

Does emotion matter in film anymore?

An essay exploring modern day cinema and its relationship with emotion

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In this essay I will explore how certain writers and directors create real and believable human connection within films that, at face value, are solely genre driven. I want to explore this aspect of filmmaking as I have always enjoyed films that are based on a genre driven concept, but still manage to have the heart and soul of the film be its characters and their connections with each other (E.g., Interstellar within the Science fiction genre). More specifically, I want to explore how films with such large ideas and concepts, still manage to take the time to successfully build up characters and their relationships with each other and themselves. I want to learn how to ground a story that, at surface level, is driven by this massive and grandiose idea, when the story is really driven by human emotion and connection. During the duration of this essay, I am hoping to discover my own style of writing in which I am able to create these large landscapes and ideas, only to then zoom in on a few individuals within this landscape and focus on them and how they evolve together within these ideas and concepts. I also want to reflect on my old work and see if/how my findings within this essay would affect how I created stories in the past.

One of the first things I think of when speaking on the topic of emotion within film and storytelling, is relatability and how to effectively create characters and situations that the audience can relate to and empathise with. Director spike lee touches on this point when in an interview with masterclass, he details a good way to develop strong characters is to ^[11]“write two characters who are at odds and yet both somehow right” - (masterclass, 2021) he later goes on to say ^[11]“for me, that makes it dramatic: when both people have beliefs, and they’re right, and they come head to head”. This shows just one way to create relatable and empathetical characters. In its simplest terms, if you create a character with strong beliefs, then somebody in that audience will relate to them. The goal is to create a character with a certain strong belief that most of the audience will be able to relate and therefore root for the character.

When studying some of my favourite films and how they build characters who us as the audience can relate to, I came upon the realisation that the relatability is never found within the specific situations these characters find themselves in, but more so the core of the story. For example, nobody can relate to the situation of Cooper, the main protagonist in Christopher Nolan’s Interstellar ^[1] (Interstellar, 2014), because his situation is that he is leaving earth to travel through a wormhole in order to find a new and habitable planet for humanity to migrate to. However, when you take away the specifics of the situation, and lay out the bare bones of the story, it becomes a tale of a man having to leaving his family for work related purposes, this is a situation that many people could relate to, whether it be such a simple thing of leaving home to go work for the day or having to move away from your family. What Interstellar does, is take the premise of “leaving home

for work” and add unimaginable stakes that make this film the science fiction epic that it is. But the basic plot idea never changes. Whilst we as an audience may be whisked away by the stunning visuals of blackholes and waves as tall as mountains, the writers take the time to remind us that these death-defying space missions have a purpose. Scenes such as the one where we see Cooper go through 23 years of messages from his family ^[2] ([Messages span 23 years - Interstellar, 2014](#)) remind us that these characters have loved ones and families, and the film asks the audience the question of “how would someone react to losing 23 years of life and memories in an instant?”. Nolan then gives his interpretation of how one would react, by having the character of Cooper begin with a smile, but that smile slowly turns into pain and anguish of seeing his life at home fly by without a moment's notice. Studying a scene like this has made me realise that the best way to write a character's emotional reaction to a situation, is to simply ask myself “How would I react to this?”. Nolans approach to Interstellars emotional aspect was that “the further out of the universe you went, the more focus came down to who we are as people and what are the connection between us” ^[10] ([Collider, 2014](#)). This further proves the point of relatability because what Nolan himself is saying is, as much as Interstellar is this universe-spanning Sci-Fi film, the focus was always the characters and the human connection. From examining this mindset that Nolan had whilst working on Interstellar, it gives me a whole new route to look down when writing and telling a story. Keeping Nolans philosophy in mind when writing should hopefully keep my stories rooted in humanity, even if the story itself is taking place on a different planet than earth.

When it comes to effectively communicating emotion within the media of film, there are a few emotions which will be easier to communicate than others, with the most basic spectrum of emotions spanning from happiness to sadness. However, effectively conveying even the most basic emotion can only be achieved through a combination of writing believable dialogue that a real human would say (unless you're writing with the intention of hyperbole) and Actors who can effectively perform the words written in the script. We again find ourselves traversing the realm of relatability, as we need truly human dialogue mixed with an actor capable of giving a truly human performance. The aim of a truly human performance is to reach a level where the audience could think to themselves “I could see myself reacting like this”. A seasoned actor such as Will Smith has mastered the art of giving truly human performances, with a sad rage being where he excels the most within his profession. A perfect example of when great writing merged with great acting to create one of the most memorable scenes in television history, was in the hit show “The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air” where we see Will Smith's character (Named Will Smith), react to the news that his father is leaving without him after promising to take Will on the road with him ^[3]([Fresh Prince of Bel-Air - Will's Father leaves, 2015](#)). From an acting perspective, we see Will Smith slowly break down as he transitions between acting unaffected, then acting angry, and then finally breaking as he cries into the arms of the only true father figure in his life, Uncle Phill. Smith seamlessly transitions through these stages and what is even more impressive is that this was seemingly done in one take. From a writing perspective, Wills character bullet points the success he's had in life despite the absence of his father, and then goes on to point out the further success's he will continue to gain in life, once again, despite his father choosing to continue his absence from Wills life. Will even goes so far to say that his lack of relationship with his biological father, will be a reason for him to love his future children more than ever, and that his father will never have anything to teach him about raising and loving one's children. This is once again a relatable moment, absentee fathers are common across the world, meaning that many people will watch this scene and relate to and believe Will Smith's acting and reaction to his father leaving once again. This scene is a perfect example on how to write the basic emotions of anger and sadness effectively, however, it also proves that for the full effect of the writing to be achieved, the dialogue and actions of the character need to be performed by an actor/actors who's skill level matches that of the writing. Proving that with the right casting, and good understanding of the human psyche, even the most basic emotion can be communicated with significant effect within a scene. With Will Smith

saying in an interview that, Uncle Phill actor James Avery “was relentlessly on me to elevate” ^[4]([Will Smith recalls iconic “how come he don’t want me” scene + Being pushed by James Avery, 2018](#)). With this in mind, in my own practice, it will be my job as a writer/director to cast actors for my own films that I can effectively communicate the kind of performance I would like from them, and to then build on that with their help, with the end goal of having my actors achieving the most emotion and though provoking performances possible.

In modern day film, whilst we are still receiving ground-breaking, genre bending, beautiful works of art within the medium, it is no secret that modern day Hollywood is dictated by one aspect, money. With 4 of the top 5 ^[5][highest grossing films of all time](#) ([Top Lifetime Grosses - Box Office Mojo, 2022](#)) being superhero/science fiction films, it would be appropriate to ask the question: Does emotion make money anymore? And whilst at its surface, the answer could easily be no, with the explanation being that people solely watch these superhero films for the flashy costumes, the utopian locations, and most importantly, the CGI heavy action scenes. Within these films, most of the actors' faces are covered by Computer Generated masks, helmets etc. And whilst within the comics, these head pieces are what make characters so recognizable and iconic, the covering of the actors' faces can leave some performances feeling less than what the actor is capable of. A perfect example for the opposite of this is Andrew Garfield's performance in ^[6][“The Amazing Spiderman 1&2”](#) ([The Amazing Spider-Man \(2012\) - IMDb, 2022](#)) In both these films, we see Andrew exude emotion even whilst in costume. In this clip: ^[7][\(Andrew Garfield - Best Spider-Man moments, 2015\)](#), we see Andrew emote so much character solely through body language and voice acting that without even seeing his face in these scenes, we get a feel for how charismatic and quick-witted the character of Spider-Man is. Unfortunately, this type of body performance can't be credited to all Superhero films. With the focus of modern Hollywood blockbusters being the cheesy comedy and action sequences, it can easily be perceived that these films no longer focus on emotion, or at the very least they only focus on making the audience laugh. However, the most successful superhero endeavour within the film industry is quite clearly the Marvel Cinematic Universe, and their recipe for success was building up to this one massive event by using multiple films to create its story. In the case of ^[8][Avengers: Endgame](#) ([Avengers: Endgame \(2019\) - IMDb, 2022](#)), it took a prior 21 films, spanning across 11 years to reach the epic climax of what fans call “The Infinity Saga”. During this time, the audience has built an emotional connection with the characters in these films. Due to this decade lasting emotional connection, the audience would be flooding screenings of Avengers: Endgame, with tears as they watch Rober Downey Jr's Iron man, the character who started this whole cinematic universe, make the sacrifice play and eventually die. Was the colossal success of Avengers: Endgame solely due to its action and cheesy jokes? Most would say no, and that its success was due it being a satisfying and emotional conclusion to the biggest setup in film history. It was a success because of how it made the audience feel, whether that be the death of Iron Man, whether that be the sheer childlike joy when the heroes arrived at the final battle in the famous portal scene. At the surface it seems as if superhero films achieve their success via a copy and paste formula where every film has the same structure, the same jokes, just different characters. And whilst yes that can be the case at times, when you look at the most successful films in the superhero genre, it is clear that the success of these films is due to the emotional connection the audience has to the characters, whether that be because of the films themselves or because they've been a fan of the comics. So, to answer the question: Does emotion make money anymore? Yes, it does. Emotion and the audience's emotional connection to the characters or actors on screen are the reason why people go to the cinema. Even if it is to watch the most basic comedy/action film, the audience is at least watching so they can laugh and have a good time.

In conclusion, it would be fair to say that, via the research done in the essay, that the answer to the question: Does Emotion Matter in Film Anymore? Is yes. Emotion is and will always be the

driving force in the film industry, no matter what film you set out on making, a romance, a tragedy, a comedy/action film, emotion will always be the reason why audiences sit down in theatres and watch these films. People watch films to cry, to laugh, to be in shock. And the truly great filmmakers know this and feed off this. In the quotes shown throughout this essay, Directors such as Christopher Nolan and Spike Lee show that they look at stories with the characters and relationships between these characters at the forefront of their minds. Seeing these filmmakers focus on the human connection more than anything else is what will drive me to try and take their perspectives and build my own off the base that they have created. After researching for this essay, I have learned that no matter how cosmic or Inhuman my stories may get, that the singularity in this proverbial black hole should be humanity, human characters should always be at the centre of the story if I want to write stories that audiences can relate to.

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