

How human emotions change through watching sad films and how these changes may affect life.

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I confirm that this assignment is my own work.

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Introduction

Why do people pay for and take time to watch films that project and evoke sadness? What contexts or processes are in play in a willing approach to experiencing sadness? This is the central line of questioning followed in this paper. The problem will be approached through discussion of two contexts: the viewer's comparison of the film scenario with his/her real-life scenario and emotional catharsis prompted by the film's soundtrack. Movies are touching and enjoyable. Movies can entertain, educate, and inspire people. Horror movies entertain audiences by showing fear-evoking, unrealistic contexts. Comedies make the viewer laugh. Romance movies bring tears and feelings of warmth as they point towards the importance of love, and crime-focused movies evoke fear as they warn us about dangers present in human society. War movies, or historical movies, can educate audiences by re-telling moments in history that people alive today have never experienced whilst also generating emotional reactions like sadness, joy or contentment.

The list above is clearly an overly simple outline of movie types and audience reactions but does serve to highlight how movies offer entertainment whilst also evoking emotions. Of interest to this discussion is the context in which sad movies make audiences feel better – how the entertaining can co-exist with the heartbreaking. Consumption of movies that project and evoke happiness could be explained by Freud's pleasure principle. "Freud originally claimed that the guiding principle behind the functioning of human beings is the pleasure principle: that is the search for pleasure and avoidance of pain." (Moccia et al, 2018, p.359). When films that contain saddening content are watched, however, sadness can be evoked in the viewer. Such films might focus on some form of trouble familiar in human experience, for example, loss, hopelessness, and heartbreak. The pleasure principle suggests we would not willingly seek out and embrace sadness in real life, but people willingly and actively engage with movies that

depict and evoke painful emotional states. It would be logical here to suggest that audience must feel that the type of sadness in focus here is, paradoxically, a pleasure, or in some way beneficial. This paper seeks to investigate this paradox.

Pleasure and sadness

A recent study relevant to this context was undertaken by Hanich et al. The researchers used film clips as sadness-eliciting triggers and asked 76 participants to view 38 clips showing variants of the same sad scenario: a character or a group of characters learns about the death of a close person. Importantly, the study showed a significantly relevant relation between sadness and enjoyment. The researchers' key suggestion was that "this correlation was fully mediated by the feeling of being moved. People simply like to be moved." (Hanich et al, 2014, pp.130-143). The suggestion made by Hanich et al regarding the notion of pleasure in being moved (here, moved to sadness) is, it could be argued, an important observation in regard to why pleasure and sadness can co-exist. The argument offered in this paper will develop out of Hanich's observation by exploring the possibility that central to the process of being moved by watching a sad movie is a combining (fusing) of real-world experience with the emotional world of the movie.

The fears and diverse struggles of humans can be understood as existing in the real world. Movies deemed 'sad,' can offer pleasure-giving assistance in the management of these real-world, uncomfortable phenomena, even though films are recognizably fictional. A sad scene in a movie can remind the viewer that s/he has the strength to overcome a problem or notice that s/he is not alone. Also, perhaps there are times when the viewer realizes that what s/he thought was a terrible situation in her/his life is not actually so bad by watching a movie that depicts a

more intense situation. The state of feeling created here might be understood as a form of *schadenfreude*. David Carroll Simon (2017, p. 281) gives some sense of the relationship between sadness, pleasure, and *schadenfreude* in his description of Michel de Montaigne's reflections on finding comfort in being "spared" from "threat":

"In his *Essais* (1572–1592), Michel de Montaigne anticipates modern conceptions of *schadenfreude* (and echoes ancient ones) when he savors the exultant pleasure of safety from another's misfortune. He proposes that the ground of this experience is awareness of danger: the perception of a threat from which he finds himself spared."

The suggestion here, then, is that evaluation of bad (negative) real-life experience can be positively modified by watching movie scenes that project sadness and are distant (i.e., fictional). That is to say that the viewer is in a 'safe' position as he/she watches fictional tragedies unfold. A useful context to consider here is the shipwreck and spectator image (topos): "Shipwreck is only useful with someone witnessing it. In that case, the spectator in question becomes the locus determining the moral dimensions of man's natural boundaries" (Oostveldt, 2012, p. 141). The suggestion communicated by Oostveldt is that distance from the tragedy offers a pleasurable opportunity for consideration of the relationship between the actions and choices of humans and the tragedies that might happen to them. The distance between the fictional sadness of the movie and the viewer himself/herself enables pleasure to develop.

Music and emotion

It is useful here to turn to a single element within a movie, the soundtrack. According to Matt Vegeris (2018), “Film music helps to establish tone, enhance atmosphere, amplify emotions, and change audience perceptions.” Vegeris goes on to suggest that “an audience’s experience of a film can be dramatically altered by even a slight variation in how a piece of music is applied.” The idea that music and mood are closely related is famously evidenced by Apple music’s presentation of the products it offers. Apple music’s navigation system presents the consumer with albums or playlists for different moods. For example, music selections are listed under such titles as ‘good feeling,’ ‘chill,’ ‘feeling blue’ and ‘romance.’ This suggests not only that music leads you to feel certain emotions, but – assuming that Apple’s business model is built upon exchanging pleasure for payment – also that pleasure can be taken in listening to music that projects sadness. Humans, it would seem, might choose to listen to music that opposes their mood or feelings, or might choose to listen to music that matches their mood or feelings. Music selection becomes, then, a choice between catharsis (purging sadness through increasing sadness) or escape (shutting out sadness by turning to happiness).

The overall suggestion that music is capable of controlling or modifying emotional state implied above is supported by a 2015 study on the effect of music played in a shopping environment conducted by Jasmine Moradi and Gabriella Johanson. This study found that when brand fit background music was being played in a store, average sales increased by 31.7 percent and time spent in the store increased by 42.24 percent. Moradi and Johansson suggest that “brand fit background music contributed to increased customer satisfaction” and “customers’ associations with the brand were strengthened and their attitudes towards the perceived store

atmosphere was improved.” (Moradi and Johansson, p.9, 2015). While the context here is not film consumption, this study does suggest that music is an influential controller (or director) of human emotional state.

There seems, then, to be an important connection between music and human brain function that contributes to the forming of emotional state. Let us consider this alongside a focus on pleasure in greater detail below.

Brain function

What does music have to do with brain function? What is happening in the human brain when a moment in a movie soundtrack evokes tears? According to Barry Goldstein, music stimulates emotions by triggering specific brain circuits. Listening to music can evoke emotions and lead to an increase in the amount of dopamine released. Dopamine is a neurotransmitter, a chemical that helps control the brain’s reward and pleasure centres (Goldstein, 2017). This suggests that the music employed in a film plays a huge role in evoking emotion and, in turn, leading the viewer into higher engagement with the world of the movie. It could be argued that such increased engagement with the film could then lead to a further increase in – or deepening of – emotional reaction, and a related increase in pleasure.

The human brain responds fully whenever the nervous system encounters something that looks and sounds real – a context which results in the human experiencing a natural, uncontrolled biological response. Circuits in the emotional brain can be activated by watching emotional expressions. This was found from Functional MRI studies (Jeffery, 2014, cited in Reilly, 2018). The section of the brain known as the prefrontal cortex is the place in which other people’s feelings and emotions are processed and understood. Stimuli include not only words but also

facial expressions, bodily movements, and tones of voice. This mechanism goes some way to explaining why movie viewers might sympathetically cry when watching a movie scene that depicts crying. As noted above in regard to suggestions made by Goldstein, such transmission of sadness from the film to the viewer can lead to the experiencing of pleasure.

A Japanese study undertaken in 2008 focused on human tearfulness and the workings of the brain. The subjects watched a movie that was considered to be very emotional, and the researchers recorded the activity taking place in the prefrontal cortex. The researchers discovered that when the film activated the subjects' feelings, there was a steady increase in activity that transitioned into a further increase when the participants started crying (cited in Meriwether, 2015). In line with Goldstein's suggestion, this study offered scientific proof as to why the watching of sad films registers as pleasurable. Researchers reported that the watching of sad movies boosts endorphin levels in the brain which increases pain tolerance, both physical and emotional. This investigation involved the participation of 169 subjects. Some watched a traumatic film and others watched documentaries. They found that on average, those who watched the traumatic film had a 13.1 percent rise in pain tolerance, and those who watched the documentaries had a 4.6 percent drop in pain threshold (Nicola Davis, 2016). This is one of the reasons why people want to watch sad movies and want to cry. As Freud explained, humans are driven to seek out pleasure.

Impact on life

Having outlined a way in which movies offer pleasure as they evoke emotion, the focus now turns to how this affects human lives. As mentioned above, pain tolerance rises when traumatic scenes are watched. This, it could be argued, might link to a reduction in stress. Ohio State

researchers uncovered the reasons why people enjoy watching *Titanic*, a movie that depicts the tragedy of more than 1500 deaths, including some suicides, and a detailed depiction of the loss of a loved one. It is a sad movie. Viewers, however, enjoy this movie. The researchers also had 361 college students watch a sad film that involved two lovers being separated and killed at a time of war. The researchers interviewed their subjects about how happy they were with their lives before and after watching the film and asked them to rate the various emotions they had felt. This study allowed the researchers to develop a sense of how much the subjects enjoyed watching the movie. A central suggestion was that watching the movie forced the subjects to reflect on themselves, their aspirations, their relationships, and life in general (Villarica, 2012). This is an example of the viewer finding pleasure in the thought that his/her life is better than the fictional lives depicted in a movie: as mentioned above, watching sad movies can offer the chance to reflect on the state of one's own life. To explain further, if a viewer notices – or senses – how fortunate (in relative terms) s/he is, an increase in contentedness or appreciation of the 'good' in her/his life might follow. In other words, watching sad movies focuses the viewer's attention on the positive aspects of her/his own life.

A contrasting variation on the context outlined directly above is found in the situation in which a viewer compares her/his reality to the depiction of reality offered by a movie. This might allow the viewer to reduce feelings of loneliness or alienation. This is to say that emotional well-being might improve if the viewer comes to sense that s/he is not the only person experiencing tough times. Crying also helps. It is thought to be healthy to cry as it is believed that crying is beneficial to both physical and mental health. As explained by experts in the field of mental health, crying activates the parasympathetic nervous system. This helps people to self-soothe and, therefore, could be one reason people sometimes want to cry. Sad films can, then, have a positive impact on life. This might explain why people choose to watch such sad films.

Conclusion

This paper has shown that sad movies can play a significant role in people's lives. People like to be moved, which means they like to experience emotional reactions. Notably, if films are clearly fictitious, 'sad' movies will provide pleasure-giving guidance in the control of real-world, unpleasant phenomena. The film soundtrack, it has been argued, can play a significant role in this process. The human brain response to music involves a feeling of emotion alongside the experiencing of pleasure. It has been suggested that crying at sad movies and, relatedly, enjoying sad movies, increases pain tolerance. This denotes a positive effect of the viewing of sad movies. After experiencing the world of a movie people tend to reflect on themselves and think about their lives and behavior as they compare their experience of life with the depiction of life presented in the fictional world of the movie. This is when a viewer might feel increased contentment with his/her own life situation. To sum up, sad movies and their soundtracks are able to ease pain, educate, and improve the viewer's emotional state. This paper suggests that such positive change in emotional state can have a huge positive influence on human well-being.

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