

Cinematic Creativity and Aesthetics

Empirical Studies of a
Collaborative Art Form

Overview

- Introduction
- Investigations
- Conclusions

Introduction

- Cinema is probably the single most important art form to emerge in the 20th century
- It is certainly the most popular and financially lucrative form of artistic expression
- Yet it is perhaps the most understudied art form from the standpoint of psychological science
- This neglect may be due to its collaborative nature – as group rather than individual creativity
- Hence arised the series of exploratory investigations to be reported here

Investigations

- Film Awards and Creative Achievement
- Creative Clusters and Cinematic Success
- Film as Art versus Film as Business
- Great Films versus Bad Films

Film Awards and Creative Achievement

- Film Awards and Critical Acclaim
 - Awards: Professional, Journalistic, Critical
 - Ratings: Movie/Video/DVD Guides
- Questions:
 - How strong is the consensus, if any?
 - What is the best indicator of any consensus?

Film Awards and Creative Achievement

- Sample

- 1,132 English-language narrative films released between 1975 and 2002
- that received an award or award nomination in the categories of best picture, screenplay, direction, male and female leads, male and female supporting actors, cinematography, art direction, costume design, makeup, score, song, film editing, visual effects, sound effects editing, and sound
- from 7 distinct sources (Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Hollywood Foreign Press Association, British Academy of Film and Television Arts, New York Film Critics Circle, National Board of Review, National Society of Film Critics, and Los Angeles Film Critics Association)

Film Awards and Creative Achievement

- **Measures**

- Award indicators for each category and each source: 2 = award, 1 = nomination, 0 = neither
- Award indicators for both 7 organizations and more specialized societies (viz. Directors Guild of America, the Writers Guild of America, the Screen Actors Guild, the American Society of Cinematographers, the Art Directors Guild, the Costume Designers Guild, the Grammy Awards, and the American Cinema Editors)
- Movie guide ratings based on composite of 5 sources converted to 5-star scale (coefficient alpha = .82)

Film Awards and Creative Achievement

- **Results**

- almost all award categories exhibited a conspicuous consensus, the Oscars providing the best single indicator of that agreement
- Oscar awards provided meaningful information about cinematic creativity and achievement beyond that provided by Oscar nominations alone
- awards bestowed by the seven organizations corresponded with more specialized awards granted by guilds and societies, with the Oscars usually providing the best correspondence
- awards correlated positively with later movie guide ratings, the correlations being especially large in the categories of picture, direction, screenplay, and acting (i.e., dramatic properties)

Creative Clusters and Cinematic Success

- Questions:
 - Do the various forms of cinematic achievement, as indicated by awards, form specific creative clusters?
 - Which clusters predict cinematic success as gauged by (a) best picture honors and (b) movie guide ratings?
 - Are the optimal prediction equations additive or multiplicative?

Creative Clusters and Cinematic Success

- Sample: 1,327 English-language, narrative feature films released between 1968 and 1999 that were nominated for at least one award from one of 7 major organizations

Creative Clusters and Cinematic Success

- Measures
 - Dependent Variables:
 - Best Picture Honors (7-item composite; $\alpha = .76$)
 - Movie Guide Ratings (5-item composite; $\alpha = .83$)

Creative Clusters and Cinematic Success

- Measures
 - Independent Variables:
 - Cinematic Contributions: direction, screenplay, acting (male/female, lead/supporting), cinematography, editing, art direction, costume design, makeup, visual effects, sound effects editing, sound, score, and song (all composites).
 - Methodological Controls: release date, genre, and MPAA rating (latter two using dummy coding).

Creative Clusters and Cinematic Success

- Results
 - Factor Analysis (Principle Axes with Varimax Rotation) 🕒 4 creative clusters
 - Dramatic – direction, screenplay, acting, and film editing (7 items; $\alpha = .88$)
 - Visual – art direction, costume design, makeup, and cinematography (4 items; $\alpha = .83$)
 - Technical – visual effects, sound effects editing, and sound (3 items; $\alpha = .73$)
 - Musical – score and song (2 items; $\alpha = .55$)

Creative Clusters and Cinematic Success

- Results
 - Multiple Regression Analysis
 - Additive Model
 - Best Picture Honors: dramatic and visual clusters (former 10 times impact of latter)
 - Movie Guide Ratings: all four clusters (but dramatic still dominant and music actually negative)
 - Multiplicative Model:
 - 2-, 3-, and 4-way interactions, but ...
 - Very small increment to R^2
 - No consistent pattern across the two criteria

Creative Clusters and Cinematic Success

- Discussion
 - The Factor Analysis
 - Four Creative Clusters (film editing as dramatic)
 - Possible gender effects (cf. Simonton, 2004)
 - The Regression Analysis
 - Both criteria highly predictable:
 - 75% for Best Picture Honors and
 - 37% for Movie Guide Ratings
 - Cinema as drama

Film as Art versus Film as Business

- Study 1: Economic Attributes
- Study 2: Screenplay Traits

Study 1: Economic Attributes

- Question: Does Money Make the Movie?
- Sample: 203 award-nominated, English-language, feature narrative films released between 1997 and 2001

Study 1: Economic Attributes

- Measures
 - Success criteria:
 - Critics ratings (metacritic and movie guide ratings)
 - Best picture honors
 - Box office (first weekend and gross)
 - Creative clusters (dramatic, visual, technical, musical)
 - Film budget ($M = 44.81$, range 0-200,000)
 - Statistical controls (same as previous study)

Study 1: Economic Attributes

- Results
 - Budget was positively related to box office success (by first weekend and gross)
 - But budget had no correlation with best picture honors and a negative correlation with critical acclaim (metacritic and movie guides)
 - This contrast could be partly attributed to how budget and success criteria differentially correlate with the four creative clusters, especially the dramatic.

Study 2: Screenplay Traits

- Given
 - that films can be differentiated into artistic and entrepreneurial products,
 - that this differentiation depends heavily on the distinctive role of the dramatic creative cluster, and
 - that the screenplay plays a major role in defining this particular creative cluster,
 - can the two film types be distinguished by the characteristics of their screenplays?

Study 2: Screenplay Traits

- Sample: 1,436 English-language, narrative films released between 1968 and 2002
- Measures
 - 4 economic indicators (budget, screens, first weekend, gross)
 - 5 movie award assessments (best picture and four creative clusters)
 - 2 composite critical evaluations (metacritic and movie guides)
 - 24 screenplay characteristics (adaptation, genre, MPAA ratings, runtime, writer-director, etc.)

Study 2: Screenplay Traits

- Results
 - The two types can be distinguished
 - For example, artistic cinematic products are more likely to be adaptations (especially from plays), to be in the drama genre, have an R MPAA rating, and be the output of writer directors (or “Auteurs”), but are less likely to be sequels to previous films.
 - Hence, film as art more likely represents personal creative expression in cinema – comparable to dramatic creativity in traditional theater.

Great Films versus Bad Films

- Because all of the previous samples looked at films that received at least one award nomination, so far we have been looking at what distinguishes great films from good films.
- But what distinguishes great films from really bad films?
- In particular ...

Great Films versus Bad Films

- Are negative assessments just the inverse of positive assessments?
- Are negative assessments just as influential as positive assessments?
- Are negative assessments just as cohesive as positive assessments?
- Do negative and positive assessments have the same cinematic correlates, but with opposite signs?

Great Films versus Bad Films

- But how is it possible to address these questions within the current methodology?
- For instance, fewer nominations and awards indicate less goodness but no more badness.
- Even the absence of nominations does not necessarily indicate location on the badness end of the supposed negative pole of the evaluative dimension.

Great Films versus Bad Films

- Solution: The annual “dishonors” bestowed upon bad films by the Golden Raspberries (“Razzies”), namely,
- the “awards” for worst picture, worst director, worst actor, worst actress, worst supporting actor, worst supporting actress, worst screenplay, and worst song.

Great Films versus Bad Films

- Sample: 877 English-language, narrative feature films released between 1980 and 2003, to wit,
- 445 Razzie nominees or awardees in the preceding eight negative categories, and
- 483 Oscar nominees or awardees in the corresponding eight positive categories,
- with 51 films satisfying both criteria!

Great Films versus Bad Films

- Measures
 - Critic evaluations (as in previous studies)
 - Film awards (both bad and good)
 - Financial and box office (production budget, season of release, number of screens, first weekend earnings, and gross earnings)
 - Film attributes (indicators regarding adaptations, writer-director, real-life origins, cinematic predecessors, film genre, runtime, and MPAA ratings)
- Results

Great Films versus Bad Films

- Are negative assessments just the inverse of positive assessments?
- Yes, Razzies and Oscars display correlations with critic evaluations that are quite similar:
- the picture, director, and screenplay categories tend to have the highest correlations, the song category the lowest correlations, with the acting categories falling in the middle.
- the only minor discrepancy is that the screenplay Oscar is more strongly correlated with critic evaluations than is the screenplay Razzie.

Great Films versus Bad Films

- Are negative assessments just as influential as positive assessments?
- Yes, the correlations with critic evaluations are about the same magnitude but just opposite sign, and
- Razzies and Oscars account for about the same amount of variance in critical acclaim when introduced into a regression equation.

Great Films versus Bad Films

- Are negative assessments just as cohesive as positive assessments?
- Yes, as can be demonstrated two ways:
- Internal consistency reliability coefficients
- Principle components analysis.
- The cohesion even greater if the song category deleted.

Great Films versus Bad Films

- Do negative and positive assessments have the same cinematic correlates, but with opposite signs?
- Yes, using separate Oscar/Razzie composites in the picture, director, acting, and screenplay categories,
- the two measures exhibit correlations about equal in magnitude but opposite in sign with numerous film attributes.
- In particular, ...

Great Films versus Bad Films

- Great films, besides receiving lots of stars in critic evaluations and earning Oscar nominations and awards in the dramatic categories, are more likely to be adaptations of prize-winning works (especially of plays, novels, or nonfiction), to have had the original author or the director involved in writing the screenplay, to be based on a true story (perhaps even a biopic), to be dramas, to have long runtimes, to be R rated, to be released during the Christmas season, and to do well in total gross earnings.
- In contrast, great films are less likely to be sequels or remakes, to be comedies or musicals, to have huge budgets, to be released in the summer months, to be rated PG-13, to open on numerous screens, or to do a big box office the first weekend.
- Reverse the direction of these positive and negative correlates, and the result is the attributes of the bad film;
- when it comes to cinematic assessments, bad is largely the opposite of good.

Conclusions

- Film awards and nominations – especially the Oscars – provide reliable and valid indicators of creative achievement.
- Various collaborative contributions form approximately orthogonal creative clusters that have distinct repercussions for cinematic success – the dramatic cluster having special significance.
- Artistic cinematic products can be distinguished from their entrepreneurial counterparts according to these clusters and to screenplay characteristics.
- Bad films can be considered the inverse of good films; the same criteria that distinguish great from good films distinguish masterpieces from turkeys or bombs.

Future Directions

- The Aesthetics of Screenplays: Are the same factors that account for the success of plays the same as those accounting for the success of screenplays?
- The Creativity of Writer-Directors (“Auteurs”): Are the same variables that explain artistic creativity the same as those explaining filmmaking creativity?