

Making Sense of Entertainment.

On the Interplay of Emotion and Cognition in Entertainment Experience

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Abstract

This essay explores the relationship of emotion and cognition in entertainment experience. Drawing on the reflective model of aesthetic experience (Cupchik, 1995) and the concept of appreciation (Oliver & Bartsch, 2010), we propose a multi-level view of affective processing that includes simple affect schemata as well as more elaborate forms of sociomoral reasoning that build on this basic layer of emotional meaning. To better understand how affective factors can stimulate or impede cognitive elaboration processes, we review research on motivated cognition that has dealt with the influence of arousal, valence, and personal relevance on cognitive depth. The role of affect in defensive information processing (i.e., the motivated neglect or denial of information) is also considered. Specifically, we discuss how research on motivated cognition can help explain thought-provoking entertainment experiences, and the potential of such experiences to stimulate self-reflection and personal growth.

Keywords: entertainment, affect, motivated cognition, appreciation, eudaimonia

For nearly two decades, the work of Gerald Cupchik and his associates (Cupchik, 1995; Cupchik & Gignac, 2007; Cupchik, Oatley, & Vorderer, 1998; Cupchik & Shereck, 1998) has dealt with a topic that entertainment researchers have only begun to fully appreciate and explore in recent years, namely the relationship of emotion and cognition in art and entertainment experience. It is commonplace assumption in emotion theory that emotion and cognition are inseparable (cf., Damasio, 1994; Lazarus, 1991; Scherer, 2001), however, in the field of entertainment research, relatively little is known still about the ways emotion and cognition intertwine in individuals' processing of movies, novels, games, TV shows, and other entertainment offerings.

The dominant focus of entertainment research on emotions is due, perhaps, to a widely held belief that audiences' emotional involvement with media content comes at the expense of cognitive depth and rational scrutiny. One of the most popular and radical expressions of this view is Postman's (1985) *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, where he argues that the growing prevalence of emotion-focused entertainment media, and their successive merger with the news media will lead to a decline in serious information and meaningful political debate. This concern is also echoed in research on *infotainment*, *politainment*, and *tabloidization* of the news (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995; Sparks & Tulloch, 2000). Other lines of research have dealt with less than rational learning and persuasion effects from emotionally engaging media content as well, including, for instance, research on *exemplification* (Aust & Zillmann, 1996; Zillmann & Brosius, 2000), *cultivation* (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 2002), and *narrative persuasion* (Appel & Richter, 2007; Bilandzic & Busselle, 2008; Wheeler, Green, & Brock, 1999). Collectively, these lines of research seem to suggest that emotional involvement with media content promotes a superficial and heuristic mode of information processing that makes the viewer susceptible to different kinds of cognitive fallacies and biases, and can lead to

irrational persuasion effects (cf., Appel & Richter, 2007; Wheeler et al., 1999; Zillmann & Brosius, 2000).

Cupchik's Reflective Model of Aesthetic Experience

The work of Cupchik (1995; this issue) recognizes that entertainment experience can be affect-oriented and intellectually superficial. This aspect of entertainment is covered by his *reactive model* of aesthetic experience. At the same time, however, Cupchik confronts this notion with a radically different view of emotion and cognition in aesthetic experience. His *reflective model* of aesthetic experience assumes that emotional involvement with an artwork can also have the opposite effect, that is, the experience of emotions can be associated with heightened levels of reflectiveness, insight, and personal meaning.

The reflective model holds that a deeper aesthetic engagement occurs when a person permits the work to resonate through his or her emotional life experiences. A search for coherence in the unfolding narrative, be it a short story, play, novel, or film, provides an occasion, not simply to digress into one's own life, but to critically embrace the episode and adopt a fresh perspective on life (Cupchik, this issue). In a series of qualitative studies on individuals' experience of artworks, Cupchik and coworkers found evidence that emotional viewing or reading experiences can stimulate personal memories and reflectiveness in a variety of genres. For example, the findings showed that readers can find personal meaning in short story excerpts (Cupchik et al., 1998), can relate scenes depicted by sculptures back to their own life experiences (Cupchik & Shereck, 1998), and can be inspired by multilayered images that evoke personal memories and stimulate reflection on personal growth (Cupchik & Gignac, 2007).

This reflective mode of aesthetic experience does not seem to be confined to art or "high cultural" products such as literature, sculptures, or paintings. Early research from a uses-and-gratifications perspective has revealed comparable gratification factors in film and

TV audiences. For example, Katz, Gurevitch, and Haas (1973) found that in addition to using media for purposes of entertainment and relaxation, individuals also reported using media as a means of experiencing beauty and raising morale. Likewise, Tesser, Millar, and Wu's (1988) research on movie gratifications identified a motivational factor "self-development" that was characterized by greater interest in viewing films to experience strong emotions and to understand how others think and feel. Recent research that has addressed the domain of more serious, poignant, and pensive media experiences specifically (Oliver & Bartsch, 2010; Oliver & Raney, 2008) has confirmed that such experiences form an important factor in entertainment audiences' viewing motivations and gratifications. This serious entertainment factor is labeled "appreciation" by Oliver and Bartsch (2010), and is described as "an experiential state that is characterized by the perception of deeper meaning, the feeling of being moved, and the motivation to elaborate on thoughts and feelings inspired by the experience" (ibid, p. 76). Like Cupchik's reflective model, the concept of appreciation assumes that under certain conditions, emotions can stimulate more profound reflection on and elaboration of media content.

Thus, although the reflective model of aesthetic experience is less frequently considered in entertainment theory, it is equally backed by a growing body of empirical evidence. Hence, the question arises how both assumptions can be true. How can emotions be associated with a heuristic and superficial mode of information processing, on the one hand, and stimulate more profound reflection and elaboration, on the other hand?

Multiple Levels of Affective Processing

According to Cupchik (this issue), superficial and more in-depth forms of affective processing are not mutually exclusive. To illustrate this point, he uses the metaphor of a layer cake: Affective processing usually starts at the top layer of simple perceptual schemata and appraisals, and then optionally proceeds to explore more complex and profound layers of

meaning. To distinguish superficial and more in-depth forms of affective processing, Cupchik discriminates between the role of “feelings” and “emotions” in aesthetic experience. Feelings are conceptualized in his model as fleeting states of pleasure, interest, and arousal that reflect the embodied processing of superficial meaning structures such as the matching of media content with perceptual schemata and stereotypes, the construction of mental models of the story world, and the appraisal of media content with regard to the viewer's needs and desires. Emotions, by contrast, are associated in his account with a more profoundly meaningful mode of processing that relates the media content to personal life experiences and creates a more holistic understanding of social situations and underlying verities of life.

This notion of multi-layered affective processing is in line with research on socioemotional development (Fischer, Shaver, & Carnochan, 1990; Mascolo & Fischer, 1998) indicating that complex moral concepts and self-images grow out of the stepwise integration and elaboration of more simple affect schemata. According to Fischer et al. (1990), basic emotion scripts and scripts of nice and mean social interaction form the building blocks of more complex sociomoral reasoning, including abstract concepts such as “honesty” and “responsibility” or the development of mature self-images that integrate both positive and negative aspects of the self. As these authors point out, basic affect schemata that are acquired at early stages of socioemotional development continue to function independently, but are progressively embedded in an architecture of more elaborate concepts and meaning structures that reflect their interrelatedness and moral implications.

Through this lens of multi-layered affective processing, then, it may be the wrong question to ask whether affective processing per se is elaborate or superficial, as it seems that it can be either depending on individuals' willingness and ability to engage in more substantive processing after superficial layers of affective meaning have been decoded. As

Cupchik suggests, the most gratifying kinds of art and entertainment experience seem to combine both levels of affective processing:

Masterpieces may be said to ply the waters of feelings and emotions, utilizing affective covariation and emotional elaboration to both engage audiences and awaken them to the verities of life. (Cupchik, this issue)

Hence, a more fruitful question for entertainment researchers to ask may be what motivates audiences, in terms of the layer cake metaphor, to either content themselves with enjoying the surface layer, or to explore and appreciate more profound layers of meaning that are hidden deep inside the affective cake.

The Role of Affect in Motivated Information Processing

In the field of persuasive communication, extensive research on motivated information processing has been conducted (e.g., Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Forgas, 1995; Lang & Yegiyian, 2008; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Wegener, Petty, & Smith, 1995) that may help elucidate this question about the motivational background of cognitive elaboration, and may inform future research on elaboration processes in the context of media entertainment. This literature is far too voluminous to be reviewed comprehensively in this essay. Therefore, our focus will be on a set of three factors that are directly related to the role of affect in motivated information processing, namely the influence of *personal relevance*, *valence*, and *arousal*. Further, we consider the role of affect in defensive processing, i.e., the motivated neglect or denial of information in the interest of goals such as mood-management or bolstering self-esteem.

Personal Relevance

Personal relevance is one of the key elaboration factors that has been studied, for instance, in the framework of the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Cacioppo & Petty, 1986; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Results from this line of research indicate that media users are

motivated to process messages more thoroughly when the content of the message is relevant to their personal goals, values, and interests. A remarkably parallel claim has been made by appraisal theories (e.g., Lazarus, 1991; Scherer, 2001) about the role of personal relevance in emotion elicitation. According to these theories, appraisal of events as relevant to personal goals and concerns is the key condition for emotion elicitation. Thus, apparently, the same relevance appraisals that evoke emotions seem to motivate the allocation of cognitive resources to the processing of information (cf., Lang & Yegiyan, 2008).

Despite the straightforwardness of this theoretical conclusion, a caveat is in place here concerning the fictional nature of much of entertainment media content. If the people and events portrayed are purely fictional and cannot, therefore, affect the viewers' real-life concerns, the question arises how fictional media content can be perceived to be personally relevant. Cupchik (this issue) suggests that evocation of personal memories may fill this theoretical gap and may account for the perceived relevance, emotional impact, and cognitively stimulating effects of fictional portrayals. Another complementary explanation is that a sense of personal relevance may arise in the context of perspective taking, identification, and parasocial interaction with media characters (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009; Igartua, 2009; Klimmt, Hartmann, & Schramm, 2006). If the viewer adopts the perspective of one or more of the characters and appraises the fictional events from the characters' perspective, then a sense of personal relevance may be vicariously experienced, thus providing a basis for emotional responses and cognitive elaboration. Results of Igartua (2009) indirectly support this assumption, indicating that film viewers' identification with the characters is associated with more intense affective reactions, and with greater cognitive elaboration of the film content.

Affective Valence

Research concerning the influence of affective valence on cognitive elaboration has typically supported the idea implied in the saying “sadder but wiser”, i.e. that positive moods are associated with a casual and heuristic style of processing, whereas negative moods are associated with a more careful and reflective style of processing (e.g., Fiedler & Bless, 2001; Forgas, 1995; Lang & Yegiyan, 2008). The theoretical background assumption of much of this research is that the valence of mood serves as information that guides the allocation of cognitive resources: A positive mood signals to the organism that things are going right, and that casual information processing is sufficient, whereas a negative mood signals that important concerns are at stake, and that careful processing is required to avoid erroneous actions and decisions (cf., Fiedler & Bless, 2001; Forgas, 1995).

This pattern of influence of affective valence on the depth of cognitive processing seems to fall in line with research on movie enjoyment and appreciation (Oliver & Bartsch, 2010) indicating that among movies from different genres, dramas were perceived to be most thought provoking, and comedies were rated least thought provoking. However, despite the intuitive appeal of the idea that dramas and other forms of serious entertainment can make us sadder but wiser, this notion needs to be treated with some caution. First, it is important to note that entertainment is not typically associated with thoroughly negative feelings. Rather, the experience of dramas seems to be characterized by a co-occurrence of positive and negative valence, either in the form of mixed affect (Oliver, Limparos, Tamul, & Woolley, 2009), or in the form of negative feelings that are accompanied with positive meta-emotions (Bartsch, Appel, & Storch, in press; Oliver, 1993). Second, as Nabi (1999) points out, discrete emotions such as anger, fear, or sadness may be associated with specific effects on motivated processing that go beyond the influence of positive or negative valence per se. For example, although the levels of negative valence experienced in response to dramas and horror movies are comparable, horror films are perceived to be less thought provoking (Bartsch, Oliver, &

Mangold, 2009). Thus, it seems that negative valence alone is insufficient to account for the thought provoking appeal of dramas.

Arousal

Arousal is a third affective factor that has been found to influence the depth of cognitive processing (Lang & Yegiyan, 2008; Keller & Block, 1995). For example, in a study on public service announcements, Lang and Yegiyan (2008) found that arousing messages with both positive and negative valence were processed more carefully than calm positive and negative messages respectively. Thus, at moderate levels, arousal seems to enhance cognitive elaboration. However, as Lang (2000) points out, the relationship between arousal and depth of processing may be reversed at high levels of arousal, specifically in the case of negative emotions. That is, at high levels of arousal, message scrutiny is diminished compared to moderate arousal (cf., Sanbonmatsu & Kardes, 1988).

This inverted U-shape relationship of arousal with cognitive elaboration is explained by Lang (2000) within a psychophysiology framework referring to the dual function of the aversive motivational system: At moderate levels, aversive arousal is assumed to motivate vigilance and careful information processing, whereas at high levels of arousal, emergency reactions such as the fight/flight reaction set in that redirect the focus away from time consuming scrutiny and prepare the organism for unhesitant action (cf., LeDoux, 2002). In terms of entertainment, the inverted U-shape relationship of arousal with cognitive elaboration may help explain why horror movies are rated among the least thought-provoking entertainment experiences (cf., Bartsch, Oliver, & Mangold, 2009), given that particularly high levels of arousal are typically experienced in response to this genre.

Affective Factors in Defensive Processing

Finally, in addition to motivated elaboration of media content, affective factors have also been found to be involved in defensive processing, that is, in the motivated neglect or

denial of information in the interest of goals such as mood management or the protection of a positive self-image (Das & Fennis, 2008; Raghunathan & Trope, 2002; Wegener et al., 1995). For instance, individuals seem to have a tendency to disregard or downplay information that threatens their self-image (Das & Fennis, 2008; Raghunathan & Trope, 2002). Further, the hedonic contingency view (Wegener et al., 1995) proposes that individuals in a good mood are motivated to preserve their good mood and are, therefore, more sensitive to the hedonic consequences of information processing compared to those who are in a negative mood and, thus, have little to lose in hedonistic terms. In line with this prediction, Wegener et al. (1995) found that individuals in a good mood were likely to process uplifting messages more carefully, and to process unpleasant messages less carefully, whereas, for individuals in a negative mood, depth of processing was less influenced by the assumed hedonic consequences of message elaboration.

However, as Das and Fennis (2008; cf., Raghunathan & Trope, 2002) point out, such hedonistic motivations may be moderated by self-relevance. If messages are relevant to the self, intensive processing of negative information may have short-term affective costs, but it can also benefit the self in the longer run, for instance, because it can promote the development of a more realistic and mature self-concept that integrates both positive and negative information about the self, or because such information can stimulate self-improvement and personal growth. Therefore, in the case of self-relevant information, a positive mood may have the opposite effect, that is, it may prompt individuals to let down their defenses by assuring them that they can “afford” the affective costs of processing negative self-relevant information. In line with this reasoning, research has shown that threatening health messages received more intensive processing when the message was self-relevant and the recipient was put in a good mood prior to message exposure (Das & Fennis, 2008; Raghunathan & Trope, 2002).

This line of research on defensive biases in information processing and how they can be overcome seems to offer a promising framework for entertainment scholars as well, specifically when studying more serious forms of entertainment experiences like those described by the reflective model of aesthetic experience (Cupchik, 1995), and the concept of appreciation (Oliver & Bartsch, 2010). For example, it may be speculated that the blends of positive and negative feelings that are typically associated with the experience of appreciation (Oliver et al., 2009) could reflect a form of entertainment experience where painful memories and insights are framed in an affectively positive and reassuring way that makes it easier for viewers to accept this information as part of their self-image and to use it as an incentive for self-improvement and personal growth.

Summary and Outlook

To summarize, research on motivated information processing can offer a great deal of insight to entertainment researchers concerning the role of affect in cognitive elaboration of media content. Despite the cursorness of the present overview, it seems safe to conclude that this role is far more complex than Postman's (1985) notion of affect-oriented and intellectually undemanding entertainment audiences. The interplay of affect and cognition may even be more complex than assumed in Cupchik's (1995) active/reactive model of aesthetic experience in which self-relevance, via emotional memories, is conceived to be the primary source of motivation to engage in elaborative processing of media content. Feeling qualities of affective valence and arousal that are assumed in his model to be linked with heuristic processing may actually be associated with more complex patterns of influence on cognitive elaboration. Further, in addition to state-like affective factors, more enduring personality traits such as *need for cognition* (Cacioppo & Petty, 1986), *need for affect* (Maio & Esses, 2001) or *eudaimonic motivations* (Oliver & Raney, 2008), that we do not have the

space to discuss here, may also contribute to individuals' motivation to engage in elaborative processing of emotional media experiences.

Though it is quite an ambitious task to integrate and extend this complex body of research on motivated cognition in the context of entertainment research, we think it is worth the effort. Affective factors including arousal, valence, and personal relevance as well as their interactions seem to be among the primary determinants of individuals' motivation to either content themselves with superficial, heuristic processing, or to engage in more extensive elaboration and reflection. We think entertainment research could profit from expanding its current focus on emotion per se to the interplay of emotion and cognition, so as to better understand how media entertainment can not only provide its audiences with a (sometimes much needed) brain holiday, but how it can also make people more cognizant and reflective of important information about the self and reality that they tend to neglect in everyday life.

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