

Is There a Disdain of Comedy among critics?

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1. Introduction

In antiquity, tragedy was regarded as the paradigm of truth, morality, and seriousness, while comedy was often dismissed as frivolous or immoral. Since the Enlightenment, however, comedy has come to be seen as a philosophical paradigm in its own right, capable of transforming how truth and morality are conceived (Kieran, 2013; Street, 2018).

Throughout Western aesthetics, the distinction between the tragic and the comic long structured artistic and intellectual discourse. With modernity, these boundaries became increasingly permeable, leading to more fluid representations and shared narrative functions (Mosse and Street, 2016).

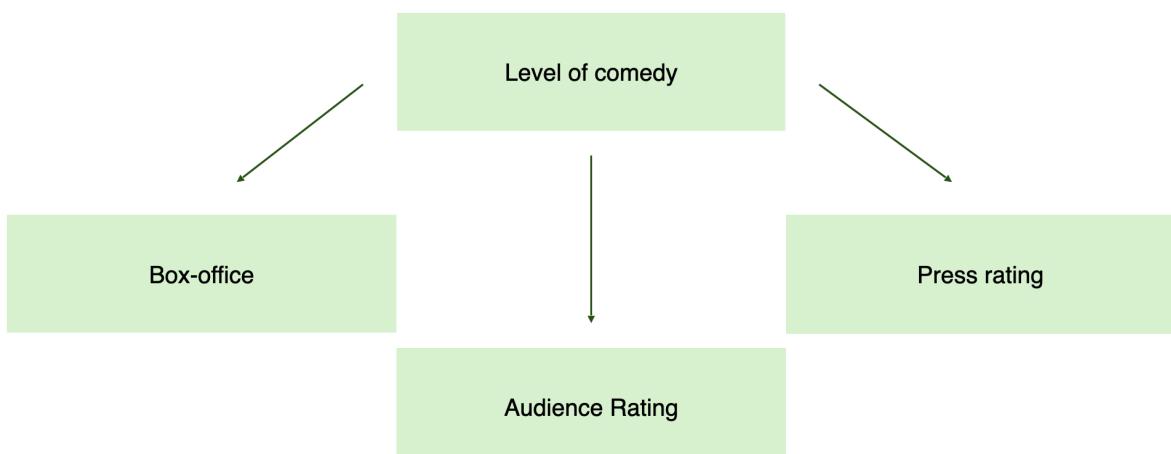
Despite this historical hierarchy, comedy remains one of the most appreciated genres in popular cinema, particularly among general audiences (Georgakopoulou, 2000). However, this popularity does not necessarily extend to professional criticism, as it is critically underrated (Arell, 2012).

Plus, niche films tend to attract more attention and are often judged more severely than mainstream productions (Chen et al., 2021), which may also apply to comedies. Moreover, reputational motivations can influence expert reviews (Camara and Dupuis, 2014), meaning that critics' evaluations may diverge from public opinion.

It therefore remains uncertain whether comedies are evaluated less favorably by critics than by audiences.

Are comedies rated less favorably by critics than by audiences?

To answer this question, we formulated three hypothesis:



Predictions:

- **P1** - The higher a movie's level of comedy, the greater its box-office success.
- **P2** - The higher a movie's level of comedy, the better its audience rating.
- **P3** - The higher a movie's level of comedy, the lower its rating from the press.

2. Data

We used two publicly available datasets from Kaggle for our analysis.

The first dataset ([available here](#)) includes $N = 1,306,063$ films from the TMDB database, containing classical information such as movie titles, release dates, and genres.

The second dataset ([available here](#)) contains $N = 69,263$ films with data on critical and audience ratings from Rotten Tomatoes, including the Tomatometer (an aggregated score based on professional critics' reviews, mostly from press, measuring the share of positive reviews out of all reviews submitted) and audience ratings. We treat the Tomatometer score as a measure of press or critical evaluation, since it is derived exclusively from professional critics' reviews, whose opinions tend to shape public perception and strongly influence audience behavior.

We merged the two datasets and retained only the films present in both sources.

We then removed rows with missing values in the Tomatometer score, the audience score, or the box-office revenue.

After cleaning, the final dataset contained **$N = 8,775$** films, from 1913 to 2025.

Finally, we created a new variable measuring the “level of comedy” of each film, based on the TMDB genre tags, using the following algorithm:

- **0 (No Comedy)** – The Comedy tag is absent from the list of genres.
- **1 (Mixed Comedy)** – The Comedy tag is present alongside at least one of the following genres: Drama, Action, Romance, or Horror.
- **2 (Pure Comedy)** – The Comedy tag is present, and none of the four genres above appear.

These four genres were chosen because, in classical and neoclassical theatre traditions, they were considered incompatible with Comedy. For example, a comedy could not include elements of horror. The case of Romance is more nuanced: romantic comedies existed in classical theatre, but from a contemporary perspective, romantic comedy and pure comedy slightly differ in both narrative and humorous structure.

We used four variables of different types to test our predictions:

- Continuous: the **box-office revenue** in USD (**Figure 2a**).
- Continuous: the **audience rating** for each film (0-100, **Figure 2b**);

- Continuous: the **press rating** (0-100, **Figure 2c**);
- Ordinal: the **level of Comedy** (see the scale above, **Figure 2d**);

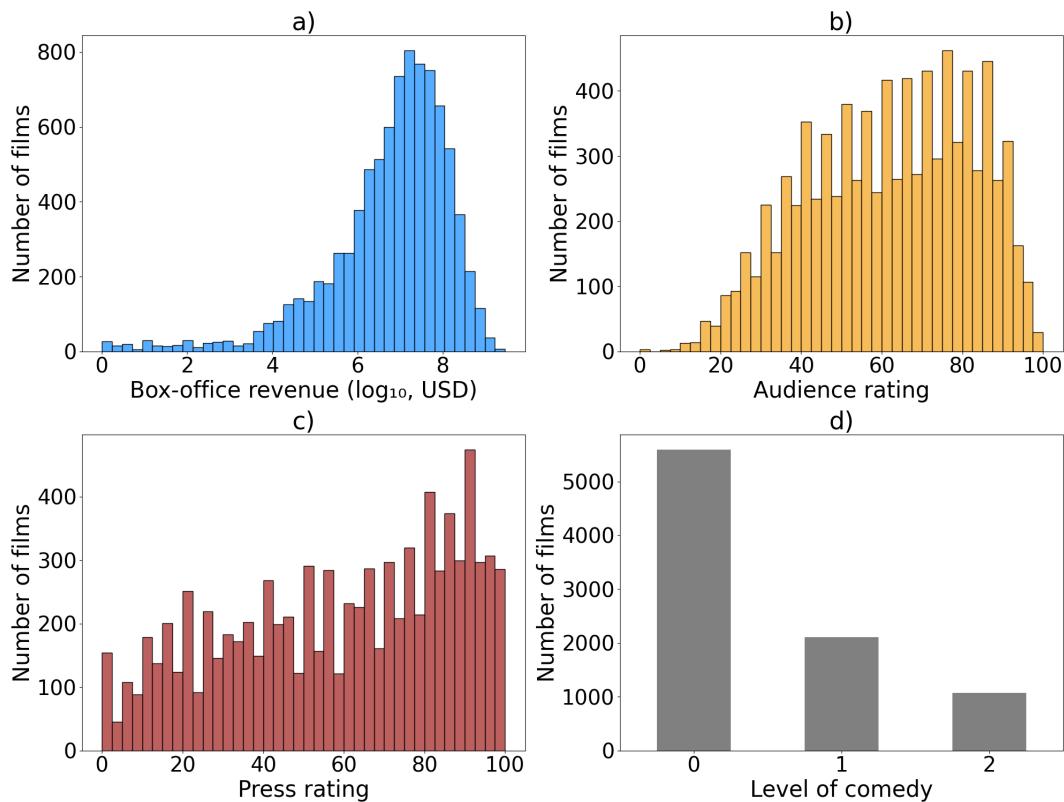


Figure 2 – Repartition according to the number of movies of a) the box-office revenue (\log_{10} , USD), b) the audience rating (from 0 to 100), c) the press rating (from 0 to 100), and d) the level of comedy (with 0: No Comedy, 1: Comedy mixed with another genre, 2 : Pure comedy.)

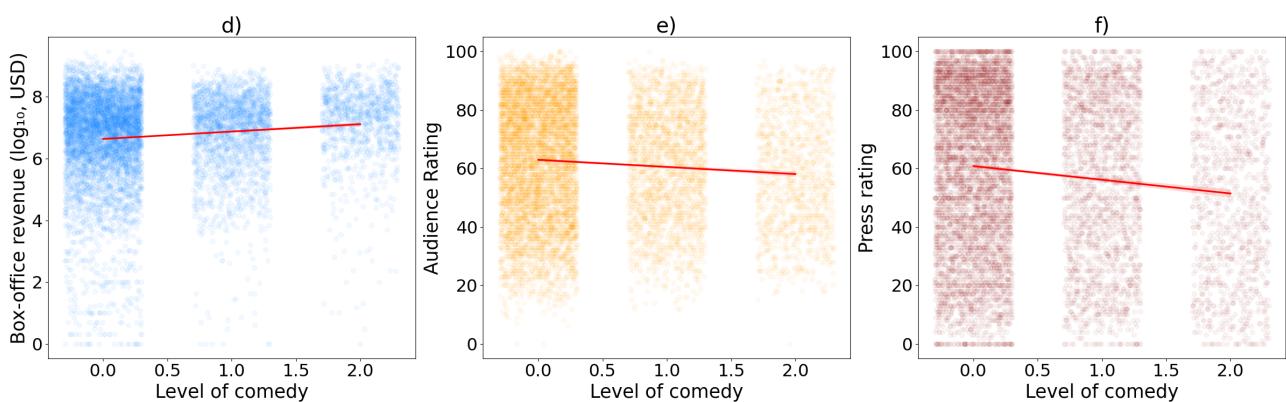


Figure 3 – Repartition of d) the box-office revenue (\log_{10} , USD), e) the audience rating (from 0 to 100), and f) the press rating (from 0 to 100), all depending on the level of comedy (with 0: No Comedy, 1: Comedy mixed with another genre, 2 : Pure comedy)

3. Methods

To test our three predictions, we compared box-office revenue, audience ratings, and press ratings as a function of the level of comedy (**Figure 3.d, 3.e, and 3.f**). We conducted three simple linear regressions, assuming equal variance and an equivalent gap between categories 0 and 1, and between 1 and 2. Because the distribution of revenues is highly skewed, with many low-revenue movies and only a few high-revenue ones, we applied a logarithmic (base 10) transformation to the revenue variable. The corresponding formula is:

$$R_i = b_0 + b_1 C_i + \varepsilon_i$$

Where :

R_i : the rating or revenue of movie i ,

C_i : the comedy level of movie i ,

ε_i : the error term.

4. Results

The regression shows that the level of comedy in a film increases significantly with its log box-office revenue ($b = 0.239\$$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.013\$$). Conversely, the level of comedy decreases significantly with audience ratings ($b = -2.440$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.007$) and press ratings ($b = -4.690$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.014$).

5. Conclusion

See the MVP presentation

6. References

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