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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Elevation in Response to Entertainment Portrayals of Moral VirtueMary Beth Oliver¹, Tilo Hartmann², & Julia K. Woolley³

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Media psychologists have long puzzled over how individuals can experience enjoyment from entertainment such as tragedies that often elicit profound feelings of sadness. The present research examines the idea that a focus on “meaningful” entertainment and affective responses identified as “elevation” may provide a framework for understanding many examples of sad or dramatic entertainment. The results of this study suggest that many types of meaningful cinematic entertainment feature portrayals of moral virtues (e.g., altruism). These portrayals, in turn, elicit feelings of elevation (e.g., inspiration) that are signified in terms of mixed affect and unique physical responses (e.g., lump in throat). Ultimately, elevation also gives rise to motivations to embody moral virtues, such as being a better person or helping others.

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The assumed importance of positive affect in media enjoyment is reflected in a number of notable entertainment theories. For example, disposition theory generally argues that viewers experience the greatest pleasure (and hence enjoyment) when liked characters are depicted as triumphant and disliked characters as castigated or suffering (Zillmann, 1991). Likewise, mood-management theory conceptualizes entertainment consumption in hedonistic terms, arguing that the termination of negative moods and the maintenance of positive moods guide many entertainment choices (Zillmann, 2000).

The emphasis placed on positive affect has resulted in considerable theorizing among scholars who have tried to understand the seeming paradoxical enjoyment of entertainment that fails to conform to hedonic considerations. In particular, scholars have presented a variety of explanations to try to account for the enjoyment of sad or tragic entertainment, and how or why viewers may experience gratification from entertainment that features beloved characters suffering and that successfully elicits sadness and tears among audience members. Among the many explanations that

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have been considered are the idea that the experience and expression of sadness may be cathartic (Cornelius, 1997), that tragedies may provide viewers the opportunity to engage in downward-social comparison (Mares & Cantor, 1992), or that at a meta-emotional level, viewers may find some enjoyment or gratification in feeling sadness (e.g., “wallowing in grief”) (Bartsch, Vorderer, Mangold, & Viehoff, 2008; Oliver, 1993; Zillmann, 1998).

In this article, we do not want to suggest that extant research on the enjoyment of sad films or tragedies is misplaced. Rather, our intention is to provide an additional perspective on this seemingly puzzling enjoyment by broadening the conceptualization of audiences’ responses. Specifically, in this article, we test the idea that many forms of *meaningful* entertainment (including many sad films) may elicit feelings of *elevation*—an other-praising affective response to witnessing moral beauty that involves mixed affect—feelings of both sadness and happiness.

Meaningful entertainment

The use of the terms “sad films” or “tear jerkers” to describe films such as *Sophie’s Choice*, *Hotel Rwanda*, or *Schindler’s List* is understandable given that these films undeniably feature tragic stories that typically elicit deep sorrow. At the same time, however, many sad films and dramas also depict characters that embody profound and moving virtues such as strength, courage, wisdom, and sacrifice. Likewise, the stories that are told by these types of films often do more than simply weave tales of sorrow. Rather, they grapple with questions of life’s profundities, and they lay bare the vulnerabilities of the human condition. Many of these movies do not only portray protagonists in crises, but, more importantly, highlight certain moral qualities or virtues that enable protagonists to encounter a threat (even if the ending is fatal) and maintain a sense of human dignity and integrity. Put differently, many sad movies do not portray human life simply as a meaningless struggle that manifests itself in the death of a protagonist, but they document how the idea of human ideals persists, and, thus, triumphs over the forces of nature, even if single individuals may have to suffer or die. Accordingly, many sad movies may actually tell a quite comforting, even transcendental, story about the human condition.

The idea that many sad films may “do more” than simply elicit sadness is a position increasingly recognized by a number of entertainment scholars examining gratifications aside from those focused on hedonic concerns. For example, Oliver and Woolley (2010) suggested that sad films are but one example of entertainment that focuses on human values, with other films such as some romances and dramas also often interested in exploring issues of life purpose. By noting that the genre of sad films can often be characterized more broadly in terms of the portrayal of human meaningfulness, research in entertainment psychology has begun to move away from considering the “enjoyment” of tragedy as particularly paradoxical. Rather, scholars now seem to recognize that although such entertainment may not be *enjoyed* in terms of positive valence, it may nevertheless be deeply gratifying and hence *appreciated* (Oliver & Bartsch, 2010). As such, many scholars are expanding the

notion of audience response to recognize not only the positive and negative affective reactions that are frequently elicited, but also the more cognitive components such as introspection that also appear to be important responses to dramatic fare.

In line with this growing body of research, we suggest that although sadness may be one component of affective reactions to meaningful entertainment, many audience responses may also be described in terms of “mixed affect.” In particular, we believe many affective responses to films perceived as “meaningful” may be characterized, at least in part, in terms of “elevation,” which is a mixed emotional response to witnessing exemplars of moral beauty.

Elevation as an emotional response

Jonathan Haidt and his colleagues have identified a number of other-praising emotions which may be relevant to experiences of meaningful entertainment, such as gratitude and admiration (Algoe & Haidt, 2009; Haidt, 2003). However, the emotion that they have labeled as “elevation” seems *most* relevant for a number of different reasons. First, elevation is conceptualized as the affective response that occurs when witnessing others who display acts of moral beauty or who embody virtues such as “charity, gratitude, fidelity, [and] generosity,” with such responses also giving rise to the desire to emulate or embody virtuous or noble traits (Algoe & Haidt, 2009, p. 106; see also Haidt, 2003; Schnall, Roper, & Fessler, 2010). As a result, elevation may be experienced in response to sad films that feature characters displaying courage or facing hardship, dramas that grapple with issues of human value, or even more serious romances that depict the power of love in lifting the human spirit.

Elevation also seems relevant because it helps to address questions concerning the negative aspects of audiences’ affective responses to such entertainment. Specifically, although elevation is generally characterized as positively valenced, it is simultaneously associated with negative feelings such as sadness or anxiety (Silvers & Haidt, 2008). Thus, although elevation tends to be associated with positive feelings such as contentment, words reflecting mixed-affective responses such as “touched” or “inspired” are often employed to better capture the experience. These experiences of elevation also tend to be associated with unique physical reactions such as tears, goose bumps, a warmth or opening up of the chest, and a lump in the throat (Silvers & Haidt, 2008)—responses that appear to capture common physical responses to moving entertainment such as sad films, dramas, and romances. It is possible then, that when viewing meaningful entertainment, viewers may not simply experience feelings of sadness as extant research may have implied. Rather, many of these feelings may be described, at least in part, in terms of *mixed*-affective responses such as elevation.

The importance of mixed affect in response to entertainment is only beginning to garner systematic attention, but research in this area generally supports the proposition that meaningfulness may be signified by the experience of mixed affect.

For example, Larsen, McGraw, and Cacioppo (2001) found that viewing the film *Life is Beautiful* often resulted in feelings of happiness and sadness simultaneously. Similar findings have also been reported for other types of media content such as advertising (Edell & Burke, 1987). The idea that entertainment focused on the human condition can result in heightened feelings of mixed affect is consistent with recent research on viewer motivations for entertainment consumption. Specifically, Oliver and Raney (2011) argued that sad films, rather than being understood as particularly *nonhedonic*, might better be understood, at least in part, as fulfilling needs associated with greater insight, wisdom, or meaning-in-life (i.e., *eudaimonic*) concerns. Furthermore, these authors reported that higher scores on eudaimonic motivations for viewing entertainment were associated with greater preferences for entertainment that elicit mixed emotions. Although this research did not measure elevation specifically, these findings are consistent with the notion that the desire to view entertainment that grapples with questions of the human condition may reflect, to some degree, an interest in entertainment that has the potential to be elevating.

However, in suggesting that many sad films may be aptly described in terms of their elevating qualities, we do not mean to imply that *all* sad films or tragedies hold appeal because they elicit elevation. Indeed, examples of relentless and horrific tragic drama (such as antiwar movies like *Full Metal Jacket* or *Waltz With Bashir*) are notable examples of entertainment that may be highly valued and appreciated, but that may not result in feelings of inspiration, warmth, or heightened desire to be a better person, as displays of moral excellence are not necessarily prominent characteristics of their protagonists. Consequently, in this research, our goal is not to suggest that elevation can account for the experience of *all* sad films or tragedies, but rather to test the idea that entertainment that is characterized by viewers as particularly meaningful (including but not limited to tragedies) can frequently be described in terms of its elevating qualities.

In summary, existing research points to the idea that the enjoyment of many examples of entertainment that have been labeled as “sad” or as “tear-jerkers” may be described, in part, in terms of the experience of *elevation* in response to meaningful entertainment—an affective state associated with unique elicitors, emotional and physical responses, and motivational outcomes. Consequently, this study was designed to assess the extent to which responses to meaningful entertainment can be characterized in terms of elevation.

Present research and hypotheses

To assess the unique aspects of meaningful entertainment experiences and to contrast such experiences with entertainment experiences associated with hedonic gratifications, this study employed an experimental design in which participants were asked to name a film that they found particularly meaningful, or to name a film they found particularly pleasurable. After naming the film, participants rated their perceptions of and responses to the film on a series of closed-ended questions

designed to tap into unique dimensions of elevation. These ratings formed the basis of the following hypotheses.

First, if meaningful films are thought to evoke elevation in users, they should feature themes of moral virtue and human excellence that have been associated with that affective response (Algoe & Haidt, 2009). Accordingly we hypothesized that:

H1: Moral virtues will be featured more prevalently in meaningful films than in pleasurable films.

Second, meaningful films should elicit unique affective responses indicative of elevation (e.g., feeling moved, touched, inspired; see Silvers & Haidt, 2008). Here, we term these kinds of potentially elevating responses as “meaningful” affective responses:

H2: Meaningful affect should be higher for meaningful than pleasurable films.

These unique “meaningful” affective responses should be associated with mixed-affective responses, and have unique physical indicators (e.g., tears, lump in throat) (Oliver, 2008; Silvers & Haidt, 2008).

H3: Mixed affect (e.g., feeling both happy and sad at the same time) should be higher for meaningful than pleasurable films.

H4: Physical responses associated with elevation should be more common for meaningful than pleasurable films.

Finally, if elevation aptly describes a common affective response to meaningful entertainment, then meaningful films should be associated with unique motivational outcomes (Algoe & Haidt, 2009; Schnall et al., 2010).

H5: Meaningful films should be more likely than pleasurable films to elicit motivations to embody or enact moral virtues.

In addition to testing these five hypotheses in separate analyses, this study also tested a model that further illustrates and delineates the hypothesized causal relationships among the variables of interest (Figure 1). This model represents the idea that, if elevation in response to moral beauty is an apt descriptor of many meaningful cinematic experiences, then, first, meaningful films should be associated with more frequent displays of moral virtue (Path a). These displays should then give rise to elevation (meaningful affect) (Path b), which should be characterized in terms of mixed-affective reactions (Path c) as well as unique physical indicators (Path d). Finally, feelings of elevation (meaningful affect) should in turn lead to motivations to embrace moral virtues (Path e). This model also implies several indirect effects of interest, including the idea that meaningful films lead to heightened elevation (meaningful affective responses) via their portrayal of moral virtue, and that portrayals of moral virtue lead to heightened moral motivations via the experience of elevation (meaningful affect). Figure 1 provides a graphic description of this argument.

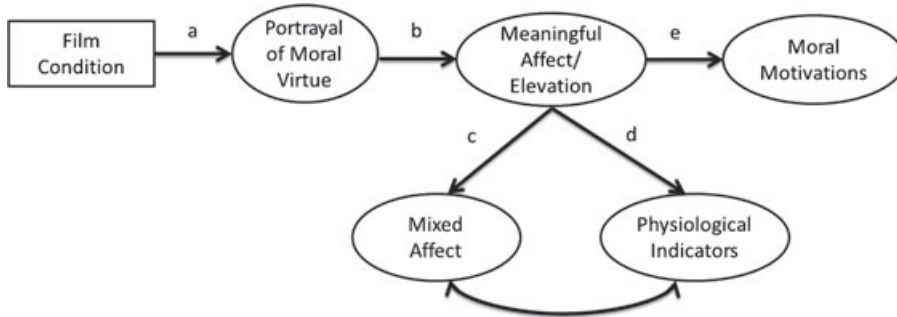


Figure 1 Hypothesized relationships among variables.

Method

Participants and procedures

Four hundred and eighty-three students (54.9% female; age: $M = 19.69$, $SD = 1.37$) enrolled in large-lecture courses participated in this research in exchange for a nominal amount of course credit. Participants were given a URL for an online questionnaire, and were instructed to complete the questionnaire on their own at some point over the course of approximately 2 weeks. Upon logging into the questionnaire, participants were randomly assigned to name and rate their responses to either a film that they found particularly pleasurable ($n = 221$) or a film that they found particularly meaningful ($n = 262$) (see Oliver & Hartmann, 2010).

Measures

Film genres

Because this study was motivated in part by extant research on sad films and tragedies, the genre(s) of the film named by participants was assessed as a way of examining whether or not participants were likely to name sad films and dramas more when identifying meaningful than pleasurable films. After naming their film, participants were presented with a list of 10 genres and, for each one, asked to indicate if their film was an example of that genre. The genres included: drama, sad film, classic, documentary, comedy, romance, action, thriller, horror, and science fiction.

Portrayal of moral virtue

To assess the values that were prevalent in the films, participants were presented with 15 items from Stern, Dietz, and Guagnano's (1998) brief inventory of values and were asked to indicate how important each value was in the movie that they had named (1 = *Not at All*, 7 = *Very Much*). Three items each were used to assess biospheric values (e.g., unity with nature), altruistic values (e.g., caring for the weak), conservative/traditional values (e.g., honoring parents and elders), self-enhancement/egoistic values (e.g., material possessions), and values reflecting

openness to change (e.g., an exciting life). In line with Haidt's (2003) notion that elevation results from witnessing moral excellence, altruistic values resembled the idea of moral human virtues most closely because they were inherently linked to interpersonal and, thus, truly moral behavior.

Affective responses indicative of elevation

Affective responses to the film were assessed by presenting participants with a series of affect terms and having them rate how much they experienced each affect while viewing the film (1 = *Not at All*, 7 = *Very Much*). Items were drawn from a variety of sources with the intention of including items that would represent meaningful affect (reflecting elevation), positive affect, and negative affect (Algoe & Haidt, 2009; Edell & Burke, 1987; Oliver, 2008; Oliver & Raney, 2011; Schnall et al., 2010). An exploratory factor analysis using principal axis factoring and promax rotation was conducted, with items producing low loadings or cross loadings removed from the analysis. This analysis suggested three factors with strong simple structure and with eigenvalues greater than 1 that explained 65.80% of the variance. Scales were constructed by averaging the items loading highly on a given factor. The first factor was labeled "meaningful affect" and included the items *touched*, *moved*, *emotional*, *meaningful*, *compassion*, *inspired*, and *tender* ($M = 4.94$, $SD = 1.41$, $\alpha = .91$). The second factor was labeled positive affect and included the items *cheerful*, *happy*, *joyful*, and *upbeat* ($M = 4.75$, $SD = 1.54$, $\alpha = .91$). The final factor was labeled negative affect and included the items *sad*, *gloomy*, *depressed*, and *melancholy* ($M = 3.62$, $SD = 1.57$, $\alpha = .87$).

Using procedures outlined by Ersner-Hershfield, Mikels, Sullivan, and Carstensen (2008), mixed-affect scores were computed for each participant in terms of the minimum score on either the positive-affect or negative-affect scale. Thus, if a person reported low levels for both positive and negative affect, the person's mixed-affect score would be low. Likewise, if a person reported high levels of positive affect (e.g., $M = 6$) and low levels of negative affect (e.g., $M = 2$) (or vice versa), the person's mixed-affect score would also be low ($M = 2$). In contrast, if a person reported high levels of both positive affect (e.g., $M = 6$) and negative affect (e.g., $M = 5$), the person's mixed-affect score would be higher ($M = 5$).

Physical responses to the film

To assess physical manifestations of affective responses related to elevation, participants were presented with 10 bodily reactions (e.g., "lump in the throat," "chills") as reported by Algoe and Haidt (2009), as well as an additional item pertaining to tears and crying as reported by Silvers and Haidt (2008).

Motivational outcomes from viewing films

To assess motivational outcomes from viewing the film, participants were presented with a list of ways the movie may have motivated them to behave. Some of these items were based on Algoe and Haidt's (2009) motivational effects of elevation

Table 1 Percent of Respondents Identifying Their Named Film With Specific Genres

Genre	Film Condition		χ^2 ($df = 1$)	Cramer's <i>V</i>
	Meaningful	Pleasurable		
Drama	63.74%	35.29%	38.81***	.28
Sad film	41.22%	14.93%	40.08***	.29
Romance	22.90%	34.39%	7.82**	.13
Action	22.52%	21.72%	0.04	.01
Comedy	16.79%	54.30%	75.19***	.40
Thriller	12.60%	11.31%	0.19	.02
Classic	12.98%	8.14%	2.91	.08
Documentary	9.54%	2.26%	10.91**	.15
Science fiction	9.16%	8.14%	0.16	.02
Horror	1.53%	1.81%	0.06	.01

** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

(e.g., being a better person, to do something good for others), some were created to reflect a change in focus on life values that we thought also reflected elevation (e.g., to seek what really matters in life), whereas others were motivations not predicted to be associated with elevation (e.g., to make a lot of money, to enjoy one's self).

Results

Film genres

Before testing the specific hypotheses, a series of chi-square tests was conducted to examine the genres named by participants as descriptive of the meaningful or pleasurable film that they had named (Table 1). As expected, participants naming a meaningful film were significantly more likely than those naming a pleasurable film to identify their film as a drama, a sad film, and/or (to a lesser extent) a documentary. Participants naming a pleasurable film were overwhelmingly more likely to identify their film as a comedy. Unexpectedly, participants naming a pleasurable film were also somewhat more likely to identify their film as a romance. Although this finding seems somewhat inconsistent with prior work identifying the romance film as an instance of human drama (Oliver, 2008), perhaps this finding reflects the diversity of romance genres available (e.g., romantic comedy, romantic tragedy, etc.). Consistent with this interpretation, within the pleasurable-film condition, 56.6% of participants who identified their film as a romance also identified it as a comedy, but only 25.0% of the participants in the meaningful condition identified their film as both a romance and a comedy. Together, then, this analysis of film genres demonstrated that the manipulation of meaningful versus pleasurable films appeared to have functioned as expected.

Virtues present in meaningful versus pleasurable films

Hypothesis 1 predicted that moral virtues would be more important values featured in meaningful films than in pleasurable films. To examine this hypothesis, a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted on the 15 items composing the brief inventory of values (Stern et al., 1998). Although gender differences were not of primary interest in this research, gender was included as an additional factor in these analyses based on prior research reporting strong gender differences in enjoyment of sad and dramatic types of entertainment specifically (e.g., Oliver, 1993). This analysis revealed a significant multivariate effect of film condition, Multivariate $F(15, 465) = 5.14, p < .001, \eta^2 = .14$. Table 2 reports the means and univariate statistics for this analysis. Importantly, this analysis showed that participants in the meaningful-film condition rated all three altruistic values as more central to their film than did participants in the pleasurable-film condition. Interestingly, two other values were also rated as substantially more central in meaningful than pleasurable films: (a) family security, safety for loved ones; and (b) influential, having an impact on people and events. At first glance, both of these findings may seem at odds with the values hypothesized to be important in meaningful entertainment. However, we note that an emphasis on family and loved ones is consistent with the notion of human connectedness—a theme we believe should be important in meaningful entertainment. Likewise, although influence may be associated with power or coercion, an additional interpretation is that one can be influential and impactful in terms of helping people and/or leading them to a just course of action. Of course, these interpretations await further scrutiny, but given the large and consistent emphasis on altruistic values in meaningful films (as hypothesized in H1), these interpretations seem viable at this point. Neither the multivariate main effect of gender, Multivariate $F(15, 465) = 1.54, p > .05, \eta^2 = .05$, nor the Gender \times Film Condition interaction, Multivariate $F(15, 465) = 0.57, p > .05, \eta^2 = .02$, were statistically significant.

Affective responses

Hypotheses 2 and 3 predicted that meaningful and mixed affect would be higher in the meaningful- than pleasurable-film condition. A MANOVA was employed to test these hypotheses, as well as to examine how the conditions differed on negative and positive affect. This analysis revealed strong support for these hypotheses, Multivariate $F(4, 476) = 47.36, p < .001, \eta^2 = .29$. Table 3 reports the univariate statistics associated with these hypotheses, showing that, as predicted, participants in the meaningful condition reported stronger meaningful- and mixed-affective responses than did participants in the pleasurable condition. Likewise, negative affect was higher in the meaningful than pleasurable condition, whereas positive affect was higher in the pleasurable condition. However, it is interesting to note that whereas positive affect was considerably higher than negative affect in the pleasurable condition, $t(225) = 15.29, p < .001$, positive and negative affect scores were almost identical in the meaningful condition, $t(261) = 0.08, p = .94$. Consequently,

Table 2 Importance of Values in Meaningful Versus Pleasurable Films

Values	Film Condition				Univariate <i>F</i>	
	Meaningful		Pleasurable			
	<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>F</i> (1, 479)	η^2
Biospheric						
Protecting the environment, preserving nature	2.86	.12	2.72	.13	0.65	.00
Unity with nature, fitting into nature	3.15	.12	3.01	.14	0.52	.00
Respecting the earth, harmony with other species	3.18	.13	2.97	.14	1.30	.00
Altruistic						
A world at peace, free of war and conflict	3.56	.13	2.91	.14	11.38***	.02
Social justice, correcting injustice, care for the weak	4.93	.12	3.93	.13	32.38***	.06
Equality, equal opportunity for all	4.49	.12	4.00	.14	7.09**	.01
Conservative/traditional						
Honoring parents and elders, showing respect	4.18	.13	3.87	.14	2.80	.01
Family security, safety for loved ones	5.30	.11	4.74	.12	11.64***	.02
Self-discipline, self-restraint, resistance to temptation	4.65	.11	4.22	.12	6.65*	.01
Self-enhancement/egoistic						
Authority, the right to lead or command	4.40	.12	4.10	.13	3.15	.01
Influential, having an impact on people and events	5.60	.10	4.80	.11	27.52***	.05
Wealth, material possessions, money	3.98	.13	3.74	.14	1.66	.00
Openness to change						
A varied life, filled with challenge, novelty, and change	5.18	.11	4.92	.12	2.82	.01
An exciting life, stimulating experiences	4.90	.10	5.44	.11	13.39***	.03
Curious, interested in everything, exploring	4.42	.11	4.64	.12	1.74	.00

* $p < .05$. *** $p < .001$.

Note: These univariate statistics are associated with a Multivariate $F(15, 465) = 5.14, p < .001, \eta^2 = .14$.

these analyses speak to the importance of the simultaneous experience of positive and negative affect that may be elicited by meaningful entertainment (Larsen et al., 2001).

This analysis also revealed a significant multivariate main effect for gender, $F(4, 476) = 6.71, p < .001, \eta^2 = .05$. The univariate effects revealed significant gender differences for both meaningful affect and positive affect, with females scoring higher than males on both measures.¹ However, a significant Gender \times Film Condition interaction for positive affect was also obtained. Although both genders

Table 3 Affective Responses to Meaningful Versus Pleasurable Films

Affective Responses	Film Condition				Univariate <i>F</i>	
	Meaningful		Pleasurable			
	<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>F</i> (1, 479)	η^2
Meaningful	5.44	.08	4.31	.09	92.76***	.16
Mixed	3.35	.08	2.72	.09	28.63***	.06
Positive	4.23	.09	5.32	.10	69.75***	.13
Negative	4.21	.09	2.92	.10	97.11***	.17

*** $p < .001$.

Note: These univariate statistics are associated with a Multivariate $F(4, 476) = 47.36, p < .001, \eta^2 = .29$.

reported significantly greater positive affect in the pleasurable- than the meaningful-film condition, this difference was slightly larger for females than males.

Hypothesis 4 pertained to the physical responses associated with viewing meaningful entertainment, predicting that responses associated with elevation (e.g., tears, lump in throat) should be more common for meaningful than pleasurable films. A MANOVA was employed to test this hypothesis. This analysis revealed a significant multivariate effect of film condition, Multivariate $F(11, 469) = 13.49, p < .001, \eta^2 = .24$, with the univariate results revealing general support for Hypothesis 4 (Table 4). Specifically, many of the physical responses identified in prior research as associated with elevation were higher in the meaningful- than the pleasurable-film condition, including a lump in the throat, tears, a rising or open chest, and chills (e.g., goose bumps). Tense muscles were also higher for meaningful films in this sample. In contrast, the pleasurable film was associated with greater laughter, light and bouncy feelings, relaxation, and energy.

This analysis also revealed a significant multivariate effect of gender, Multivariate $F(11, 469) = 11.82, p < .001, \eta^2 = .22$. Univariate effects revealed that females reported higher scores on feeling a lump in the throat, tears/crying, and feeling light and bouncy. In contrast, males reported higher scores than females on feelings of energy. The multivariate Gender \times Film Condition interaction was not significant, Multivariate $F(11, 469) = 1.43, p > .05, \eta^2 = .03$.

Motivational outcomes

The final hypothesis (H5) pertained to motivational outcomes in response to viewing. Specifically, meaningful films were predicted to elicit motivations to embody or enact moral virtues more strongly than were pleasurable films. A MANOVA revealed support for this hypothesis, Multivariate $F(11, 469) = 10.36, p < .001, \eta^2 = .20$ (Table 5). Meaningful films were associated with feelings of wanting to be a better person and to do good things for others—both of which had been identified as associated with elevation in prior research (Algoe & Haidt, 2009). Meaningful films were also associated with additional motivations developed in this study: seeking what

Table 4 Physical Responses to Meaningful Versus Pleasurable Films

Physical Responses	Film Condition				Univariate <i>F</i>	
	Meaningful		Pleasurable		<i>F</i> (1, 479)	η^2
	<i>M</i>	SE	<i>M</i>	SE		
Lump in throat	3.92	.12	2.78	.13	43.44***	.08
Tears Crying	3.87	.12	2.57	.13	50.74***	.10
Muscles tensed	4.17	.11	3.38	.12	22.24***	.04
Rising or Open Chest	4.00	.11	3.37	.12	15.38***	.03
Chills	3.95	.12	3.10	.14	21.49***	.04
Warmth in chest	4.10	.11	3.92	.13	1.19	.00
Increased heart rate	4.14	.11	3.83	.12	3.48	.01
Light bouncy	2.86	.11	3.98	.12	50.78***	.10
High energy	3.83	.11	4.78	.12	34.39***	.07
Laughter	3.80	.11	5.28	.12	83.93***	.15
Muscles relaxed	3.61	.10	4.17	.11	14.00***	.03

*** $p < .001$.

Note: These univariate statistics are associated with a Multivariate $F(11, 469) = 13.49, p < .001, \eta^2 = .24$.

matters in life, living life in a better way, and adjusting one's life to what is truly desired. Interestingly, meaningful films were also associated with slightly higher reports of wanting to work hard to achieve success (an unanticipated finding), though this observation calls into question how "success" was interpreted by these participants (e.g., financial success, success in goals). In contrast, pleasurable films were more strongly associated with motivations to make people laugh, to enjoy one's self, and to be popular.

This analysis also revealed a significant multivariate main effect of gender, Multivariate $F(11, 469) = 5.01, p < .001, \eta^2 = .11$. Females reported higher scores on motivations to seek what matters in life, whereas males scored higher on motivations to make money and to be popular.

A significant multivariate interaction was also obtained, Multivariate $F(11, 469) = 3.01, p < .001, \eta^2 = .07$. This interaction was associated with significant univariate interactions for each of the five motivations of interest in this study: wanting to be a better person, wanting to do good things for others, seeking what matters in life, wanting to live a better life, and adjusting one's life to what is really wanted. Although these motivations were associated with higher scores in the meaningful than pleasurable conditions for both males and females, differences between conditions were stronger for females than for males. However, meaningful versus pleasurable differences were significant for both genders on all five motivations with the exception of males' reports of wanting to do good things for others. In this instance, the difference between meaningful versus pleasurable conditions only approached significance ($p = .10$), though the means were in the expected direction.

Table 5 Motivation Outcomes in Response to Meaningful Versus Pleasurable Films

Motivations	Film Condition				Univariate F	
	Meaningful		Pleasurable			
	M	SE	M	SE	$F(1, 479)$	η^2
Be a better person	5.42	.10	4.38	.11	45.18***	.09
Do good things for other people	5.24	.11	4.46	.12	24.32***	.05
Seek what really matters in life	5.48	.11	4.71	.11	24.74***	.05
Live my life a better way	5.41	.10	4.36	.11	45.84***	.09
Adjust my life to what I really want	4.89	.11	4.40	.12	9.18**	.02
Make people laugh	3.60	.12	4.36	.13	18.27***	.04
Enjoy myself	4.97	.10	5.32	.11	5.38*	.01
Work hard to achieve success	4.74	.12	4.34	.13	5.25*	.01
Meet new friends	3.93	.12	4.19	.13	2.22	.00
Make a lot of money	3.06	.11	2.99	.13	0.16	.00
Be popular	2.65	.10	2.96	.11	4.06*	.01

* $p < .05$. *** $p < .001$.

Note: These univariate statistics are associated with a Multivariate $F(11, 469) = 10.36, p < .001, \eta^2 = .20$.

Model testing

To test the model of the hypothesized relationship between variables, several scales were developed from the items analyzed thus far in this article. First, a scale representing the portrayal of moral virtue was computed by averaging the three items forming the altruism scale from the brief inventory of values (Stern et al., 1998), $M = 3.99, SD = 1.65, \alpha = .73$. Second, a measure of physical indicators of elevation was created by averaging the four items that have been identified in prior research (lump in the throat, tears, a rising or open chest, chills/goose bumps), $M = 3.51, SD = 1.54, \alpha = .77$. Muscle tension was not included because, although it was higher in the meaningful condition, it has not yet been uniquely associated with elevation in the literature. Finally, a measure of moral motivations was computed by averaging five items: the two items from prior research about doing good for others, and the three items developed in this research concerning living and adjusting ones' life for positive ends, $M = 4.91, SD = 1.51, \alpha = .90$.

The hypothesized model was tested in AMOS. Except for film condition and mixed affect (which was a single item), all of the variables were modeled as single indicator latent constructs with errors estimated as $(1-\alpha)\sigma^2$. In addition, because the previous analyses had revealed some gender differences, gender was included as a covariate in the analysis, though is not pictured in the figure in the interest of clarity. Although the initial run of this model showed that all of the predicted paths were statistically significant, the overall fit of the model suggested that it could be improved, $\chi^2(df = 9) = 65.69, p < .001, CFI = .94, RMSEA = .11, 90\% CI = .09$ to $.14$.

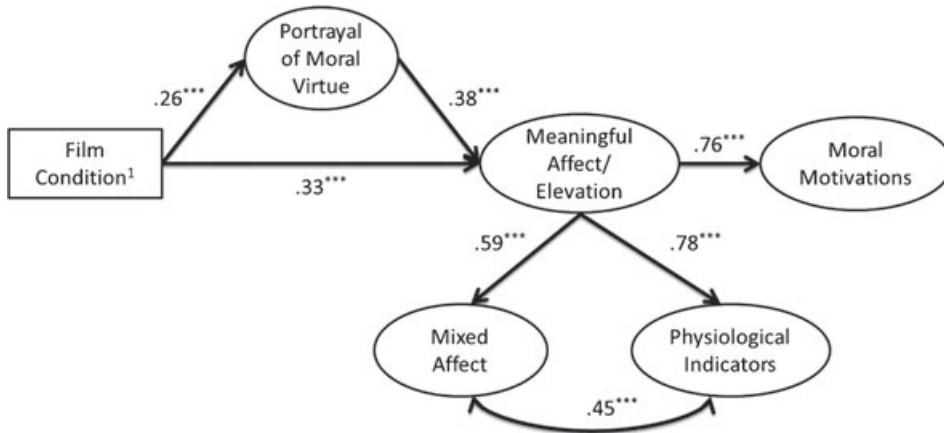


Figure 2 Resultant model. $\chi^2(df = 8) = 11.55, p = .17, CFI = 1.00, RMSEA = .03, 90\%$ CF = .00 to .07. *** $p < .001$.

Note: Film condition was coded as 0 = pleasurable film; 1 = meaningful film.

An examination of the modification indices identified the utility of the addition of a direct path from naming a meaningful film to meaningful affective reactions (elevation). Given that we believe the presence of this path has important theoretical implications (discussed below), we decided to include it in our final model, resulting in an acceptable fit, $\chi^2(df = 8) = 11.55, p = .17, CFI = 1.00, RMSEA = .03, 90\%$ CI = .00 to .07. Figure 2 shows the paths associated with this revised model. All hypothesized paths, as well as the additional path added to the model, were statistically significant. An examination of two indirect paths added further support for our argument that meaningful films may induce feelings of elevation among viewers. First, bootstrapping procedures using 2,000 bootstrap samples and bias-corrected confidence intervals revealed that the indirect path from naming a meaningful film to meaningful affect (elevation) was mediated by the portrayal of moral virtue, $\beta = .10, p < .001, CI = .06$ to $.14$. Likewise, the indirect path from the portrayal of moral virtue to moral motivation via meaningful affect (elevation) was significant, $\beta = .30, p < .01, CI = .22$ to $.35$.

Discussion

The overarching purpose of this research was to examine the viability of the argument that many responses to sad films or tragedies may be interpreted, at least in part, in terms of elevation. Specifically, we reasoned that many sad films present more than tragedy, and that audiences can experience more than only sadness in response. Rather, sad films and dramas often focus on questions of human virtue, including values such as resilience, sacrifice, and altruism. Such portrayals of moral beauty could then lead to meaningful affective reactions that can be described in terms of elevation, with these reactions associated with mixed affective responses and physical indicators

such as tears and chills. Finally, we hypothesized that elevation (or meaningful affect) should predict motivational outcomes regarding moral values.

We believe our research supports our overarching interpretation. Consistent with the notion that elevation is an apt descriptor of an affective response that accompanies viewing many forms of meaningful entertainment, meaningful films were associated with perceptions of a greater focus on portrayals of moral virtue, and these portrayals were, in turn, associated with heightened meaningful affect (elevation). Furthermore, meaningful affect (elevation) was signified by both mixed-affective reactions, as well as unique physical indicators (e.g., lump in the throat) identified in prior research. Finally, meaningful affect (elevation) was associated with motivational outcomes reflecting desires to be more moral and to lead a more meaningful life.

On the basis of these findings, we believe these results speak to the idea that people's responses to some tragedies or sad films may reflect not only sad reactions per se, but also feelings of elevation in response to portrayals of moral beauty. However, we are not suggesting that all tragic entertainment results in elevating experiences, nor that meaningful entertainment should be conceptualized entirely on the basis of elevation. Undoubtedly, many sad films are tragic rather than inspiring in their depiction of the human condition, and entertainment may be perceived as meaningful in the absence of feelings of elevation. For example, feelings of greater insight, awareness of core values, or ability to cope with mortality salience are among the many responses that may contribute to audience appreciation of sad, tragic, or meaningful entertainment, even if elevation is not experienced.

In addition, though our final model suggested that meaningful films led to enhanced feelings of meaningful affect (elevation) via portrayals of moral virtue (as predicted), there was also a significant direct path from meaningful films to meaningful affect. This path implies that there are other aspects of meaningful films (other than their portrayals of virtue) that can lead to feelings of meaningful affect. At this point, the list of potential variables is seemingly endless. For example, moving musical scores, awe-inspiring cinematography, and authentic character portrayals may all play important roles in arousing feelings of elevation (Cupchik, 2001). Without a doubt, additional aesthetic elements deserve greater attention in our continued exploration of elevation as an audience response. At the same time, we also think it is equally plausible that our admittedly truncated measure of the portrayal of moral virtue (three items) may have failed to capture the full range of virtues that are characteristic in dramas that may give rise to elevation. For example, our measure focused on altruism (i.e., world at peace, social justice, etc.) failed to capture values such as quiet humility, genuine friendship, or humble gratitude. If this interpretation is correct, media scholars may find it fruitful to examine and catalogue the diversity of values prevalent not only in human drama, but also across the entertainment spectrum.

Together, these results contribute to existing research in entertainment psychology in a number of respects. First, they provide one potential explanation for the "sad-film paradox" that has long puzzled scholars looking for reasons why people may

“enjoy” entertainment that is sad. First, this study highlights the importance of the idea that entertainment choices and audience responses can reflect more than only hedonistic impulses, and can additionally demonstrate feelings of deep appreciation. These findings also suggest that at least for some “sad films,” a more apt focus may be on portrayals of virtue rather than tragedy, and on audience responses of elevation rather than sadness alone. This conclusion also points to the importance of continued research on additional genres and portrayals that may seem initially odd or misplaced, such as the enjoyment of horror or the fascination with morally ambiguous characters such as Tony Soprano of *The Sopranos* or *Dexter*.

These results also hold import for scholars who may be interested in prosocial effects of media entertainment. These findings suggest that rather than only providing viewers with models of prosocial behavior, eliciting elevation may further increase the likelihood of engaging in these behaviors, as elevation entails motivational enhancement. Of course, this study examined only self-reports of motivational outcomes, but recent research that has examined behavioral measures points to the promise of this suggestion (Schnall et al., 2010).

Limitations

Although our study found general support for the idea that responses to meaningful films may reflect feelings of elevation, a great deal of additional work in this area is needed. Some of this work should attempt to expand the boundaries of how elevation functions in entertainment, whereas other work should attempt to address the limitations present in our current research. In terms of our limitations, first, we recognize the potential problems in our use of a college-student sample. Not only do entertainment preferences change over the course of a lifetime (Mares, Oliver, & Cantor, 2008), but older populations most certainly have more life experiences (e.g., marriage, death of a close friend or parent, birth of a child) that could serve to make some portrayals particularly salient or elevating. Further, research in socioemotional selectivity suggests a tendency for people to increasingly avoid situations that elicit negative affect and seek situations that are perceived as meaningful as they age (Carstensen, Isaacowitz, & Charles, 1999). This theoretical perspective is particularly relevant in this context, as it would imply very different patterns of results for sad films that plainly portray life as a meaningless tragedy (e.g., some antiwar movies) or that are manipulative or shallow in their portrayals, versus those which provide valuable meaning or elicit elevation. As a result of these considerations, expanding the boundaries of the study sample may be a particularly fruitful direction of scholarship.

We previously mentioned potential problems in our measures (i.e., portrayal of moral virtue). Ultimately, a careful accounting of the types of portrayals associated with heightened levels of elevation is crucial for this area of research. We believe that our measure has merely indicated a very small sample of the types of virtuous portrayals that are likely to be important, so more systematic content-analytic work will undoubtedly prove to be very valuable.

In this research we also allowed participants to name for themselves the films that they found particularly meaningful. Of course, the danger in this approach is that a very large variety of films were identified, introducing greater variability (noise) and also running the risk of including films that may be seemingly odd examples of films perceived to be meaningful (e.g., a person may name *Spider-Man* as a meaningful film). On the other hand, employing a “subjectivist” approach gives participants greater freedom in reporting on experiences that they find personally meaningful, and avoids potential criticisms of defining for others the types of entertainment that should be valuable or worthy (see Huta & Ryan, 2010, for a similar argument). In this study, the fact that the experimental manipulation successfully predicted the hypothesized outcomes leads us to conclude that the benefits associated with this approach outweighed the potential costs in this circumstance. However, additional experimental work that employs pretested film stimuli would clearly contribute to this line of research.

Another potential limitation in this study is that we employed self-reports of past viewing experiences. This approach had the advantage of allowing participants to name and report on media entertainment that presumably elicited a particularly strong response—a technique that a variety of media effects studies have demonstrated to be valid in assessing emotional and salient media content (e.g., Cantor, Mares, & Hyde, 2009). Yet, at the same time, research in this area would benefit from assessing responses in more naturalistic settings and to ongoing (rather than recalled) viewing. Likewise, the use of more nuanced measures such as physical indicators of emotion (Silvers & Haidt, 2008) may help to address any retrospective biases that may be present in these self-report measures based on autobiographical memories.

Additional directions for future research

In addition to addressing limitations in our research, we hope that scholars will find it fruitful to expand upon our ideas. For example, our study focused on cinematic entertainment. Yet it seems evident that moral values can run throughout almost any type of media content, including books, television programs, news, video games, and even advertising. Importantly, too, newer technologies have expanded opportunities for viewers/users to create their own stories that may be particularly inspiring (e.g., YouTube videos, personal blogs), and to share and comment on media content that they may find elevating (Berger & Milkman, 2010). As a result, we believe that scholarship on media use/creation/sharing of elevating content should engage in creative exploration of the variety of ways that inspiring stories can be consumed and generated.

We also hope that future scholars find it fruitful to further examine the motivational outcomes associated with the experience of elevation. For example, specific applications of this motivation are particularly exciting, including helping behaviors, charitability, or even prejudice reduction. Consequently, we hope that scholars will be motivated to explore the diversity of positive outcomes associated with the

consumption of elevating content, as well as to examine how long-lasting these outcomes may be.

We began this article by noting that the enjoyment of sad films may be too narrow a description of what we believe to be a very enriching experience for many people. Our research supports this general argument, suggesting that the consumption of meaningful entertainment can provide us with elevating experiences that result in complex affective reactions and benevolent motivational outcomes. As a result, what may appear to be “paradoxical” entertainment at first glance may at times be a media experience that is deeply moving and profoundly gratifying.

Notes

- 1 Because gender differences were not a primary focus of this research, and because gender differences did not alter the hypothesized relationships between variables, neither the means nor the specific univariate statistics for gender differences are reported in this paper in the interest of space. However, this information is available from the first author upon request.

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对娱乐媒体道德品质描绘的反应升华

【摘要：】

媒体心理学家长期困扰的命题是为什么人们可以从娱乐，如往往引起深厚的悲伤感情的悲剧，来体验享受。本研究探讨的重点是“有意义”的，和“升华”情感反应可能会对了解悲伤或戏剧娱乐提供一个理解的框架。研究结果表明，许多有意义的电影娱乐都描绘美德（例如利他思想）。这类描写反过来会引起升华的情感（例如灵感），体现在混合的情感和独特的生理反应（例如如哽在喉）。最终，升华也引起体现美德的动机，如做一个更好的人，或帮助他人。

L'élévation en réaction aux représentations médiatiques de la vertu morale

Résumé

Les psychologues des médias se sont longuement demandé comment il était possible que des individus tirent du plaisir de divertissements tels que des tragédies, qui suscitent souvent de profonds sentiments de tristesse. Cette présente recherche examine l'idée selon laquelle un accent sur le divertissement « significatif » et des réactions affectives identifiées comme de l'« élévation » pourraient offrir un cadre pour comprendre plusieurs exemples de divertissements tristes ou dramatiques. Les résultats de cette étude suggèrent que plusieurs types de divertissements cinématographiques significatifs présentent des portraits de vertus morales (p. ex. l'altruisme). Ces portraits, à leur tour, suscitent des sentiments d'élévation (p. ex. l'inspiration) qui sont exprimés en termes d'affect mixte et de réactions physiques uniques (p. ex. une boule dans la gorge). En fin de compte, l'élévation met également en exergue des motivations à incarner les vertus morales, comme être une meilleure personne ou aider les autres.

Mots clés : divertissement, élévation, signification, émotion, moralité

Erbauung als Reaktion auf unterhaltende Darstellungen von moralischer Tugend

Medienpsychologen befassen sich seit langem mit der Frage, wie Menschen von Unterhaltungsangeboten wie Tragödien, die oft starke Gefühle von Traurigkeit vermitteln, Enjoyment erfahren können. Diese Studie untersucht die Idee, dass ein Fokus auf „bedeutsame“ Unterhaltung und affektive Reaktionen, die als „Erbauung“ bezeichnet werden, möglicherweise einen Ansatz bieten, um die vielen Beispiele von trauriger oder dramatischer Unterhaltung zu verstehen. Die Ergebnisse dieser Studie zeigen, dass viele Arten von bedeutsamer Kinounterhaltung die Darstellung von moralischen Tugenden (z.B. Altruismus) beinhalten. Diese Darstellungen wiederum bieten Gefühle der Erbauung (z.B. Inspiration), die sich durch gemischten Affekt und besondere physische Reaktionen (z.B. Kloss im Hals) auszeichnen. In der Folge führt diese Erbauung zur Bereitschaft, diese moralischen Tugenden zu verkörpern, bspw. indem man ein besserer Mensch wird oder anderen hilft.

Schlüsselbegriffe: Unterhaltung, Erbauung, Bedeutsamkeit, Emotion, Moral

도덕적 미덕의 오락적 묘사들에 대한 반응에서의 고양이

요약

미디어 심리학자들은 오랫동안 어떻게 개인들이 심오한 정도의 비애를 나타내는 비극과 같은 오락물로부터 즐거움을 경험하는지에 대해 의문을 가지고 있었다. 본 연구는 의미있는 오락과 정서적인 반응들에 대한 중점이 고양이로 동일시된다는 아이디어는 슬프거나 드라마틱한 오락의 예들을 이해하는 프레임이 될 수 있다는 것을 연구하였다. 연구 결과들은 여러 형태의 의미있는 극적 오락물들은 도덕적 가치들을 나타낸다는 것을 제안하고 있다. 이러한 묘사들은 혼합된 감정과 독특한 신체적 반응들이라는 점에서 인지되는 고양의 감정들을 개발하였다. 궁극적으로 고양은 더 좋은 사람이 되거나 다른 사람들을 도와주는 것과 같은 도덕적 가치들을 구체화하는 동기를 부여할 수 있다.

La Elevación en Respuesta a las Representaciones de la Virtud Moral del Entretenimiento

Resumen

Los psicólogos de los medios han estado largamente intrigados sobre cómo los individuos pueden experimentar placer a través del entretenimiento tales como tragedias que a menudo provocan sentimientos de tristeza. La investigación presente examina la idea que un enfoque sobre “lo significativo” del entretenimiento y las respuestas afectivas identificadas como una “elevación” pueden promover un encuadre para entender muchos ejemplos del entretenimiento triste o dramático. Los resultados de este estudio sugieren que muchos tipos del entretenimiento cinematográfico significativo muestran las representaciones de las virtudes morales (como por ejemplo, el altruismo). Estas representaciones, a su vez, provocan sentimientos de elevación (como por ejemplo, la inspiración) que están significadas en términos de afecto mixto y de respuestas físicas únicas (como por ejemplo, un bulto en la garganta). En última instancia, la elevación incrementa también las motivaciones que encarnan las virtudes morales, tales como ser una buena persona o ayudar a otros.

Palabras claves Entretenimiento, Elevación, Significativo, Emoción, Moralidad