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, 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 Hazanavius, 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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