer* (2001). Both films purposefully and un-ironically present themselves as pieces of schlock yet nevertheless use this aesthetic form as a vehicle to successfully communicate complex artistic ideas.

KITSCH AND SCHLOCK

Defining Kitsch

In his seminal essay on kitsch and the avant-garde, Clement Greenberg lays much of the groundwork of tracing the history of Kitsch in order to fix upon a definition for this specific form or style of work. Greenberg finds the first examples of kitsch in the Industrial Revolution, with an explosion of kitsch following in the early 20th century (9-11). According to Greenberg, the appearance of kitsch can be attributed to a two social developments during the Industrial Revolution: the appearance of a middle class, with enough money and leisure time to desire art objects as a means of utilizing this newfound wealth; and the establishment of formalized universal education systems, which encouraged literacy along with a general familiarity with the canon of classical works of elite culture but failed to cultivate any familiarity with current artistic movements and trends (10). Both of these social trends correlate to two essential elements of what constitutes kitsch.

Firstly, the growing moneyed middle class brought with it an expansion of the free market culture, which stresses mass appeal and profit over the craftsmanship and expression encouraged by the former system of patronage. These forces encourage the creation of art pieces that are immediately understandable and easy to digest above all else. Taking a painting by Repin, for example, Greenberg describes the way he “predigests art for the spectator and spares him effort, provides him with a shortcut to the pleasure of art that detours

what is necessarily difficult in genuine art” (15). This pressure towards digestibility essentially created the consumer art category in which both kitsch and schlock exist, and thusly this pressure remains an essential element in both forms.

The second major element of Kitsch can be traced to the introduction of universal literacy and basic familiarity with the western canon across classes. This is kitsch’s need to imitate the appearance of those art works already accepted as great by elite culture. Since the bourgeoisie desires to become as much like the elite culture as possible, it makes sense that any art they choose to consume would at least superficially resemble the art of elite culture, especially the Romantics and the Renaissance. Kitsch takes classical artistic ideals and approaches, and broadens them into their most simplistic, basic components in order to be both immediately easy to digest and flattering to the one who chooses to consume it.

Kitsch and Cinema

Perhaps appropriately, as a form that first appeared and flourished in the early 20th century, cinema is considered to be a medium that is, and always has been, particularly susceptible to kitsch for a variety of reasons. First, creating a film is an extremely expensive proposition: a failed film has been known to capsize entire companies. Second, cinema requires a very high degree of collaboration: although it is possible for a particularly strong director to impose his or her authorial stamp upon a production, the help of multiple skilled technicians is still required. Third, films are intended for mass-production: Films

are widely distributed and therefore depend on wide popularity in order to make up their cost and hopefully turn a profit. These elements make Cinema far more open to the kitsch creating pressure of market forces (Dorfles, 195).

Additionally, cinema is, perhaps more so than any other medium, tasked with recreating a sense of reality upon the screen. Western cinema began as a sort of means of documentation, and since then has remained particularly concerned with bolstering the illusion that what one sees in a film is realistic (if not exactly *real*). Gillo Dorfles argues that this expectation of reality places cinema in a uniquely vulnerable position in terms of falling into Kitsch (195). As a fusion of various art forms (literature, acting, photography), film can fall into danger of becoming kitschy when it fails to correctly utilize any one of these elements. Any failure serves to highlight the artificiality of the cinematic experience and can turn a film toward kitsch (that is, an attempt to pass off a shoddy or false piece as the real thing). When a film becomes kitsch, the unreality of it creates a jarring effect (either wincingly bad or laughable) for the audience. Dorfles is very careful to point out the way certain Avant-Garde artists purposefully draw attention to the artificiality of the experience in order to make a broader point, or experiment with the plasticity of the medium (195). Such experimentation with the unreality of cinema from artists such as Vertov, Man Ray, and others also satisfactorily avoids the danger of kitsch through their very insistence on unreality, therefore kitsch in cinema requires an element of failure (that is, the creator must intend to sufficiently represent reality, but fail).

In addition to simply being a matter of technical ability, cinematic kitsch also depends heavily upon the ways by which a piece communicates its ideals. This is popularly considered to be a problem of sentimentality, in which many famous pieces of kitsch (Thomas Kinkade, for example) wallow. However, in her examination of cinematic kitsch, Lotte Eisner finds mere sentimentality insufficient to create a piece of kitsch. Looking primarily to the German expressionist films of the 1920s and 30s, Eisner finds a great deal of sentimentality, but not necessarily as much kitsch. F. W. Murnau's *Faust* may contain the wildly exaggerated imagery and extremely sentimental, flowery commentary that one would find laughable in kitsch, but it still manages to succeed as a non-kitschy artistic piece. Today's viewer experiences it more as "a remarkable expression of the sentiments of the age" (Eisner, 198). So rather than relying simply upon the presence of sentimentality to designate a piece as kitsch, Eisner turns toward the German concept of artistic *Stimmung* (201). *Stimmung*, which Eisner very roughly translates into 'mood,' generally refers to the sense of authenticity carried by a cinematic piece. The *Stimmung* of a piece is successfully created through the seamless integration of aesthetic elements and ideological content, so that even if a work is wildly stylized and unreal (as in the earlier *Faust* example) it remains a smoothly functioning, natural whole. When a work's *Stimmung* fails, it feels inauthentic (jarring and forced) (Eisner, 202). In order to illustrate this concept, Eisner turns towards perhaps the greatest source of kitsch: Nazi propaganda. Eisner finds the false values being presented in Nazi propaganda pieces to almost unfailingly represent pieces of kitsch, since the

attempts to place artistic beauty upon such an ugly ideology always comes across as forced. Chiaroscuro (stylized, shadowy lighting), to cite one specific example, becomes “imposed on the cameraman” rather than a natural choice for the particular piece (203). Rather than simply being a matter of the technical failure to negotiate the reality of the cinema story, Eisner sees kitsch as stemming from a more fundamental falseness of artistic vision. This falseness lends the sense of fundamental wrongness to each and every aesthetic choice, and it is precisely this sense of wrongness or failure that defines kitsch.

In addition to stemming from a false ideals, kitsch also becomes problematic when the fact of reenactment becomes essential to a cinematic piece. This is especially the case in films dealing with the lives of famous historical figures. The gulf between the represented reality and the real “makes us aware of the substitute...the make-up, the wigs” which is the ultimate realization of Kitsch (Eisner, 206). When the retelling of history becomes, as Eisner puts it, a “constructed account,” a sense of kitschy falseness becomes unavoidable (209). Eisner additionally blames historical kitsch upon a sense of “pomp and circumstance” in the treatment of events that have only become imbued with grandiosity in hindsight, pointing particularly to Hollywood’s insistence on treating Biblical stories with a pervasive sense of inflated self-importance that forces even great directors into kitsch (212). Kitsch is thus created when, rather than satisfyingly presenting the historical reality, the piece becomes more about playacting a particular view of history-- when history becomes tainted with propaganda.

Finally, Eisner looks to horror films as a great wellspring of cinematic kitsch. According to Eisner, the reason for this is often quite simple: the horror film requires, more so than offerings of other genres, a director with the ability to “impose the absurdity of another world on us as if it were real,” and when this feat is beyond the talents of the director, “kitsch is inevitable” (213). Eisner compares the kitschy realizations of films such as Freddy Francis’ *The Skull* (1966) or Michael Garrera’s *The Curse of the Mummy’s Tomb* (1964), with the successful realization of horror in Murnau’s *Nosferatu* (1922), stating that Murnau’s artistic genius allows the audience to see his film as “an icy wind blowing in from another world and producing plausible images of reality” (215). In comparison to this fully realized artistic world of Murnau, the earlier named films of Freddy Francis or Michel Garrera play as silly pantomimes of horror, lacking even the vaguest sense of surreal plausibility that comes with the successful realization of an absurd world. In this case, avoiding kitsch seems to come from a synthesis of true artistic vision and workable technical skill to render the absurd in a way that feels organic to a viewing audience. A failure of artistic vision means that, like in the earlier examples from Nazi propaganda, the aesthetic choices made in terms of rendering this absurd reality will register as false and strained--and thus hopelessly silly--to most audiences.

Kitsch vs. Schlock

As a different subset of consumer art, definitions and understandings of kitsch are essential in understanding what may typify schlock as similar to kitsch while remaining its own distinct form. Firstly, both schlock and kitsch are very well

known for their inability to successfully negotiate the reality of the cinematic experience, with many aesthetic false-notes that render them laughable to audiences. In many cases, in schlock just as in kitsch, this stems from technical incompetence. Schlocky film, is well known for its cheap, silly, and often grossly incompetent production quality, which constantly reminds the viewer of the ultimate falseness of the experience. The films of Ed Wood, especially *Plan 9 from Outer Space*, were infamous for their silly content and constant technical errors which typify schlock filmmaking. However, this quality in schlock does not necessarily proceed from technical incompetence. Sam Fuller, who often traded in schlock, was a masterful director with a keen visual sense and high level of competence. Much of the sense of schlockiness in his film's aesthetics come about as a result of the independently funded, guerilla nature of his approach to filmmaking, which practically guarantees some degree of the roughness and raggedy feeling that comes along with schlock. Schlockiness can also result from a lack of artistic vision, with many schlock pieces being typified by a "throw it at the wall and see what sticks" approach to filmmaking technique, which can create a very similar sense of silly falseness in the filmic piece.

However, schlock as a category differs from kitsch in a few very important and fundamental ways, which completely disqualifies it from simply being another word for, or subsection of, kitsch. First, a major difference lies in the aspirations of schlock compared to kitsch. Following Greenberg's argument that kitsch attempts to at least superficially copy the appearance and style of the elite culture 'canon' of Romanticism and the Renaissance, with at least some wide

gesturing toward lofty ideals of artistic beauty that the work of kitsch intends to evoke. Works of schlock, on the other hand, avoid such grandiosity in favor of straight thrills and genre plotting. Whereas the works of kitsch cited by Eisner mostly dealt with the so-called 'serious subjects' of great historical figures or biblical tales, schlock generally involves less obviously serious elements, often playing with monsters, aliens, and wildly unrealistic heroes and villains. For this reason, some of the films Eisner pointed to as being kitschy (the horror films in particular), may be more appropriately considered schlock. This lack of pretension may be what Andrew Ross was getting at when he characterized schlock as a form roughly correlating to the lower class, compared to kitsch's petty bourgeoisie, who wish for their art to pull them closer to their conception of 'elite' artistic taste. Compared against this tendency of kitsch, schlock tends to be direct and unpretentious in its attempted appeal. Whereas kitsch attempts to maintain some patina of respectability while courting the lowest common denominator, schlock pursues this same market brazenly, with little pretense of being anything more than an immediate cheap thrill. When schlock does make some thematic gestures toward ideas or value beyond the immediate excitement and spectacle of film, this message is invariably subordinated to the sheer spectacle (often shock value) of the film itself.

Secondly, the matter of *Stimmung* is dealt with somewhat differently in a schlock film versus a kitsch film. The pervasive sense of 'wrongness' that comes from the inauthentic *Stimmung* of a piece of kitsch rarely becomes an issue in a schlock film. Many of the most famous pieces of schlock are very clearly

absolutely earnest in their intention and execution (the films of Ed Wood serving again, as an excellent example), and it is only technical incompetence that keeps the film from successfully maintaining the illusion of reality. Where the calculating falseness of a kitsch often invites derisive laughter at the failure of the artist to convince, schlock tends to be more charming, lovable, and endearing in its various slip-ups and overarching raggedness. One major reason that *Stimmung* rarely becomes an issue for schlock may be that it seldom has an agenda as kitsch does. Kitsch attempts to recreate the look of the great art of the past, and often, in doing so, attempts to lend the respectability of classical art to contemporary ideas and movements. This usage of kitsch was a hallmark of Nazi propaganda. Schlock, which openly eschews respectability, rarely carries such an agenda simply because there is no reason for it. Schlock isn't an effective tool for propaganda due to its lack of pretension toward deep meaning. This authenticity in approach is perhaps the most important element separating schlock from kitsch.

CAMP AND SCHLOCK

Defining Camp

If kitsch is, as Andrew Ross claims, fundamentally defined by the bourgeoisie striving to join the elite in terms of culture, then camp would be the elite's aggressive rejection of this striving. Susan Sontag, in her seminal essay on camp, argues that very point, claiming that "camp is the modern dandyism" and the answer to the problem of "how to be a dandy in the age of mass culture" (290). According to these arguments, camp is essentially a creative way

to maintain the borders of elite culture against the attempted advances of kitsch. To this end, camp utilizes numerous tactics of reevaluation and fetishization in order to distinguish the consumer of camp against the unsophisticated, bourgeoisie person who consumes Kitsch.

Camp as a Sensibility

One of the primary advantages of camp is to mark the consumer as elite not through *what* he or she chooses to consume, but rather through *how* he or she chooses to consume it. One of the primary ways camp functions in opposition to kitsch, is to prioritize those very things that cause kitsch to trip up in its attempt to approach legitimate art. Sontag argues that proponents of camp view work “not in terms of beauty, but in terms of the degree of artifice, of stylization” (279). When kitsch fails due to its inability to negotiate this artifice, camp smugly celebrates the excess of artifice, and while kitsch uses pretentious gesture toward the past canon of great art in order to disguise the insufficiency of its content, camp celebrates that same lack of content and joyfully wallows in the cheapening and misappropriation of this past imagery. Sontag discusses the way the dandy “sought rare sensations, undefiled by mass appreciation,” but in an age of universal education, mass production, and leisure being extended toward greater and greater numbers--the essential elements to creating an age of kitsch-- the amount of pleasures that one can call ‘undefiled’ began to dwindle (290). The answer, then, is to adopt a new mode of appreciation in order to find a new, more exclusive way to appreciate the same mass-produced works. This new method of appreciation thus adopts a new set of standards. In order to

defend elite culture from the advances of the bourgeoisie, camp chooses to reject those very artistic values which the bourgeoisie art of kitsch strives for in place of laughingly celebrating each and every failure along the way.

However, it is unfair to simply paint camp as just another means for the world of elite taste to remain 'elite' (that is, insulated and exclusive). After all, camp is also famously associated with gay culture and therefore has a history of being used by social outcasts in order to subvert the prevailing cultural standards. The camp sensibility rests entirely on upending the artistic values of the past and privileging appearance over content, artifice over substance. This subversive quality can be seen in the many reclamations of past artistic trends that make up much of the 'camp canon,' Sontag points out the way "so many of the objects prized by camp taste are old-fashioned, out-of-date, *démodé*" (286). Andrew Ross sees this as part of camp's essential definition, especially in its development in regard to British pop culture of the 1960s, arguing that "the 'camp' moment...is the ironic recognition of the eclipsed capacity of real British power to play the imperialist game of dominating foreign taste" (58). Camp purposefully pulls together and celebrates that power whose time has passed by, whose relevance has long since vanished. This celebration of powerlessness lends camp a sense of extreme egalitarianism, Ross quotes Tom Wolfe, saying "now high style comes from low places...the poor boys...teenagers, bohos, camp culturati...have won by default" (59). So, in many ways camp is inherently subversive. Similarly, when Camp claims a piece of art that is highly prized by the wider culture, it does so in rebuke of the cultural values that prize the piece in the

first place. Camp looks directly into the face of culture at large and tells it that its enjoyment is incorrect or even worse, laughable. This can make camp into an extremely powerful liberating force for those who maintain the sensibility. Furthermore, camp's celebration of context-free artifice can be read as a parodic criticism of the wider culture, particularly as concerns its overlap with gay culture. If camp is, as Sontag suggests, about "being-as-playing-a-role" and a metaphor of "life as theater," then camp certainly contains the ability to be turned into a weapon. When culture requires homosexuals to remain closeted and quietly play a role that isn't truly what they are, camp responds by cranking the falseness all the way up (281). In addition to rebelliously lampooning the culture's need for homosexuals to play a role, camp turns a mocking mirror upon all that is false and artificial in mainstream culture and celebratorially proclaims artifice and emptiness to be the reigning values of culture, not authenticity or substance. Camp argues that its celebration of artifice is more real and authentic than mainstream culture's pretension towards meaning.

Qualities and Types of Camp

In addition to camp's place as a particular means of consuming art, camp also exists as a discoverable quality within individual works. The qualities in a work that help make it 'campy' are those same qualities which the camp sensibility so idealizes. Works that are simultaneously excessive and empty, works in which great amounts of creative effort and passion ultimately go toward elements of decoration, make up the essential camp canon. As Sontag argues "camp Art is often decorative art" (280). So in many ways, whether or not a work

can be considered campy depends on the allocation of the creator's efforts within the work itself.

In addition to the slighting of content in favor of generally empty style which is a basic mark of camp, another extremely important quality is that of excess. A piece of bad art that lacks this element of grandiosity does not ever cross over into actual camp; rather, it rests in the realm of the merely bad. Sontag recognizes that bad art which fails to be camp is often just "too mediocre in its ambition" in comparison to Camp's "spirit of extravagance" (283). Kristin Thompson's piece on cinematic excess discusses the concept at length in specific relation to cinema. Thompson argues that a film, rather than simply being a single object, is more properly understood as as a "filmic system" in which differing elements pull the film in two different directions. First, one has the forces of narrative homogeneity (that is, the elements of the film which directly contribute the the narrative force of the film as a whole). These forces work to make a film into a coherent, homogeneous 'object' that can be viewed as having a particular, storable purpose (131). Second, one has the forces of excess which are those elements that are either extraneous to, or work in direct opposition to, the narrative elements of the film. Thompson explains that these elements can merely be examples of "style for its own sake" or any element of a film that causes one's understanding or reading to trip, or, in her quotation of Roland Barthes, "skid" (132). In order to provide concrete examples of such excess, Thompson looks to Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible I & II* (1944, 1958), a choice with interesting implications considering the way Sontag also singles the film out

for the way it skirts camp territory without ever truly crossing the line into it (Sontag, 285). Thompson's examples of excess within *Ivan* primarily dealt with the way particular arrangements or movements serve style rather than narrative. Factors such as "its broken rhythms of acting, its systematic stylistic mismatches of mise-en-scène at cuts, and its constant heightening of stylistic devices" foreground style "to an unusual degree, necessarily calling attention to the material of the film" (Thompson, 136). Even these general examples begin to illuminate exactly what is meant by 'excess': any of those elements which draw attention to the film as a material object by way of pulling against, or distracting from, the narrative thrust of the work can be called excessive. Thompson's specific examples often deal with visual composition in relation to the movements of actors and costuming, such as the "three bald European ambassadors" whose heads form a pattern "in the center of three large white ruffs," which is presented as equally important as the narrative content of the exchange. On a similar note, Thompson points out the way Ivan's and Philip's cloaks create "swirling patterns of visual interest and excess" even as they perform unnatural movements that do not serve the narrative (137). These examples of excess also clarify a lot in terms of what brings *Ivan* close to the world of camp. Excess distracts from the logical narrative of the film in favor of drawing attention to the sheer style, the sensuality of the artifice, which are the principle values of camp. Any example of camp will require a healthy dose of excess in order to elevate it above the merely bad and bring it into the grand celebration of artifice and style that is the world of camp.

Aside from these basic qualities of camp, there are also several subcategories, each referring to specific types of qualities to be found within a campy piece. First of all, Susan Sontag distinguishes between “naïve” (or pure) camp, and purposeful camp. Naïve camp is exactly what the name implies-- camp that was not made to be camp-- with purposeful camp being the exact opposite. In Sontag’s view, naïve camp is purer and more satisfying due entirely to its underlying seriousness. The sheer earnestness of it invites the one who finds camp in it to enjoy the piece in a way the artist never actually intended, thereby allowing the consumer a position of superiority to the camp work (284-285). However, an appreciation of naïve camp doesn’t inherently constitute placing oneself in a position of smirking superiority over it. According to Scott Long in *The Loneliness of Camp*, an appreciation of naïve camp may, in fact, constitute an elevation of it rather than a denigration. Long argues that “camp reading is...a conscious *misreading*,” citing, for example, that “Camp sees a Busby Berkeley extravaganza as an immense mockery of film and musical clichés, not for its naïve acceptance of them” (86-87). In this case, camp turns the failings of Kitsch into essential values of the work, transforming unthinking, uncritical kitsch into an indictment of the artistic failures of the piece itself, and other kitsch pieces like it. Long argues further that even pieces with recognizable artistic value can become camp objects, pointing to the Hitchcock films *Vertigo* and *Marnie*. He claims that although “the straight interpretation does not reduce the work to kitsch...it does...in specific ways reduce its value” (87). Due to the moral issues present in the way both films deal with unhealthy relationships

between men and women, a straight interpretation of these films trips up, and ultimately finds the films to be flawed by this reactionary outlook. However, according to Long, a camp reading of the films liberates them from their romanticization of unhealthy, immoral behavior by noticing and expanding the gulf between the capable aesthetic presentation and the bankrupt moral values for comedic effect. As Long points out, “laughter is both purifying and enabling” (87). Camp preys on the false *Stimmung* created by the bankrupt moral values at the center of the film and exposes it, and therefore the values themselves, as objects worthy of scorn and mockery.

In addition to the split between naïve and purposeful camp, there is also a categorical split between High and Low Camp. Vincent Brooks piece “Puce Modern Moment” attempts to define and describe both high and low camp as functions of modern and postmodern life. According to Brooks, high camp is that camp which Sontag describes, the sensibility which smirkingly enjoys the hypersentimentality and silliness of the past with a particular love of marginal work. Brooks refers to this type of camp through the description by Christopher Isherwood: “true high camp always has an underlying seriousness. You can’t camp about something you don’t take seriously. You’re not making fun *of* it; you’re making fun *out* of it. You’re expressing what’s basically serious in terms of fun and artifice and elegance” (Bergman, 4). Camp then is a lovingly playful usage of iconography and forms, a way of taking something about which the creator feels real passion, and creating something fun out of it all. Brooks points towards Kenneth Anger’s mixing of the sublime with the vulgar, sexually

appropriating such classically important imagery as the *Pietà* in order to demonstrate this sensibility (5). In *The Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome*, Brooks sees perhaps the ultimate example of this kind of loving playfulness in the carnivalesque gender-bending play of gods, spirits, and figures from old films (8). In Anger's experimental clash of bikers and religious iconography: *Scorpio Rising*, however, Brooks sees a fundamental shift towards postmodernism and low camp. Low camp and postmodernism are, according to Brooks, inextricably linked, both consisting of a "symbiosis between barb and embrace" (10). *Scorpio Rising* represents this link in its constant shifting of music, which embodies the impatient, consumption-based approach to media that comes along with postmodernism. This constant demand for the new and novel in the postmodern world allows for the creation of instant camp, previously impossible due to the need, as Sontag pointed out, for time to liberate the camp object from the failed relevance that renders it frustrating rather than entertaining (Sontag, 287). *Scorpio* portrays this smashing of time in the constant shifting of sound and imagery, which turns the experience of the film into a stream of pure sensation. This constant mixing eventually draws morality into the void with it. "Gay/straight, fanciful/horrific, new/recycled, sacred/profane--all binary oppositions camped/postmodernized into oblivion. Add Swastikas to the mix...and morality appears to go up in smoke as well," Brooks comments, adding that these forces of "sadism, male sexuality, immaturity...Nazism--are not...widely approved of, but it is not at all clear that the film disapproves of them" (12). This detached, anti-serious approach to moral issues is a particular hallmark of low camp; a hallmark that

Sontag also noticed and commented upon when she stated that “Camp is a solvent of morality. It neutralizes moral indignation” (290-291). This moral sensibility may represent the basic difference between the categories of high and low Camp: high camp is fun but serious, it is a new, fun, frivolous attitude towards what one basically takes seriously; low camp is anti-serious, any underlying seriousness or moral sense is swallowed up in an amoral vacuum of camp.

The Subversive Potential of Camp

As noted earlier, due to the way that camp upends the traditional set of values one uses in order to evaluate art, camp inherently contains an element of subversion that may be brought out and utilized against the larger culture in which it exists. This essential subversive element is noted by Scott Long as a sort of dialectical process:

“[Camp] asserts an opposition between the absurd and the serious. Then it gestures towards a point--a moment of consciousness, a shock, a synthesis--from which that opposition can be seen as absurd in turn, based on a higher and more encompassing sense of absurdity...it separates the beholder...from a whole encrusted body of cultural dictates and values” (79).

Camp’s subversive power, then, lies in its ability to synthesize the absurd and the serious into a mix in which neither element can be fully separated from the other. Everything is simultaneously laughable and grave, and in this moment of absurdity, cultural context and values disappear into irrelevance against this absurd seriousness of the world. This synthesis may adopt the general tone of

high-spirited laughter and mockery, but it never forgets that within all the silliness are streaks of real pain, anguish, and certainly anger.

Another element to this subversive potential of Camp lies in its very contentless, or content-light, nature. The work of Jacques Derrida in particular reveals some of the ways this element of camp offers subversive potential. In his discussion of the organization and idea of structure in terms of dominant cultural paradigms, Derrida hits upon the idea of “the center” of a concept. According to Derrida, the human tendency to demand that conceptual structures contain some fundamental kernel or ‘center’ around which the rest of the structure revolves has a tendency toward supporting the domination of certain cultural paradigms (115-116). In order to demonstrate this tendency, Derrida points to the criticisms of thought structures offered by Nietzsche and Heidegger, commenting that both found themselves unable to attack metaphysics without first accepting the language that metaphysics had established. Derrida notes that without the language controlled by the dominant paradigm, “we have no language -- no syntax and no lexicon” with which to properly criticize it (117). Derrida sees two possible solutions to this problem. The first lies in “reducing or deriving the signifier...ultimately *submitting* the sign to thought” (118). In this way the system on which a signifier rests can be questioned in order to reduce its power, but the argument made will paradoxically rely completely upon the same system it opposes. Since all language concerning a system first proceeds from the center that governs it, the center itself becomes a sort of chain, limiting criticism’s ability to affect the system it criticizes. The alternative that Derrida proposes is

Freeplay. *Freeplay*, as Derrida puts it, is directly related to the fundamental difficulties inherent with the concept of the center. Essentially, the moment an idea is considered the conceptual center or a larger system, it becomes its own separate concept. The center, upon becoming the center, moves paradoxically out of the center of whichever system it is intended to govern. As Derrida puts it: “The center is not the center” (116). Following this, *Freeplay* “*determines the non-center otherwise than as the loss of the center,*” meaning that *Freeplay* works by utilizing this slippery inability to define a center against the paradigm itself (118). This centerless *Freeplay* concept helps to explain much of camp’s subversive power. In its rejection of the content-filled ‘center’ one tends to look for in an artwork, camp plays instead with the outside and the artifice, running far away from the widely accepted means of expression, instead celebrating that which is overlooked and rejected. This celebration of artifice frees camp from the hegemony imposed by conceptual centers, allowing it to attack the wider cultural system without having to accept its language as a starting point. A specific example of this can be seen in the earlier discussion of Kenneth Anger’s films, particularly *Scorpio Rising*. The way the film chops apart time, space, content, and symbolism into a mix that drains the symbols of content lends it the ability to play with concepts of media and masculinity without having to accept the moralistic and gendered language that it would otherwise require.

Camp vs. Schlock

Since camp is such a complex and singular phenomenon itself, it is somewhat simpler to note the places where schlock differs fundamentally as a

category. First, rather than a sensibility or quality, schlock is more of a general category of works. Works can be “schlocky”--that is contain elements that lead them toward being schlock--but there is no schlock-attitude. A work is either schlock or it is not. Secondly, schlock misses that sense of irony that is essential to camp as a style and sensibility. Camp’s whole mode of appreciation proceeds from a sense of ironic absurdity, even if there is a core of seriousness; as in high camp, the entire piece will be slathered in a sense of ironic humor. Schlock is, as mentioned before in the discussion of kitsch, unpretentious. It doesn’t present itself as anything except exactly what it is. This idea can again be seen in Ross’ three-part structure. Camp’s reservation of self-conscious irony lends it the sense of exclusivity and control that allows its correlation with the upper class as discussed by both Ross and Sontag. Schlock, on the other hand, correlates to the lower class. It lacks both the pretension towards meaningful art, and the pretension of superiority or specialness in the consumer that one finds in camp. Additionally, although this lack of irony may qualify particular works of schlock for appreciation as naïve camp, this does not necessarily mean that all schlock can be considered so, or indeed that this is the *only* way by which one can read a work of schlock.

The most important similarity to be drawn between camp and schlock is the importance of excess as a feature. Schlock’s direct, visceral pursuit of the most simplistic thrills essentially guarantees a certain degree of excess in order to maintain interest in the piece, given the often slight or ineptly handled content at the center of the film. In many cases, schlock films act primarily as delivery

systems for their excessive elements, with the actual narrative content being presented in a perfunctory, clumsy, tedious, and often confused manner. Due to these common problems of narrative and aesthetics, schlock relies almost entirely upon excess in order to provide its entertainment value. Indeed, schlock cannot be “schlocky” without an element of excess. Schlock without excess would merely be a bad film, matching schlock in its ragged aesthetics, but holding little interest or entertainment value to the schlock consumer. Schlock cinema isn’t just cheap, poorly made film pandering to the basest elements of an audience. Instead, schlock requires both the elements of excess and absurdity in its pursuit of thrills. Additionally, while the centrality of absurd excess in schlock makes it susceptible to camp, schlock need not necessarily be enjoyed with a camp sensibility.

This necessarily excessive element of schlock, also like camp, brings a strong possibility for subversion along with it. However, the specific ways in which excess acts within a piece of schlock tend to be fairly different from those of camp. In his piece on the use of postmodern parody in *Blue Velvet*, Paul Coughlin discusses the way that excess can become a tool to parody or subvert the narrative frameworks offered by the greater cultural context of a given piece. Taking *Blue Velvet* as his example, Coughlin discusses the ways in which the tension between a story’s narrative framework and the elements of excess can reveal problems in the wider culture that the narrative represents. In *Blue Velvet*, the basic plot resembles that of a *Hardy Boys* mystery, while taking place in a small American town that Coughlin describes as *Capraesque* (304). These

pieces of narrative backing create an archetypically conservative structure to the narrative that Lynch proceeds to pull apart through elements of narrative excess. One of the strongest excessive elements noticed is Frank Booth's profanity-filled dialogue: "Frank's repetitive use of the word 'fuck' is gratuitous, yet it is not...unwarranted" (307). Frank's constant stream of profanity directly attacks the '50s conservative narrative construct in which it takes place. By forcing elements such as Frank's profanity, Lynch begins to reveal the insufficiency of the conservative narrative construct. It isn't merely Frank's dialogue that pulls against the innocent thrust of the narrative and setting but also the entire group of characters that Frank brings along with him. The criminals of *Blue Velvet* are, as Coughlin notes, "atypical of the jewel thieves or counterfeiters that invade Bayport; they are, instead, nasty, irrational, and at times violently psychotic" (308). The most violent affront to this reality comes in the form of the 'Yellow Man': a man in Dorothy's apartment who stands despite having been "shot in the head with blood sullyng his garishly yellow jacket...the police radio in his pocket blares an incomprehensible message" (308). These aggressively irrational elements violate one of the most basic principles of this 1950s, *Hardy Boys*-style universe: the fundamentally rational order and knowability of all things. There may be the occasional mystery, but it gets solved, loose ends get tied up, and everything satisfactorily returns to the way it was before. Lynch's irrational crooks and standing dead man deny this, instead revealing a world of irrational human complexity that the film's narrative structure is completely incapable of dealing with. This is excess weaponized, "[preventing] us from

accepting naïvely, and [forcing] us to look to the social ideologies of which we are the products and in which we live. perceive, and create” (305). This subversive potential of excess lends a lot of promise to schlock as a meaningful form.

Excess’ ability to subvert means that schlock need not be relegated to the world of poor-quality filmmaking but can instead be utilized by talented artists in order to make artistic statements in strikingly different, unexpected ways.

Additionally, many of the possible methods of subversion offered by camp could just as easily be claimed by schlock. The amoral perspective offered by low camp due to its lack of discrimination towards content exists in schlock just as in camp. Elements in schlock film may have originally carried some sense of moral weight (such as the Yakuza and drug use in *Ichi the Killer*), but through their schlocky presentation, they become drained of meaning. These elements become empty signifiers which can be refilled (or not) in anyway the filmmaker wishes. This schlock tendency toward emptiness means that schlock could serve as subversive *freeplay*. Schlock’s ability to drain symbols and signifiers of their meaning puts it in a unique position to criticize or subvert cultural norms without necessarily accepting the language as it is currently set.

EXPLOITATION VS. SCHLOCK

One final category of film that bears discussion in relation to schlock is the exploitation film. A type of film that has existed almost as long as Hollywood itself, exploitation films suddenly grew greatly in prominence with the introduction of the Motion Picture Production Code as a way for small independent film producers to offer something that Hollywood could not: depiction of all manner of taboo

themes. The centrality of such themes constitutes an essential element of exploitation according to Eric Schaefer, who noted that such films invariably revolved around a “‘forbidden’ topic...[including] sex and sex hygiene, prostitution and vice” and any other such subject that was found to be “in bad taste” (*As Long as it was in Bad Taste*, 5). Schaefer also notes that these subjects would be handled “directly and were the primary point of interest in the motion picture” (5). The aesthetics of such films generally align with the aesthetics of schlock, being extremely cheap, and made with very low production values. The attitude of exploitation films is based far more in exhibition and spectacle, than in narrative. Schaefer notes that exploitation films are given to vacillating between “frenzied instances of display...and long stretches of torpor,” due to the combination of the centrality of spectacle and ineptness in filmmaking (*Teaching Sin in the Suburbs*, 94-95). These two elements essentially mean that an exploitation film operates on one of two levels: it is either exploding in frenzied spectacle or drearily setting up the next instance of the first.

It quickly becomes clear when examining exploitation films, that although exploitation necessarily contains the attendant ingredients for a piece of schlock, not all schlock can be considered exploitation. The primary cause of this difference is exploitation’s need for a subject to be exploited. Schaefer himself notes this difference when he states that neither Phil Tucker’s *Robot Monster* (1953) nor Ed Wood’s *Plan 9 From Outer Space* (1959), both classics of schlock, qualify as exploitation films due to the lack of such a theme (*Bad Taste*, 5). Additionally, while schlock may also be given to long stretches of torpor balanced

with explosive spectacle, this isn't necessarily the case. Films such as Takashi Miike's *Ichi the Killer* certainly constitute schlock pieces, although *Ichi* in particular finds a way to maintain a tone of hysterical spectacle from beginning to end. Perhaps the most revealing point of similarity is the primacy of spectacle. The direct pursuit of spectacle and visceral thrills is a defining feature of schlock, which also often accounts for its preponderance of excess. The relationship between exploitation and schlock can be understood in that exploitation is schlock, but schlock is not necessarily exploitation.

DEFINING SCHLOCK

Through these examinations of the relationships between schlock and these other various categories, one can finally begin to fix a clearer definition of just what schlock is, along with the ability to describe those traits that make schlock its own distinct category. First: schlock belongs to the general category of bad art along with kitsch and camp; schlock commands no great amount of respect, and generally holds very little cultural capital. Second: schlock is known for its cheap, shoddy, ragged aesthetics, sometimes resulting from sheer ineptitude, but sometimes also simply being a matter of funding. Third: schlock bears no pretension toward higher artistic goals or ideals; schlock openly courts the lowest common denominator in the most direct, brazen fashion. Fourth: schlock pursues its ends through the liberal usage of cinematic excess in service of visceral, often violent thrills. Fifth: schlock lacks the elements of self-awareness and irony that make up camp. Schlock is direct--it intends itself to be understood exactly as it presents itself to be. Furthermore, although some schlock is highly susceptible to

being consumed and enjoyed with the camp sensibility, this is not necessarily true of all Schlock, nor is Camp always the best lens through which to view a Schlock piece.

THE CRITICAL POWER OF SCHLOCK: *WHITE DOG*

Although schlock as a category is necessarily related to bad art as a larger category, this does not necessarily mean that schlock is valueless. Schlock, when utilized as a general form or aesthetic mode of filmmaking by a competent director, can become a powerful form of criticism against dominant social paradigms. This critical power of schlock is evident throughout the career of Sam Fuller. Fuller, with his independent spirit and tendency to make cheap, visceral genre-pieces, devoted nearly his entire career to the creation of schlock. However, Fuller's ability to deftly tell a story and zest for exciting staging often turns his schlock pieces into something more powerful than initially expected. Furthermore, Fuller's strong social conscience led him to deal with all manner of issues in his films, bringing his sledgehammer schlock aesthetic to bear on of themes including racism, nuclear paranoia, and social conformity.

White Dog's Schlock Power

White Dog, Fuller's pulpy statement on racism, constitutes one of Samuel Fuller's schlockiest yet also most viscerally powerful cinematic pieces. Fuller's film takes full advantage of the schlock aesthetic he builds in order to lull the viewer into a certain set of expectations as concerns the style and content of the film. These lowered expectations then allow Fuller to deliver his thudding

symbolism with a visceral emotional power that could never have worked otherwise.

The central conceit of *White Dog* immediately betrays the potential for schlock. Even if the source material for the film is a true story and phenomenon, the idea of a film centered around a racist dog tends to inspire smirks. The concept also comes very close to the bastion of schlock that is the animal horror genre (a genre Fuller himself dabbled in with 1969's ill-fated *Shark!*). The film immediately delivers on its promise of schlock the moment Kristy McNichol (playing aspiring actress Julie Sawyer) speaks her first line. Fuller's choice to cast the former child star seems somewhat strange, especially considering the consistent woodenness of the performance she turns in throughout the film. A scene in which Julie's co-worker is attacked while she looks on in horror is especially problematic. The slow-motion closeup of McNichol's strained grimace almost unfailingly inspires laughs. In addition to McNichol's wooden performance, the film also provides its viewers with over the top performances from both Burl Ives and Paul Winfield as Carruthers and Keys, the co-owners of the animal training center who attempt to rehabilitate the Julie's "white dog." Both turn in a gleefully exaggerated performance, with Ives flinging syringes from a tranquilizer gun at a cardboard R2-D2 and loudly proclaiming that his hand "helped Duke win the Oscar!" while Keys is given to monologuing on the film's themes. Fuller's script additionally provides a great deal of schlockiness for the viewer, with his famous unsubtle hardboiled dialogue being constantly foregrounded.

After the dog saves Julie from a rapist in her apartment, a police officer

cuffs him while commenting, “It’s the same damn rapist I booked last year!” Additionally, such lines as “You’ve got a four-legged time bomb!,” “This is a laboratory Darwin himself would go ape over!,” and “He was made that way by a two-legged racist” keep the silly Schlock tone up throughout the course of the film.

Finally, the film is stuffed to the brim with the moments of cinematic excess which so typify schlock. Shots such as the dog leaping in slow motion through a closed window and tackling a criminal in a shower of shattering glass inspire either wincing or laughter and applause, based on the viewer’s attitude at this point. Additional scenes, including the dog’s attack of a street cleaner (which subsequently causes a massive slow-motion crash into a nearby shop) and the dog’s escape leaping over an electrified fence which fires sparks in all directions (for no discernible reason) also contribute to a generally excessive and authentically schlocky feel.

The Advantages of Schlock

Although Fuller’s *White Dog* is undoubtedly schlock, it also, ultimately, just as surely works as a cinematic comment on racism with unusual emotional power. The fact that Fuller famously had difficulties getting the film released due to objections by NAACP representatives reveals the film’s ability to make people severely uncomfortable (*White, Fuller vs. Racism*). Even more strangely, Fuller’s film succeeds not in spite of its schlockiness, but rather *because* of this sense of schlock and silliness that it builds early on. As a director who was very familiar with schlock as a form, Fuller knew exactly which advantages a sense of

schlockiness could afford him. Fuller's usage of the schlock aesthetic early on creates a certain level of expectation in a viewer, which then allows Fuller's usually blunt, unsubtle style to hit the viewer with an unexpected emotional force. The first scene in which the surprising power of *White Dog* begins to show through occurs soon after the dog escapes from the training facility. Fuller's camera follows the dog as it stalks down the streets of an idyllic small American town. Suddenly the dog isn't just a character in the story, or even the monster terrorizing the denizens of the town. Instead, the dog becomes a blunt, powerful symbol for the pervasiveness of racial hatred in American society. The incongruity between the sweetness of the town and the ratcheting tension as the dog nearly spots a small black child becomes almost too much to bear. Suddenly, unexpectedly, the film works. However, it is possible that this scene could have worked equally well had the film not been as schlocky in the preceding scenes. This doesn't hold true for the action that follows however. The White Dog spotting a black man on the street, chasing him into a small church, and savaging him as the camera roams the pews and the stained glass plays as a screaming indictment of Christianity's historical place in the oppression and savagery of anti-black racism. The scene is extremely painful and harrowing, and yet, the symbolic imagery is thuddingly obvious. Divorced from the expectations Fuller created through his schlock aesthetic, the scene would play as too obvious and un-nuanced to be effective. Although it works shockingly well, it remains a schlock scene nonetheless, with a visceral, direct pursuit of its ends performed without nuance or sophistication. In a more serious and dignified film, this scene

would be regarded with wincing embarrassment. It would be considered a misstep, a moment during which the director, in his zeal to make his point, got a little too obvious to be effective. In this film however, where the preceding scenes have been filled to the brim with schlock performances, dialogue, and excess, this scene connects with unbelievable force.

Following the church-attack scene, the film suddenly achieves an emotional gravity while in no way sacrificing the inherent schlockiness that the film has maintained up until that moment. After roughly an hour of disconnected wincing or laughing (depending on the viewer's attitude), the viewer suddenly becomes emotionally involved in the dilemma. In a later scene, Julie finally meets the original owner of her white dog: the man who abused and trained racial violence into it. The revelation of this virulent racist as a seemingly kindly old man, who arrives with his two granddaughters and a box of chocolates in order to thank Julie pushes the hysterical criticism of American racism even further. Lines like Julie's "You got two puppies there. You gonna teach 'em to be as sick as you are?" (in reference to his grandchildren) are imbued with a power and dignity that wouldn't be possible in a film that eschewed the schlock aesthetic that Fuller embraces. The final scene, in which the dog finally snaps over into indiscriminate hatred after an apparently successful cure, carries an unbelievable degree of emotional punch, even though the excessiveness of having two false-start sequences of the dog charging before the final attack would completely derail the scene in a more dignified film. The film's schlock aesthetic even manages to redeem one of its iconic images: the charging dog in slow motion, fangs out and

jowls flapping. When this shot occurs early in the film, the goofiness of the slow-motion flopping of the dog's tongue and jowls dissolves the seriousness of the scene. However, when the same image is reused extensively at the end, the new sense of emotional gravity imbues this image with the sense of insane rage that always existed beneath the surface.

White Dog stands as an excellent example of the way schlock aesthetics can be used to divert the viewers expectations, which allows a director such as Sam Fuller to attack with a sledgehammer-like lack of subtlety that wouldn't work in a more consciously dignified film. Fuller's willingness to let the film exist in the realm of schlocky silliness for nearly a full hour allows him to exploit such symbolically unsubtle, yet powerful images as the black man being torn apart in a church. Fuller uses the direct, visceral nature of Schlock in order to strip away the silliness and reveal and undercurrent of rage that not only carries the final third of the film, but retroactively elevates the preceding two-thirds. Had Fuller not allowed the film to be the Schlock that it is, such scenes and dialogue never would have worked as well as they do.

SCHLOCK ARTISTRY: *ICHI THE KILLER*

Japan's national cinema is certainly no stranger to schlock. The historical prominence of such directors as Seijun Suzuki and Nobuhiko Obayashi means that not simply schlock itself, but the artistic use of it, has long had a place in the Japanese film industry. More recently, Japan has seen the rise of one of schlock's most deliriously emphatic producers: Takashi Miike. Miike has a famously long list of schlock works that includes *Full Metal Yakuza*, *MPD Psycho*,

and *Zabraman*. Miike's penchant for delirious, visceral violence and constant excess has earned him a reputation as "a director of 'bad taste' films far removed from...his more distinguished predecessors such as Kurosawa, Mizoguchi, and Ozu" (Tony Williams, *Miike's Cinema of Outrage*, 55). Many critics have attempted to define Miike simply by his most extremely violent and excessive films, derisively calling him a "'flavor of the month' and a 'lowest common denominator' director," both terms which are heavily associated with schlock (Desjardins, 189). Perhaps the most infamous among Miike's schlock masterpieces is his *Ichi the Killer*. An adaptation of a manga, *Ichi* features famously gratuitous scenes of visceral violence, dizzyingly fast-paced cinematography and editing, and a near-constant pushing of the boundaries of cinematic excess. Even so, Miike's schlocky, wild, excessive film also contains a core of real emotion, and it utilizes its schlock aesthetic in order to carry out a surprisingly effective and sensitive study of pain and violence.

The Parallel Film Worlds of Ichi

Ichi the Killer is a film with an extreme level of layered complexity behind the excess and violence on its surface. In fact, the thematic content contained within the film is far too complex and layered to be fully explored within the bounds of this project. So for the purposes of the paper, the focus will have to remain primarily upon how, and to what effect, Miike chooses to employ the schlock elements of his film in order to make his ultimate point.

Ichi the Killer's relationship with its schlocky elements is somewhat more complicated than that of *White Dog*. Rather than a fully schlock film that

eventually uses its schlock elements to unexpected effect, Miike mixes elements of schlocky Yakuza action with scenes of very real, raw emotional power. Through both his characters and events, Miike creates two parallel filmic universes: a larger-than-life, violent, Yakuza film world and a world of ordinary people with real emotional references. As the film progresses these two worlds comment upon each other and eventually reveal a greater intent behind Miike's wild excess.

The closest thing to a protagonist in Miike's film is also one of the schlockiest figures in it: Kakiyama, Miike's sadistic Yakuza enforcer. From the moment Kakiyama turns to the screen, with cigarette smoke billowing out of the slits on the side of his face, he embodies the concept of Excess. His bleach-blond hair, wildly colored and patterned clothes, and piercings which practically hold his jaw to his face constantly draw attention to his wild unreality. When walking down a street surrounded by the ordinary, dark-suited Yakuza, Kakiyama appears to have wandered in from another film. However, in the many wild scenes of violence and torture, Kakiyama is the only character who appears to belong. Alongside Kakiyama, Miike provides a set of corrupt twin detectives. These identical men in their bright velvet coats fit right in with Kakiyama in Miike's crazed schlock world. In addition to being schlock figures, the characters also react to the violence as schlock consumers, all three reacting to the film's wild violence with boyish glee, constantly pushing the envelope of crazy excess (Kakiyama even expresses disappointment when the violence doesn't meet his expectations).

In addition to these wild schlock characters, *Ichi* also contains characters such as Kaneko, a low-level Yakuza bodyguard, and his son Takeshi. Far from the extreme unreality of Kakihara and the twin detectives, Kaneko and Takeshi are very realistic, grounded, self-contained characters. Kaneko is a former cop, fired from the force because he lost his gun, who has joined the Yakuza simply in order to provide the basics for himself and his son. Takeshi, meanwhile, is just a young kid with bully problems who wishes his father was around more. These character's feelings and struggles all carry real emotional weight; they wrestle with their emotions and ideals in the face of difficult decisions and situations. The substance these characters bring to a film that, up until their appearance, consists primarily of wildly excessive violence provides an unsettling contrast to the schlocky surroundings.

Finally, Miike also provides a couple figures who straddle the line between schlock and reality with the film's nominal villains: Jiji and the titular Ichi. Jiji (who's name literally means "grandpa") is a small, unassuming old man who seems to be somehow involved with, or at least known to, Kakihara's Yakuza group. The film immediately reveals Jiji to be the figure ultimately in control of Ichi, but for a while, he doesn't seem to be all that out there when put next to Kakihara. Jiji instead seems to be a sort of substitute father figure for Ichi, gazing concernedly at a forlorn Ichi, who sits in front of a videogame. Jiji's normality is eventually shown to be little more than a facade. Not only is he the masterful string-puller who's been quietly orchestrating the events of the plot, but he is also a master hypnotist, who uses his powers to implant false memories into Ichi's

brain and fashion him into a weapon against the Yakuza. The extreme silliness of Jiji's instant hypnotism of Kaneko at the climax of the film, leading to a scene which portrays him as a musclebound hulk, an effect that is immediately excessive and silly, and therefore schlocky.

The spectre of Ichi's character hangs over the entire plot. The audience is first introduced to the explosively gorey aftermaths of his attacks. It then comes as a shock to find that Ichi is essentially a scared child, who conducts his massacres through constant sobs streams of tears. Far from Kakiyama's anticipatory glee in the face of violence, Ichi is terrified of it and only conducts his assaults due to Jiji's appeals to his guilt (implanted in his false memories) and ideals (Jiji frames his attacks on the Yakuza as part of a mission to eliminate bullies from the world). Despite the clear schlockiness of Ichi's rubber jumpsuit and razor-heeled shoes, his behavior and motivations reveal a fully grounded, realistic human being who contends with real emotional anguish, hardly something one expects to find in a schlock Yakuza film.

A Continuum of Violence

As the various figures in Miike's film interact and take part in the central plot, it begins to become clear that Miike is doing far more than simply relating a wild Yakuza story in his signature excessive style. The tension between the outbursts of cartoony schlock violence and the real emotional pain and anguish in other scenes keeps the viewer extremely unsettled, and uncomfortable. The shift between weightless violence and real cruelty creates a constant sense of tonal whiplash, and it never allows the viewer to settle into one way of viewing

the film. Miike uses this constant tension to examine violence in all its forms, from wild filmic representation, to instances of real, substantive cruelty. Miike's film lays out a continuum of violence in order to examine how and why human beings use and react to it in all its forms.

In this continuum, Kakehara provides schlocky, extreme violence. In his continuing quest for satisfaction, he performs such gruesome acts as tearing the skin off a man's hand with his teeth, stabbing needles through someone else's face, cutting off his own tongue, and suspending a man from the ceiling with hooks and dumping boiling oil on him. Kakehara spends the entire film pushing the envelope of violence further and further into the realms of the extreme and bizarre. At the start it is sickening, but as it becomes more and more extreme, a strange thing happens: the wild violence loses its effect and it eventually becomes cartoony, so disconnected from reality that it no longer carries any weight. The deliriousness of it all becomes exhilarating. It's almost like a theme park ride or a freak show, where the whole point is to just watch something crazy and laugh at the goofiness of it all.

In dramatic contrast to this delirious, over-the-top violence of Miike's Yakuza schlock is Ichi himself. Although the violence he inflicts is certainly extreme, the core of emotional pain and fear that Ichi brings with him lends his actions more weight than those of Kakehara. It is especially telling that the character who manages to inflict violence on the largest scale is one who regards violence with abject horror, rather than the one who exults in it. In addition to the fear Ichi brings into his violence, his acts are also streaked with the idealism

inherent in his belief (imparted by Jiji) that he's on a mission to rid the world of bullies like those who tormented him as a child. The film clearly takes the violence perpetrated by Ichi far more seriously than the wild acts of the schlock figures. Unlike Kakihara's crazed search for thrills, Ichi speaks to the destructive power of a person who is simply emotionally tormented to his breaking point. Ichi demonstrates the power lent to violent acts through the presence of a meaningful emotional core, and his story both comments upon and criticizes Kakihara's empty savagery. Even so, Ichi's violence doesn't always retain its explosive power; in many cases, the sheer excess inherent in its nature turns Ichi's attacks more in the direction of spectacle and drains them of their power. Ultimately, Ichi embodies the fundamental tension between excessive violence and real-world pain at the heart of the film.

The final pieces to Miike's examination of pain are also his most realistic characters: a violent pimp, whose constant abuse of a prostitute is observed by Ichi and the saddened, struggling enforcer Kaneko. At the very start of the film, the audience finds Ichi spying on a pimp mercilessly beating one of his prostitutes. This character is occasionally revisited throughout the film, and his violent outbursts account for much of the tonal whiplash compared to the silly cartoon-like violence of Kakihara. This pimp, as a fairly ordinary and realistic character, forces the viewer to confront the awful ugly reality of violence as it actually exists in the real world. The fact that this far more simplistic (even mundane, next to Kakihara's torture) display of violence is immeasurably harder to watch reveals Miike's true feelings on violence both real and fictionalized.

Even so, the most painful burst of violence comes neither from this pimp, nor Kakahara, nor even Ichi, but from Kaneko himself. Throughout the film, Kaneko remains the most sympathetic figure in the film. A poor father, just struggling to get by and retain some semblance of a normal life for his kid. His motivation for tracking down Ichi--revenge for the Yakuza boss who showed him kindness at his lowest, most desperate point--provides a counterpoint and criticism to Kakahara's ultimately empty quest for the ultimate thrill. Throughout the entire film, Kaneko commits a single act of violence: left in a room with a prostitute Kakahara and the twin detectives tortured for information, despairing over the state of his life, terrified that he or his child may be hurt, he takes out all of his feelings on her, kicking her repeatedly. In a movie filled with the most extreme, wild depictions of violence, this remains the most difficult scene to watch. The sheer level of emotional content contained within Kaneko's outburst, combined with the sudden unexpected cruelty from the one character the audience feels they can trust to be a real, emotionally resonant human being, gives this simple act of violence far more impact than Kakahara's elaborate torture scenarios. This scene reveals Miike's true intent. The crazed, schlocky violence of Kakahara may be extreme, but it lacks any real power when put up against the real-world violence of one who is truly despairing.

As a director famed for the creation of schlock, Takashi Miike proves his ability to see schlock as more than simply a derogatory category for poorly made films, but rather as an aesthetic tool a director can choose to employ to a particular effect. The complex schlock world that Miike creates is not only

commented upon and criticized by the more realistic characters in his film, but it in turn comments upon the real world. This uncomfortable tension Miike creates between the wild, schlocky world of Kakekita and the messy, realistic world of Kaneko begins to reveal Miike's ideas on how violence functions both in the real world and within schlocky media such as Yakuza films.

CONCLUSION

For much of its history as a category, schlock has either been ignored or simply derided as cheap, shoddy, lowest-common-denominator work that simply isn't due much consideration or study. For that reason, kitsch and camp both received quite a bit of critical attention and study, while schlock was relegated to passing comments (if any mention at all). The purpose of this project was twofold: first, to fix an academically defensible concept of schlock by researching its most closely related categories (kitsch, camp, and exploitation); second, to discuss ways in which Schlock could be utilized as a legitimate form of filmmaking in order to create specific artistic effects that would not otherwise be possible.

White Dog and *Ichi the Killer* provide some basic illustrations of how schlock, as defined in this paper, contains real artistic possibility. The intelligent use of schlock can explore topics in new ways and create artistic effects that simply wouldn't be possible in other forms of filmmaking. *White Dog* and *Ichi the Killer* are just two examples of an entire world of cinematic schlock that exists. schlock is not a new phenomenon in film, and film history is rife with examples of it.

Additionally, although schlock has been thus far remained inextricably tied to the world of cinema, nothing in the definition of the concept I have developed strictly limits schlock to film. schlock's spirit of excess, bluntness, and failure in an attempt to gain broad appeal could possibly be found in a wide variety of artistic media. Further, if schlock can be found to offer new and surprising approaches to art in film, then there should be no reason why it cannot accomplish similar goals in other media. My desire with this project is to hopefully spark some interest in the subject, in order that more work on this vast and fascinating category of art can follow. The world of schlock is often ridiculous, frustrating, fascinating, and surprising in equal measure, and the work of understanding and evaluating it promises to be extremely valuable and entertaining.

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to create a well defined concept out of the colloquial term “Schlock” as applied to cinema in particular. In order to accomplish this, I examine the wider field of consumer art in which Schlock exists, specifically the categories of Kitsch, Camp, and Exploitation film. Through comparing and contrasting Schlock with these other categories, I am able to establish the specific features of Schlock and what truly differentiates Schlock from these other, similar filmic forms. Once a fixed concept of Schlock is established, I proceed to defend it’s viability as an aesthetic form through close readings of the films *White Dog* (1982) by Samuel Fuller and *Ichi the Killer* (2001) by Takashi Miike. *White Dog* reveals the critical power of Schlock in it’s ability to mislead the viewers expectations, a quality which becomes an essential part of the film’s visceral statement, *Ichi the Killer* allows a cinematic Schlock world to comment upon the real world, ultimately revealing ways in which human beings interpret and make sense of violence.