

“You remind me of a man”: How the prior knowledge about the director is shaping the viewers’ reception of a film

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Abstract

This article explores how prior knowledge about the film’s director shapes viewers’ expectations and responses to the film. We examine how film audiences use directors’ names and stylistic peculiarities as interpretive tools, during the selection and viewing process. For the empirical part of the research, we conducted focus group discussions, and based on the results, revealed how viewers rely on previously gathered knowledge, rather than actively searching for new information. In some cases, a single viewing experience significantly shifts a viewer’s perception of a director’s brand, reinforcing positive expectations or forming negative associations that prevent from further film experience with this director. The article argues that directors can function as brands whose names and styles operate similarly to genre labels, guiding interpretation and influencing selection. While not all directors achieve brand status, viewers of various audience types demonstrate the ability to interpret directors’ presence, thereby shaping their individual reception of a film.

Keywords: Film reception, Film directors, Cinephile, Film brand, Prior knowledge

Introduction

Information about films is ubiquitous and almost unavoidable for viewers, and it can affect their expectations and their approach to reading films. Often, this information applies to viewers’ knowledge of a film’s director; many marketing strategies rely on the director’s name. The names of popular directors frequently appear on posters or trailers, even when the director only contributed minimally. Does it influence audience expectations and interpretations, their approach to watch and interpret the film?

When *Challengers* (Guadagnino, 2014) was released, film critics noted (Zelvensky, 2024) that those viewers who were familiar with Guadagnino’s previous works interpreted the film as a ménage à trois or a queer narrative. In contrast, viewers unfamiliar with Guadagnino’s style or prior films might have perceived it as a plot about a love triangle. As a former film critic, I have also observed that the reception of a monotonous or divisive film can change dramatically depending on the director’s reputation. If an unfamiliar director makes such a film, audiences may dismiss it outright. However, viewers often second-guess their initial impressions if the director is highly regarded or well-known. They might search for deeper meaning, assuming their perception is flawed, because they believe the celebrated director’s work must have merit.

The academic focus on directors’ roles in communication studies has evolved in waves (Elsaesser 2006). Recently, research has shifted to studying individual directors (Rao et al. 2017). Contemporary studies also examine film critics’ impact on audience perceptions (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2012; Peng et al. 2013; Debenedetti and Ghariani 2019) and actors’ personal brands in shaping film reception (Barbas 2002; Ralph and Barker 2015). These studies highlight the link between audience expectations and film responses.

Drawing on Barker’s concept of audience expectations, and theories of directors’ personas, we explore how prior knowledge of a director shapes film perception. This study takes a reception studies approach, focusing solely on audience familiarity with directors, excluding social factors. The research specifically examines European audiences.

The article is fully based on the ongoing research conducted as part of the author’s Master’s dissertation.

Audience, audiencing, and the types of viewers

If the audience is a process rather than a fixed entity (Fiske 1992; Livingstone 2007; Wessel 2023), the audience does not exist without engaging in the process of consumption. Some may engage with film as casual spectators with a non-professional approach, while others may adopt a more analytical or semi-professional stance, sometimes approaching film consumption with a deep dedication.

Based on numerous theories (Barker and Brooks 1998; Jenkins 2003; Elsaesser 2006; Chinita, 2016; Barbas 2002; etc.), we distinguish three types of audiences, which do not contradict the main studies, but combine various approaches:

- Films fans;
- Cinephiles;
- Regular filmgoers, or movie watchers, including film lovers.

The concept of maintaining the “one film—one audience” (Biltereyst and Meers 2018, 34) perspective, in which “a film generates and sustains audiences” (Wessels 2023, 289), offers a useful approach to audience analysis. Under this model, each film creates its own audience, which may consist of film fans, cinephiles, and regular filmgoers. The audience formed for a particular film engages with it, processes it, and is then reformed with new participants each time.

Wessels (2023) argues that the interaction between audience and film is linked to the resources viewers can invest in it and to the nature of the particular

film itself, and adopts the concept of “extra-textual knowledge” (Livingstone 2007, 6). Thus, it is not a unilateral process, but an interaction in which the film influences audiences and their sense-making, while audiences, in turn, also shape the film’s reception. This position is directly connected with the understanding of the audience as a process. It correlates with Keller’s (2019) approach in her study on cinephiles, where she focuses on the perceptive side of the process rather than the object of perception. This perspective highlights the process of perception and meaning-making that ultimately defines viewers.

The act of interpretation can be seen either as part of filmic reality, as “a representation of the world” (Casetti 2011, 62), or as something that exists separately, occurring only on screen. Thus, we determine that the term reception, which is both central to our field and most suitable for our research, has two meanings: 1. A broader one that encompasses all stages and levels of interaction between an audience and the film they watch. This includes gathering knowledge about the film, pre-watching interactions, post-watching interactions, film reviewing, film discussions and talks, and the process of watching itself; synonym of film/filmic experience. 2. A narrower meaning referring specifically to the process of watching the film and interpreting it (meaning-making) from the perspective of an individual viewer, or “interpretive labour” (Forrest and Merrington 2021, 225).

Process of and influences on interpretation and meaning-making

Considering film interpretations, we will stay within the frame that it is part of the reception process and, as Barker and Brooks (1999) highlighted, part of the process of participation in the film. The same idea is presented by Bordwell, who highlighted that “The artwork is necessarily incomplete, needing to be unified and fleshed out by active participation of the perceiver” (Bordwell 1989, 32).

To identify what influences interpretations of a film, we need to understand how the process of interpretation unfolds. Bordwell (1987/2013), in his classic book *Meaning Making*, repeatedly claimed that spectators must “construct a story” (Bordwell 1987/2013, 49). Yet, while staying within the field of communication studies and not delving into a purely semiotic perspective, we still see that the process of meaning construction is an integral part of film consumption.

Different scholars define interpretation as a performative and creative process, or, as Forrest and Merrington (2021, 2023) named it, “interpretive labour”. Abercrombie and Longhurst (2012) also highlight the importance of the performance itself and its influence on how audiences interpret it. This aligns with the idea that one film corresponds to one audience, as audiences focus their attention on distinguishing different performances and different films.

However, Forrest and Merrington (2021), in analysing the same processes of interpretation and meaning attribution, focus on viewers’ understandings of place,

country, language, practices, narrative, and directorial approaches. They examine “viewing strategies... to determine how audiences make meaning from the film” and mention the audience’s “interpretive labour” (Forrest and Merrington 2023, 225). In the research, scholars look for patterns in how meaning is created by viewers and what references or frameworks help them to interpret films. They distinguish between “expert reading” and “naive account,” basing these conclusions solely on viewers’ self-representations. Thus, their description of audience interaction with film includes “the act of reading the film” and interpretation as a dynamic process. It directly correlates also with Barker and Brooks (1998, 76), who mentioned “specialist audience” for a particular film or genre, and a general audience. This specific approach to reception/reading films in some cases aligns with our classification of audiences described above: fans can perform expert reading or represent specialist audiences for particular films, while being a naive audience or part of the general audience for other movies or genres, so, “some audiences learn to appreciate and engage better with each different array” (Ralph and Barker 2015, 754).

Prior knowledge about a film: types and sources

Viewers can access almost any information about any film (Daly 2010, 92). Ralph and Barker explored the concepts of “known figures” and “myth” in relation to the audience’s knowledge of a story. They also focused on how knowledge about the actors starring in a film shapes viewers’ expectations, stating that “perception and evaluation of the film can respond” to these expectations (2015, 748). In his chapter “Crossing out the audience” (2012), Barker discussed connections between “evaluations of the film” and the informational frameworks within which viewers and critics engage with a movie. Grundström named “the current price of cinema admission, one can’t run the risk of going to see a film without any prior knowledge of it” (2018, 18). The practice of gathering such knowledge becomes at the same time necessary and risky to spoil “the excitement of going to see a new film” (Grundström 2018, 18).

Still, there are different types of prior knowledge, or extra-knowledge, based on its source (where a viewer received this information) or its object (what about this knowledge is). We use the term prior knowledge following Barker and Brooks (1999, p. 78) and Hart who argued that it “acquired through past film consumption literature and film theory, the diary extracts were coded into key points” (2016, p. 380), and categorise it into different types based on the nature of the information it contains and the manner in which it is acquired.

- *knowledge of genre* (Barker and Brooks, 1998; Ralph and Barker, 2015; Forrest 2023, 235).
- *knowledge about the film production process* affects viewers’ response to a film: “Knowledge about film-making makes a viewer less likely to ignore the artifice in a film. However, this ‘effect’ doesn’t seem

to hold in the case of indirect knowledge about film, i.e. the kind of knowledge" (Messaris 1981, 55). He showed that interaction between this kind of knowledge can be shaped by the genre of the film: "Kind of filmmaking has dulled audiences' awareness of the filmmakers' presence. This argument is often invoked by experimental filmmakers whose 'obtrusive' style is seen by untutored audiences as an error" (Messaris 1981, 53), as well as the level of depth of audience's knowledge.

- *knowledge about the film crew*: actors, directors, and other filmmakers. Whether we unite them into one broader group or not, the knowledge about different participants involved in film production—actors, directors, and more specific members—changes the audience's point of view and shapes the viewing experience in different ways.

Bourdieu defined knowledge about directors as one "more closely and exclusively linked to educational capital" when "knowledge of actors varies mainly—and considerably—with the number of films seen" (Bourdieu 1984/2020, 18). Barker and Brooks distinguished also perceived and accumulated information about adaptations, remakes, figures as knowledge that can shape audience relation to the film (Ralph and Barker 2015, 753).

We are not going to explore and categorise types of knowledge based on its level because the types of audience explicitly contain the level of knowledge about films: fans have knowledge about specific films, genres, or personas, cinephiles have deep, expert knowledge about various films and film production process, and regular audiences, filmgoers, have basic or limited knowledge.

Frey (2014), in "The Permanent Crisis of Film Criticism: The Anxiety of Authority", categorised three types of online media where users can participate in film discussion (128). Also, specific social networks also can be such a source, as, for example, Letterboxd that helps film viewers "pour garder une trace des choses" (Souvanlasy 2024) ["keep track of things", translated by author] as it is published in *Le Monde*, to explain why this social network grows increasingly and who uses it more.

Film reviews constitute an important source of knowledge about films. Hennig-Thurau, Marchand, and Hiller (2012) linked "reviewer judgments to motion picture success" (251).

Based on Debenedetti and Ghariani's (2018) and Baumann (2007), we also can identify advertisements as a source of knowledge about films. Kerrigan and Yalkin (2009) showed the importance of marketing communication in formation of the film image for potential audience and build "want-to-see" approach.

Daly (2010) noted the importance of databases where viewers are looking for information; these services become a part of "storytelling and visibility" which is a natural continuation of viewers' everyday use of technologies (90).

Also, knowledge can be formed with biases (word of mouth) or myths which have existed around the brand of the film, studio, or particular member of the film crew or cast (Kohli et al. 2021, 371).

How knowledge about the film forms expectations

According to Kohli et al. (2021, 370), viewers may "classify films based on their anticipated film experience." Hart claimed that "By associating an actor, director, studio or character with a particular style of film" the viewer indicates whether the film meets certain standards, and this increases the film's attractiveness and decreases uncertainty (2016, 380). Jenkins used the term 'textual activators' to describe "advertisements, film trailers, newspapers reviews" and other sources that shape audience expectations of a film. Some textual activators have "a power to predetermine audience response" (Jenkins 2000, 169–171) and lead audiences' reception in a particular way.

Barker used the term 'investment', which "refers to the multifaceted ways in which, and degrees to which, audiences become involved in cultural forms and activities" which can include "the complex kinds of preparation, expectations, hopes, and fears" (Barker 2012, 190). Scholars mentioned also the idea of "ideal expectations which includes "set of social aspirations, routine, predictions, shared knowledge" with their own strategic conclusions (Barker and Brooks 1999, 76–80). Expectations relate to the semiotic term 'schemata' which "generates hypotheses about what we will see next", forms "visual recognition" (Bordwell 1987/2013, 31–32). Schemata do not exist solely in the viewer's mind but functions as a tool that helps them "make sense of the film narrative" by drawing upon a foundation of prior knowledge.

However, researching the influence of knowledge and presumable expectations on viewers, we agree that viewers "must rely on his or her knowledge" (Staiger 2000, 17) but they do not necessarily have it, and such an absence can also represent a context of film viewing.

Films, Actors, and Directors as Brands

Film brand associates with the condition when, considering a film as a brand, a viewer recognises "a brand's symbolic meanings and the brand's ability to express and enhance a consumer's identity" (Kohli 2021, 369). Kohli argued that all films constitute brands at the basic level, but some can "establish themselves as strong brands by combining various elements such as name, logo, symbol, brand characters, slogan, jingle, signage" as an investment to the interaction with audience and application to the recognition (Kohli et al. 2021, 372).

Recognition of the brand can lead to positive engagement, positive word-of-mouth (Tuškej et al. 2013), all of which are likely to contribute to box office success (Kohli 2021). However, it also can form negative expectations and deprive a potential viewer

of a desire to watch the film. The concept of “brand” is thus applicable both within Reception Studies (Hall 1980) and Marketing, where it generally denotes a recognisable entity. Crucially, the presence of a brand enables audiences, after viewing, to “follow the film’s premise onto different platforms (e.g. TV series, novels and video games), due to their familiarity and fascination with the storyline and characters, which encourage them to explore deeply other related facets” (Kohli et al. 2021, 371). Westwell and Kuhn (2020) emphasised the strong connection between brand identity and directors within the fields of economics and marketing, highlighting its significance for distribution.

The concept of actors and directors as brands was introduced by Levin, Levin and Health (1997) and subsequently expanded upon by other researchers. The idea that brand names influence how audiences perceive audiovisual products, including experimental ones, aligns with our perspective on the connections between prior knowledge, expectations, and reception. Scholars argued that audiences’ reactions on films where “well-known” actors participated are mostly “more favourable”, “star power” effect was experimentally proven, and “in the movies was a perception that top stars... are associated with high quality products” (Levin et al. 1997, 175-180).

Significant to more that brands of actors and directors can differ. According to Gledhill (1991), actor-star is a “construct of three components: star as a real person; as a character in the film, and as the star’s persona” (Bhowmick 2021, 2) when the directors don’t have a character entity, their brand construct with real personality and director’s persona.

Despite Kohli et al. (2021), who, in contrast to O’Reilly and Kerrigan (2013), argued that actors, directors, and production studios “don’t dictate brand status, but collectively constitute a film’s identity” (379), we argue that directors’ brands function in a similar manner, particularly when a director’s films exhibit a distinctive style, narrative features, and allow audiences to form specific expectations based on the director’s name.

At the same time, Flanagan (2004) argued that directors and their identities are “more central to convincing potentially sceptical audiences of the serious merits of event movies (especially those working from culturally ‘debased’ source material like comics)” (26). Orgeron shared this view, citing examples from the 1970s such as Bertolucci, Lean, and Cimino. He introduced the concept of “brand-name vision,” suggesting that “contextual meanings are already determined, the way a movie is seen and received” is already shaped by the audience (Orgeron 2007, 57).

Staiger studied a case of Marlen Dietrich’s brand or myth, and how it affected the reception of actress’s films: “Discourse about Dietrich’s “real” life and the romantic story offered motivations for a fan to interpret the film’s ambiguities in quite another way.” Also, the scholar noted that “not all moviegoers were fans of the actress” (Staiger 2000, 88-89) and many could interpret films in a different way and didn’t understand hints to Dietrich’s personal life in film reviews.

Methodology

To examine the audiences’ relationship between the prior knowledge of the film director and their perception of the film, we adopted qualitative methods, as they provide a better “understanding of individual film audience experiences” (Hanchard et al. 2020, 118). Qualitative research methods are a more “suitable way of gaining insights” into analysing the interaction between audiences and films, considering their “experimental” nature (Hart et al. 2016, 375).

We adopt focus groups as the main method, following Barker and Brooks’ approach to studying audiences’ expectations.

Following the completion of the literature review and analytical framework, we conducted a series of focus group discussions with two preliminary steps: each participant was asked to complete a form and to watch a film selected based on the answers. This paper is based on the first part of the research which is provided as a dissertation study. This part includes five focus groups with 25 participants in total.

Generally, a focus group is understood to consist of 6–12 participants (Smithson 2007, 358), with an interviewer or moderator posing questions about a particular topic; however, there is no universal consensus on this matter (Masadeh 2012). Barker and Brooks typically gathered three people in each focus group (1998, 2017). For us, it was important to maintain participants’ interest in the discussion and allow all of them to reflect on the questions and share their interpretations on the film, so we opted for smaller group sizes. We conducted online focus groups with 3 or 5 participants excluding a moderator, and a broader offline focus group with 7 participants excluding a moderator.

For our research, participants’ sociodemographic characteristics, such as gender or age, were not of central importance. However, we did aim to ensure variation across groups, and paid attention to avoiding a situation in which almost all participants of our empirical research were only men or only women, from the same age group, or composed solely of cinephiles or, conversely, regular moviegoers. To narrow the scope of this small-scale study (which at the end will include 10-12 focus groups), we restricted participation to individuals residing in European countries. Due to the nature of some of the films selected for viewing, all participants were required to be over the age of 18. All focus groups were conducted in April and May 2025.

Both online and offline discussions were recorded and transcribed, then coded and analysed, in order to identify key insights.

Focus groups steps

Our focus groups consisted of the following steps: filling the form, film viewing, group discussion. The survey served as a preliminary stage designed to refine the focus group process. Participants were asked to fill out the form aimed at identifying their film-viewing habits. The form included neutral questions to classify their viewing preferences, as well as a direct question

asking how they define themselves as viewers. In addition, participants were presented with a list of directors to indicate which ones they were familiar with; this helped us narrow the selection of films for the experiment, this information was used to organise people into focus groups (Barker and Brooks 1998, 22).

Participant grouping and film for watching

Based on the responses in the form, four films were selected: *Brief Encounters* (1967), directed by Kira Muratova; *Benny's Video* (1992), directed by Michael Haneke; *Challengers* (2024), directed by Luca Gaudanigno; *The Royal Tenenbaums* (2001), directed by Wes Anderson.

Our goal was to explore how a director's brand or prior knowledge about a film director influences audience reception. Thus, we included in the survey a list of directors who are internationally recognised and whose names are often used as brands. Some of these directors have been extensively studied in terms of their brand identity, while others are frequently discussed in the media as having a strong and distinctive style. We decided on a variety of four films to avoid results being overly influenced by a single film's specific features. Our final film set included works from different decades, covering a range of genres and themes.

"When the director is well-known, they matter; when it's a newcomer, they don't"

As we identified through analysing the initial forms, we achieved our goal of assembling focus groups without focusing solely on one type of audience. Among our 26 participants, there was a more or less equal representation of different audience types: Cinephiles—6, Fans of Specific Aspects of Cinema—8, Regular Moviegoers who watch films weekly or more often—7, and Regular Moviegoers who watch films monthly or more rarely—5. Based on this initial data, we could expect to obtain less biased results compared to, for example, studies focusing exclusively on cinephiles.

In the form, participants could also indicate their approach to directors and whether directors influence their film choices. Mark from focus group 2 shared that a director matters when there is a "unique visual or narrative style, or strong previous works—then there's trust in the new film" (April 2025). However, a director doesn't matter if "the film belongs to a favourite franchise, the plot or theme is interesting, or a favourite actor/actress is in the film"—in such cases, these factors are more important than the director when selecting a film.

The first part is particularly relevant to our research: narrative or unique style can outweigh the lack of an interesting plot, and these elements help to form expectations, just as much as the quality of a director's previous work. Expectations can also be negative, as Andrey from focus group 3 added: "If it's a director who made two terrible films, then there's a 99% chance I won't watch their third one."

Selection of a film to watch//pre-event: what influences the most?

Viewers have many ways to find and select films to watch. We grouped the most influential factors in the selection process and tried to examine the connections between the selection process and audience types, paying particular attention to the role knowledge plays here, specifically, the roles that directors and other crew members have for potential viewers.

Film Crew

The director is mentioned most often, even among occasional viewers who watch fewer than 10 films a year and get their cinema-related insights and news from memes. For many viewers, directors have become more important than appealing trailers:

"Let's assume I've decided to go and check out some new releases—in that case, I'd probably look at who directed the film first. I think choosing a film based on the trailer is, well, a bit of a mistake. So yes, if we suppose that I'm actively deciding whether to watch something new, then I'm more interested in who made it than in how they're trying to sell it to me visually" (Katya, focus group 1, April 2025).

Only in a focus group 4 did all participants say they are primarily interested in actors and don't pay attention to directors. Several participants from other groups expressed the same view: they are interested in actors, who, like directors, can have either strong or weak personal brands.

Anastasia from focus group 3 shared that big names influence her film choices, while unfamiliar ones don't—they neither attract her to watch a film nor actively put her off.

At the same time, one participant who initially claimed she wasn't interested in directors realised during the discussion that although she doesn't pay attention to the director before watching something, if she ends up liking a film or series, she will look up other works by the same director to find something similar.

"A bit of a contradictory thing because I said that I don't really care about the director. The director, the filmmaker. But I do. I do. When I know that, if I watched a series or a movie that they have a common director, I want to see more of that director. Then I Google the name of the director, and I see the type of films that I will enjoy" (Ludmila, focus group 4, May 2025).

Lists

Viewers' lists, along with those published on online platforms and in printed books:

"Alex: I had a book as well. I don't have it here in Portugal, but I had it in Brazil. It was like a book about movies that you need to watch before you die. So, I would just, like, sometimes open it on a random page and watch whatever I found in the book, that's it for me.

Camilla: Yeah, I have it too!" (focus group 5, May 2025)

Personal lists are often compiled based on word of mouth, viewer engagement, favourite cinematographers, or curated by individuals with established reputations. As such, these lists frequently reflect current trends and popular discourse. The distinction, however, lies in the fact that lists offer a tangible and structured reference—they may exist online (for instance, on Letterboxd), in print, or even as handwritten notes. In contrast, the next category of viewer behaviour is shaped more by general tendencies that “are in the air”—informal, unstructured impressions circulating socially rather than recorded or curated.

Word of Mouth and Trends

Recommendations from close friends, memes, critics, and awards. When everyone is talking about a film, people are often inclined to watch it. The reasons vary: sometimes they want to join the discussion, sometimes they see it as part of pop culture, and sometimes they simply want to form their own opinion on the topic:

“I don't really search for anything about new film releases. It's more like, when I see some memes—like when everyone had joked about Barbie—Oppenheimer for the 50,000th time—I was like, ‘Oh, yeah, this film exists.’ And yes, it turns out it is. So, is someone talking about it? Yes. Then does it count? Then somehow it makes its way into my information field.” (Katya, focus group 1, April 2025)

“I ended up confirming my own assumption to myself. It might not have happened, but it did”

Viewers tend to make assumptions based on prior knowledge, which relates to the idea of the “soap opera effect” (Livingstone 2007, 7) where viewers predict the plot or plot twists based on their familiarity with the genre. Participants from various focus groups shared that they made assumptions based on their knowledge of the directors, if they had such knowledge, of course. For example, Mark shared that he expected *Benny's Video* to be a “heavy film” because *The Piano Teacher*, which he had seen earlier, was heavy. He also demonstrated how his expectations were formed before watching, explaining that he relied solely on prior knowledge, followed instructions, and avoided additional research:

“I unconsciously prepared myself for what might be a heavy film, and at the same time I made an unsubstantiated assumption that the director is probably about this age, which means he was born, and therefore might hold certain beliefs. I expected that something about mass culture would be conveyed to us. That was the first thought that came to mind effortlessly, and I had to watch the film through that filter. On the other hand, the film began with video violence, so it turned out that I confirmed my assumption.” (Mark, focus group 2, April 2025)

Assumptions can be made about the visual styles, even colours: “From him, maybe I thought that would be kind of disturbing because that's what *Funny Games* is. I also expected the shooting methods to be similar and also the colouring similar to *Funny Games*, like more greyish tones, bluish” (Alex, focus group 5, May 2025).

Also, assumptions and expectations can be made based on the director's gender, as happened with Gena, who expected a female director who is currently popular to make “a feminist film.” Expectations can be shaped by the director's gender, but this was mentioned only in reference to female directors, as Camilla described Sofia Coppola's style as “girly.”

At the same time, cinephiles specifically emphasised that some films are director-centric, while others are not: “In this case, it helped, because the film turned out to be more director-centric, and all those thoughts I summed up were really about the director's craft rather than the acting” (Alexey, focus group 1, April 2025). In the discussion of *Challengers* by Luca Guadagnino, Andrey L., a cinephile from the focus group 3, claimed that the film looks different from his other works. He didn't recognise the director's style here (before *Challengers*, he could describe and specify Guadagnino's style), and he suggested that for this film, the cinematographer or cameraman might be more important than the director.

“When I see his name as director, I won't watch the film”

Two focus groups watched Haneke's *Benny's Video*, a film released in 1992. This film provoked controversial emotions. Five participants had watched his films before, four had never seen them, and one participant indicated on the form that she didn't know Haneke but realised during the screening that she had seen this film already.

Haneke's specificity lies mainly in the themes he explores and his point of view. Therefore, it was important for us not only to find the way viewers interpret his films and the knowledge they use for such interpretations, but also whether they could define Haneke's style or uniqueness in his films, and how this uniqueness affects viewers' approach to selecting films he directs.

Mark and Alex, who participated in different focus groups 2 and 5, respectively, mentioned that the director didn't try to make the film appealing or attractive for viewers. Mark referred to this as a part of his statement about the film's visuals. According to him, these films are:

“I felt that these were rather cold films. Not even that they show a real palette... Usually, films are made more appealing and warmer. If they want something realistic, then somewhere in the middle. But here, they are specifically cold.” (Mark, focus group 2, April 2025)

But when Mark enjoyed the director's approach, Alex also pointed out that the director clearly didn't try to make the film pleasant for viewers:

"I think it was a little painful to watch. It felt like it was a four-hour movie. To me, it's a less Hollywoodian version of *Let's Talk About Kevin*, which is very exciting, with lots of plot twists and other elements. I can understand what the director was going for, but I think that it could have been made in a more exciting way." (Alex, focus group 6, May 2025)

It is worth a mention that Mark and Alex are both cinephiles, but their approaches to watching "unpleasant films" are quite different. It's also curious how expectations and attitudes towards a director can shift based on a single film experience. Alex, who was familiar with Haneke and had seen two of his films, expected something "disturbing"—and was, in fact, too disturbed by *Benny's Video*:

"I had an idea of his movies from *Funny Games*, and I really like *Funny Games*. I don't like this one, so maybe now it's pushing me towards negative." (Alex, focus group 5, May 2025)

In the focus group 5, Llory, who had seen three of Haneke's films before and hadn't particularly liked them, initially didn't see a clear connection between them. However, after watching *Benny's Video*, he changed his opinion of Haneke and became more interested in exploring his work:

"I can't say I'm a fan of him, per se. It's more, like, the opposite. But, you know, negative marketing is still marketing. So yeah, I'm invested. I'm enjoying it. I'll always look at the movies from a more critical perspective, but they entertain me enough for me to, like, express that critique. Love it. Gonna hate it." (Llory, Focus group 5, May 2025)

A strong directorial approach and distinctive treatment of subject matter can leave a powerful impression, both positive and negative. This can either spark a desire to watch more of the director's work or lead to a sense of aversion, making viewers unwilling to engage with director's films in the future. Darya claimed, "I'd say he's an unknown director to me, and he'll remain that way... when I see his name as director, I won't watch the films (*laughs*)" (focus group 2, April 2025). At the same time, she engaged in an impressive interpretive process and was willing to discuss the film for longer than planned. She formed her idea of Haneke based primarily on the emotions she experienced during the film, and she expects to feel the same emotions from his other works.

Once again, a correlation emerged between the type of reaction and the type of audience. More expert viewers expressed a willingness to continue watching the director's films, despite potentially unpleasant content. Some mentioned that they would prefer to read a synopsis in advance to mentally prepare for what they might witness on the screen.

In contrast, occasional viewers, even when their interpretations of the film were deep and close to those of expert audiences or critics, often said they were unlikely to watch more of Haneke's work. As Camilla put it, they felt they were "not the target audience" (focus group 6, May 2025) or noted that they simply preferred more pleasant viewing experiences.

These examples came from focus groups who watched Haneke's films, but a similar situation occurred in response to Kira Muratova's work. Katya, who interpreted the film and found it impressive, still claimed that she is not the target audience for it.

Thus, if a film is not enjoyable or entertaining, the director's brand can take on a negative connotation, even despite the film's obvious quality or artistic merit. After viewing a film that requires significant interpretive effort or evokes unpleasant emotions, regular or occasional moviegoers are unlikely to seek out other works by the same director. Even if they are "not into directors," the director's name may later function as a form of negative marketing.

This effect was observed not only with so-called "difficult" directors, but also with someone like Wes Anderson, whom many participants described as joyful and entertaining. Viewers who found his film "very slow," "overly detailed," or "annoyingly colourful" stated that they would not watch his films in the future. For them, his name now represents a negative brand, regardless of elements such as a "great cast full of celebrities," "well-developed characters," or the film's "meaningful message" (as Ludmila, Vanessa, and Raquel from focus group 4 noted).

"If you're watching a Tim Burton movie, you can tell that it's by him. It has a very, very specific vibe"

If we claim that the director represents their own brand, their name should relate to clear associations within viewers, and these associations should live in the same field, should be similar within different viewers. A first-order association with directors' brand for most of the participants was a standing out or a particularly impressive film of theirs, which became "significant reference point" (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2001, 6). The features and characteristics of these films spread across the entire director's work and essentially create the director's brand. However, a brand can also be formed without the involvement of films, based on the same trends or the public persona of the director, which may be unrelated to authorship or the film brand. Some viewers try to merge the public persona with the film persona so that they complement each other, forming one cohesive brand. A notable example is Woody Allen and his persona. At the same time, any other activities or professional career outside cinema can also be included in the director's brand and build strong associations with their films, thus confluencing into a single brand:

"So I feel like he's just a creepy guy. His movies are creepy. *The ABC of Sex [Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex]* ("But Were Afraid to Ask)—the author's note] is creepy, and he's just pretentious. New York, my man, is just in love, like, with hearing himself talk and pretending like he's always the smartest guy in the world" (Sebastian, focus group 5, May 2025).

A director's brand can be connected to visual specificities, even the colours alone that directors use most often: "The easiest one is Wong Kar-wai—the associations are, well, night, some kind of electricity, those... red and green colours" (Andrey L., focus group 3, April 2025), narrative peculiarities: "I think I would recognise it maybe if he does that in other movies. Like the narration of the story that's happening and the images... I think that's something that you recognise when you see it" (Raquel, focus group 4, May 2025), motifs and themes, or the locations where the plots of the director's films usually take place: "Woody Allen is New York; New York and a melodrama set in New York" (Gena, focus group 1, April 2025). It can also involve attitudes toward film production, such as production expenses, the frequency and speed of film releases: "Woody Allen, a Stakhanovite, a man who makes an impossible number of films that I will never watch" (Alexey, focus group 1, April 2025).

The director's brand can include the era, the setting, and a flagship film that becomes a brand in itself. Sometimes it is the spirit, mood, or "vibe" of the film, as Camilla described Tim Burton's and Sofia Coppola's films: "Her [Coppola's] movies kind of feel like it's, like, escapism, kind of, escapist... if you're watching a Tim Burton's movie, you can tell that it's by him. You know, it has a very, very specific vibe." As we can see, this can be achieved with visual tools, or it can also include the ideas directors convey.

However, for the brand to be constructed, viewers expect to be able to recognise that a film is made by a particular director. Thus, if the name brand works at the pre-selection stage, the director's brand—constructed through the style of the film—operates during the film's reception. When these combine, as Camilla experiences it with Tim Burton and Sofia Coppola, we can speak of a complete director's brand that forms direct expectations. If all these directors' films can be united by the director's name because of repetitiveness and formed expectations of similar topics and their representations, while simultaneously changing from film to film and being constructed differently yet kept at the same level of fame, we can claim that such a brand forms a specific genre of film from the viewer's point of view.

We assume that the director's brand and the brand of their flagship film can compete with each other in the audience's perception. For instance, Wes Anderson is associated with his visual style alone among the focus group participants, while Nolan is more frequently described in relation to one of his films, and Lynch is described in terms of his style, unique features, and specific films.

Wes Anderson: "Symmetry and the Inner Child", "Symmetrical editing and beautiful visuals," "Warmth, comfort, and very pleasant visuals", "Wes Anderson is, above all, about frame composition, symmetry, visuals, and... I don't know, this might sound bad, but the plot becomes secondary", "I love the repetition on how he's like building his own shared universe even though they're all the same movie pretty much. Feels like, like they're whimsical", "Symmetry", "Wes Anderson is a light director. His films are very colourful, very whimsical, fun", "I just think it's really whimsical. I really like when the director creates, like, a very, you know, unique vision or fantasy. I like the colours. I just think his movies are really beautiful, they're entertaining."

All of these characteristics and associations show that many people, even with different backgrounds in different focus groups, use the same epithets to describe Wes Anderson's directorial approach and his films. Most of them refer to quite clear characteristics of his visual style, and even the participant who hadn't watched his films and described him through memes she remembered still used the same word: symmetry: "He didn't like the memes about symmetrical shots. Remember when everyone was making those reels, pretending they were shooting a Wes Anderson film? And then he came out and said it was awful, horrible" (Katya, focus group 1, April 2025).

"And we know why!"

When both the director and the country/era are not too familiar to viewers, the competition between brands starts, as it happens when both the style and the film are popular, recognisable, and unique. For example, Kira Muratova was a familiar name to all participants in the focus group 1, but they mostly associated her with the period and country where she lived and worked. Gena found that her works were close to those of another Soviet director, Alexey German, and, based on this, he described her film as a Soviet melodrama. Alexey, however, had watched her other films and knew more about that period, so he described her film as a melodrama with her own specificities and features, comparing her mostly to Allen Raine.

This suggests that the depth and specificity of viewers' prior knowledge is particularly significant when it comes to recognising directors from distant countries or past eras. In the absence of sufficient cinematic knowledge, viewers are often compelled to rely on broader historical or geopolitical frameworks.

Nevertheless, we still see that viewers' interpretive labour still requires some form of knowledge, though viewers rarely seek it out actively—either during or immediately after watching, even when viewing alone or online. As a result, they draw on what they already know: cinephiles may rely on their knowledge of cinema and its key figures; experts in other domains refer to their own disciplinary backgrounds. For instance, Katya and Gena, who, being music experts, applied music knowledge to find parallels or interpretive keys). Anastasia, an occasional moviegoer from focus group 3, gave an example in which, to form

ideas about Agnès Varda, she applied her knowledge of French culture because she had worked with the French language. Ludmila from focus group 4 finds that she can be an expert in stars and actors and interpret why Gwyneth Paltrow played her depressed character so well: "She was so, like, into the character. Into the character. Yeah. And we know why! We know why—she [actress] was depressed."

Hart, in his self-ethnographic study, observed that he "made sense of the 'type of film' on offer based on the actor(s)." He also argued that the director, "as the project's artistic head, arguably bears most responsibility for the final product and overall quality, providing insight into the 'type of film' on offer, thus supporting the theory of auteurism" (2016, 380). In this study, we proposed that directors can indeed shape the type of film for viewers, establishing a brand that sets expectations and influences reception. Moreover, we argued that viewers with prior knowledge about the director experience the same film differently than those without such knowledge.

Conclusion

Knowledge can shape all stages of the film-viewing experience, from film selection to pre-viewing context, all the way through to the process of interpretation and meaning-making (Casetti, 2012). However, the influence of knowledge depends on the type of audience. Cinephiles, for example, tend to use more specific and technical knowledge during the selection and interpretive stages. Still, this expertise does not necessarily lead to a different interpretative outcome: both cinephiles and casual viewers may arrive at similar understandings of a film.

A single film can form either positive or negative expectations that influence whether viewers engage with director's future work. However, one film alone may not be sufficient to create a sustained director brand. For a brand to be effective, it must be underpinned by consistent and recognisable stylistic features that persist across films and resonate with audiences, even when the director's name is not explicitly mentioned. A director's brand may also be shaped by broader cultural narratives, including industry trends, biographical details, or myths circulated through online discourse. These extratextual associations can influence not only the selection of films but also their interpretation.

Following Hart and Forrest, we suggest that certain directors may come to signify a particular "genre" of film through their personal brand (Hart et al. 2016; Forrest 2023). Not all directors, however, achieve this level of recognition, and not all viewers perceive directors through this lens. Nevertheless, our findings show that casual viewers, as well as cinephiles and fans, are capable of interpreting directors as brands.

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