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Not So Moral Moral Responses to Media Entertainment?

In his essay, Art Raney discusses the complex relationships between morality and emotions within the context of media entertainment. At its core, Raney's essay ponders the question to what extent exposure to media entertainment involves moral processes among users – like moral judgments and moral emotions – and consequently, how desirable these responses to media entertainment are. In this spirit, Raney connects to an old but still heated debate about whether media entertainment consumption resembles a good or bad activity, and whether it promotes a society's welfare or decline (e.g., see for example Postman, 1985). In general, the public discourse has been quite skeptical about media entertainment in the past. This seems to be true even for scholars working in the field. The standard notion seems to be that media entertainment is problematic, and arguments are exceptional that suggest that entertainment may also provide “beneficial” or “serious” effects like conceptual learning (e.g., in serious games, Michael & Chen, 2006), cathartic purification (Scheele & duBois, 2006), or the development of justice beliefs and justice norms (Schmitt & Maes, 2006).

Profound doubt seem to exist that the light-hearted pleasure that is typically obtained by entertaining media content is something desirable in itself. Light-hearted pleasure may not be serious, substantial, and meaningful enough to qualify for a “higher ethical good”. Raney, too, seems to be skeptical about simply pleasurable media offerings. In his essay, he favors media content that rather “leads us to contemplate our existence, to ruminate on the human condition”. In this context, he refers to Oliver's (2009, 2008) notion that users may not always enjoy, but may sometimes appreciate media content, if it makes them thinking about a deeper truth. According to this notion, users may appreciate media content even if it induces aversive states such as sadness or irritation, because it provides meaningful insights and leads to an important and satisfying learning experience. Although it is more common sense among lay people to link entertainment to light-hearted pleasure or enjoyment (Dehm, 1984), this view argues that users still feel entertained by media content even if it primarily evokes painful but relevant insights.

Accordingly, media entertainment could either resemble light-hearted pleasure or the appreciation of insight accompanied by mixed emotions. It seems that Raney is more suspicious about pleasure-based entertainment, as he presumes that it may be linked to detrimental effects. Following his essay, appreciation-based entertainment, in contrast,

promises to evoke “a change in the individual towards higher moral standards” (Scheele & duBois, 2006, p. 408). This suggests that bad (pleasure-based) entertainment can be distinguished from good (appreciation-based) entertainment.

The Seeming Morality of the Enjoyment of Dramatic Narratives

Raney considers appreciation-based entertainment to be more desirable, although he agrees that particularly pleasure-based entertainment involves a lot of moral activity among the users. This is especially true for the enjoyment of *dramatic narratives*¹. According to the empirically well confirmed Affective-disposition Theory of Drama (ADT, Zillmann & Cantor, 1976; Zillmann, 2000), users of dramatic media content engage in three different moral processes. First, users form a disposition towards the displayed characters based on their moral judgments. Usually, users consider antagonists to be bad, because they did something unjust to a protagonist. Second, out of a desire to see justice restored, viewers tend to feel empathetic with the good protagonist and hope for his or her best, whereas they feel counter-empathetic for the bad antagonists, and hope for their worst. Raney assumes that users’ hoping for a positive outcome is not purely instrumental. Rather, “viewers do not simply *want* certain outcomes to occur, but they think those hoped for outcomes *should* happen. Thus, the anticipatory emotions that we experience relative to the characters during a dramatic narrative are facilitated by a metaphysical hope for justice to reign, for good to overcome evil, for right to win out in the end”. Third, viewers enjoy if justice is restored (in the so-called justice sequence): they cheer about a good outcome for the good guys, which usually implies a negative outcome for the bad guys. Taken together, Raney reviews research in the context of the ADT that provides good evidence that the enjoyment of dramatic media content involves a substantial amount of moral activity among users.

Not so Moral Moral Processes

However, one of Raney’s central arguments is that these moral processes are actually not so moral as they may appear at first glance. The moral processes outlined in the ADT may not suffice to consider the light-hearted pleasure derived from dramatic media content like Hollywood movies an ethically desirable activity. Raney undermines his claim with two arguments. First, Raney conjectures that the moral emotions experienced by users of dramatic media content may often not arise from an altruistic stance. Rather, users may be worried about a protagonists’ fate, because they are worried about their own entertainment experience. In other words: The seemingly moral emotions of users may only be the result of a profound self-interest that roots in their need to feel entertained.

In this case, the moral substance of users' empathetic concerns about the welfare of a protagonist would indeed be doubtful. According to Haidt (2003), for example, truly moral emotions have to be "linked to the interests or welfare of society as a whole or at least of persons other than the judge or agent" (p. 853). Emotions are the more moral the less they "directly relate to the self" (p. 853). Haidt explicitly does not consider emotions to be moral emotions, if they arise, because a user "identif[ies] temporarily with the other (as when one fears for the protagonist in a movie)" (p. 853) and thus maintains a strong self-interest. Accordingly, users' empathetic concern about the protagonist of a narrative may indeed be less moral than it appears at first glance, if it primarily results from a selfish interest in the own entertainment experience.

However, two arguments can be made to counter this view. One counter-argument relates to a certain inconsistency in Raney's own argumentation. Earlier in his text, Raney explicitly presumes that users are not worried about a protagonist's fate because of sheer self-interest, but because of a "metaphysical hope for justice to reign". If this is true, however, users' concerns about a protagonist would be moral, because they reflected an interest in the principles of justice rather than a selfish interest in the own entertainment experience. A second counter-argument refers to Haidt's (2003) notion that emotions resulting from an identification with a protagonist may not be called moral, because by identifying with a protagonist users eventually care about their own fate rather than somebody else's fate. Haidt, however, seems to relate to an out-dated notion of identification that assumes that users would completely take over the perspective of a protagonist, and would indeed feel like being the protagonist. Such a notion of identification, however, has received little support in the past. According to Zillmann (2000), users of drama do not identify with protagonists, but are empathetic with protagonists. Empathy, in turn, is a truly moral emotion, because it is inherently bound to the fate of another person rather than one's own fate.

Taken together, the moral value of users' concern about a protagonist is ambiguous. The moral value of users' concern seems to eventually depend on how users cognitively represent the narrative and the exposure situation. If they are only afraid about a protagonist's fate, because they fear for their own entertainment experience, their concerns may be barely called moral. But to the extent users indeed altruistically fear about the fate of the protagonist instead of their own fate, and to the extent that users fear about violations of the principle of justice, their emotional responses seem to hold moral value.

Raney poses a second argument, why the moral processes outlined by the ADT may be not so moral as they appear on first glance. His second argument is linked to users'

emotional responses to the justice sequence of drama. He assumes that users may not always enjoy the justice sequence, because they enjoy the restoration of universal moral laws, but because they fall prey to more immoral tendencies. For example, users, in their automatic drive towards retributive justice, may call for a punishment of the villain that is too severe to be judged as morally acceptable upon more reflective consideration. As Zillmann (2006, p. 233) states: „Moral sanction is conceived of as a readiness to accept, in moral terms, observed outcomes. It may well happen that, on occasion, specific harm, such as torture and death, is deliberately wished upon a brutal villain.“ Although revenge and even severe forms such as torture or death of a villain may satisfy users’ intuitional feelings of justice, they seem to violate other moral principles bound to the welfare of humankind. For example, from the view of an Aristotelian virtue ethical theory, a person that is indulging revenge cultivates a wrong character, reinforces virtueless traits, and distances him/herself from the ultimate goal of eudaimonia. To rejoice in the punishment of a villain may be therefore considered immoral. Particularly, in line with Haidt’s discussion of self-interest (2003), if users accept even severe forms of punishment of a villain for the sake of enjoyment. As Raney concludes: “In these situations, we as media viewers greatly extend our latitudes of moral sanction - in fact, [...] we morally disengage [...] - for the sake of enjoyment.”

Next to Raney’s two arguments, one could add another argument why the moral activity of users of dramatic narratives may be equivocal. As Raney states, viewers of dramatic content often do not judge characters in a reasoned manner, but rely on automatic and intuitional judgments (Haidt, 2001). According to Haidt’s social-intuitionist model of moral judgment (2001; Haidt & Graham, 2007; see Tamborini, this volume), a person’s intuitional moral judgments are profoundly shaped by the socialization of the moral community this person grew up in. Accordingly, a member of a culture is likely to reflect the moral consensus of the culture. Persons tend to automatically judge things as moral that are valued by the culture surrounding them, and they tend to automatically judge things as immoral that are defied by their culture. Principles of a culture, however, provide not necessarily the best reason for moral judgments, because the culture itself may follow immoral principles (e.g., the moral principles of the Third Reich), if judged from a broader or supra-cultural perspective. Accordingly, intuitional moral judgments are not necessarily desirable, if judged in a more elaborate and reflective ethical manner (e.g., by a philosopher). People of a certain subculture may feel disgusted by the skin color of another person, for example, because the skin color automatically violates their moral principle of purity (Haidt & Graham, 2007). They may therefore tend to develop a negative affective disposition

towards the other person. Although this process could be described as a moral mechanism, many people, if they reflect upon it, will probably not consider it a desirable mechanism.

Similar “not so moral” intuitional moral judgments may accompany the exposure to many dramatic narratives offered by the media. One example are Hollywood movies, where the bad guys sometimes seem to be bad, simply because they violate moral principles of the US-culture: they have the “wrong” ethnic background (Russian, North-Korean, German,...) and they do not adhere to the principles of purity of the US culture (i.e., they have filthy hair, dirty clothes, etc.). Users’ intuitional moral reactions towards these media characters may not necessarily be desirable, because they do not necessarily adhere to moral principles that foster the welfare of *all* human beings.

In sum, it can be argued that pleasure-seeking users of dramatic media content engage in three different moral processes that have been outlined in the ADT, i.e., moral judgments of characters, a concern for the fate of the protagonist, and appraisals of justice restoration. To a large extent, these moral processes may be rather automatic than reflective. Pleasure-seeking users may draw automatic moral judgments, for example, and experience intuitional moral emotions rather than reflectively scrutinizing the moral status of characters. Raney doubts the moral value of these moral processes and his doubts seem to be strongly related to assumption that most processes are rather automatic. The idea seems to be that, upon more reflective consideration, the outcomes of automatic moral processes may not always be desirable. Accordingly, Raney concludes: “Enjoyment is desired and the feelings of pleasure can be experience cheaply; partiality removes the need for moral scrutiny and contemplation. With enjoyment the intended destination, viewers know the shortest path: It is through the phylogenetically ancient affect system, and it is through the least moral of the moral emotions.” Raney’s doubts seem justified to the extent that users’ intuitively form dispositions on the basis of shady moral principles that do not seem to promote the welfare of humankind, and to the degree they readily accept even severe forms of retributive justice. However, the moral value of users’ empathetic concern about the fate of a protagonist seems less questionable – as long as it does not simply result from a selfish interest in a good entertainment experience.

Are Truly Moral Emotions Still Entertaining?

In his essay, Raney raises the question if good forms of media entertainment exist, which should be promoted in society. In this context, he suggests media content that elicits emotions that are both truly moral and entertaining. But are truly moral emotions entertaining? Users’ moral responses to drama would probably be indeed less suspicious for

many people, if they would only include “(burdensome) moral feelings such as grief, desperation, guilt, regret, etc., [...], which make possible the further development of the self” (Scheele & DuBois, 2006, p. 418). Among the various moral emotions identified by Haidt (2003), guilt, shame, and embarrassment, contempt, anger and disgust also reflect rather burdensome emotions. However, such burdensome moral emotions may raise self-consciousness in users and may urge them to reflect upon themselves. To experience burdensome emotions and a raised self-consciousness is probably not typical for the mood-optimizing entertainment seeker that primarily seeks drama to escape from a noxious reality (Zillmann, 2000; Bosshart & Macconi, 1998). Such responses seem to oppose light-hearted pleasure-based entertainment.

The idea that truly moral responses may be entertaining would require a very broad understanding of the concept; one that acknowledges that people may not only feel entertained if a media stimulus brings them pleasure and enjoyment, but also if it offers alternative rewards like insights into a deeper truth (Oliver, 2009)². For example, users may feel entertained, because they learned something relevant about themselves or their environment (Vorderer & Hartmann, 2009). And even if this learning experience was painful, users may still appreciate what they learnt. Truly moral emotions may also lead to an appreciated learning experience, even if they are not enjoyable in themselves (Scheele & DuBois, 2006). In this respect, media content may promote truly moral emotions that establish an entertaining experience. It should be noted, however, that the idea of appreciation-based entertainment implies a profound departure from the original scientific understanding of the term that focused on pleasure and enjoyment (Vorderer, 2001; Bosshart & Macconi, 1998), as well as from common-sense interpretations of “entertainment” (Dehm, 1984).

In sum, it appears that truly moral emotions do not fit well to light-hearted pleasure-based entertainment. Truly moral emotions rather seem to underlie a different entertainment-experience; one that users may appreciate, but that they do not simply enjoy (Oliver, 2009). If truly moral emotions are pivotal in separating good from bad media entertainment, it seems that pleasure-based entertainment is indeed rather “bad” and appreciation-based entertainment is rather “good”.

Entertainment Is Good, Because It Is Adaptive

But is pleasure-based entertainment, which probably represents the typical way of media entertainment, indeed simply a bad and undesirable activity? I think it is not. To undermine this statement I like to propose an alternative view on media entertainment that

may help to integrate appreciation-based and pleasure-based enjoyment; and maybe such a view also rebuts the need to distinguish “good” and “bad” media entertainment. My basic suggestion is that pleasure functions as a “marker” for something people seek from the media (see “utility”, Kahneman, Wakker & Sarin, 1997). As outlined in my recreation/challenge model of media entertainment (Hartmann, 2006a, b; Vorderer & Hartmann, 2009), I assume that this “something” is, to a vast extent, recreation and comfort, and to a smaller degree challenges or adventure. Recreation and challenges can both provide pleasure, but challenges are risky and may be usually accompanied by noxious states, and even suffering and pain. I suggest that people feel entertained by the media if they experience the pleasure of recreation and of mastered challenges. The concept of appreciation only seems important, because some challenges may provide noxious learning experiences that users still consider relevant.

Many people’s lives are dominated by exhausting activities, like work. Leisure time, in contrast, offers opportunities to recreate. People seek media entertainment in their leisure time. It seems plausible that they enter leisure time often in a quite exhausted or ego-depleted state. In exhausted conditions, people’s ability to exploit their own cognitive potential is diminished (Baumeister, Sparks, Stillmann & Vohs, 2008; Schmeichel, Baumeister & Vohs, 2003); they pass to their more impulsive and maybe even archaic drives, which likely makes them more susceptible to seek for light-hearted pleasure. I assume that media entertainment may play an important role in recreating exhausted or depleted resources (Tice, Baumeister, Shmueli & Muraven, 2007; Reinecke, 2009). At least, entertaining content often does not seem to further drain already exhausted resources. It seems plausible that people, particularly if they are exhausted and if they cannot bear much more risks, tend to enjoy familiar media content, including media persons they know very well, and humour they can easily comprehend (cf., Schmeichel et al., 2003). And this enjoyment would not be part of a recreational mechanism, if it would not strongly root on people’s effortless automatic and maybe even archaic processes (like intuitional moral judgements). Taken together, I think that media entertainment allows users to recreate exhausted resources, which is an adaptive and in this sense desirable function, although the recreation process may involve automatic, archaic and less desirable moral processes.

At the same time, most entertaining media content usually challenges the user to a certain extent. Users may be challenged by novel media content they need to comprehend, for example, or by aversive emotions like suspense or fear which they need to master, by irritating or even self-threatening information they need to accept, by vicarious tasks that their hero needs to accomplish (for them), and by tasks in interactive media environments they

need to accomplish themselves. As long as users manage to meet these challenges, they will be rewarded with pleasurable learning experiences that may allow them to appreciate their previous travels through the uncomfortable “danger zone” (Apter, 1992).

Challenges usually require self-regulation and some cognitive effort to be mastered. It therefore seems reasonable that users’ existing resources determine how much challenge they seek and appreciate, and if they feel seduced or repelled by a challenge posed by a medium. Exhausted users may not feel inclined to meet the challenge of comprehending modern art, for example, of listening to complex classical music, of suffering fear in a horror movie, or of receiving painful (but true) insights about themselves (Gaillot, Schmeichel & Baumeister, 2006). They may be more likely to avoid these and similar challenges and to seek light-hearted pleasure in well-controlled areas, such as feel-good movies, highly standardized narratives, definitely manageable video games, or long-lasting, barely thrilling sport contests that always offer the comfortable opportunity to blame the team in case of a defeat. In sum, I like to argue that media entertainment usually provides a lot of light-hearted, comforting pleasure that allows people to recreate as well as some challenges here and there, that require self-regulation and usually imply some suffering on the side of the user, but that can be appreciated if mastered.

In this sense, the distinction between seemingly “bad” pleasure-based and “good” appreciation-based entertainment may be artificial. Even a highly recognized movie like *Schindler’s List* may not entertain a user, if it would not provide some simple pleasures (e.g., the recreational pleasure of just sitting on a sofa or movie chair; or the aesthetical appeal of the protagonist). And even seemingly pleasure-bound cartoon movies like *Ice Age* may provide some inconvenient challenges, like suspenseful uncertainty, and a rehearsal of the deeper truth that friendship is of ultimate importance in life.

I like to stress my argument that both mechanisms, recreation on the one hand and learning or the mastery of challenges on the other, may be adaptive, and therefore – in an ethical sense – desirable, because they allow the individual to function within his/her social environment. Pleasurable recreation allows exhausted people to turn back into “human-beings”, i.e., into persons capable of making use of all means of human functioning (Baumeister, 2008). And certainly, every mastered challenge implies a learning experience that helps an individual to adjust to a given environment in the long-run (Deci & Ryan, 2000). In this view, it may be good if people seek media entertainment in their leisure time, because this may help them to recover – and to seek some challenges within the limits of their

depleted resources. Even if this implies that users, by doing so, engage in not so moral moral processes.

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Footnotes

¹ The role of moral activity in pleasurable exposure to non-narrative media content is less clear, e.g., in the enjoyment of simple video games like Tetris, TV game shows, or art paintings. Accordingly, the present discussion focuses on narrative entertainment content.

² This argument presumes that most emotions that are truly moral are also burdensome emotions that oppose light-hearted pleasure. An exception to this assumption needs to be made. As it has been argued before, empathic concern (or “compassion”, Haidt, 2003) is a truly moral response that may also underlie pleasure-based entertainment.