Badwatching: Scenes from a Misspent Life

By J. D. Connor • December 6, 2023

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WHAT IS THE point of watching bad things? Of settling down to a cruddy TV show or a bad movie? I don't mean guilty pleasures (those have their justifications and I'll get to one below) or comfort watching or "so bad it's good" shlock; nor am I talking about misfires, where you went in hoping, thinking it would be better; nor total catastrophes like Amazon Prime's *Citadel* or that 2015 *Fantastic Four* movie they had to reshoot most of. I mean pure, replacement-level Hollywood *stuff*.

You have to know a couple of things going in: 1) that just about everyone involved—technicians, craftspeople, writers, performers—is doing their level best given the circumstances, since every gig they take is at some level an advertisement for their next one; 2) that whatever you are seeing is the product of an infinitude of choices—choices made under constraints, to be sure, but still choices, accommodations, resignations, triumphs, sneak attacks, gambits; and 3) that "the circumstances" are never going to be normal again. There are still systems, protocols, habits, and genres, but all those regularities seem to be crumbling in the face of a comprehensive improvisation, a lack of confidence in the linkage between effort and result. No one knows when or where or even whether (*Coyote vs. Acme*) you might encounter what they have made.

The flip side of nearly universal precarity is an aesthetics of getting away with it. Badwatching is a tour of those tactics. In the content tsunami, the bad stuff is where we encounter creative workers making do, a repertoire of getting by.

I had seen the billboard on Sunset for the new gameshow *Snake Oil* for weeks, with David Spade sporting an old-timey straw boater and cane, the whole thing in supersaturated purple-and-gold, but I had resisted. The Netflix billboards in Hollywood are directed at the folks who work for Netflix or who might give awards to Netflix, but DisneyFox didn't put this one up to assuage Spade's ego. This was directed at locals who might watch on Fox 11, at tourists, at anyone who still tunes in to linear broadcast television. One night, when a hot wind was coming out of the north and I was desiccated and dizzy, I gave in; it was streaming on Hulu.

Snake Oil has almost no meaningful gameplay. Contestants are presented with two products, one real, one fake, and they are supposed to choose the real one. Each product has its attendant entrepreneur in mild cosplay; each contestant has a celeb "business advisor" chosen as much for the poetic value of their name as for their financial acumen: Ice-T, Bethenny Frankel, J. B. Smoove, Rob Riggle. These contestants bet money on how confident they are, which their opponents have the chance to poach. You can win a couple hundred thousand dollars if you understand the very edges of commodity possibility.

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The gameplay is minimal but the intensity is astonishing. From the jump, *Snake Oil* assaults viewers with some *very* CGI-forward interstitials. The average shot lasts less than two seconds, and the show seems to have been edited on the fly by someone chasing an angry bee around the control room. The stage is huge and full of people and stuff; it looks hard and slippery, and the momentary establishing shots are utterly disorienting, like when you see a basketball game being played inside a football stadium. Various scanning lasers that I thought were banned in the US play across the crowd.

In lieu of gameplay, *Snake Oil* serves up for each of its products a mock ad that can go very, very hard. In episode five, one of these commercials is trilingual. I have a feeling I would love to hang out with the whackos who are writing this stuff; I have a feeling I would love to hang out with the producers—including Will Arnett—who must periodically shake their heads and say, "They gave us how much to make this?"

They gave them a lot.

In this shiny maelstrom, Spade's vibe is to remain unperturbed. You don't have to be a "David Spade fan" to see that he is playing against the energy that surrounds him, that he is taking his time, making everyone feel at home, and it appears that he is getting off some good jokes. But his entire performance has been whittled down to the bone, sliced and diced and turned into an anxiety sofrito, with incomprehensible shots of the Metro Atlanta audience members making cobra gestures with their hands and scream-hissing (*snake* oil).

Snake Oil is bad because its key dynamic—Spade's calm in the midst of a storm of demented *Shark Tank*-ery—is not given the space to play out. But it is worth badwatching because, in that mismatch of host and spectacle, the actual work of the host became, for me, and maybe for the first time, clear.

I could come up with a grand interpretation, some way that all this *signifies*, how it is an endpoint of the flop dialectics of subversion and selling out that defined the last generation of people who cared about linear television, people for whom David Spade functioned. That is how *Snake Oil* might be useful for my *job*, but my job is part of the problem here (I'm a film studies professor).

Nearly 30 years ago, Jeffrey Sconce published an essay called "'Trashing' the Academy: Taste, Excess, and an Emerging Politics of Cinematic Style," an attempt to account for the proliferation of cinema studies grad students fascinated by psychotronic stuff like *Two Thousand Maniacs!* (1964) or "badfilm" opuses like *Glen or Glenda* (1953). He points to the predominance of lower-middle-class, often first-gen students, rising into the ranks of the professoriate for the first time. And he

draws on the work of Norwegian media scholar Jostein Gripsrud to put a fine, Bourdieusian point on it: "[T]he valorization of mass culture serves as a form of 'symbolic homecoming' that allows such scholars to 'strive for or pretend re-integration into the classes they once left, preferably as 'leaders' in some sense, 'voices' for the people.'"

Sconce's paradigm is more or less true for me, but I am not offering you some symbolic homecoming. David Spade is. Surely nearly all of us are—and feel—more precarious than in the early '90s. Class mobility in the United States has all but ended, replaced by a stochastic hustle culture and the grinding anxiety of limited-run seasons and limited-run lives. For that, Spade might be the ideal docent. He's wealthy now, but he grew up *Joe Dirt*–poor in Arizona; he has seen, through family tragedy and Hollywood happenstance, just how awful things can be. If he has held on to whatever got him through that, maybe that is how he got everyone through the *Snake Oil* tapings. "It seems like David Spade was just what everyone needed on the day they showed up to make *Snake Oil*. Hunh."

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The Haunted Mansion is a central attraction in the Disney theme parks. As IP, it is not to be trifled with; making a Haunted Mansion movie, then, means navigating an extended obstacle course of narrative and marketing pressures. It has to sell itself. It has to sell people on the idea of going to the parks. And it has to sell all sorts of other products that have been placed in its story.

Nearly every review of Disney's new *Haunted Mansion* movie noted the clunky product placements throughout. Noted—but didn't, or couldn't, explain. It is fair to say that I would see LaKeith Stanfield in *anything*, but even I had not planned to go to *Haunted Mansion* to watch him play a physicist who has forsaken his gifts to become a desultory New Orleans tour guide. What has led him down this melancholic spiral? The death of his beloved, of course. She had gone out for tater tots and died when a drunk driver crashed into her car. She had to stop "at a little Baskin-Robbins." That was the game changer. I had to see him say that. In public.

As the summer of Barbenheimer tailed off, the earlier box office disappointments (*Indiana Jones and the Dial of Destiny*; *Mission: Impossible—Dead Reckoning Part One*) gave way to new box office disappointments. August remains a relative dead zone. Into this soft earth Disney, for some reason, opted to plant its latest version of *Haunted Mansion*. Twenty years after the Eddie Murphy–led *The Haunted Mansion* and just two years after *Muppets Haunted Mansion*, Disney lined up Justin Simien (*Dear White People*, 2014) to direct, and convinced Stanfield, Rosario Dawson, Danny DeVito, Tiffany Haddish, and Owen Wilson to star. Because of the SAG strike, none of those people could do publicity, so Simien was on his own. The movie easily lost $100 million in theaters.

Everything in *Haunted Mansion* is torqued by the pressure of the project as a whole. The product placements were neither well-integrated activations of major brands nor meta-jokes about themselves. They were just fuckin' weird. Tiffany Haddish interrupts a silly séance to implore a ghost to communicate with a pen and paper that she "purchased from CVS."

Dawson explains that she got the house on Zillow, like a true aficionado of Kelsey McKinney's "Zillowing Out" feature. As we were walking out of our screening at Disney's El Capitan Theatre, ushers offered us free key rings with the *Haunted Mansion* logo on one side and, yes, Zillow on the other. Maybe that is just market-leading confidence. But Dawson also starred alongside Jake from State Farm in a series of commercials in which the insurance company assures her that she can get great coverage from them. (Sorry, California.)

Driving back to the mansion from a Burger King run, Stanfield's passenger suggests that the tater tots in the bag are a "wink" from fate—you know, his dead wife saying, "Heyyy!" Stanfield immediately corrects him: "Those are my jalapeño poppers." So, 1) fuck you for thinking that this was going to be a fun little callback, and 2) Burger King doesn't even *sell* Jalapeño Cheddar Bites anymore. It's the ghost of a menu item, a haunted placement; it causes an argument.

After the line about Baskin-Robbins, DeVito almost immediately makes a joke about Stanfield's dead wife's cholesterol, and *fully in character* but also clearly fully in the presence of Danny DeVito uncorked, Stanfield laughs and thanks him for it. That *only* happens if the placements are strange, if we are in some zone that mixes tragedy verging on racial necropolitics, hacky screenwriting about diet, and performances that have been opened up wide.

The reviews I saw missed this articulation. They noted the strangeness of the internal ads but underestimated the weird wit with which they were deployed. And then—almost to a T—they would find themselves praising the cast, nearly endorsing the movie as a good hang. It *is* a good hang, and it is so *because* they are getting away with it, where "it" is something very much like presentness to each other. For even in IP cinema, things work better when the cast is doing more than merely cashing a check.

The grandest product placement, of course, is the Haunted Mansion itself, and the mansion demands explanation. DeVito plays a crazed ghost historian, Disney's version of *Vertigo*'s Pop Leibel, and it falls to him to dump all sorts of exposition on us. The best moment comes when he must explain the history of this decrepit plantation house: "[T]he mansion was discovered fully built! No land had ever been worked!" For a major media company that is *extremely worried* about the legacies of

slavery that underlie some of its IP, this was exactly what Disney needed to hear. They had just undertaken a gut renovation of the log flume ride to purge its *Song of the South* baggage, and here the script offered a way out of their historical bind: the Haunted Mansion is not a plantation because no one ever planted anything. I like to think I was laughing along with Simien at that moment. The mansion just appeared; the products were just placed. Corporate "discomfort" at its own history moves down the product placement ladder until everything is just as uncomfortable. And it falls to the actors to release that tension, which these actors can.

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Snake Oil is broadcast on Fox; I watch it on Hulu. *Haunted Mansion* was in theaters; you can watch it on Disney+. *The Irrational* is on NBC; I watch it on Peacock. It is the latest in a line of gimmicky police procedurals that include *The Mentalist* (2008–15), *Numb3rs* (2005–10), *Psych* (2006–14), *Elementary* (2012–19), and on and on. Some of these, like the *CSI*-niverse and *Criminal Minds* (2005–), make claims about their science; some are silly. In this one, should-be-discredited real-world behavioral scientist Dan Ariely has been remade as a crime-solving hero. The Israeli American author of *Predictably Irrational: The Hidden Forces That Shape Our Decisions* (2008) has morphed into the African American Alec Mercer, played by the always likable Jesse L. Martin. *The Irrational* is a decent-sized hit.

The folks involved with the show have a great deal of experience breaking these sorts of stories, but you wouldn't know it by watching. The plots are wildly out of balance, lumpy, and unmotivated. *The Irrational* knows it has serious exposition problems, so much so that Alec's sister Kylie rolls her eyes at "Mercer monologues." He delivers them anyway since the pseudoscience is the point.

The Irrational was rumbling along, confessing its bad faith about its junk science but generally being not very good until the sixth episode. Then, for that one episode, the tone, the characters, the upshot all changed. It was the first episode in which executive producer Kirk Moore was credited as a writer, the first one directed by legendary cinematographer Ernest Dickerson— which is to say, the first one in this series with a Black (credited) writer and director and the first one really about race. Prodded by his sister, our hero throws aside his scholarly reasonableness to testify as an expert against cops who have killed a young Black building inspector.

The plot pulls its punches eventually, laying most of the blame not on the cops but on a corrupt white judge who has let his love for capitalist real estate development go too far. There is some ex machina police reform in which "The VIPER Squad" is disbanded. All this is in keeping with the show's usual understanding of Alec's work: his investigations of "bias" are not about racial bias, or about why cops would disproportionately kill young Black men. The kinds of bias he researches are the kinds that corporations want to use to sell us things, biases that usually function to

suppress considerations of race in the United States—recency, loss aversion, the halo effect.

But if the plot circles back to *The Irrational*'s home turf, the lopsided storytelling undermines such comfortable expectations. Halfway through, when the cops are still on trial, Alec and Kylie get pulled over in a retaliatory, pretextual stop. For the next three minutes—an eternity in an episode runtime of 42 minutes—they are under sustained, racist police pressure. There is no clunky exposition, no psychmagic to get out of the situation. It just sucks.

And it doesn't go away. The next morning, Kylie is watching *Real Housewives of Potomac* (2016–). "You've been watching this trash since I went to bed last night," Alec says. "We should talk about this." And then Kylie explains exactly how this guilty pleasure is working for her. "No, we shouldn't. Because I'll scream. And I don't want to scream at you. But you're the only one here. So I will if you force me to talk about my feelings right now. All I want to do is watch *Housewives of Potomac* and focus on other people's problems." And Alec, to his credit and out of character, agrees: "It probably isn't a good idea, but okay."

And it *still* doesn't go away. In the episode's close, the building inspector's widower is hanging out with Kylie and Alec. "I have all these feelings: anger, shock, guilt, but never peace. […] I know I should go home, but I don't wanna face it yet." Alec goes full *Sullivan's Travels*: "I hear that there's a reality show set in Potomac that will help you forget all your problems, even if it's only for an hour. We should tune in."

The *RHOP* scenes are synergistic product placements, and this episode conveniently dropped the week before BravoCon, that network's huge reality festival. So, yes, it was NBCUniversal advertising itself and touting the therapeutic benefits of watching "other people's problems."

But because those scenes are motivated by the show's first serious consideration of its own racial dynamics, the corporate product placement simply works better; it is striking—almost good.

Writing, directing, performance, production design—in badwatching, any of it can suddenly stand out. My job may be to take those moments of meaning and refashion them as some light conjunctural analysis. To note that the forces that open up a run-of-the-mill procedural to sudden analyses of structural racism are the same ones that drive writers and actors in big-budget IP adaptations to veer into the weird and the same ones that ever-so-slightly downshift the consumptive mania of an overwrought gameshow. Our precarities, whatever forms they take, are being brought into alignment with the pervasive indeterminacy of the entertainment industry and its current, off-kilter delivery systems.

But that alignment isn't perfect. There are edges and remainders—bursts of expression that the machine hasn't yet sanded off. These are places where creative workers have responded to the pressure and strangeness of their jobs in ways we can now see. Maybe we can make use of that; maybe we can only witness. In the cracks in the content system, as I said, we encounter a repertoire for getting by. Not enough; not nothing.

LARB CONTRIBUTOR

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