The role of integrative complexity and interest in evoking a sense of meaningfulness underscores that the value of art is not reducible to simply feeling good. Art contributes to people’s lives because it encourages an expanding scope of experience. As Menninghaus et al. argued, negative emotions can be attenuated or cast in a positive light when people reappraise the negative emotion content. Nevertheless, negative emotions may be an integral, unavoidable component of much of the art that broadens the mind and contributes to life’s meaningfulness.

Context matters: How macroeconomic forces may alter the reception of negative emotions in art

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Abstract: Menninghaus et al. offer a comprehensive model to explain why people pursue darker emotions in art, but we believe they underplay the considerable role of situational factors in driving these preferences. In particular, changing mood states are likely to shape artistic preferences, in large part because positive mood states act as a protective buffer against otherwise aversive experiences.

Menninghaus et al. propose a cogent and comprehensive model that explains when and why people enjoy darker or negative emotions when they perceive art. Although the authors include social, cultural, and situation variables as components in their model, they do so in an ancillary way; such factors are “likely to be only occasional contributors to such enjoyment” (Fig. 1). We contend, however, that these broader, situational variables meaningfully predict when people opt to consume heavier or more negative art forms.

To make this prediction, we draw on the affect and decision-making literatures. Previous research suggests that judgments and decisions can be influenced by aspects internal to a given decision maker (such as personality) as well as incidental emotional states brought on by external forces (e.g., the weather [Lerner et al. 2015]; for a comprehensive review, see Alter [2013a]). Notably, incidental states have carryover effects by which feeling states elicited by one context influence judgments and choices in another context (Forgas 2001). For example, anger that arises in one situation can prompt a motive to blame others in subsequent social interactions (Quigley & Tedeschi 1996), and depression and sadness brought on by winter months can lead to increased risk aversion in the stock market (Kamstra et al. 2003).

Here, we assert that incidental mood states brought on by changes in broader situational domains, such as macroeconomic, political, and social arenas, may carry over to art reception. Past research has indicated that changes in such domains can in fact result in changes in public mood: Bollen et al. (2009), for example, found that daily fluctuations in the stock market were linked to daily fluctuations in the moods expressed by Twitter users. Could such changes, on a broader, more diffuse, level, lead to differential acceptance and consumption of differently valenced forms of art?

Mood theorists have suggested that mood can be thought of as a sort of “alarm system”: Bad states indicate that something may be wrong and in need of fixing, whereas good mood states suggest to individuals that all is fine in their environment (Bless et al. 2006; see also Alter 2013b). Indeed, negative emotions often lead people to engage in behavior meant to alleviate an unpleasant state: Research participants who were induced to feel sadness chose smaller, immediate rewards over larger rewards that could be obtained only later (Lerner et al. 2013) and also opted to eat more “comfort” food (Garg et al. 2007).

By contrast, and perhaps more relevant to the Menninghaus et al. target article, research from the “mood-as-resource” literature proposes situations in which people might actually seek out negative information. Namely, researchers have proposed that positive moods are resources that act as a buffer against negatively valenced information (Trope et al. 2000; see also Alter & Forgus 2007). As an analogy, Raghunathan and Trope (2002) liken positive moods to currency: Just as a rich person has more material resources with which to purchase expensive products that will nonetheless put a dent in his or her budget, someone who is “rich in positive mood” may feel less daunted by the possibility of interacting with or consuming negative material. In one study, research participants were willing to take in negative performance feedback, but only if they were in a good mood first (Trope & Neter 1994). Theoretically, such negative information is not consumed without good reason. Information or material that can lead to better outcomes in the long run can sometimes be associated with short-term emotional costs (e.g., negative performance feedback that can nonetheless help one improve over time). Although such negative material can dampen mood, people who begin in a positive state have a buffer that allows them to process such negative information. One influential line of work—Fredrickson’s (2004) Broaden-and-Build theory of positive emotions—even suggests that positive emotions may be useful precisely because they allow for greater perspective and, ultimately, the incorporation of negative material.

Along these lines, longitudinal research designs have found that people who frequently experience negative emotions alongside positive emotions (i.e., mixed emotions) experience fewer age-related declines in physical health (Hershfield et al. 2013), and improved mental health if they happen to be undergoing therapy (Adler & Hershfield 2012). Similarly, mixed emotional states foster more creativity in laboratory-based tasks (Fong 2006).

Taken together, this work implies that positive changes in macroeconomic, political, and social contexts could allow for more acceptance and consumption of negative emotions in a variety of art forms. Nonetheless, many questions remain. Though we have discussed broad trends, could acute events (e.g., acts of terrorism) affect the consumption and reception of negative emotions differently than prolonged changes in collective mood? Are some segments of the population more or less swayed by such trends and events? Finally, although we have grouped economic, political, and social events as members of one family of events, might each domain have stronger or weaker effects on art reception? These questions, coupled with the literature suggesting that mood states sway information consumption, suggest that situational factors—specifically macroeconomic contexts—deserve more weight in the model proposed by Menninghaus et al.

The paradox of tragedy and emotional response to simulation

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Abstract: The insightful analysis of Menninghaus et al. could be deepened and rendered more systematic by recognizing that our emotional enjoyment of tragedy—and our response to fiction more generally—are versions of what happens with simulation. They derive from the operation and evolutionary function of simulation. Once we understand emotion in simulation, we largely understand emotion in tragedy (and fiction).