



What's the saddest movie scene? Research says answer may be in 'The Champ'

MARK ROTH

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Jennifer Lerner, a professor at Harvard University, wants to figure out if anti-smoking ads that evoke sadness really work.

In both cases, they needed a reliable way to make people feel the blues.



Their solution? Ricky Schroder.

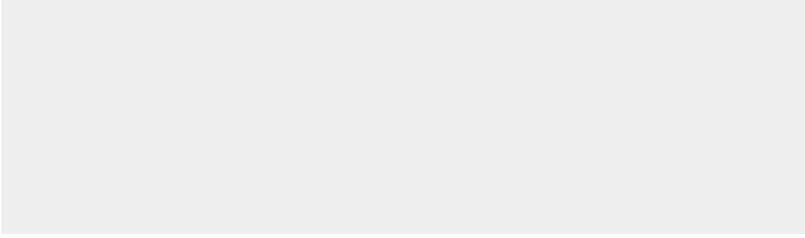
Specifically, Mr. Schroder's role as a child actor in the 1979 film "[The Champ](#)," in which his father, played by Jon Voight, is a boxer who comes out of retirement and then dies from blows in the ring. The heart-rending scene used in social psychology labs all over the world shows Mr. Schroder, who was 8 at the time of filming, realizing his father has just died. "Champ, wake up, Champ!" the boy cries. "Don't go to sleep now. We got to go home."

The film earned little acclaim from the critics (Rotten Tomatoes rating: 40 percent), but Mr. Schroder, now 45, won a Golden Globe for his performance.

In a phone interview last week, Mr. Schroder said he doesn't remember the scene that well, but he does know one thing: "I wasn't acting. It was real emotion. I'd never been to acting class. I think I suspended reality in an intense way, so I think I believed the Champ was dying. Little kids have vivid imaginations, and I was able to use that.

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“Also, I had developed a close bond with Jon [Voight] and with the director,” Franco Zeffirelli.

The use of the film clip in psychology studies grew out of research by University of California, Berkeley professor Robert Levenson in the 1980s. He and his graduate student at the time, James Gross, who is now at Stanford University, wanted to figure out ways to induce various emotions in a reliable, reproducible way. So they reviewed 250 separate film clips and showed them to 500 people, ranking their ability to induce not only sadness but amusement, anger, disgust, fear, surprise and contentment.

When it came to unalloyed sadness, the clip from “The Champ” was the clear winner.

The scene “not only produced sadness with good intensity, but it didn’t produce anything else,” Mr. Levenson said. “Sometimes in a sad movie, the sadness can be tinged with anger. In ‘The Champ,’ there’s just a pure loss. The fact it’s a child who loses a parent makes it particularly profound,” he said, “and what’s really wonderful is that 30 years later, it still works.”

When they studied the ability of film clips to evoke emotions, he said, it turned out that it was easy to amuse people or make them feel disgust (a particularly gross toilet scene in “Trainspotting” is often used). Sadness was a little harder to evoke, he said.

The most difficult emotion to elicit? Anger.

“I guess if we had been smart we would have realized that the thing that produces anger is when you’re treated unfairly or you’re frustrated and when you see someone else treated unfairly it’s not quite as an effective,” Mr. Levenson said, especially if someone is watching a short scene.

People who watched the scene from “The Champ” in the original study rated its sadness at 5.7 on an 8-point scale. Next closest was a scene from “Bambi” where the mother deer dies.

After all these years, Mr. Levenson said, Ricky Schroder’s histrionics don’t affect him much anymore. “I think I’ve gotten more habituated to it.”

Not so for Ms. Lerner, co-founder of the Harvard Decision Science Laboratory. “I’m a mother,” she said, “so anything that happens to kids has a huge emotional effect on me. There is one doctoral student in my lab who says she never cries over anything, and she cried at that scene.”

Mr. Friedman, the Albany psychology researcher, said the scene still gets to him, too. “I’ve been using this clip for several years, and it’s difficult for me to sit through and watch it.”

Ms. Lerner said she has used the film excerpt in at least 10 studies and could end up using it another 10 times.

In an upcoming study, she plans to use the clip to test whether anti-smoking ads that try to make people feel sad, such as showing someone who is dying from cancer, work as intended. Other research has shown that when people are sad, they often have trouble controlling their impulses, so that they will pay more for an item than at other times or sell something for less. That could cause such ads to backfire because they could cause smokers to actually be more likely to smoke or buy cigarettes when they are feeling blue.

Mr. Friedman was interested in seeing if sadness affected what kind of music people listened to because previous studies had been split on the issue. Using “The Champ” excerpt, his team found that watching it did not affect whether people listened to sad or neutral music, but it did make them avoid happy music.

“It makes a lot of sense that people would say [after watching the

clip], I can't just turn away from this kid and then listen to a happy song.”

The scientists know that some people think their research either proves the obvious or is too esoteric to have practical value.

“Sometimes you do find out things that are common sense,” Mr. Levenson said, “but sometimes you find out that common sense is wrong.”

For instance, in their original study on film clips and emotions, everyone assumed the best clip to induce fear would be the shower stabbing scene from “Psycho.” “It turns out people don't get afraid when they see that shower stabbing clip,” he said. “They feel disgust.”

Over the years, Mr. Schroder said, he has slowly begun to realize that “The Champ” excerpt has taken on a life of its own. “What is interesting to me is that they can show the scene to people and people don't have the benefit of seeing the whole movie and seeing the relationship between Jon and me and it still makes a big impact on them.

”Jon said to me a few years ago, ‘You know, you and I made history that will last forever.’ Now I'm starting to understand what he meant.”

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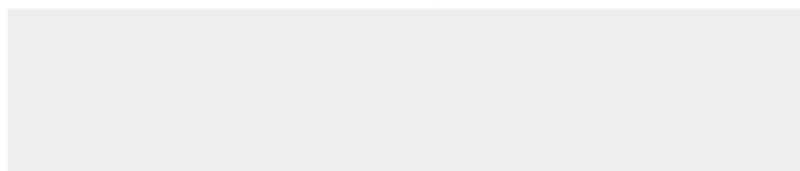
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