

Saggi

What can Hume Teach Us about Film Evaluation?

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Abstract

This article identifies three distinct temporal notions in Hume's essays on aesthetics: passing the test of time, repeated viewing of a work, and the personal aging of the viewer. It applies these notions to film evaluation and enjoyment, between which Hume implicitly distinguishes. The article extends the author's earlier theory of positive, negative, and counter-purposive forms of film dating, which are associated with nostalgia, boredom, and comic amusement, respectively. It discusses Hume's "Of the Standard of Taste" (1757), "Of Simplicity and Refinement in Writing" (1742), and "Of Eloquence" (1742). Although the article does not offer close readings of films, it uses as illustrations Allen's *Zelig*, Antonioni's *La Notte*, Cameron's *The Terminator*, Lucas's *Star Wars*, Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*, Spielberg's *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial*, and Renoir's *La Règle du Jeu*.

Cet article identifie trois notions temporelles dans les essais esthétiques de David Hume: l'épreuve du temps (*the test of time*), l'observation répétitive de l'œuvre et le vieillissement (*aging*) du spectateur. Ces trois notions sont utilisées en discutant l'évaluation et le plaisir (*enjoyment*) de l'œuvre, deux concepts distingués implicitement par Hume. L'article étend ma théorie de la vieillesse (*dating*) positive, négative et contre-téléologique, trois formes associées à la nostalgie, l'ennui, et l'amusement comique. Dans l'article je prends en considération les textes de Hume "Of the Standard of Taste" (1757), "Of Simplicity and Refinement in Writing" (1742), and "Of Eloquence" (1742), en discutant comme exemples les films suivants: *Zelig* (Allen), *La Notte* (Antonioni), *The Terminator* (Cameron), *Star Wars* (Lucas), *Taxi Driver* (Scorsese), *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial* (Spielberg), et *La Règle du Jeu* (Renoir).

Keywords

Emotion - affective response - dating - film critic - personal aging - test of time

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Why do artistically excellent films sometimes become less enjoyable with time? Why are we attracted to and fascinated by dated films? How should we understand our laughter when we find a dated film ridiculous due to dated effects? In an earlier paper, “Film Evaluation and the Enjoyment of Dated Films” (2012), I introduced the idea that the concepts of film dating and unintended emotional responses can help us understand what is going on in these questions. The first question touches on the phenomenon I call *negative* dating, the second question concerns *positive* dating, and the last question *counter-purposive* dating. In this paper I wish to go beyond that analysis by suggesting what David Hume’s aesthetics might add to the discussion of film evaluation.

This paper pays philosophical attention to this common experience for several reasons. For many viewers – from experts, cinephiles, and critics to novices and ordinary spectators – the experience of watching a dated film might be a certain *je ne sais quoi*, thus ripe for philosophical analysis. Moreover, the last decade has seen a surge of interest in the topic of film evaluation among philosophers of film (Clewis 2012; Carroll 2009, 2008, 2003; Freeland 2006; Wartenberg 2005). Since evaluation is an important part of aesthetics, it is crucial for an aesthetic theory of film to understand how we evaluate films. In addition, as Noël Carroll notes (2008, 192), our engagement with films often involves an assessment of them. “It would be a grave mistake to think of moving picture evaluation as exclusively a professional affair. Evaluating movies is something that we all do all of the time” (Carroll 2008, 193). Finally, Hume’s account has something interesting and insightful to say here. While his “Of the Standard of Taste” has been thoroughly examined by aestheticians in recent decades, his ideas have not yet been applied to film evaluation. (I shall examine two additional essays by Hume.) In applying Hume to film evaluation, I shall (perhaps with some irony) combine his thought with that Carroll, who largely disagrees with Hume’s subjectivism, hedonism, and sentimentalism, in short, Hume’s understanding of aesthetic value in terms of a subject’s or spectator’s pleasure and feeling¹.

¹ In addition to being inspired by aspects of Aristotle’s teleological, intention-based, aretic account of

I begin with an overview of my account of film dating, defining my use of the concepts of dating and related terms. I then look at Hume's "Of the Standard of Taste" (1757) while referring to his less discussed essays, "Of Simplicity and Refinement in Writing" (1742) and "Of Eloquence" (1742). I argue that we should distinguish three main kinds of aging in Hume's work: (i) passing the test of time, or retaining value as an artwork (ii) repeated viewing of the work, and (iii) the personal aging of the viewer, which Hume thinks influences appraisals of artworks.

A word about scope is necessary: my discussion is meant to refer only to commercial, narrative films such as suspense thrillers, comedies, dramas, action and adventure films, and horror pictures. It is not meant to take into account non-narrative films, broadly conceived to encompass avant-garde, minimalist, postmodernist, abstract, and reflexive motion pictures. For, when non-narrative films appear dated, it can be difficult to separate those features that are due to their being non-narrative films from those that are due to the effects of dating. Yet the distancing effect that non-narrative films have on viewers is distinct from the one caused by dating. Indeed, a non-narrative film could be intended to engage a viewer's intellectual and cognitive abilities, yet with very little emotional engagement, or at least little engagement of a positive timbre or valence. Non-narrative films may even deliberately aim to evoke distress or confusion. I focus on narrative films since these are more likely to be created with the intention of moving and compelling the interest of filmgoers, and hence make for paradigm cases for the kinds of changes I have in mind. I propose we understand this kind of film before we examine non-narrative films, the importance of which I do not deny or wish to downplay.

artistic activity and production (here of course applied to film), and by Hume's notion of expert critics, my approach is in line with that of Noël Carroll (2003, 208, 2009) who in turn is influenced by Daniel Kaufman (2002, 2003) and Kendall Walton (1970). My approach can be contrasted with that of Jim Hoberman (2006) at least insofar as he would not distinguish *enjoyment* from evaluation of "bad" movies: my view is that enjoyment of "poor" films is common and needs to be accounted for, but should not be confused with evaluation of them as good overall. For a survey of the evaluation debate in film and media studies, see Laura Hubner (2011). Carolyn Korsmeyer (2008) discusses nostalgia and the dating of artworks, but without focusing on films. Moreover, she examines artifacts and artworks as being *objectively* old (e.g., placeable on a timeline), whereas I am providing a philosophical account of the aesthetic phenomenon of finding a film to be dated.

Three Types of Dating, Three Emotional Responses

First, I should note that, as I am using the term, film dating is caused by a film's cinematic elements. Such elements include some or all of the following: close-ups, camera movement and angles, trick photography, CGI, fades and wipes, superimposition and other visual devices, music, sound recording, dialogue, acting style, costume, *mise en scène*, sets, makeup and hairstyling, editing, screenplay, plot, and other filmic elements. This is not meant to be an exhaustive list. Moreover, elements such as color-coding and symbolism may also cause a film to appear to dated.

More broadly speaking, dating is a result of at least two distinct features of filmic art. The first is the industrial and commercial nature of cinema, which implies that film is largely subject to fashions, which come and go quickly, but can also come back at a later date. The second reason, usually working conjointly with the first reason, is the indexical nature of the film image. A film offers viewers a depiction of the real world on screen in all of its architectural, technological, linguistic, and cultural detail. Each of these detailed elements date at its own pace, but the cumulative effect of these can be the very rapid dating of the film.

Previously I argued that the unintended affective² responses – nostalgia, boredom, comic amusement – can be associated with each of the three types of dating (Clewis 2012, 51–9). I held that they have little to do with the artistic value of the film, even if they directly bear on the spectator's enjoyment when viewing the film, and that, by recognizing this, evaluators can rationally resolve disagreements that are grounded on these unintended emotions³. We find some

² In this paper, I will interchangeably use “emotions” and “affective” responses (not to be confused with *affection*), thus ignoring whatever differences they might have. I follow the synonymous use of the terms by Carroll and (to my knowledge) by much psychological research in English. There is also a tight connection between *Affekt* and *Rührung* in German philosophy, above all in Kant's *Analytic of the Sublime* in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790) and *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (1798).

³ I pass over the ontological question of whether the aesthetic and artistic properties that constitute a film change with time. The issue of film identity across time is quite complicated and merits a fuller discussion than I can give here.

of this already in Hume. Before turning to other aspects of Hume's account, I briefly review the connection between these three kinds of dating and the unintended responses.

1. Let us call a film dated in a *positive* sense if and only if the enjoyment⁴ it provides increases on account of the effects of dating. One of the main ways (though not necessarily the only way) we respond to such dated films is with nostalgia.

Nostalgia is here neither a Romantic trope or longing for time past, nor an idealizing melancholy, nor an unpleasant yearning for a by-gone era, nor a medical condition. The term "nostalgia" is used in an ordinary, contemporary sense to refer to the pleasant affective state that accompanies finding something charming that is associated with, or from, the past. To take the obvious case: the fictional world on screen can seem old-fashioned or remind us of how things used to be, bringing forth nostalgia for that world. Past clothes and cars, idioms and ways of speaking, or what Hume (1985, 245) calls the depicted "manners" and "customs," can strike viewers as charming or quaint. This is perhaps the most obvious sense in which nostalgia leads to positive dating⁵.

In addition, the film's cinematic elements (and not just the world screened) can bring forth this sentiment. Consider the case of visual extravaganzas: viewers can enjoy how films such as *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming et al., 1939) were shot in Technicolor. Filmgoers can take delight in surveying the Western scenery in John Ford pictures, or the ranging shades of black and white in Carol Reed films. Moreover, aesthetic-cinematic factors such as color-coding and symbolism, if dated, can be interesting due to the nostalgia they evoke. Finally, the response can also be elicited by more formally aesthetic elements: the sensible properties of the film such as its use of shadows or color, or the formal properties such as its shot composition.

2. Let us call a film dated in a *negative* sense if and only if, due to the effects of dating, the enjoyment it brings about decreases. For instance, consider

⁴ Note that what is at stake here is enjoyment, not evaluation, of the film.

⁵ Note that if the Humean enjoyment/evaluation distinction is defensible, this kind of positive dating is distinct from passing the test of time, which would be a reflection of the film's artistic value.

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 work, even if at one time they were successful.

The filmgoer may struggle to feel wonder, admiration, curiosity, suspense, or other emotions that the film's creators intended to elicit. Though viewers may not be completely bored, such effects take spectators in the direction of boredom. Again, I wish to use the term in an uncomplicated, straightforward way. "Boredom" does not refer to existential ennui or lack of motivation. It is here used to refer to the affective state associated with increased distraction and inattention as well as the self-perception thereof (Damrad-Frye 1989, 315). Such a state 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. Hume writes (of course, about literature rather than film): "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" (1985, 244f.). In a similar way, finding a strong dissimilarity between our world and the one screened can be unpleasant, at least *prima facie*.

As an example of negative dating, consider *The Terminator* (James Cameron, 1984). When it was first released, its make-up and visual effects were mesmerizing and absorbing. But, as reviewer James Berardinelli notes (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." *The Terminator* may hold up well overall and retain its artistic value, but it would do so despite this negative dating, which makes the film less enjoyable to a certain degree.

3. Finally, let us call a film dated in a "counter-purposive comic" sense if and only if (i) the film, or a significant part of it, is found to be amusing over time due to the effects of dating, and (ii) it is viewed in a way that the

filmmakers did not intend, i.e., against the grain of its historically correct genre. I call this counter-purposive comic dating since the film is still enjoyable, yet is enjoyed in a way that goes against the creators' intentions, and for its humorous qualities.

Some dated movies, judged to be artistically deficient as instances of their genres, can be enjoyed if viewed for jocular fun. 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 rather than nostalgia. Many dated B movies, exploitation films, and cult classics give rise to such mixed pleasures. Although many bad movies are just too aesthetically or artistically flawed to deride, let alone watch, some poor films can be fun when seen with friends and in the appropriate frame of mind, sometimes involving actively participating as "spectators." A dated⁶ action, horror, or drama film can be viewed and enjoyed not as a successful member of its genre, but for its comedic moments, when it may (but need not) be viewed as if it belonged to another genre.

The US television comedy series *Mystery Science Theater 3000* (1988-1999) was devoted to enjoyment of inferior films from an earlier era, usually science fiction B or C movies and low-budget pictures (Sconce 2007, 2). The audio commentaries of RiffTrax (2006 – present) continue this tradition of mixed pleasures in response to dated motion pictures, providing heckling audio commentaries on films that are dated (though they also comment on new releases). Note that counter-purposive comic dating can occur with films from various genres, and is not limited to camp films or to movies intended to be camp. RiffTrax usually provides comic commentary on science fiction, horror, action, or adventure films, but it also offers commentaries on crime thrillers, dramas, and romances.

Such viewing for "guilty pleasures" is common. Although critic Patricia Kael and scholar Jeffrey Sconce are not referring only to *dated* films, Kael calls films viewed for their guilty pleasures "trash" (1994), and Sconce uses the term *cinophile of the paracinematic* to refer to such viewers (2007, 2). In French this

⁶ Note that, by definition, counter-purposive comic *dating* cannot occur in response to a new release.

kind of spectator is called a *nanard*. (A *nanar* is an inferior film that, due to shortcomings in plot, acting, special effects, etc., becomes enjoyable in another sense or on another level. This concept would include instances of seeing the dated film against the grain, or counter to the intentions of the filmmakers.) Moreover, such viewing is not based on ignorance of film and its history, but to the contrary is associated with expertise and knowledge. *Nanards* and cinephiles of the paracinematic are typically very knowledgeable about film and its history, as critic Kael's own writing reveals and research in film and media studies confirms (de Valck and Hagener 2005; Keathley 2005; Sconce 1995, 2007).⁷

What does all of this have to do with evaluation? I understand "evaluation" in terms of a success-value model according to which the critic appraises what was actually achieved by the artists (filmmakers) and this achievement is understood in terms of the artists' aims (Clewis 2012). Passing the test of time is not to be confused with what I called positive dating, for the latter has to do with our enjoyment of a film, not our evaluation of it. To say that a work passes the test of time is to say something about its value as a work of art. Peter Lamarque describes our interest in an artwork that we esteem or give high artistic marks: "Much of this interest lies in the artist's achievement, how aims are realized, problems solved, themes developed, how a subject matter emerges from, and melds with, the materials used" (Lamarque 2010, 213). We understand the artist's achievement in terms of how her aims are realized, and, accordingly, we evaluate how well she executes her task.

Insofar as nostalgia, boredom,⁸ and amusement are *unintended* and thus beyond the control of the filmmakers, these emotions have little influence on the film's artistic value, which is here understood in terms of what the filmmaker actually achieved and thus in terms of intentions. (Although one's actions may have unintended consequences, it makes little sense to say that unintended consequences are "achieved" by or are the "achievement" of one's actions.) Yet

⁷ Note, too, that positive, negative, and counter-purposive dating can occur even when the viewer has not previously seen the movie. Dating does not require previous viewing of the film, though it *may* also touch films one has already seen.

⁸ I do not mean *intended* boredom, the sort Michelangelo Antonioni aimed for with *La Notte* (1961), which was meant to "articulate the theme of the pointlessness of modern life" (Carroll 2008, 193).

nostalgia, boredom, and amusement clearly can affect a viewer's level of enjoyment. Insofar as these three states are unintended, they would affect our enjoyment of the film but not our evaluation of it. In the earlier paper, I argued that this account can help us resolve disputes in which one filmgoer feels boredom in response to a dated film while another feels nostalgia. By properly understanding and explaining their different responses, the two viewers can realize that they are responding to the film with different levels of enjoyment and that this has little to do with the film's artistic value. The film's artistic value is located elsewhere.

Let me try to avoid a possible confusion. I think that evaluation can and should take into account, when relevant, intended garden-variety emotions evoked by the film being judged. Evaluations ought to take into account the extent to which the film in question evokes the emotions that films of its genre typically elicit and that the film was intended to elicit. For instance, a suspense thriller that is gripping and enthralling is in some degree artistically successful or excellent since that is what suspense thrillers typically do – that is what they are supposed to do.

Following Hume's "Of the Standard of Taste," I am tempted to formulate this claim as one of the "laws of criticism" (Hume 1985, 231), "general rules of art" (Hume 1985, 232), "general principles" of art (Hume 1985, 236), or "avowed patterns" (Hume 1985, 235) derived from established models and empirical observation of what works and what fails. Although I cannot defend the validity of the principle-based approach here, I can sketch how it might look. Assuming one wanted to offer such an empirical rule, one could formulate this as a general principle that applies to the genre of thrillers (with the necessary *ceteris paribus* clause): "Suspense in a thriller is always good in some degree."⁹ This principle would refer to the suspenseful quality in isolation from other properties of the work. Thus, it would leave aside how suspense might interact with other aesthetic properties such as humor, which might make the film better

⁹ I am adopting the structure of the formula used in George Dickie's summary of Monroe Beardsley's account (Dickie 1997, 144). By "good," I of course mean *artistically* (not financially, commercially, etc.) good.

or worse or leave it about the same (cf. Dickie 1997, 164).

But this leads to another distinction: How is “oldness” different from dating? An object’s being old is a matter of the passage of time. Such oldness is an external, not an aesthetic, property, measurable by scientific instruments. Dating is an aesthetic phenomenon and is response-dependent. It requires a viewer to be affected in some way and to be acquainted with the film. It would be hard to determine beforehand or *a priori* how films will age, and how much. Experience shows which movies have become dated and how they have done so. There is no equation that will give us a determinate answer if we wish to know if a film will appear dated, what kind of dating might apply, or to what extent. A viewer has to assess such matters on a case-by-case basis.¹⁰ In addition, we do not know how long or short the time scale of dating will be for a particular film.¹¹

The objective passage of time, however, is a logically *necessary* condition of dating. Perhaps a skeptic will object to this claim by referring to new releases that look dated, such as Woody Allen’s *Zelig* when it was first released in 1983. Surely it was dated when it premiered, one might insist. However, this black and white mockumentary was produced long after the filmworld was releasing color films, which had been around since the 1930s. In Thomas Wartenberg’s sense of the term (Wartenberg 2005), Allen made a “sylistic” choice to shoot the film in black and white, and informed viewers will know this. Allen adopted one of many possible options available to him. Educated viewers of *Zelig* will know that the film, even if it is designed to look dated, is going for a dated *look*. They therefore will view the film as a new release that is attempting to appear dated. (Of course, the ways in which a film tries to look dated, the filmic means it uses, can appear dated at a later time.)

¹⁰ In saying that judging a film’s dating requires acquaintance with the film, I mean neither to affirm nor to deny an “intuitionist” position. I am not claiming that there is an intuitive faculty that apprehends or senses dating.

¹¹ Dating is not to be confused with a film stock’s decomposition or deterioration, requiring restoration or preservation. Datedness does not concern the physical degradation of any material substance.

Three Temporal Notions in Hume

Although I do not wish to provide an elaborate interpretation of Hume's essays in aesthetics, I would like to anchor my discussion in his work. After all, it is the Scottish philosopher who introduced to the modern reader the philosophical puzzles associated with passing the test of time. Before explaining the three temporal notions implicit in Hume's work, I will give a brief word about his theory of evaluation, a taste-aesthetic according to which experts or critics are said to make judgments of beauty or taste.

Hume understood artistic appraisal in terms of taste and beauty. For Hume there is an analogy between the tongue's "taste" and Taste (with a capital "T"), the faculty of judging artworks and finding what is valuable in them (Carroll 2009, 156f.). Even if Hume himself did not take "subjective" to mean what is private, individual, or idiosyncratic, several later interpreters unfortunately read him as claiming just that. Hume himself thought there was a faculty of taste that allowed critics to make accurate and correct judgments. Hence their judgments were subjective in that they depended on the sentiment of the critic, yet inter-subjective in that they were shared by fellow informed critics and were not merely private or whimsical.

Hume's evaluating judges ("critics") are supposed to be sensible, experienced, informed, and unbiased. Specifically, the critics are to have at least five qualities that are necessary if they are to make accurate judgments and if they are not to be "unqualified" as critics (Hume 1985, 238): delicacy of taste, frequent practice in a particular art, freedom from prejudice, good sense, and experience in comparing artworks with other ones (Hume 1985, 241). In addition, Hume thinks that qualified critics will possess "a perfect serenity of mind" and "a recollection of thought" and that they will give "due attention to the object" (Hume 1985, 232).

The notion of "comparing" artworks raises the question of the passage of time, for the critic is supposed to compare works from different nations and ages. Thus, this brings us to the different temporal notions, which, in my view,

the literature on Hume's aesthetics has neither sufficiently examined nor properly distinguished.

First, what has been called "passing the test of time" (Savile 1977, 1982) involves a work's being valued and esteemed by different *generations*. A work that passes the test of time will evoke "durable admiration" and survive "all the caprices of mode and fashion, all the mistakes of ignorance and envy" (Hume 1985, 233). Thus, Hume continues: "The same Homer, who pleased at Athens and Rome two thousand years ago, is still admired at Paris and at London. All the changes of climate, government, religion, and language, have not been able to obscure his glory" (Hume 1985, 233). And: "A real genius, the longer his works endure, and the more wide they are spread, the more sincere is the admiration which he meets with" (Hume 1985, 233). Hume's point is similar to Lamarque's claim: "Artistic value, then, is the value that survives across time when a work continues to be valued beyond its context of origin. Many works that initially seem important simply fade from view when the context changes" (Lamarque 2010, 212; cf. Silvers 1991, 213).

The critic should see many other works so that that he can compare the judged work to these other artworks, allowing him to contextualize the work better. He should be acquainted with many "species" of beauty and know his art form. The critic's activity apparently involves examining and comparing works in the same category or genre. Thus, Carroll is right to discuss Hume's claim in terms of genre (Carroll 1984, 184f.).

Hume explicitly holds that comparative judging would involve works from different *ages*. "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" (Hume 1985, 238). Some works will not hold up well when so examined.

He thinks we are inclined to be more pleased by those works from our own age because they will resemble and depict subject matter that is more familiar to us. Hume recognizes that a critic's noticing a resemblance between the depicted fictional world and her own world is enjoyable. He then claims that

a critic's preferences for, say, comedy over tragedy are "innocent and unavoidable" and can never reasonably be the object of dispute because there is no standard by which it could be decided or resolved.¹² He continues: "For a like reason, 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" (Hume 1985, 244f.).

This last point is related to the aforementioned indexicality of films, one of the characteristics of film giving rise to its tendency to become dated. Hume rightly endorsed the principle that our appraisals should aim not to be anachronistic. He explained his "freedom from prejudice" condition by referring to a critic who comes from another era than that of the work. Such a critic (of oration) should "place himself in the same situation as the audience, in order to form a true judgment of the oration" (Hume 1985, 239). The critic, in other words, should attempt to close the gap between him and the work or the artist.¹³

Hume himself compares artworks from different eras. He juxtaposes ancient and modern oration in "Of Eloquence." Unlike the modern kind, prevalent in England, ancient eloquence is "sublime and passionate" (Hume 1985, 108), and it is superior to its modern counterpart (Hume 1985, 98). Ancient eloquence "is of a much juster taste than the modern, or the argumentative and rational; and, if properly executed, will always have more command and authority over mankind" (Hume 1985, 108). He adds: "We are satisfied with our mediocrity, because we have had no experience of anything better" (Hume 1985, 108). That is why the critic must be familiar with many instances of an artform and with several models of artistically successful works, including works and models from different nations and ages.

I now turn to the second temporal notion. Hume refers to the viewing of a

¹² Hume seems to be overly pessimistic here. For one genre likely has more significance for the culture than another. A cultural critic, taking a broader perspective than the film critic, can plausibly argue that realistic drama is more valuable than slapstick comedy insofar as realistic drama has more importance to the culture. But this would bring us beyond the realm of aesthetics and into other kinds of value theory. Carroll offers an account along these lines (2008, 223–226).

¹³ In similar fashion, Carroll argues that in order to overcome cultural distances or gaps between viewers and the screened worlds found in films from previous eras or different cultures, viewers ought to be educated in film, ethnography, and film history (Carroll 2003, 73) and should be suitably educated and "backgrounded" (Carroll 2008, 195).

work by the same *person* who ages over time. This is what I call the personal aging of the viewer or critic. “A young man, whose passions are warm, will be more sensibly touched with amorous and tender images, than a man more advanced in years, who takes pleasure in wise, philosophical reflections concerning the conduct of life and moderation of the passions. At twenty, Ovid may be the favourite author; Horace at forty; and perhaps Tacitus at fifty” (Hume 1985, 244). As any marketer of films knows, viewing preferences typically change as filmgoers grow older. (Hume himself thinks that these preferences are beyond rational dispute, but he is arguably wrong about that.¹⁴) The concept of personal aging includes the changes a person undergoes over time, including developments in his or her physical, moral, intellectual, psychological, and emotional character. Since personal aging in Hume’s account is relatively straightforward, I turn to the third notion.¹⁵

Hume suggests that the critic see the work more than once. He recommends repeated viewing, or the “frequent survey or contemplation of a particular species of beauty” (Hume 1985, 237). He says that before we can “give judgment on any work of importance,” the “very individual performance [must] be more than once perused by us and be surveyed in different lights with attention and deliberation” (Hume 1985, 237f.). A few lines later he adds: “There is a species of beauty, which, as it is florid and superficial, pleases at first; but being found incompatible with a just expression either of reason or passion, soon palls upon the taste, and is then rejected with disdain, at least rated at a much lower value” (Hume 1985, 238). An artwork that first impressed the critic may not do so after a second or third viewing. The inferior work “soon palls upon the taste” on account of its artistic demerits.

¹⁴ Hume’s view of preferences based on “humours of particular men” (1985, 243) or “diversity in the internal frame” (1985, 244) seems too extreme. A cultural critic would be in a position to judge the value of action films (paradigmatically enjoyed, let us assume, by adolescent males) *vis-à-vis* realistic dramas in which serious social issues are presented. The action films would presumably be judged to be less valuable or significant *for the culture*. Of course, such an estimation would be supra-generic and lead us beyond genre-based appraisals. It would bring us out of the realm of aesthetics and into cultural criticism.

¹⁵ It should be obvious that as a result of personal aging, one or more of the kinds of film dating may occur. As we shall see below, when a viewer re-watches a film 30 years later, he may feel nostalgia, boredom, etc.

Let us leave aside that Hume focuses on beauty and taste. Beauty is too limited a concept for film evaluation, since many films are intended to evoke disgust, fear, sadness, pity, suspense, and many other kinds of emotions. Nevertheless, Hume's point about repeated engagement with the artwork can be expanded and applied to films. Some movies that once struck the critic as well executed in terms of their genres can, after re-watching, strike him or her as having less artistic value. This is true of films from the past and present alike.

In "Of Simplicity and Refinement in Writing," Hume compares ancient and modern authors. It is as if he was already fulfilling the "comparison" condition he would later defend in "Of the Standard of Taste." Moreover, he points out that repeated engagement with the work can lead us to devalue it – in this case, a superficially witty and refined epigram.

If the merit of the composition lie in a point of wit; it may strike at first; but the mind anticipates the thought in the second perusal, and is no longer affected by it. When I read an epigram of Martial, the first line recalls the whole; and I have no pleasure in repeating to myself what I know already. But each line, each word, in Catullus, has its merit; and I am never tired with the perusal of him. It is sufficient to run over Cowley once: But Parnel, after the fiftieth reading, is as fresh as the first. (Hume 1985, 195)

The critic should view the work more than once in order to catch parts or elements he may have missed the first time, to see the artwork as it really is, as it were.

Poems that have plainness and simplicity, and are not glaring and dazzling, hold up after repeated viewing. For Hume, this is not merely a matter of enjoyment or displeasure. Repeated viewing devalues the inferior artwork; the work *deserves* to be demoted. The able critic, he implies, judges the epigrams of Martial to be inferior to those of Catullus. That Martial's epigram no longer pleases us after repeated reading is a consequence of its artistic demerits.

To turn to film: Roger Ebert claims that *Taxi Driver* holds up after repeated viewings. In a 2004 review of *Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorsese, 1976),

Ebert comments on how the film endures over the years: it “is a film that does not grow dated, or over-familiar.” Although Ebert uses the term “dated,” in my terms he is actually saying that the film passes the test of time (not that it has dated positively). In addition, as if applying Hume’s principle, he adds: “I have seen it dozens of times. Every time I see it, it works.”

Consider another example, *The Rules of the Game* (*La Règle du Jeu*, Jean Renoir, 1939). André Bazin held that it is only after repeated viewing of the film that its excellence emerges.

The Rules of the Game is a work which should be seen again and again. As it is necessary to hear a symphony more than once to understand it or to meditate before a great painting in order to appreciate its inner harmonies, so it is with Renoir’s great film. The fact that *The Rules of the Game* was so long misunderstood is not simply the result of its originality and the public’s psychological inertia, but also because it is a work that reveals itself only gradually to the spectator, even if he is attentive. (Bazin 1992, 83)

After repeated viewing, this film is more clearly seen for the superior film that it is. François Truffaut claimed that at the time of its release, *The Rules of the Game* was “the greatest failure of Renoir’s career,” yet, in retrospect, his “masterpiece” (in Bazin 1992, 257). Truffaut added that the two re-releases of the film, in 1945 and 1948, met with “complete commercial failure” before the great success of the release of the definitive version in 1965 (257).

Finally, we see Hume’s three temporal notions in the following review of *E.T.* (Steven Spielberg, 1982), a short piece written by critic Charles Taylor in 2002. To facilitate my commentary, I break up Taylor’s opening paragraph. (I cite it not in order to convince the reader about the artistic value of *E.T.*, but to illustrate the key concepts of this article.)

Returning to a movie that delighted you when you were younger can be a dicey proposition. We’ve all re-viewed some once-beloved picture only to find that we no longer connect to it, that our previous affection was based on who we were and where we were in life when we first saw it, that experience

has shaped our outlook in a different way... (Taylor 2002).

Note the implicit reference to personal aging (“who we were”). Taylor admits that the film might have delighted him merely because he was a young man at the time. In addition, he explicitly mentions repeated viewing (“re-viewed”). The film might pall “upon the taste” after repeated viewing. Does it? For Taylor, *E.T.* holds up. But for other viewers, it does not.¹⁶ Taylor continues:

Watching *E.T.* 20 years after it was first released (half my life ago), I can’t say that the movie holds the same sense of discovery it did in 1982. (Narrative discovery is a casualty of knowing what’s going to happen in a story, for one thing.)...

Since the filmgoer knows what is going to happen in the film, it does not move him in the same way or as it once did. This is indeed a casualty of repeated viewing. The jokes might not be not as funny, the thrills as thrilling, or the surprises as surprising.

But for people who saw *E.T.* on its first go-round, particularly moviegoers who were kids back then, the pleasure of seeing it now is the joy of feeling your responses deepen...

Note that Taylor felt nostalgia when re-viewing the film. Taylor’s viewing experience is clearly pleasant (“joy”), just like nostalgia described earlier.

It’s no news to anyone that *E.T.* is one of the loveliest and happiest of American movie entertainments. It’s also a greater picture than we could have known. (Taylor 2002)

In other words, *E.T.* passes the test of time and its artistic value endures.

¹⁶ In personal correspondence, US philosopher Craig Fox commented: “I can remember watching *E.T.* as a kid and being thoroughly mesmerized by it. I had occasion to see a few minutes of it within the past few years and I was struck at how almost unwatchable certain scenes were. (The same might apply to the TV show *Alf*.) Audiences today won’t accept special effects that impressed in 1982. It seems of note, though, that we’re almost embarrassed by being taken in at something so comparatively crude years ago. We say – of this or of other similar examples – that we were wrong, that ‘we *thought* it was a good movie.’”

Taylor's claim here suggests that *E.T.* holds up across generations and will continue to do so: it is a great film in the sense that it continues to do for filmgoers what it did for previous ones. Similarly, critic Roger Ebert describes how the film "worked" the first time his young grandchildren saw the film, in 1997, just as it worked for viewers in 1982 (Ebert 1997). In short, all three temporal notions are at work in Taylor's opening paragraph.

Conclusion: A Small Irony

I shall end by noting an irony that Hume's remarks seem to imply, and which Taylor also indicated. If we follow Hume's implication that we should watch a film repeatedly before we judge it, it might not work as well for us or have the same effect. This is perhaps a rather obvious point, actually. For instance, if we know that the killer is lurking behind the door, we will no longer jump and scream when he appears. When we are familiar with the film's jokes, it will be hard (or at least harder) to make us laugh. Is our failure to be moved or engaged evidence of the artistic shortcomings and demerits of the film, or is it a result of the fact that we have seen the film too many times?

If my hypothesis about evaluation and enjoyment is correct, then, insofar as this response (lack of engagement) is an unintended consequence of seeing the film repeatedly, it would have no bearing on the film's artistic qualities or merits. Yet it would bear on how much we enjoy the film. If this is correct, the fact that, due to the numerous viewings of a comedy, jokes become stale or gags worn out has no bearing on the film's artistic value. Thus, such a case would be unlike Hume's ranking of Martial below Catullus, since the latter judgment was an assessment of the artistic value of their poetry.

Sometimes it is due to the film's artistic success that we are so familiar with it. On account of its *excellence* (which leads to repeated viewing), it fails to move us as it was intended to move us and as it once did. If we watch an excellent action film over and over again because it is a superior work, we will

be prepared for what is about to happen in the film. This is likely to decrease our enjoyment of it. It is rather ironic, and certainly too bad, that we may enjoy a classic less, precisely *because* we have seen it so many times. Yet *qua* classic it surely deserves such repeated viewings.

I close with a critic's report of this. Consider Peter Stack's review of the 1997 re-release of George Lucas's *Star Wars* (1977).

So many years, so much exposure, so many spin-offs, special-effects trends and continuous warp-speed hype have made it nearly impossible to look at *Star Wars* as just a movie anymore. It remains an icon on the ever-changing pop culture landscape – but there's no going back to the young eyes that glowed with awe when the film landed in May 1977. (Stack 1997)

Is the fact that “there's no going back” an artistic shortcoming of *Star Wars*? That would appear to be an unfair judgment of such an influential and culturally significant action and adventure film. But our exposure to and familiarity with the film may very well affect our enjoyment of it.

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