"It Was Like I Had Murdered a Baby": Hollywood Filmmakers' *Apologia* Following "Bad" Films

Kevin A. Stein
Matthew H. Barton
Kolton Pierson

This study uses Benoit's (2015) Image Repair Theory to examine the way Hollywood directors, producers, and actors defend or apologize for films universally panned by audiences or containing controversial elements. The sample included movies such as Batman & Robin, Catwoman, The Fantastic Four, Battlefield Earth, Suicide Squad, Wild Wild West, Dragon Ball Evolution, The Last Sect, Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull, Showgirls, The Joker, and Cats. The analysis revealed that filmmakers utilize a wide variety of apologia strategies; however, they most often engage in mortification, defeasibility, shifting blame, and attacking the accuser. The paper provides explanations for these discursive choices and why audiences elevate artistic failures to the same level as socially deviant behaviors, such as domestic abuse, sexual infidelity, and racism.

Introduction

Movies are big business. In 2019, the global film industry generated $103 billion in total revenue (IBIS World, 2019) and in the U.S. alone, box office ticket sales have remained a multi-billion-dollar juggernaut since 1995 (The Numbers, 2019). In addition to the financial impact of film, movies have dominated the pop culture landscape in a plethora of ways including book adaptations, TV spin-offs, product marketing campaigns, and fan conventions.[1] There is no question that people love movies, as they open up their wallets and support the industry in a variety of ways.

On an individual level, movies satisfy a variety of human needs. For instance, liberating us from the duty of our routines (Kael, 2001), satisfying significant social/relational needs (Chancellor, 2016), and even taking "us to places we've never been and inside the skin of people quite different from ourselves" (McCracken, 2010, para. 2). But what happens when the film is bad? The deep emotional connection that people have for films creates an impetus for people to react negatively when films fail to meet their expectations. This paper wrestles with this question by examining the filmmakers' (e.g., directors, producers, actors) specific strategies for films deemed bad or disappointing by audiences. Not only can a bad movie create a negative experience for audiences, but it can also derail entire careers. For example, famed director John McTiernan (*Die Hard, Predator, Hunt for Red October)* essentially torpedoed his career with a single bad film, *Rollerball* (Thiebaut, 2015, para. 44). Director David Fincher (*Se7en, Fight Club)* reinforces the old Hollywood adage, "You're only as good as your last film" (Knapp, 2014, p. 43). Thus, audiences have the expectation that every film will satisfy their diverse needs.

It is perhaps no surprise then, that the disappointment is heightened when the film is created by filmmakers who are expected to produce consistent quality. One of the most highly esteemed film directors

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[1] For example, the San Diego Comic-Con, which hosts studios campaigning for most Hollywood tentpole films, welcomed approximately 135,000 people from more than 80 countries. Moreover, the 2020 San Diego Comic-Con sold out just one hour after tickets were first made available (Fox 5 San Diego, 2019).

Kevin A. Stein (Ph.D., University of Missouri, 2005) is a Professor of Communication at Southern Utah University. Address correspondence to the first author at stein@suu.edu.
Matthew H. Barton (Ph.D., University of Nebraska, 2002) is a Professor of Communication at Southern Utah University.
Kolton Pierson (B.A., Southern Utah University, 2019) is a graduate student in the Master of Professional Communication program at Southern Utah University.

in history, Steven Spielberg (*Jaws, E.T., Schindler's List*), was torn apart by fans following the release of *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*. One person Tweeted: "It's so bad the makers of *Suicide Squad* have something to look down on." Another wrote, "Anger leads to hate and hate leads to suffering. That movie caused much suffering!" The YouTube channel *Screen Junkies* succumbed to constant fan pressure to create an "honest" remixed trailer. The parodic voice-over narration argued, "Steven Spielberg and George Lucas take a giant steaming dump on their own legacy…" (*Screen Junkies*, 2013). In short, fans often react with great hostility when their favorite film actors, producers, or directors let them down. How then should these filmmakers respond?

As Benoit (2015) argued, "When faced with a threat to our image, we rarely ignore it, because our face, image, or reputation is a valuable commodity" (p. ix). People from all walks of life desire a positive image as their reputations are integrally tied to their ability to profit from that reputation. Scathing reviews and negative fan responses to their work compel filmmakers to offer *apologia* in response to the torrent of persuasive attacks. Often, the threats to image emerge from people engaging in deviant acts, such as sexual infidelity, racism, drugs, and domestic violence. Ironically, threats to a filmmaker's image can develop simply from creating a piece of art that violates audience expectations. This violation alone makes these types of texts unique and worthy of study as part of the broader landscape of public apology research.

Previous Research on *Apologia* and Celebrity

There is a substantial body of literature in *apologia* linking theoretical observations to various case study analyses. Scott and Lyman (1968) discussed *apologia* as a series of excuses and justifications for wrongful behavior. Burke (1970) offered several *apologia* strategies as part of his theory of dramatism and the guilt-redemption cycle (victimage, scapegoating, mortification, transcendence). Ware and Linkugel (1973) argued for a variety of subgenres of image repair including denial, bolstering, differentiation, and transcendence. Benoit (1995) integrated these previous image repair approaches into a more comprehensive framework. Many scholars, including Benoit himself, have used this conceptualization to explore image repair in a variety of contexts. In fact, the last several decades have been replete with studies analyzing the image repair strategies of politicians (Benoit, 1982), organizations (Benoit & Brinson, 1994), athletes (Stein, Barton, & Turman, 2014) and international leaders (Drumheller & Benoit, 2004).

There are a fair number of studies examining celebrity *apologia*, such as: Hugh Grant's misdeeds with a prostitute (Benoit, 1997), Ricky Gervais' mean-spirited jokes at the Golden Globes (Kauffman, 2012), Paula Dean's spouting of the "N-word" during a lawsuit deposition (Len-Ríos, Finneman, Han, Bhandari, & Perry, 2015), and Christian Bale's "F-word" infused tirade on the set of *Terminator Salvation* (Johnson, 2011). Surprisingly, there is very little research examining the image repair efforts of filmmakers in defense of their art form. Perhaps the most relevant literature is Benoit and Nill's (1998) analysis of Oliver Stone's defense of his controversial film *JFK*. The film examines the events leading to the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in November 1963. The movie was controversial as many accused Stone of taking liberties with historical facts and even implying that Vice-President Lyndon Johnson may have had some role in Kennedy's death. Stone offered what the authors claim to be a "flurry" of self-defense, using image repair strategies of attacking his accusers (journalists and historians), bolstering his sources (Garrison's case), and denial (of inaccuracy). Although Stone was forced to defend the film, it was not a response to accusations of poor quality or questions about his skill as one of the best directors working in Hollywood at the time.

Lauzen (2016) analyzed Thierry Frémaux's (Cannes Film Festival Artistic Director) image repair tactics following public scrutiny over his choice of films showcased at the prestigious festival. When he was attacked by several feminist groups for having an underrepresentation of female directors, Frémaux shifted the blame and reduced offensiveness. "I select films because I think they deserve to be in [the] selection. It wouldn't be very nice to select a film because the film is not good, but it is directed by a woman" (p. 172). He also issued statements suggesting that he focuses on the quality of the film rather than the person who directed it to keep the festival at its highest quality. This latter strategy represents transcendence as Frémaux references a higher motivation for his choices.

Both the Stone and Frémaux cases are somewhat unique in that neither was offering *apologia* for deviant behavior. They were both defending choices with regard to the art form of film. Most cases of celebrity *apologia* in the literature deal with socially deviant and sometimes even criminal behavior. Celebrities are naturally scrutinized for their actions simply because they are in the limelight and there tends to be greater public interest in their activities. What is peculiar about the filmmaker context is that they have done nothing wrong by any traditional apology standard -- their offense is simply a failure to satisfy the entertainment hopes of a movie audience. The fact that they engage in *apologia* for actions that are not legally criminal and barely even socially inappropriate is a cultural paradox that leaves researchers asking why. Therefore, this study explores filmmakers' image repair strategies following poorly received movies. The analysis evaluates their effectiveness consistent with Scott and Brock's (1989) claims about rhetorical effects. They suggest, "rhetorical criticism requires that people make descriptive, interpretive judgments regarding the effectiveness of rhetoric" (p. 183). Consequently, we offer claims common in rhetorical criticism regarding the internal plausibility and consistency of the text(s).

Approach to Analyzing the Filmmakers' Statements

Benoit's (1995) typology of image repair strategies provided a structure to evaluate the strategies. Benoit's (1995) method is the most comprehensive because it includes all of the strategies addressed in the previous literature. This broad typology supplies critics with clear categories to more easily organize the discourse.

Image Repair Strategies

Benoit's (1995) theory operates on two premises. One is that communication is a goal-oriented activity. The other is that the maintenance of a favorable image is one of the principal objectives of the discourse. The typology contains five major categories: denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. Three of the previous categories have subcategories, making a total of fourteen image repair strategies. The denial category consists of simple denial and shifting responsibility. The evading responsibility category consists of provocation, defeasibility, accident, and good intentions. The reducing offensiveness category consists of bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, attacking the accuser, and compensation. Due to space constraints, these strategies are defined and illustrated in Table 1.

Texts Used in the Analysis

Because our analysis uses critical methods and is exploratory in nature, we make no effort to generalize our findings to all filmmakers who have or may defend their films. We simply gathered an appropriate sample for discerning important patterns in this type of discourse and drawing some general conclusions about the key image repair strategies. To collect the sample, we conducted Google searches using combinations of the following keywords: actor, actress, director, producer, filmmaker, film, movie, apology, defend(s), audience, reaction, bad, terrible. The search yielded transcripts of primary texts (interview transcripts) as well as secondary texts (quotes in newspapers).[2] Please note that directors will

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[2] The films, and those associated with their creation, that became a part of our sample were the following: *Mary Poppins* (1964), *The Day the Clown Cried* (1972), *Annie Hall* (1977), *Midnight Express* (1978), *Alien 3* (1992), *Interview with the Vampire* (1994), *Showgirls* (1995), *The Underneath* (1995), *Batman & Robin* (1997), *Chasing Amy* (1997), *Armageddon* (1998), *American History X* (1998), *Wild Wild West* (1999), *Battlefield Earth* (2000), *The Brown Bunny* (2003), *Catwoman* (2004), *Monster House* (2006), *The Last Sect* (2006), *Spiderman 3* (2007), *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* (2008), *Babylon A.D.* (2008), *Dragonball Evolution* (2009), *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen* (2009), *Star Trek* (2009), *Clash of the Titans* (2010), *Iron Man 3* (2013), *Elysium* (2013), *Fantastic Four* (2015), *Aloha* (2015), *Jem and the Holograms* (2015), *Project Almanac* (2015),

sometimes defend a controversial part of the film rather than the totality of the film. For example, though people generally liked his film, they criticized director J.J. Abrams for his overuse of lens flare effects (721 of them) in *Star Trek*, whereas people criticized seemingly every part of the movie *Cats.* Our sample included *apologia* regarding many different elements of the filmmaking process.

Apologia of Hollywood Filmmakers

Hollywood filmmakers used a wide variety of strategies in accounting for their films. We provide illustrations that best represent the strategies employed. Most often, they defended themselves for movies deemed aesthetically terrible by audiences, whereas sometimes filmmakers would defend themselves for elements of the films argued to be culturally controversial or insensitive in some way. The strategies present in the discourse included: mortification, defeasibility, bolstering, shifting blame, attacking the accuser, good intentions, and corrective action.

Mortification

In traditional *apologia* scholarship, mortification implies that the rhetoric functions to take full responsibility for harmful behavior. However, Stein and Barton (2019) argued that "mortification is sometimes a strategy in which the accused accepts all responsibility and demonstrates genuine contrition, while in others the accused uses a general statement of regret to deflect, rather than accept, responsibility" (p. 256). Our analysis discovered examples of both types, which we classify here as mortification, even though some statements of responsibility are more evasive and ambiguous than others. For example, Ben Ramsey apologized for writing the film *Dragonball Evolution*: "I spent so many years trying to deflect the blame, but at the end of the day it all comes down to the written word on the page and I take full responsibility for what was such a disappointment to so many fans. I did the best I could, but at the end of the day, I dropped the dragon ball" (Padula, 2016, para. 9). J.D. Shapiro, writer of *Battlefield Earth*, also took responsibility for his role in the disastrous film: "Now, looking back at the movie with fresh eyes, I can't help but be strangely proud of it. Because out of all the sucky movies, mine is the *suckiest*" (Shapiro, 2010, para. 28, emphasis in original).

In addition to screenwriters, directors also took responsibility for bad films. For example, Steven Spielberg apologized for one of the most criticized scenes in *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*: "What people *really* jumped at was Indy climbing into a refrigerator and getting blown into the sky by an atom-bomb blast. Blame me. Don't blame George [Lucas]. That was my silly idea. People stopped saying 'jump the shark.' They now say 'nuked the fridge.' I'm proud of that. I'm glad I was able to bring that into popular culture" (Franich, 2011, para. 5). While Spielberg was playful in his comments, others took a more serious tone. Steven Soderbergh said about his movie *The Underneath,* "it's the worst thing I've ever made" (Perez, 2014, para. 10) and Michael Bay reflected on his film *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen* by suggesting, "The real fault with it is that it ran into a mystical world. When I look back at it, that was crap" (Yuan, 2011, para. 3).

Some filmmakers apologized for controversial casting choices. Writer/director Cameron Crowe apologized for accusations of whitewashing in his film *Aloha:* "I have heard your words and your disappointment, and I offer you a heart-felt apology to all who felt this was an odd or misguided casting choice" (Crowe, 2015, para. 2). Director Alex Proyas apologized for a similar accusation with his movie *Gods of Egypt:* "The process of casting a movie has many complicated variables, but it is clear that our casting choices should have been more diverse. I sincerely apologize to those who are offended by the decisions we made" (Medelson, 2015, para. 2). Both of these statements use the words "apology" or

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Suicide Squad (2016), *Gods of Egypt* (2016), *Doctor Strange* (2016), *Anything* (2017), *The Snowman* (2017), *Shanghai Forest* (2019), *Charlie's Angels* (2019), *Cats* (2019), and *The Joker* (2019).

"apologize," yet the rhetors detract from the apology by suggesting they only did something wrong in the eyes of the audience.

Although we do not use frequency data in this exploratory analysis, the most commonly used strategy was mortification. This result is surprising considering how bonded artists can be to the work they produce and how humiliating it must be to apologize for something created with (sometimes) years of hard work. Perhaps filmmakers find it even harder to defend a film as "very good" quality, like Paul Verhoeven's description of *Showgirls* as "elegantly made," when millions of people are telling them that it was dreadful. Making a film that has taken years to write, cast, shoot, and edit in post-production is created with the hope of the movie leaving a lasting, positive impact. These efforts are likely an investment into image *building* as opposed to simply image *repair*. Because film apologies are categorically different from deviant apologies, filmmakers are forced into a situation that runs counter to expectations for entertainment. That expectation likely involves building an artistic legacy rather than apologizing for a singular misstep. Thus, it is important for these artists to maintain a relationship with their audiences, and this connection can best be cultivated by accepting responsibility and pleading with fans to continue viewing their work.

Defeasibility

Other filmmakers used the strategy of defeasibility by claiming there was some type of external cause for their failures. For example, actor Will Smith blamed his sudden fame for his poor decision to make *Wild Wild West*: "I had so much success that I started to taste global blood, and my focus shifted from my artistry to winning...I found myself promoting something because I wanted to win, versus promoting something because I believed in it" (Nadkarni, 2016, para. 2). Smith claims to have lost focus on creating good films and focused merely on global box office success and his own personal star power. Others blamed an unrealistic timeline, such as David Robbeson (writer of *The Last Sect*): "I wrote it in six days for 15 grand. With a budget of about $2 million, the film was cast with a handful of hot-bodied unknowns and one idiosyncratic Hollywood legend" (Robbeson, 2008, para. 3). Tomas Alfredson, director of *The Snowman*, argued, "Our shoot time in Norway was way too short. We didn't get the whole story with us and when we started cutting, we discovered that a lot was missing" (Shamsian, 2017, para. 2). Shane Black, director of *Iron Man 3*, blamed his lack of awareness about the audience expectations for him ruining the Mandarin character: "We didn't know. We all thought they'd eat it up because it never occurred to us the Mandarin is as iconic to people as, say, the Joker in *Batman*" (Ryan, 2016, para. 9). In each of these examples, the filmmakers attribute the cause of their failures to something external, such as quick timetables or faulty thinking.

Defeasibility was likely effective in softening criticism by suggesting that there was no overt effort to give the audience a poor return on its money. We believe the use of this strategy in accounting for poorly released films is categorically different than saying you did not mean to hurt someone by engaging in infidelity and, therefore, this strategy is probably a more logical fit in the entertainment context.

Bolstering

In other instances, writers, actors, and directors would attempt to offset perceived damage to their reputations by emphasizing positive qualities associated with other elements of the filmmaking process. First, several filmmakers focused on the amount of work that was put into the film. For example, Joel Schumacher, who directed *Batman & Robin,* said, "The special effects, stunt people, and everybody that breaks their asses along with the cast [sic]. Everybody worked really hard under very long hours" (Ransome, 2017, para. 8).

Second, some emphasized the joy they experienced working on the films, such as Halle Berry discussing her role in *Catwoman*: "While I failed to most people, it wasn't a failure for me because I met so many interesting people that I wouldn't have met otherwise. I learned two forms of martial arts and I learned what not to do" (Penrose, 2018, para. 5). Similarly, Paul Verhoeven, the director of *Showgirls,* described the conditions on set: "There was never any question about nudity and we actually had a very pleasant shoot and everybody thought we were making an interesting movie" (Desborough & Patterson,

2015, para. 20). Comments like these are meant to preserve the reputation of the filmmakers by suggesting they could rise above the criticism and take something positive from the experience overall.

Third, filmmakers would tout their own technical skills or discuss the artistic merits of their films. For example, director Tony Kaye emphasized his filmmaking skills in response to criticism for *American History X*: "I've been playing with film for 15 or 16 years and to be honest with you, I consider myself the greatest craftsman/director/imagemaker on this planet and I defy anyone to try and create film like me when I'm allowed to work in a way that suits my style and my personality" (Maurer, 1998, para. 2). Though the film is widely admired by critics and audiences (83% critics score and 96% audience score on *Rotten Tomatoes*), Kaye vehemently defended himself for the final product. While he focused primarily on himself in the previous example, Tom Hooper discussed the advanced technology used by his team at Working Title in creating the movie *Cats*: "Bringing the story of a group of cats trying to determine who will be resurrected and reborn to a new life presented certain challenges. The Working Title team spent three years developing effects, dubbed 'digital fur technology,' that enable its stars to be covered in photo-realistic fur" (Variety Staff, 2019, para. 8).

In these examples, the filmmakers attempted to offset damage to their reputations by emphasizing their own positive attitudes as well as their work ethic in creating these films for audience members. While bolstering makes sense in other contexts, it does not work well with film *apologia*. For instance, hard work is typically admired and rewarded in a merit-based capitalist system, like three years mastering computer graphic work for *Cats*, or the efforts of stuntmen in *Batman & Robin*, so this strategy should work. However, audiences do not consume a film in categories (e.g cinematography, poor casting, or special effects alone) rather they view the totality of the film. Thus, one positive element cannot compensate for other deficiencies, no matter how good that element may be. Moreover, audiences have a present mindset, disregarding the filmmaker's entire resume in favor of what is "now playing." In short, they have already spent their money on the "old film" -- they want current value. Consequently, audiences are also not interested in what an actor or director learned via their mistakes; they want a quality finished product.

Shifting Blame

Another common strategy was shifting blame, wherein filmmakers would blame anyone but themselves for their movies' failure. Actor Shia LaBeouf blamed Steven Spielberg for *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*: "He's done so much great work that there's no need for him to feel vulnerable about one film. But when you drop the ball, you drop the ball" (Franich, 2010, para. 2). Steven Spielberg then blamed story creator George Lucas: "I am loyal to my best friend. When he writes a story he believes in—even if I don't believe in it—I'm going to shoot the movie the way George envisaged it" (Franich, 2011, para. 3). Other instances involved directors blaming actors, such as David Robbeson blaming his lead actor for a poor performance in his movie: "While I can't blame *The Last Sect* on David Carradine, his bizarre orations (improvised all—I've no idea what he's talking about most of the time) and the flute playing (not in the script) didn't help" (Robbeson, 2008, para. 3).

Most often, however, it was writers blaming directors and producers for not staying true to their otherwise brilliant scripts. J.D. Shapiro blasted those who brought his script for *Battlefield Earth* to the big screen: "My script was very, very different than what ended up on the screen. My screenplay was darker, grittier and had a very compelling story with rich characters. What my screenplay didn't have was slow motion at every turn, Dutch tilts, campy dialogue, aliens in KISS boots, and everyone wearing Bob Marley wigs" (Shapiro, 2010, para. 18). Similarly, Mathieu Kassovitz criticized the production team for *Babylon A.D.*: "I'm very unhappy with the film. I never had a chance to do one scene the way it was written or the way I wanted it to be. The script wasn't respected. Bad producers, bad partners, it was a terrible experience" (Brevet, 2008, para. 3). In these examples, filmmakers offloaded responsibility for their films' poor reception by blaming other members of the production team.

The strategy of shifting blame was a logical choice for filmmakers, especially with the multitude of people working on a given film. Obviously, the director of a film can control certain variables that lend themselves to a positive outcome, yet a single poorly conceived effort in the areas of screenwriting,

cinematography, acting, or editing can derail the prospects for a good film in its totality. For example, with *Indiana Jones 4*, actor Shia Lebouf blamed Director Steven Spielberg, who then blamed screenwriter George Lucas. It would be easy to blame any of the other people on the set, but perhaps easier to blame those occupying roles in the filmmaking process immediately preceding or following the person offering the image repair.

Attacking the Accuser

Filmmakers would also frequently lash out at people who were disapproving of their films, such as general audiences or professional film critics. One example of an attack on a critic came from director Todd Phillips, who was upset that people would write negative commentary about his film, *The Joker,* without actually having seen it. He argued, "I think it's okay that it sparks conversations and there are debates around it. The film is the statement and it's great to talk about it, but it's much more helpful if you've seen it. There's been so much conversation around the movie by people who haven't seen the movie; thinkpieces written by people who say, 'I haven't seen the movie. I'm not going to see the movie.' And then they write two pages about the movie" (Sharf, 2019b, para. 2). Most of those people shifting blame criticized the general public for a lack of awareness or understanding of what the film was trying to convey. For example, Todd Phillips and Joaquin Phoenix (who played the Joker) both criticized audience members who felt the film promoted violence. Phillips suggested moviegoers maintained a double standard with violence being acceptable in some films and not in others: "He's [John Wick character] a white male who kills 300 people and everybody's laughing and hooting and hollering. Why does this movie get held to different standards? It honestly doesn't make sense to me" (Sharf, 2019a, para. 4). Phoenix argued that it is not his responsibility to help the audience interpret the movie correctly: "People misinterpret lyrics from songs. They misinterpret passages from books. I don't think it's the responsibility of a filmmaker to teach the audience morality or the difference between right or wrong. I mean, to me, I think that that's obvious" (Sharf, 2019b, para. 2).

Other filmmakers attacked the audience for being either hateful or ignorant. David Ayer, writer and director of *Suicide Squad*, felt that audiences were too vicious in their expressions of outrage: "Nothing hurts more than to pick up a newspaper and see a couple years of your blood, sweat, and tears ripped to shreds. The hate game is strong out there" (Fahey, 2017, para. 16). Similarly, Ben Ramsey argued, "*Dragonball Evolution* marked a very painful creative point in my life. To have something with my name on it as the writer be so globally reviled is gut wrenching. To receive hate mail from all over the world is heartbreaking" (Padula, 2016, para. 7). Some writers and directors felt the audience was too ignorant to understand their films. Cameron Crowe (writer/director of *Aloha*) wrote, "From the very beginning... 'Aloha' has felt like a misunderstood movie. One that people felt they knew a lot about, but in fact they knew very little" (Crowe, 2015, para. 1). Paul Verhoeven, director of *Showgirls*, believed audiences were not focused on the most important elements of his film: "Half the audience only ever had their eyes below her face, so of course they would say that! [responding to criticism of Elizabeth Berkeley's acting]" (Desborough & Patterson, 2015, para. 23). In sum, filmmakers attempted to save face by focusing attention on the negative attributes of those originally levying the attacks.

Attacking the accuser may have been a bad strategy for those who opted to use it since filmmakers depend on audiences for their livelihood. Perhaps this is also why mortification was so prominent; it functioned as a direct alternative to verbally "going after" the people who line their pockets. Although it makes practical sense that the savviest directors would certainly not bite the hand that feeds them, we would suggest that civility is generally on decline in the public discourse and that filmmakers might not be able to resist the temptation to engage in hostile exchanges with fans online. Celeste Condit (2018) argued that although groups of angry people online are often driven by "cultural traditions, ideologies, and histories...they are also substantively shaped by the distinctive set of characteristics that are constitutive of

'being angry together' as a pervasive social phenomenon" (p. 2). She maintained that the impetus for an angry public usually comes from the collective group believing that an offender has violated some "crucial social norm." Without these conditions, the anger is likely to be minimal. Therefore, the only conclusion that we can draw is that fan vitriol comes from a perception that these films violate some critical social/cultural norm, even when not overtly visible.

Good Intentions

Another strategy used by filmmakers was to argue that, in spite of their films not resonating with audiences, their intentions were good. For example, David Robbeson discussed his intentions with his film *The Last Sect*: "It wasn't supposed to be like this. The *Last Sect* wasn't merely my first film; it was the first screenplay I'd ever written, an epic tale of lesbian vampires who run an Internet dating service. I wrote it to be philosophical and sexy: long sessions of blood-dripping French kisses between breathless ruminations about the nature of mortality" (Robbeson, 2008, para. 1). J.D. Shapiro also emphasized his intentions with the film *Battlefield Earth*: "It wasn't what I intended—promise. No one sets out to make a train wreck. Actually, comparing it to a train wreck isn't really fair to train wrecks, because people actually want to watch those" (Shapiro, 2010, para. 2). And Vincent Gallo (writer/director/star of *The Brown Bunny*) defended the aims of his movie: "It was never my intention to make a pretentious film, a self-indulgent film, a useless film, an unengaging film" (Gibbons, 2003, para. 2).

These three examples are used to soften criticism by suggesting there was no overt effort to make a bad film. Using good intentions is logical insulation against audience perceptions that the directors were simply collecting a paycheck. This approach humanizes filmmakers and increases the likelihood that audience members will want to give them another chance.

Corrective Action

Some filmmakers used the strategy of corrective action by claiming that in the future, they would do something to make it up to audiences. For example, Matthew Vaughn, producer of *The Fantastic Four*, said, "One of my favorites is the *Fantastic Four*, so maybe one day I'll try and rectify the mistake" (Lussier, 2017, para. 2). Another example of corrective action is a statement made by David Ayer following the release of *Suicide Squad:* "I have to give the characters the stories and plots they deserve next time" (Robinson, 2017, para. 4). The last example is Ben Ramsey, who wished to provide audiences with a better effort than he provided with *Dragonball Evolution*: "I hope I can make it up to you by creating something really cool and entertaining that you will like and that is also something I am passionate about. That's the only work I do now" (Padula, 2016, para. 11). These filmmakers recognize that they cannot turn back the clock on audience disappointment toward their films, but encourage moviegoers to give them a shot at redemption in the future.

Corrective action was unlikely to be a very persuasive strategy overall since the movie theater experience cannot generally be fixed retroactively because doing so might, at a minimum, require a refund on every ticket. Corrective action allows filmmakers to make a sincere public gesture without directly prostrating themselves financially. One exception to this was director Tom Hooper, who recently sent out a "digital patch" that theater owners could download and add to the previous version of the movie *Cats* in order to update some of the visual effects (Ricker, 2019). We wonder, though, which might be worse for Hooper's overall image: 1) Releasing a film with poor digital effects; or 2) Distributing a patch to make up for the premature release of an incomplete film.

In sum, only two of Benoit's fourteen image repair strategies were not used at all. These were the strategies of accident (likely because movies do not just pop up spontaneously) and provocation (nobody is going to say "the audience irritated me, so I decided to punish them with a bad movie"). In this case, we do not believe that accident or provocation would have been appropriate and perhaps that is why they were not used by any of the filmmakers in our textual sample. In short, the most interesting element of this discourse is that audiences feel that failure in the entertainment world is nearly as egregious and offensive as are deviant and criminal behaviors.

Conclusion

We believe there are several important insights that can be gleaned from this analysis. First, and perhaps not surprisingly, filmmakers defend themselves with the same energy and intensity of previous cases of *apologia* in non-recreational spaces, such as those involving violence, sexual infidelity, drugs, and racism. However, what is odd is that audience members seem to take it very personally when a filmmaker fails to deliver on the promise of quality entertainment. Ironically, audiences have not been wronged the way victims of a crime might be, so asking for restitution for lost time and money in a recreational space is highly unusual. For example, Joel Schumacher was absolutely decimated after the release of *Batman & Robin.* In fact, the movie still holds an IMDB rating of 3.7 (out of 10) and people continue to post scathing reviews of it even 23 years after its original release. And Schumacher seems to recognize how hurt audiences were by his film when he said, "After *Batman & Robin*, I was scum. It was like I had murdered a baby" (Bodner, 2017, para. 3). Simply put, filmmakers feel a strong sense of responsibility for giving fans what they want, and fans feel deeply offended when filmmakers fail to deliver on those promises.

Second, fan reactions are also elevated when the disappointments come from directors, producers, or actors who have very good track records for producing quality. After all, Steven Spielberg has three Academy Awards and 17 nominations, but has been reviled for films like *Hook, 1941, and Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull.* James Cameron, director of box office hits like *Titanic, Terminator 1 and 2, Aliens,* and *Avatar* also surprisingly made *Piranha 2: The Spawning*. Seemingly decades of trust can be dismantled with a single poor outing. It does not mean audiences will stop attending movies made by these film titans; however, audiences may always have lingering doubt about the potential quality of the latest release knowing their favorite filmmaker is capable of producing a turkey of a movie.

Third, there seems to be a much greater variety of strategies used in this context than in previous cases of image repair in the literature. One explanation could be that there are fewer rhetorical constraints or exigencies with defending art. In cases of deviant or criminal behavior, an accused person would be foolish to use certain strategies such as minimization ("sexual assault is not that bad") or transcendence ("I had some higher purpose for engaging in the sexual assault"). These fluctuating constraints are common with a variety of offenses, yet very few image repair strategies seem to be "off the table" for those simply defending a poor quality or controversial film. There are also fewer established norms when it comes to defending art because it is an understudied area of *apologia* discourse. Directors, producers, and actors are still trying to figure out which responses audiences will accept and which ones they will reject. The recent accessibility of social media now allows fans to take to the internet with their analyses of these films, thus increasing the likelihood of filmmaker *apologia* and providing a new context for scholars to examine.

Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, is the way that filmmaker *apologia* differs from other categories. Film *apologia* is not simply about the completed product, it is a defense of an individual's livelihood. For example, Tiger Woods' apology for cheating on his wife had no direct connection to his golfing ability. Nobody was questioning his legitimacy as a professional golfer, but they were challenging his morality. In contrast, when filmmakers are forced to apologize for a poor film, the question is raised as to whether they are capable of providing quality entertainment in the future, thereby suggesting that they should choose a new occupation.

Additionally, filmmaker *apologia* differs on the basis of the nature of offense and harm. A spontaneous act often causes emotional or physical harm to the recipient. There are medical bills to be covered, therapy to be offered, and trauma to be treated. However, when a bad film is created, there should not be any need for restitution. There is nothing inherently wrong with the act. Filmmakers simply tried to create an enjoyable film, but fell short. Thus, the motivation with filmmaking is to please the audience; the motivation for deviant acts is typically to inflict harm or acquire personal gain. Audiences can be more understanding regarding "heat of the moment" behaviors from a celebrity or athlete for a spontaneous act than with filmmakers who carefully thought through each detail of a movie and still created something that upset moviegoers.

Regardless of filmmaker intent, this study underscores a new reality that impacts the way this subcategory of movie *apologia* is viewed. We believe the cultural landscape of public blaming and complaining has taken a strong foothold and, when combined with people's reliance on technology, it is now much easier to complain to a collective of like-minded people who share perhaps only one unifying characteristic: they all hated this one particular movie, and they are not shy about broadcasting their experiences.

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Table 1. Benoit's *apologia* (image repair) strategies*

General strategy	Tactic	Example
Denial		
	Simple denial	I did not embezzle money.
	Shift blame	Steve took your wallet, not me.
Evade responsibility		
	Provocation	I insulted you, but only after you criticized me.
	Defeasibility	I was late because traffic delayed me.
	Accident	Our collision was an accident.
	Good intentions	I didn't tell you because I hoped to fix the problem first.
Reducing offensiveness		
	Bolstering	Think of all the times I helped you.
	Minimization	I broke your vase, but it was not an expensive one.
	Differentiation	I borrowed your laptop without asking; I didn't steal it.

	Transcendence	Searching travelers at the airport is an inconvenience, but it protects against terrorism.
	Attack accuser	Joe says I embezzled money, but he is a chronic liar.
	Compensation	Because the waiter spilled a drink on your clothes, we'll give you dessert for free.
Corrective action		Because the waiter spilled a drink on your suit, we'll have it dry cleaned.
Mortification		I'm so sorry I offended you. I regret hurting your feelings and I apologize.

*Versions of this table can be found in Benoit (1995 & 2015)