



Film Evaluation and the Enjoyment of Dated Films

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Abstract: How should a film's appearing dated affect critical evaluation of it? This article distinguishes enjoyment of a film from evaluation and describes how films undergo positive, negative, and comic dating. The affective responses of nostalgia, boredom, and humorous amusement, respectively, are associated with each of these kinds of dating. Insofar as these affective responses are unintended and thus beyond the control of the filmmakers, they have little influence on the film's artistic value, which is understood in terms of the filmmakers' achievement. Conversely, these states do affect levels of enjoyment. By recognizing this, evaluators can rationally resolve disagreements that are grounded on these unintended affective responses to dated films. Several films and film reviews are examined, yet no attempt is made to give close readings or analyses of the films discussed.

Keywords: boredom, cinephilia, Noël Carroll, film criticism, David Hume, humor, intention, nostalgia

Overview

It might seem commonplace to observe that viewers' enjoyment of a film changes over time, but what this implies for film evaluation is not so evident. A dated film can compel spectators' interest through the nostalgia it evokes, or struggle to hold interest at all, or elicit laughter. I argue that these affective states (nostalgia, boredom, and comic amusement) are associated with three different kinds of dating.

Before I elaborate on these three types, however, I must clarify some of the key terms used in this article. "Dating" or "aging" (used here as synonyms) does not designate dating in a physical sense, the decomposition or decaying of a material substance such as film stock. Moreover, a film's dating is not the same as its getting old or passing through time. Being dated, as I use the term, is an aesthetic property; to determine whether a film is dated, viewers must experience and see the film. "Oldness" is an extrinsic, temporal property that lies outside of the "aesthetic frame" in the sense used by Carolyn Korsmeyer (2008). My use of "age value" differs from Korsmeyer's in that "aging" here



does not refer to objective oldness, but to a way in which the film appears to viewers. There are non-aesthetic temporal facts that are true independently of what filmgoers perceive or think, whereas datedness is the result of an aesthetic encounter with the film. Although all films from the past become dated to some degree, how and to what extent they do so is an open, an aesthetic, question. Specifically, a film is “dated” if the following criteria apply: 1) Some features of the film become obtrusive in their failure to achieve their intended function. 2) Those features were unobtrusive when the film first appeared and were crucial to the emotional success of the work. 3) The current treatment of features in the relevant category (e.g., special effects) is in some objective sense superior to what it was at the time of the film’s release.

Oldness, a function of the passage of time, is necessary for being dated. A new release cannot actually seem dated. Even a new film such as *The Artist* (Michel Hazanavicius, 2011) or *Manhattan* (when it was released in 1979) that is designed to look dated will not count as a counterexample to this claim, for an informed viewer will know what the film is trying to achieve and therefore will view it as a new release that is attempting to have a dated look. Of course, the filmic means used to execute this task might become dated at some later point.

What are the general causes of dating? Filmic elements such as directorial and acting style, performances, plot structure, pacing, lighting, editing, visual special effects, use of computer-generated imagery, cinematography, composition, camera angles, music—or some combination of these—can have an influence on the extent to which a film appears dated. Changes in cinematic elements such as these lead to, among other responses, what I call positive, negative, and comic dating.

The common aesthetic experience of thinking a film has dated leads to some puzzles worthy of philosophical attention. If this older film is excellent, why doesn’t it affect or move viewers the way the creators intended to do (in the case of negative dating)? If an older film was once judged an artistic success, shouldn’t viewers still be engaged by it? Conversely: If this film from another era has serious artistic flaws, why do spectators enjoy it with amused pleasure (comic dating)? How can an earlier film be, as the saying goes, so bad it’s good? Why is it that filmgoers are attracted to some classic films and even mediocre ones from a past age (positive dating)? It may be hard for some filmgoers to make sense of their enjoyment or boredom (or other unintended, affective responses) when watching a dated film, and this topic has so far received little theoretical attention. Accordingly, this article lays out a framework for analyzing the emotional responses to dated films and shows how they pose a potential problem for film evaluation, a problem resolved by making a distinction between evaluation and enjoyment of a film. One can ad-

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dress such difficulties if one characterizes the responses as affecting the enjoyment of the film rather than its artistic value. This distinction should deepen our understanding of value judgments of film and our comprehension of the temporal processes of film reception.

Another motive of this article is the relative lack of philosophical treatment of film evaluation. Noël Carroll, one of only a few writers contributing to this area, offers an account of the evaluation of films (and art generally) in *On Criticism* (2009: 153–196), *The Philosophy of Motion Pictures* (2008: 192–226), and *Engaging the Moving Image* (2003: 147–164). My account is indebted to Carroll's, which he calls a pluralistic-category or plural category approach (2009). According to Carroll, a film fails aesthetically if it is a poor instance of its genre, style, movement, or school, whereas a film succeeds if it is an admirable or excellent instance of the same. I propose an account of evaluation that builds on Carroll's work.

Carroll recently noted that the question of motion picture evaluation has not been the subject of much philosophical or theoretical discussion, even if it was pursued by "the classical tradition" of film theory produced up to and through the 1960s (2008: 225). Five years before making that claim, Carroll presented, or re-introduced, the topic of film evaluation in a chapter called "Introducing Film Evaluation" (2003). This marked a welcome development in film studies, aesthetics, and philosophy of film. Cynthia Freeland commented: "This is an important topic he [Carroll] is right to direct our attention to" (2006: 154). Likewise, in a review of Carroll's *Engaging the Moving Image*, Thomas Wartenberg (2005) observed: "This is a topic that theorists of film have generally eschewed . . . He is to be praised for putting this issue on the agenda for film theorists. I expect that this essay will generate considerable discussion in the years to come." Alas, discussion of film evaluation has hardly been considerable so far. In a review of Carroll's *The Philosophy of Motion Pic-*

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tures, Katherine Thomson-Jones observes: "By contrast with chapter 6, the discussion of film criticism in chapter 7 has yet to generate a full critical response in the literature" (2008, 403). Accordingly, I hope this article adds life to this debate. The problem of film evaluation is an interesting one, but philosophers of film and film theorists have not yet given it the consideration it deserves. Even if

the notion of film evaluation is often avoided in work in Film and Media Studies and related disciplines (where it can be seen as elitist or hegemonic), an account of evaluation can help theorists make sense of a significant and important element of film spectatorship—yet another reason to examine the appraisals of films.

Carroll acknowledges that his proposal will not solve all of the problems in film evaluation in a rational manner. He asks scholars to explore the limits of

what, according to his proposal, can be resolved rationally: "An interesting question for students to pursue with respect to this chapter is to identify the kinds of disputes that the approach in this essay leaves unsolved. An even more interesting problem is for students to think about how some of these disputes might be rendered rationally tractable" (2003: 163). Accordingly, I describe how viewers respond to dated films in unintended ways that are beyond the limits of rational dispute. Meanwhile, recognizing this fact and distinguishing between enjoyment and evaluation can create mutual understanding among viewers of dated films whose affective experiences lead to disputes. Recognition may render viewer disagreements no longer a genuine problem. To be sure, divergence in affective responses will not suddenly disappear, but it will be better understood and seen for what it is: a difference in enjoyment, not evaluation.

Nostalgia, boredom, and humor are common—though certainly not the only—ways in which viewers engage with films that have dated positively, negatively, or comically. Note that this tripartite framework is not intended to be exclusive or totalizing. Other affective responses are possible, and individuals will continue to view films in diverse ways.

Sometimes the aforementioned emotions are intended. For instance, all comedies, qua comedies, are intended to evoke laughter and amusement. Films such as *Forrest Gump* (Robert Zemeckis, 1994) and *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* (David Fincher, 2008), most films by Spielberg and Lucas, and indeed many Hollywood films, deliberately aim to elicit nostalgia, regularly recycling the past through pastiche, parody, and remakes. In contrast, films intended to bring about boredom appear to be rarer, given the industrial and commercial aspects of film. (Andy Warhol's lengthy *Sleep* [1963] and even lengthier *Empire* [1964] might count as exceptions to this. Warhol could have easily foreseen that these films would elicit boredom and may even have intended them to do so.) Although I recognize that viewer boredom, nostalgia, and comic amusement are sometimes intended, I limit my discussion to those cases in which the filmmakers do not aim to evoke these responses.

In this article I describe the three kinds of dating, drawing support from critical reviews of films; argue that each kind is associated with the three major ways of interacting and responding affectively to the films, even if their creators did not intend to bring about those responses; suggest that this poses a problem for film evaluation; and show how this can be resolved by appealing to my Carrollian account of film evaluation, namely, by arguing that such responses influence viewers' enjoyment of the film in question, not its artistic value.

A few more clarifications are needed. The topic of this article is a film's artistic value, not its ethical, political, historical, cultural, institutional, industrial, or economic value, although these surely are important. (I believe that

some of these kinds of value, in particular ethical value, can partly determine a film's artistic value. However, such a defense of "ethicism" in film evaluation cannot be given here.) Moreover, I am not treating artistic value and enjoyment as mutually exclusive terms, and I am neither setting up an opposition between art and entertainment nor between high and low films. A classic, canonical film can be quite enjoyable. A new, entertaining action film may have artistic excellence and exhibit the artistry of its makers.

I limit my discussion to mainstream films that have a narrative structure, which I take to include both typical fiction films and documentaries. To give more focus to my argument, I also leave aside avant-garde and non-narrative films. After providing an overview of artistic evaluation, I devote a section to each of the three kinds of dating. In order to attend to concrete examples of film evaluation and reception, my discussion draws from critical reviews, in the spirit of David Hume's endorsement of the judgments of practiced, experienced judges and Immanuel Kant's notion that to make an aesthetic appraisal is to speak with a "universal voice." Though of course not everyone responds to a particular artwork in the same way, and such a judgment is neither actually universal nor should be expected to be (indeed, not even Kant thought that). Citing reviews is not meant to imply that everyone will respond to the film exactly as the critic did, nor to be taken as a monolithic generalization from one person's view, but as a sample, however small, of the critical practice that is being analyzed and theorized (Kaufman 2002: 152). Some qualitative support, after all, is better than none. Because I explore viewers' enjoyment of a film and thus reception-value, my account of dating films bears some resemblance to the literary reception theory articulated in writings by Wolfgang Iser (1980, 2006) and Hans Robert Jauss (1982a, 1982b). Despite this similarity, these reader-response studies do not take into account dating in the sense here examined, nor do they focus on the evaluation of films.

Hume, Kant, and Carroll

Since my focus on how viewers respond to films places my account in dialogue with the eighteenth-century aesthetics of taste, in particular with Hume and Kant, it would be helpful to consider their theories of artistic evaluation in light of dating. Both philosophers appeal, at least implicitly, to a notion of passing the test of time, which in my account is an indication of artistic excellence, not enjoyment, and, to put it another way, can be associated with the concept of "significance"—a work's being meaningful and important to audiences, critics, or artists, and having an influence on these.

Hume's position in "Of the Standard of Taste" ([1757] 1985) implies that over time, assuming a work's sufficient exposure and preservation, the correct or most reasonable judgment of its artistic success will be established. Of course, not all films are distributed, marketed, or archived alike. Some films

get less exposure than others due to biases concerning ethnicity, gender, generation, wealth, or geography (Hubner 2011). Hume holds that inferior works will eventually be forgotten and superior ones will continue to be esteemed; if excellent works were once misjudged as inferior, errors in judgment will be corrected. The able art critic, Hume holds, has “delicacy,” is “practiced” in judging, makes “comparisons” of artworks of different levels of excellence, is free of “prejudice,” and possesses “good sense” ([1757] 1985: 241). The best way to ascertain delicacy of taste, Hume maintains, is “to appeal to those models and principles, which have been established by the uniform consent and experience of nations and ages” (ibid.: 237). For Hume, artworks that continue to evoke delight or are esteemed across the ages are said to pass the test of time, as several scholars have noted (e.g., Savile 1977, 1982; Silvers 1991: 213). In elaborating his conception of making “comparisons,” Hume claims that critics should be familiar with artworks from different epochs. “One accustomed to see, and examine, and weigh the several performances, *admired in different ages and nations*, can alone rate the merits of a work exhibited to his view, and assign its proper rank among the productions of genius” ([1757] 1985: 238; emphasis added). Since Hume’s theory has received a great deal of attention in the literature, I will not spend more time on it and for the moment turn to Kant.

Because Kant’s *Critique of the Power of Judgment* ([1790] 2001) contains little, if any, explicit discussion of an artwork’s enduring over time, one must turn to his anthropology lectures for a clearer statement of the matter. In a lecture on anthropology from 1784–1785, Kant sounds rather like Hume: “Ages of true taste are also ages of enlightenment and mature power of judgment. Taste comes only from long experience” (Kant 1997: 1313; my translation). He goes on to say:

One must confirm the rules of taste out of experience, otherwise one is uncertain about whether one can know them immediately already beforehand. They also tolerate exceptions, for they are borrowed from experience. It is always possible to dispute taste; one cannot demonstrate it. Taste becomes more universal the more cultivated the nation becomes. The writings of the ancients have taste, for they have already retained their glory for so long. (Kant 1997: 1326; emphasis added)

In this passage, Kant understands “taste” not as a subject’s ability to perceive an artwork’s aesthetic properties and to receive delight from them, but as the work’s capacity to retain its glory or fame (*Ruhm*) across a large span of time. This falls under what may be called passing the test of time (a matter of evaluation), not to be confused with the nostalgic viewing of positively dated films (a matter of enjoyment).

Kant ([1790] 2001: 114–116) distinguished free from dependent or adherent beauty. Free beauty is appreciated by a subject in response to an artwork or

natural object independently of any concept of the object's purpose(s). In contrast, in the case of dependent beauty, the judge takes the work's purpose or end into account and reflects on that purpose in the act of appraisal. In other words, the judge sees the work or object as a good instance of its kind and in terms of the goals and ends typically associated with that kind. (Daniel Kaufman [2002, 155f.], to whose account I am otherwise indebted, fails to mention Kant's concept of adherent beauty, which a Kantian might appeal to in response to Kaufman's objections about "nonformal" features and "meaning" in artworks. Moreover, Kaufman reads Kant's account as inherently formalist.)

This connects to Carroll's account of evaluation. The latter, which relies heavily on the notions of categories and genres, bears some similarity to Kant's account of dependent beauty. Carroll claims that the evaluator should appraise the film in terms of its purposes, that the judge should attend to the creator's achievement in the film, and that this is the locus of the film's artistic value. According to Carroll's "success-value" account, one should evaluate the film in terms of how well the filmmakers realized their aims and purposes in making the film.

Thus, a film should be evaluated according to how well it does as a member of the category to which it belongs. A category can be a genre, movement, school, or style. Hybrid categories such as horror comedy or fantasy comedy are also possible; there can be a fusion of two or more categories, as in Tim Burton's *Beetlejuice* (1988). In such cases the film may succeed more in one part of its hybrid category than in another, say, more as comedy than as fantasy.

Note that the notions of "school" and "movement" are inherently historical concepts and are associated with a particular period. This implies that one's appraisals of films should not be anachronistic, but that evaluators should assess films according to the artistic standards that governed film production at the time when the film was made, judge whether and how the makers achieved what they set out to do, and appraise their achievement. It would thus be unacceptable for an evaluator to be prejudiced against a movement or period. An appraiser cannot legitimately give a negative evaluation of a film made in 1930 because it had the qualities or features of films made in 1930, but can do so only on the basis of the work's artistic qualities (broadly construed to include its ethical, cognitive, or formally aesthetic features).

This genre-sensitive approach draws on Kendall Walton's claim (1970) that a work's aesthetic properties are to be found in a work when viewers perceive the work in the "correct" (or, better, most plausible) category. For clues about how best to categorize the film, evaluators should follow the creators' intentions as expressed in interviews and press releases, examine the structural features of the film, and attend to its contextual and historical characteristics. By placing the film in the correct genre or movement, evaluators can avoid

category mistakes, which often lead to disagreements about a film's merit. When evaluative disagreements are the result of category errors, disagreements can thus be resolved in a "rational" manner—in the sense that one is compelled to giving reasons for one's appraisals.

One premise in my overall argument is that unintended emotional (or, more broadly, affective) responses such as nostalgia, boredom, and amusement, when caused by film dating, can give rise to disagreements about how "good" a film is. One viewer may be bored by a dated film, another delightfully amused, yet another may feel nostalgia, and so on. I submit that, if viewers realize that these emotions have to do with enjoyment of the film (or lack thereof) rather than its artistic value, they can resolve these disputes in a reason-governed fashion in the sense that a pluralistic-category account describes.

My account relies on a distinction between the artistic value of the film and viewers' affective responses to it. These affective responses are either intended or unintended. When judging the artistic achievement of the film, one should look at (among other things) the extent to which the film manages to elicit the emotions it was intended to evoke. For instance, an artistically excellent thriller puts viewers on the edge of their seats and keeps them in suspense, just as it was created to do.

Meanwhile, viewers sometimes have unintended affective responses. Nostalgia, boredom, and amusement are the main (though not the only) ways in which positively, negatively, and comically dated films move viewers. One might think that these unintended emotions bear on the film's artistic worth, but this mislocates the source of its artistic value. These states merely affect viewers' enjoyment of the film (or lack thereof). If the artistic value of the film is located in what the directors achieve, the unintended enjoyment of a film has (or should have) little bearing on one's evaluation of the film. Of course, any intended enjoyment (or lack thereof) would be quite relevant: if a comedy tries to make spectators laugh yet fails to evoke laughter, then it would be worse as a comedy to that very extent. My account does not recommend that viewers divorce their emotional responses, affects, and feelings from their evaluations of films, since many of these are intended and important to film evaluation, but suggests that, when giving reasons for their evaluations, spectators should consider the intended affects.

The notion of intention deserves careful consideration since it plays a crucial role in my account. Evidence external to the film itself that helps establish artistic intentions includes the filmmakers' sincere interviews, statements, diaries, letters, notes, or manifestoes; the film's genre (when that can be independently determined); comparison of the film with others from the

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director's oeuvre as well as with other films from the filmmakers' milieu and his or her peers (cf. Carroll 2003: 76).

There may be a concern regarding my reliance on the concept of artistic intention. For instance, Godard said of *Breathless* (*À bout de souffle*, 1960) that he thought he was doing a thriller film or a gangster movie, but when he saw the print for the first time he discovered that what he had done was completely different from what he had supposed (Sterritt 1998: 29). If the theorist adopts an intentionalist approach, it would seem that *Breathless* must be seen as flawed to the extent that Godard failed to realize his aims. This would be a counterintuitive verdict for this canonical film, the objection claims. Indeed, since my account presupposes that one can distinguish between affective states a film intended to elicit and those it did not, it is important to establish that an intentionalist approach is acceptable. Although I cannot give a full defense of intentionalism in this limited space (cf. Carroll 2009: 65–81, 134–152), there is room for a few points.

Opponents may object that the intentionalist position appears to give filmmakers such as Godard too much authority in establishing the identity of the film and the category to which it belongs (cf. Carroll 2003: 75). However, it must be pointed out that in the end Godard did not insist that he had made a thriller or gangster film. He identified his original goals or aims, but then he realized that he was confused about what they were (cf. Carroll 2008: 211). The film turned out to be different from what he had consciously intended. At the same time, the film seems to have achieved what Carroll (2003: 140) calls the artist's *unconscious* intentions. One has the impression that Godard did not know what he wanted until he got it, as if his actual intentions were clarified in the process of creating the film. If this is right, these intentions would still be relevant to film evaluation (cf. Carroll 2003: 146) and play an integral (though by no means the only) part in the evaluative story.

The fact that there are unintended consequences poses another concern. It is true that an artist sometimes performs an action that has unintended consequences, but this does not imply that intentions are irrelevant. In order to identify an artistic action as possessing unintended consequences, the critic will have to have an idea of what the artist's intentions were (Carroll 2003: 79).

Still, the opponent insists, doesn't intentionalism mislocate what should be evaluated or assessed, namely, what has actually been accomplished? It is true that in making evaluations the critic should attend to what has been achieved by the work rather than what was merely attempted or intended (Carroll 2003: 82). But, as before, this does not mean that intentions become irrelevant. Even if the critic does not appraise intentions as such, the latter are still important for understanding what the artists have created and achieved.

A final objection remains. Because films are typically made collaboratively, not by individuals, how can one tell who intended what? Indeed, this issue calls for considerable attention. Some of Carroll's examples, such as the references to Ed Wood (2003: 78) and Martin Scorsese (2008: 211), imply that the director is the author of the film, or at least portray the director as the artist, the primary agent whose actions—the creation of the film—evaluators are assessing. It might seem that there is a problem of assigning artistic credit or blame in any collaborative activity, filmmaking included. However, it would be a mistake to think that this means one cannot evaluate the intentions and actions of a group. If defenders of collective responsibility (e.g., Larry May 1987: 64) are correct, there is little problem in holding a private corporation responsible, and thus praising or blaming it, for an action even if not all of its members directly contributed to the action. Similarly, people regularly hold nation states accountable for their actions, even if not all members of a federal government, let alone all of the citizens, were directly involved in decision making. Our ways of speaking suggest that we assign intentions to a group and assess its actions: a fan laments that the "team" desired to win yet played poorly and lost the game. Moreover, there is room to assess the work of individual agents in filmmaking if a critic so pleases. Evaluating the acting, score, screenplay, or directing as individual contributions is compatible with assessment of the collective process that produced the picture as a whole, just as one can assess the contribution of particular agents as well as the actions of a collective group. As Carroll (2008: 215) notes, more than one criterion of excellence, corresponding to different activities on the part of various agents, may be relevant in evaluating a film. Thus, a film could be commendable for its production design while having a leaden narrative or poor directing.

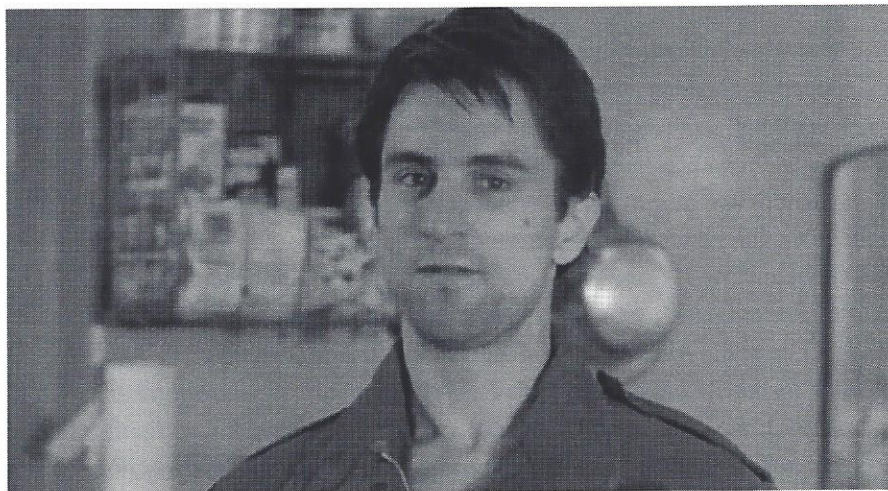
Nostalgia and Positive Dating

Let us call a film dated in a positive sense if and only if with time the enjoyment it provides increases on account of the effects of dating. One of the main ways viewers respond to such films is with nostalgia. This kind of positive dating is not the same as passing the test of time in Hume or Kant's senses (retaining "glory"), since passing the test of time is a reflection of the film's artistic value.

To see the difference between passing the test of time and dating positively by evoking nostalgia, consider Roger Ebert's 2004 review of *Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorsese, 1976). Ebert comments on how the film has endured over the years: "Martin Scorsese's 1976 film . . . is a film that does not grow dated, or over-familiar." Not only has it dated well after about three decades, Ebert says, it improves with re-watching. "I have seen it dozens of times. Every time I see it, it works." This fits

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Figure 1. Taxi Driver seems to have held up well so far and passed the test of time.



in well with Hume's ([1757] 1985) views of an artwork's passing the test of time after several viewings and comparison with other works. If Ebert is right, this film, once judged to be excellent, continues to deserve critical praise.

The notion of nostalgic viewing concerns enjoyment that is grounded in a film's appearing to be dated. What is meant by nostalgia? It is neither a Romantic trope or longing for time past, nor an idealizing melancholy, nor an unpleasant yearning for an earlier era, nor a medical condition—as it once meant. I use it in an ordinary, contemporary sense, namely, to refer to the pleasant affective state that accompanies finding something charming that is associated with the past.

For instance, many visual extravaganzas that now seem dated are still appealing to watch. Viewers can enjoy how films such as *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming et al., 1939) were shot in Technicolor. "Its special effects," Ebert



Figure 2. Where "the set ends and the backdrop begins" in The Wizard of Oz.

(1996) writes in his review of the film, "are glorious in that old Hollywood way, in which you don't even have to look closely to see where the set ends and the backdrop begins." In similar fashion, viewers take delight in surveying the Western scenery in John Ford pictures, or the ranging shades of black and white in films like *The Third Man* (Carol Reed, 1949). Even factors such as color-coding and symbolism, though now dated, sometimes compel spectators' interest in this manner. Viewers may experience these as dated yet be pleased by them. Although viewers can take an aesthetic interest in the manners and customs depicted by the film, interest can also be more formally aesthetic, focusing on the sensible and formal properties of the film such as its use of shadows or color, or the composition of its shots.

Sometimes filmgoers smile at the fictional world on screen, and do so not because viewers are disdainful or contemptuous of what they find, but because it seems old-fashioned. Past clothes and cars, idioms and ways of speaking, in short, what Hume ([1757] 1985: 245) calls the depicted "manners" and "customs" can strike viewers as charming or quaint. This interest in the dated film is not a merely intellectual or historical interest. (Korsmeyer [2008: 123–125] also connects nostalgia to aging, although, as mentioned, she is describing objective oldness rather than aesthetic dating.)

Let us consider more (and quite different) examples. Douglas Sirk's American melodramas of the 1950s were commercially successful among audiences but poorly reviewed by contemporary critics. Two or three decades later, they became popular among critics. Although this renewed popularity was partly due to a change in the ideological slant of film criticism, which shifted toward Marxism and then became concerned with gender and sexuality issues, it was also in part due to nostalgia for earlier Hollywood films (Klinger 1994).

Or, consider Peter Stack's review of the 1997 re-release of George Lucas's *Star Wars* (1977). As a commercial Hollywood blockbuster from a genre that dates quickly, *Star Wars* was a good candidate to join the pile of many action and adventure films that elicit boredom due to the effects of dating and thus are less enjoyable, whatever their original attractions were. Indeed, Stack hints that some elements of the film have dated negatively: "The young may think it's not violent, flashy or edgy enough." Yet other parts of the film still hold up, according to Stack: the film's entertaining war story and memorable characters have "traveled time like troopers." He states, "The things to love about *Star Wars* remain." If his characterization is correct, one can infer that time does not have a homogenous effect on films, that some cinematic elements in a particular film fare better than others, that there can be more than one kind of dating in a film, and that the effects of positive and negative dating can offset each other. Furthermore, it should be noted that Stack also alludes to a feeling of nostalgia: *Star Wars*, he claims, is "like a pristine '55 Chevy that you forgot was square and fat because cars have turned into jelly beans."

Taxi Driver recently celebrated its thirty-fifth anniversary with a restored print and a two-week Film Forum run. In his review of the film's 2011 release, Jim Hoberman (2011) pointed out that he did not feel nostalgia for the screened world of 1970s New York, for, alas, its problems are similar to today's. But why even mention nostalgia? In denying that he felt it, Hoberman implied that nostalgia often plays a role in viewers' enjoyment of dated films.

Perhaps an opponent of my evaluation/enjoyment distinction will object that, since a film makes audiences feel nostalgic, the film actually becomes superior to what it used to be. However, although viewers can enjoy the film for the nostalgic feelings it elicits, that does not improve the film. Such nostalgia was not intended by the creators of the film. My aim is to analyze film evaluations: such appraisals have to do with the film's artistic value and what the artists achieved in creating and executing the artwork or film (Kaufman 2002, 2003). I admit that, assuming that nostalgia is a pleasant affective state, nostalgia would, *ceteris paribus*, make viewers enjoy "film X" more than "film-X-sans-nostalgia." Nostalgia would function as an added plus, but that would have little to do with the artistic value of the film itself.

Boredom and Negative Dating

Let us call a film dated in a negative sense if and only if, due to the effects of dating, over time the enjoyment it brings about decreases. For instance, consider the action film whose special effects no longer dazzle us, or a comedy whose jokes or gags viewers find cliché or worn out, that no longer engage audiences or work the way they were supposed to, even if at one time they were successful. The aforementioned effects in the re-release of *Star Wars* provided an example of this, and there are many more.

When *The Terminator* (James Cameron, 1984) premiered, its make-up and visual effects were fascinating and cutting-edge. Yet its spectacular effects are surpassed by later installments in the *Terminator* series, which drew from bigger budgets and better imaging technology. As James Berardinelli wrote (2009), "Key special effects, which were cutting edge in 1984, appear dated by today's standards. Stan Winston's stop-animation Terminator, which takes over for Schwarzenegger at the end, looks like what it is: the product of a special effects lab." Even if the "themes and ideas presented in *The Terminator* hold up well today" and thus as a whole *The Terminator* fares well as a film and artwork, it does so despite the fact that relatively inferior special effects (judged by today's standards) can somewhat decrease enjoyment of the film, assuming one does not feel nostalgia or other positive emotions.

Watching films that are thus dated can lead audiences toward boredom. Though viewers may not be completely bored, such effects take spectators in that direction. As with nostalgia, I wish to use the term in an uncomplicated, straightforward way. "Boredom" does not refer to existential ennui or lack of

motivation, but is the affective state associated with increased distraction and inattention as well as the self-perception thereof (Damrad-Frye and Laird 1989: 315). This results in a diminished interest in the events screened.

The indexical nature of film affects enjoyment. Hume recognized that noticing a resemblance between a depicted fictional world and one's own world can be enjoyable. This implies that a dissimilarity would in turn be unpleasant. Hume writes: "We are more pleased, in the course of our reading, with pictures and characters, that resemble objects which are found in our own age or country, than with those which describe a different set of customs" ([1757] 1985: 244–245). If film evaluations should indeed strive to be as reasonable as possible (since all evaluations are presumably carried out in light of some standard), Hume's claim raises a concern, as it implies that there is a limit to how much one can rationally dispute responses to films not of "our own age." The way to resolve this issue, however, is to understand the significance of Hume's word "pleased." The term refers to enjoyment, not to the appraisal of the artwork's artistic value.

Humor and Comic Dating

Let us call a film dated in a "counter-purposive comic" sense if and only if (i) the film, or a part of it, is found to be amusing or humorous over time due to the effects of dating, and (ii) it is viewed in a way that the filmmakers did not intend, that is, against the grain of its historically correct genre. Some dated movies, judged to be artistically deficient as instances of their genres, can be enjoyed if viewed for jocular fun. I call this counter-purposive comic dating since the film is perceived to be humorous, yet it is enjoyed in a way that goes against the purposive aims and intentions of its creators.

As in the case of "positive" dating, the increased enjoyment is unintended, but with counter-purposive comic dating there is a shift in the intended emotional valence in the direction of amusement. (I thank an anonymous reviewer for clarifying this point.) If viewers watch a dated comedy with unintended nostalgia, there would be a change in emotional valence—away from comic humor and toward nostalgia—yet such spectatorship would yield (in my terms) positive dating. It would not count as counter-purposive comic dating since the film would evoke nostalgia, not jocular amusement. The difference is not just that in the case of counter-purposive comic viewing there are unintended ways of viewing the film, since this occurs in the case of positive and negative dating, but that the filmgoer deliberately and knowingly views the film against the aims of its creators and enjoys the film for its perceived humorous elements.

Note that, by my definition, counter-purposive comic dating cannot occur in response to a new release. Seeing the premiere of a substandard film for amusing fun would lead to a mixed evaluation, but would not count as see-

ing the film as dated. New, inferior films, such as recipients of dubious awards like “worst film of the year” (Medved and Medved 1980; Medved et al. 1978), would be hereby excluded. They would simply be “sleazy” (Sconce 2007: 5) or “trash” (Kael 1994) and would give rise to “guilty pleasure[s]” (Sconce 2007: 2) for the cinephiles of the paracinematic, to use Sconce’s term.

It is puzzling that a film can be *so bad it’s good*. After all, an artistic flaw should make the film worse, not better. How could something be made better by its demerits? The key to understanding this phrase is to realize that

It is puzzling that a film can be, as the saying goes, so bad it’s good . . . The key to understanding this phrase is the realization that “good” refers to enjoyment, not artistic value . . . Fans of cult classics often watch such films for kicks they were not intended to give.

“good” refers to enjoyment, not artistic value. Although the viewer is amused by the film, it remains deficient. The film does not actually improve; viewers are simply enjoying it against the grain.

Jeffrey Sconce (1995) has examined such spectatorship on the part of “badfilm” fans in the 1980s. Fans of cult classics often watch such films for kicks they were not intended to give. The passage of time in such cases (after all, it is a cult classic) improves the reception-value of the film. These fans do not view the film in question in the historically accurate way, yet they enjoy it all the same, indeed perhaps for that very reason. Such viewers are going against the grain of the artists’ intentions when they delight in films that are dated in this way, and they tend to do so knowingly and deliberately.

Many dated B movies, dated exploitation films, and cult classics give rise to such mixed pleasures. Although many bad movies are just too aesthetically flawed to deride, or even watch, some poor films can be fun when seen with the right company and in the appropriate frame of mind, sometimes involving dressing up and actively participating as “spectators.” A dated action, horror, or drama film might be viewed and enjoyed not as a successful member of those respective genres, but for its comedic moments, and often in the company of friends who share a similar sense of humor.

Consider *Troll 2* (Claudio Fragasso, 1990), a film that contains goblins, not trolls, and was the subject of *The Best Worst Movie* (Michael Stephenson, 2009), a documentary that depicts enthusiastic fan viewing of this dismal (by conventional standards) fantasy-horror film.

Fragasso, who, like his Italian crew, spoke almost no English at the time, relates that he wanted to make a well-constructed social commentary. He aimed to make a masterpiece, but he ended up creating what is actually viewed for its droll, quirky comedy. Some twenty years later, a large cult fan base watches *Troll 2* for laughs, despite Fragasso’s serious intentions.

Likewise, the American television comedy series *Mystery Science Theater 3000* (1988–1999) was devoted to a similar enjoyment of inferior films, usually dated science fiction B or C movies and low-budget pictures (Sconce 2007: 2).



Figure 3. "Oh my God!" (Troll 2).



Figure 4. Exuberant fans at a Troll 2 screening, in the documentary *The Best Worst Movie*.

The amusing audio commentaries of RiffTrax (2006–) continue this tradition of mixed pleasures in response to dated motion pictures—although they sometimes comment on new releases, too.

Counter-purposive comic dating can occur with films from various genres. It does not apply to camp films alone or to movies intended to be camp (though it can pertain to them, too), but in principle can apply to films of any genre. Although RiffTrax provides comic commentary on films that usually belong to the science fiction, horror, action, or adventure genre, it offers commentaries on the crime thriller *Memento* (Christopher Nolan, 2000) and dramas or romances such as *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, 1942), *Cocktail* (Roger Donaldson, 1988), and *Dirty Dancing* (Emile Ardolino, 1987). These are not camp films.

Critic Jim Hoberman (2006: 521) defends the enjoyment of bad films. He claims that some of the all-time worst films are bad enough to be pleasurable. His comments pertain to artistically inferior films that are dated. "There are a number of reasons to consider bad movies. The most obvious is that tastes change; that many, if not most of the films we admire were once dis-

missed as inconsequential trash; and that trash itself is not without its socio-aesthetic charms . . . In other words, it is possible for a movie to succeed *because* it has failed" (ibid. 2006: 517). Note that Hoberman is referring to films from the past. His reference to "charms" might make the reader think he is merely defending nostalgic viewing associated with positive dating, but he is not. He is describing the enjoyment of a bad film on account of its inferiority, or counter-purposive viewing. He recognizes that these films are aesthetic failures ("bad"), but holds that they can be enjoyed despite their inferiority.

If taken as a guide to evaluating the artistic achievement of the film, Hoberman's approach is of little help. Carroll makes this point well: "The reception-value critic, like Hoberman, can give you a framework for enjoying your guilty pleasures. Yet the issue is whether these guilty pleasures have anything to do with the value that should concern critics" (2009: 61). They do not. To judge the artistic value of the film as a work of art, the critic and evaluator should assess the value of what the artists have accomplished. (Note that my concern is with evaluation, not criticism per se, which is the topic of Carroll's book [2009]. Although there is obviously much overlap between the two, not all film evaluators are film critics.)

Viewers' enjoyment is a different matter. Jocular delight in response to dated, inferior films is associated with an important, even common, type of film viewing, and the enthusiasm of certain cult classic fans suggests that we should recognize the significance of such spectatorship. Such amusement is unintended by the creators of the film and thus has very little to do with the filmmaker's achievement, and therefore it does not bear on the artistic value of the film. Carroll states it well: "It makes no difference that many have spent an enjoyable evening chuckling over [Ed] Wood's follies" (2009: 78). Ed Wood is often commended by reception value theorists such as Hoberman for his transgressive, convention-busting, avant-garde filmmaking. Wood did not intend to achieve this result, but aimed to make classy, Hollywood science fiction films.

One might object to such mixed spectatorship on the grounds that it is simply mistaken, the result of ignorance. If viewers engage in such mixed viewing, it is because they are not suitably knowledgeable about film, the objection goes; if viewers were informed, they would not enjoy dated, artistically flawed movies. However, this objection mischaracterizes the enjoyment of flawed and dated films. Many cinephiles and film experts enjoy dated yet deficient films. This is verified by countless online reviews of B films and cult classics (Sconce 2007), not to mention the self-descriptions of critics such as Kael (1994). Such viewers are usually highly knowledgeable of film and its history. In fact, it appears that it is usually the experts and cinephiles who engage in this kind of film spectatorship (de Valck and Hagener 2005; Keathley 2005), and that most ordinary film viewers who know little about film simply dislike

dated, inferior films. The French language has a term for this kind of cinephile: the *nanard*, the lover of the *nanar*, a kind of bad film that, due to the weakness of its acting, special effects, cinematography, editing, and other cinematic elements, becomes enjoyable on another level, in a way unintended by the film's creators. *Nanards* are not typically ignorant or uncultured in film.

Nevertheless, the opponent of such viewing might insist that lovers of bad movies simply have bad taste. However, the *nanards*, the Hobermans of the film world, are not claiming that these films are any good, which is what the evaluators would do if they possessed bad taste. On the contrary, Hoberman recognizes that the films are artistically dismal. Although not necessarily referring to dated films, another writer describes the "enjoyment" of "bad" Mexican *naco* films from the 1970s and 1980s such as *The Red Car Gang* (*La Banda del Carro Rojo*; Rubén Galindo, 1978). "*Naco* is a commonly used term to define this genre of films by both the Mexican elite and the people who consume these films. Even within the community that consumes these films, there is an understanding that they are 'bad' but also enjoyable" (Avalos 2011: 119). Describing this as enjoyment is exactly right.

Introducing the concept of counter-purposive dating can help those writing about film understand this kind of spectatorship, which is important, common, and should not be neglected or overlooked. As Kaufman notes: "Philosophical theories belonging to the second class [e.g., philosophy of art or criticism] should avoid being prescriptive with regard to the methods and practices of the first-order disciplines [e.g., criticism] in question" (2002: 152). If this is correct, one should examine and explain Hoberman-like cases with respect to dated films. One should see them as a matter of enjoyment rather than of the film's artistic value.

Conclusion

I have argued that the unintended affective responses—nostalgia, boredom, comic amusement—can be associated with each of the three types of dating; that they have little to do with the artistic value of the film, even if they directly bear on spectators' level of enjoyment when viewing the film; and that, by recognizing this, evaluators can rationally resolve disagreements that are grounded on these unintended emotions.

If this account is correct, then film evaluation is distinct from film enjoyment. Evaluation can and should be grounded on various intended emotions, such as the suspense a superior thriller elicits. Enjoyment, in contrast, is often affected by the three unintended states (one person may be bored and dislike the film in question, while another may feel nostalgia and enjoy the film). These states are in turn associated with the three kinds of dating. Thus, when a viewer is asked, "What did you think of the film?" and her reply begins, "It was very good," she may mean one of two things. She may mean to praise it

as a work with significant artistic value, or she may simply mean that she enjoyed it and had fun.

I have relied on several critical reviews to shed light on these emotional responses. There may be a more rigorous empirical method of providing qualitative evidence in the future. Indeed, the “psycho-historical research program” proposed by Bullot and Reber (2012) implies that there may be studies of the appraisals ordinary viewers and experts make in response to canonical works of art. The authors predict that responses to artworks vary as a function of appreciators’ sensitivities to art-historical contexts—a plausible hypothesis that agrees with my account. The results from such research could provide data that would help advance our understanding of the issues addressed here.

I hope that the current debate about film evaluation will be revitalized. In the future it would be interesting, among other things, to explore how and in what ways viewers evaluate and enjoy films from a culture that has a different language, geographic location, or both. In other words, it would be worthwhile to examine how cultural distance—perhaps as a broader category under which dating can be understood—affects the enjoyment and evaluation of motion pictures.

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