

Columns: Yearnings'

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Recall the last time you cried in a theater. You probably left thinking, "I enjoyed that." You most likely bought your ticket knowing there was a chance you would cry. So why did you willingly experience something that you knew would make you feel sad? What is the cognitive appeal of tragedy?

The first and most famous response to this question comes from Aristotle, who believed in the somehow still oft-accepted idea of catharsis. A character plays acts in the amphitheater that he's sad, so you feel sad, and since you've released those emotions you won't be sad when you head home to your clay hovel. The idea of catharsis is really like bloodletting – the ancient medical technique for ridding yourself of illness by bleeding it out. We've since learned that bloodletting doesn't really work, and in the case of catharsis science has actually confirmed that, if anything, the more you experience simulated fear and pity (the emotions Aristotle says we purge ourselves of when we watch tragedy), the more they will probably compound and intensify, not magically go away: Hebbian learning theory states emotional pathways grow in intensity the more you use them; "Mean World" syndrome states the more violence you see on TV the more you'll fear the worst of your neighbor; and confirmation bias tells us that you'll continue to be paranoid about the Illuminati despite mounting evidence that you smoke too much weed.

After Aristotle, the Romans recast Greek tragedy as proto-public service announcements. For them, the appeal of tragedy wasn't so much about emotional health as it was about socially conditioning a unified empire. Shakespeare brought tragedy back with a more humanistic bent: tragedy became not so much about telling tales of caution as about poetic reflections of the human experience. Nietzsche, in the late 19th century, reframed the question of tragedy to center on the tension between form and feeling, the logical and the sublime, or the Apolline and the Dionysiac. He liked tragedy for purely aesthetic reasons, and warns in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) that imbuing tragedy with the faintest traces of meaning (and therefore optimism) was a "death leap" into the saccharine, the kitschy, the bourgeois. "Only as an aesthetic phenomenon is existence and the world justified." In essence, Nietzsche didn't care about the social learning gleaned from tragedy that had been celebrated before him; he just had a taste for the raw and the chaotic (and who can blame him?).

Freud wrangled the public discussion surrounding the psychology of stories and tragedy back to catharsis with *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899). In the same way that dreams of the individual were the subconscious mind expressing and expurgating its buried hopes and fears, so too were movies a collective dream that bubbled to the surface of the collective consciousness and projected back at us the iniquities, fears, and lost virtues of modern society. Or so Freud would say. The appeal of tragedy for the better part of the 20th century, at least to authorities, was its apparent ability to purge negative emotion from the public. Jack Valenti, the head of the MPAA from 1966-2004, gave an address to the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence in which he stated, "I am personally convinced that there is genuine validity in the belief that disturbing emotions may be purged through the vicarious experience of aggressive acts on screen."¹ Violent tragedy was a utilitarian pressure valve for pent up aggression. It was release, a regulating force. But this merely framed tragedy's appeal, and specifically violent tragedy, in functional terms. It hardly addressed the cognitive appeal of tragedy at the individual level.

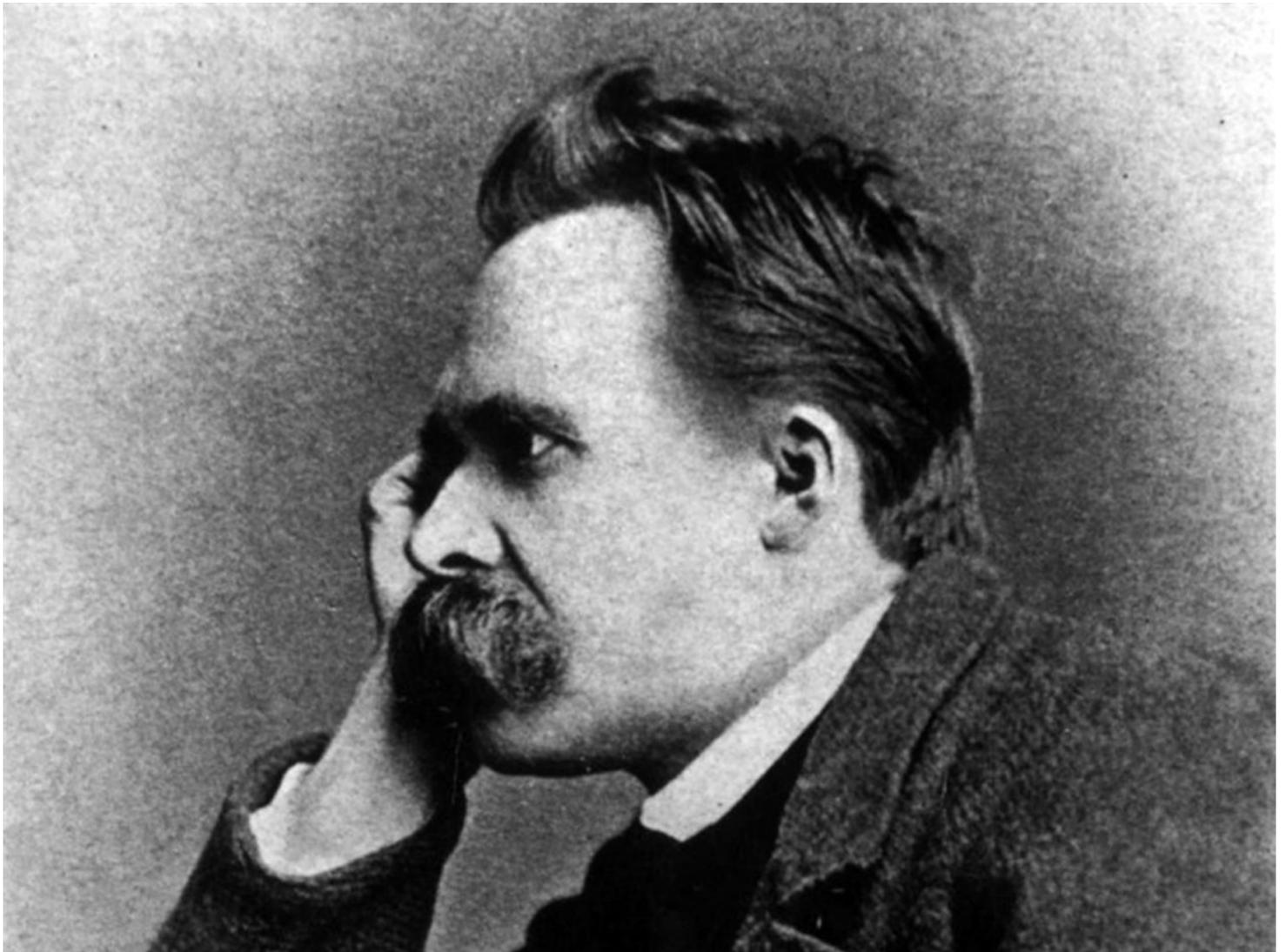
While Nietzsche and the fashionably reticent youth won't admit it, we enjoy watching people go through tough times in movies not because we're disaffected and wanton, but simply because of the feel-good hormone that's released in the blood while we do it. This feel-good hormone's name? Oxytocin. It's been nicknamed variously the "love hormone," the "hug drug," and the "womb broom." Actually, I made that last one up, but it is responsible for inducing labor in pregnant women.

"Oxytocin causes three psychological effects: it increases empathy, reduces arousal by relaxing us, and makes engaging in social experiences rewarding." Said Dr. Paul J. Zak, the neuroscientist who co-discovered oxytocin's role in facilitating trust and bonding between humans,.

“Wanting to experience tragedy sounds bad, but it’s part of our reality and our social nature,” he tells me. To him, the pleasure of tragedy is simple. “Our brains are arranged in a way that lets us share the experience of a character in a story. When we watch a narrative with a dramatic arc, we synthesize cortisol and oxytocin.” Through the mediating effects of cortisol and then oxytocin release, we experience stress and then a relaxation and closeness, not only with the characters we’re watching, but with those around us as well.

But the reason we enjoy watching or reading tragedy couldn’t be so simple. Is the appeal of tragedy really just that we feel good when feeling for others? Nietzsche managed to write an entire book about the psychology of tragedy without once mentioning empathy.

In response to Dr. Zak I mention a study, originally conducted at the New School in New York City in 2013, which concluded that those who read literary fiction are more empathic. The study made tons of headlines that extolled the prosocial virtues of reading, but it couldn’t be replicated by researchers at the University of Pennsylvania, Pace University, Boston College, or the University of Oklahoma. Reading as empathy builder was busted. “It probably has something to do with the methodology,” Dr. Zak tells me. The study used the ‘Reading the Mind in the Eyes Test,’ in which subjects try to describe the emotional state of a pair of eyes—a much weaker indicator of empathy than, say, measuring oxytocin levels in the blood in real-time, like Dr. Zak’s studies did. “But the basic premise is still accurate,” he adds. “People learn about the world and other people through stories, and that leads them to being more empathic.”



Before Aristotle, Homer told us that the tragedies he wrote were comical to the gods. And although most people’s

notion of the divine has shifted away from toga-wearing anthropomorphs atop a mountain, something about this framing of the relationship between tragedy and comedy still rings true. People do laugh at tragedy sometimes, so is it possible there is more going on than oxytocin release?

Dr. Peter McGraw knows a lot about laughing out of turn. Not that he does it himself, but because he's researched it. Nine years ago, Dr. McGraw came up with a theory of humor called Benign Violation Theory (BVT) with two colleagues. The theory states that all humor arises when one interprets a scenario as both a violation and as benign at the same time. A tragic event can become a source of humor when distanced by sufficient space and/or time, but the degree of separation required for a violation to become benign largely depends on the individual. This is why I can laugh at something and you find it offensive: it is a more distant violation for me than it is for you.

I called Dr. McGraw because I wanted to ask him if he thought the appeal of tragedy could be discovered in instances like the one that occurred in a screening of *Schindler's List*. In 1994 a group of teenagers on a field trip were caught laughing in the theater, seriously disturbing other audience members. Perhaps the appeal of tragedy exists on a spectrum, from titillating to heart-warming, laughable to... cry-able, and that the distinguishing lines exist in different places on that spectrum for everyone. "Context has a profound effect on our emotions... For these kids, the tragedy was so far removed from them that they began to laugh." Dr. McGraw suggested. The distancing effects of time, circumstance, and the movie itself made one of the biggest tragedies in history somehow benign to these teenagers. "There are certainly people out there who find pleasure in the harm of others, and that's awful, but I don't think that's the case here."

Watching tragedy is a lot like watching the benign violations of comedy. Maybe this is why younger people like to watch tragedy more than older people. For younger people, tragedy is more benign, something that seems so far off that they're only getting the kick of experiencing narrative, and none of the associative memory of past trauma – they're hijacking tragedy for pleasure. For older people, though, tragedy often hits too close to home.

Indeed, the degree to which we are influenced by our visual experiences is evidenced by the phenomenon of virtual reality being used as exposure therapy for those with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The idea is if you subject PTSD victims to a triggering event in VR while walking them through calming exercises, they eventually rid themselves of overreaction and constant fear of the triggering event.

Maybe the appeal of tragedy is all about exposing oneself to things we are anxious about – death, losing a loved one, becoming lost to addiction, losing a battle with a psychological illness – so that we can later regulate our emotions when the real tragedy hits. Maybe we undergo emotional calibration when we watch or read a tragedy: for some, tragedy is a simulation that immunizes them against a world bent on letting them down; for others, it's a way of weakening traumas from the past to a more muted and apprehensible level.

1 "Films, Like TV, Lack Research on 'Violence,'" *Variety*, December 25, 1968, p. 5.

Written by Kris Pitzek