

6-1-2017

## Nonverbal Communication and the Influence of Film Success: A Literature Review

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### Recommended Citation

Stratton, Celina (2017) "Nonverbal Communication and the Influence of Film Success: A Literature Review," *Concordia Journal of Communication Research*: Vol. 4, Article 1.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.csp.edu/comjournal/vol4/iss1/1>

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### **Abstract**

This review of literature focuses on the use of various nonverbal channels in film and explain how nonverbal communication influences the success (critical or commercial) of films. The different nonverbal channels, or cues, explored are environment, physical characteristics, gestures, and touch. Within each of these channels, subtopics are examined including color, sound, physical attractiveness, costume design, and more. Rather than a conducting a study testing respondents on any physiological reactions to films, this is an extensive literature review supporting the claim that nonverbal cues do in fact influence the success of films, specifically, critical success. While each channel could also be described as “visual cues,” they each fall under the general discipline of nonverbal communication and thus, are referred to as exclusively nonverbal “cues” or “channels.” Influence is directly related to persuasion, and for a film to be successful, audiences must be engaged. This engagement leads moviegoers to rate the film favorably, resulting in more people spending money to view the film (commercial success) and/or writing reviews praising the film’s efforts (critical success).

## **Introduction**

Films, as a prominent facet of popular culture in the United States, are considered successful in two ways: critical and commercial (or box-office) success. Critical success is based on the consensus from professional movie critics that write favorable reviews. In addition, there are well-known websites like [imdb.com](http://imdb.com) or [rottentomatoes.com](http://rottentomatoes.com) that include user ratings whose scores often align with critics' evaluations. Films are considered box-office successes based on their profitability, or grossed revenue that exceeded production costs. However, this commercial success does not mean those films are critically acclaimed.

To be critically acclaimed, films undergo intensive review and are analyzed based on certain features that can be classified as nonverbal channels. This paper will be outlining four nonverbal channels—environment, physical characteristics, gestures, and touch—how they can be found in films, and if effectively using a combination of these nonverbal cues has an influence on the critical and/or commercial success of films.

In both cases, films receive awards or break records that relate to its achievement commercially or critically. Essentially, these nonverbal cues are awarded for their achievements, such as best cinematography (environment), costume design (physical characteristics), and best acting (gestures/touch). Critics and award voters are alike: they are human and inevitably form biases. The praise given to films is ultimately based on how well the movie persuaded the audience. Whether it is persuasion of believing an actor was experiencing all of the emotions he or she portrayed in the performance, or how authentic the wardrobe compares to the time period it is resembling, audience members make their judgments on how emotionally invested they were in the film. To achieve persuasion, there needs to be an effective compilation of the mentioned nonverbal channels to convince audiences.

## **Environment**

The transactional communication model demonstrates a simultaneous exchange of information between two parties and in addition to the messages themselves, noise is present in the interaction. Noise is only one of many components of environment that affect communication. Inevitably, when people communicate with one another, their surrounding environment always has an influence on the interaction (Knapp, Hall and Horgan, 2014).

In films, the environment is an artificial set that is manipulated with colors, modified lighting, visual angles, and additional sound. Each of these elements, excluding sound, add to the film's cinematography, which is defined as "the art or science of motion-picture photography," (Schoenberg, 2011). Film production teams include the cinematographer (also known as Director of Photography) who is hired for his or her expertise and makes decisions on all visual elements of a film. These visual elements include composition, lighting, camera motion, and anything that audiences can see in each shot (Schoenberg, 2011). These aesthetic building blocks are also important because they help audiences cognitively process what is seen onscreen (Zettl, 1998). Since film is a visually-based medium, cinematography cannot be overlooked because filmmakers use it as a visual guide for the audience (Tomlinson Jr., 1999).

## ***Color***

Cinematographers add to the visual quality of their films starting with color. Colors in films are symbolic and include deeper meanings about the context or characters themselves. Research states how different colors can emit distinct wavelength frequencies and how those frequencies cause effects on people (Cerrato, 2012). Filmmakers intentionally choose certain colors to bring out emotions out of audiences and evoking those emotions makes viewers more invested in the film.

As a nonverbal channel, color in films forces audiences to react emotionally to the actors' surroundings shown onscreen. As Mehrabian (1976) researched, emotional reactions are accounted in terms of arousal, pleasure, and dominance. Films primarily focus on the arousal aspect to communicate to viewers and seek to bring out their emotions.

Arousal in this context refers to how active, stimulated, frenzied, or alert we are (Knapp, Hall and Horgan, 2014). For example, the color red can trigger stimulation and certain emotions. Red symbolizes excitement, strength, passion, speed, and danger, and in addition red is often where the eye looks first (Cerrato, 2012). Though red is a strong communicator from filmmaker to audience because of its ability to be recognized quickly, changes in color in movie frames still are effective at evoking emotions. Therefore, colors like red, are included to communicate particular messages in symbolic, subtle ways. For example, red is associated with anger, danger, excitement, desire, and love. Humans are stimulated by these colors to have actual physiological reactions the colors they see (Cerrato, 2012). However, the targeted emotion from what is on screen depends on the context in which the scene takes place. To determine the success of films, emotions must be elicited from mass audiences of regular moviegoers and critics who make the decision to pay for the film in theaters (commercial success) or review the film with great acceptance (critical success).

Within the last ten years, research has been conducted to evaluate physiological responses based on different movie scenes. In an experiment conducted by Soleymani et. al (2009), eight participants were shown 64 different scenes from eight movies as their physiological responses were recorded. The experiment measured degrees of arousal (scale of excited to calm) and valence (scale of negative to positive) from the participants based on a combination of their physiological signals.

Regarding color, their research mentioned that “colors and their proportions have an effect to elicit emotions,” (Soleymani\_et al., 2009). The average pixel’s color change between two consecutive frames measured visual excitement from the participants. Color was not the only factor when physiological responses like average skin resistance, blood pressure, heart rate, respiration, skin temperature, and eye blinking rate, were measured (Soleymani\_et al., 2009).

There is no question that color has an impact in films and on viewers. Color plays a significant role in all types of movies and is a tool utilized for nonverbal communication. However, it is important to remember that the filmmakers have the responsibility to use color where it fits best to maximize audience response. As Tomlinson Jr. (1999) states, “Movies play to the viewers’ emotions, evoking humor, fear, love, and excitement,” (p. 6).

### ***Lighting and Camera Motion***

Similar to color, lighting and camera motion are other visual nonverbal channels that enhance audiences’ experience through methods of cinematography. As mentioned before, research describes cinematography as a visual guide for the audience. Lighting and camera motion techniques are used to “lead the audience to understand events in a certain way,” (Tomlinson Jr., 1999).

Each filmmaker has their own cinematic style regarding camera angles and lighting decisions. Though styles vary, filmmakers are intentional about their decisions for certain emotions, psychological relationships, and other information to be framed in each scene. For example, lighting can “manipulate the impression conveyed on the screen” by controlling the strength, quality, angle arrangement, and coverage (Millerson, 2013). As the visual guide for audiences, lighting can also create an intended ambience and unify a series of separate subjects to develop visual consistency (Millerson, 2013). Camera motion includes several movements

that represent different emotions. A “loose” motion is described as “loose springs and strong damping,” usually used for a sad camera system. “None” is another motion style that tracks characters directly as if the camera is lurking behind that actor, resulting in a jittery look that conveys fear (Tomlinson Jr., 1999).

The cinematography style is a purposeful feature of the film and is utilized to nonverbally narrate events as they occur in the movie. To achieve success, the ability to persuade audiences is tested. When the cinematography is harmonious with the overall story, audiences are not distracted with the film’s environment to make sense of what is happening onscreen. From Tomlinson Jr.’s (1999) study, “Participants who feel comfortable with the way the scene is being presented on the screen are free from the need to think about cinematography at all, and instead are able to concentrate on interacting and understanding our characters.” To truly analyze if a film is successful at telling the story, audience members need to ask if they could immerse themselves in the plot with no or little distraction from the communicative environment. Critically acclaimed films include cinematography work that successfully achieves the filmmaker’s storytelling. The cinematography also plays the subtle role of allowing audiences to recollect what the combination of those features was subconsciously communicating.

### ***Sound***

Sound is a component of the nonverbal channel environment, but it is apart from the visual elements that are included in a film’s cinematography. However, research has shown that sound is emotionally evoking like visual images. Soleymani et al. (1999) included in their experiment that sound is an important, impactful source to the user’s experience. Loudness of speech evokes arousal, and rhythm and average pitch relate to valence. Sound does not only have to depend on the actors, but also the accompanying music played in the background.

Research conducted by Jenkins and Andrews (2012) on nonverbal contemporary film stimuli for the elicitation of emotions purposefully left sound on in their experimental film clips. The film clips included music without lyrics and no dialogue, yet the music in those films was found to add to the emotional experience. Films do not only depend on its film score (musical compositions unique to the movie without lyrics), but can use more contemporary music with words to communicate to audiences with its lyrics.

Additional research was conducted by Auer et al. (2012) to measure the influences of film music on viewers' eye movements. The authors sought to determine the strength of film music on viewers' perception by showing participants short clips with different musical conditions (horror music, no music, documentary music). Their findings concluded clear empirical evidence of film music affecting viewer eye movements and that music, does in fact, make a difference even to the core visuals in the viewer's experience.

Besides music, simple sound effects have an impact on films when added. A "whooshing" sound adds life to the camera and makes it more of an interactive tool than just an outside, invisible observer (Tomlinson Jr., 1999). This research proves that filmmakers are intentional with their sound decisions because they seek to enhance stimulation in an audible and visual manner.

Combining these environmental components—color, lighting and camera motion, and sound—all add to the viewer experience of film. Each of these elements can evoke emotions and persuade audiences through this nonverbal channel. Through this persuasion, individuals are more likely to positively receive the film whether that be contributing to its box-office success or praising it in the form of a written review. Perhaps more obvious than the environment, the physical appearances of the actors themselves adds to both categories of films' success.

## **Physical Characteristics**

### ***Physical Attractiveness***

Stereotypically, most film actors and actresses are above-average, physically attractive individuals. Filmmakers use these attractive people not only because of their acting abilities but how aesthetically pleasing it is to look at them. Physical characteristics as a nonverbal channel does not apply to environment but lies in the physicality of the actual performers.

Research suggests there is an increased liking for a person who is considered physically attractive (Knapp, Hall and Horgan, 2014). Specifically, in Hollywood the stereotype of beauty = goodness, means the beautiful characters are instantaneously viewed favorably as good people (Smith, McIntosh, and Bazzini, 1999). However, Knapp, Hall, and Horgan have accurately pointed out that stereotypes are not always valid. People have differences in their perceptions of attractive and unattractive people (2014). However, for the sake of the argument, it is reasonable to say these stereotypes do not apply in Hollywood because a film is portraying a two-dimensional person that the audience may never encounter to refute the stereotypes for themselves.

Additional research investigated of beauty-and-goodness stereotypes in film. Their findings showed in their sample of 50 years' worth of film, physical attractiveness was "significantly associated with goodness," (Smith, McIntosh and Bazzini, 1999). In addition, the physically attractive characters were more positively portrayed if that character was in a leading role. Films had the tendency to also strengthen the beauty-to-goodness stereotype in favor of attractive people (Smith, McIntosh and Bazzini, 1999).

Ever since Hollywood became the central hub for films and their stars, beautiful people have flocked to California in hopes of becoming an actor. The 21st century is no exception and

has continued to cast individuals who are considered physically attractive. The importance of physical attractiveness in society is not a “contemporary occurrence,” (Patzner, 2012). Charles Darwin observed that physical attractiveness plays a significant role in the history of humans. The anthropological evidence dating back to the beginning of human history, verifies that physical attractiveness is a timeless concept and “one is almost tempted to regard it as an instinct,” (Patzner, 2012).

If physical attractiveness is considered instinctive, the dimensions must be defined of what is considered attractive and unattractive. Desirable physical characteristics include both the body and face. The principle of symmetry is used to identify facial attractiveness, which means individuals with symmetrical facial features are viewed as more attractive. Knapp, Hall and Horgan (2014) even state famous movie actor, Denzel Washington, as an example of the principle of symmetry.

All of this is significant in answering if nonverbal cues influence the critical or commercial success of films because one of the foundational aspects of a film are the actors and what they look like. As performers, their looks are highly influential to the film’s audiences. Smith, McIntosh and Bazzini (1999) conclude in their research how physical attractiveness is exemplary of the power of mass media influencing human attitudes and judgments. Not only is mass media influential, but repeated exposure will yield powerful effects on viewers.

As a frequent moviegoer or professional film critic, there is constant exposure to physically attractive individuals fulfilling the beauty-to-goodness stereotype. Soon, people begin developing their own opinions about different actors and those develop into individuals’ personal biases. That bias has influence on the success of the film in both regards. If a highly-attractive actor has a newly released movie, one of the reasons audiences will go to theaters is because

their (probable) physical attractiveness made them more likable, therefore more moviegoers like that actor enough to see the movie. On the other hand of becoming a critically acclaimed film, many writers will comment on how exquisite the actors looked in the film along with their talents that were showcased onscreen. Film critics have their own bias and are subject to undergo the same process of favoring certain actors based on the bias they have developed from viewing their past films.

### *Costume Design*

To strengthen a film's persuasiveness, costume design is used to communicate physical characteristics nonverbally. One of the most important functions of costume design is communication through clothing. As Barnard (2001) states, clothing can be used as decoration, sexual attraction, persuasion, identification, and mood reflection.

Costume design is highly impactful when the film calls for authenticity to a geographical location or time period. Authentic clothing in period dramas (that are often critically acclaimed) adds to audiences' immersion into the story. The realness of the clothing evokes the feelings of witnessing the events in the film, true or not, unfold as if the audience was present.

In addition to authenticity, clothing's functions include artifacts (or accessories, decorations that are placed on the body) that reveal the characters' personalities or actions. Artifacts communicate without words and make the films' character(s) much more believable in their given environments. In addition, research shows clothing itself acts as a means of persuasion (Knapp, Hall and Horgan, 2014). In a study conducted six decades ago, researchers tested the ability of people dressed in "high-status" clothing to get bystanders to follow their actions and violate a traffic light. The researchers discovered these unsuspecting pedestrians were more likely to violate the traffic light "if another person violated it ahead of them,

especially if that other person's attire represented a person with social status," (Lefkowitz, Blake and Mouton, 1955). Though the same circumstances do not apply to movie viewers, the fact is research has proven that clothing can be persuasive.

Since clothing is persuasive, filmmakers spend insurmountable amounts of time and money to reassure their costumes are exact. Clothing is used to portray interpersonal relationships between characters and the characters' relationships with their environment. The visual appearance of actors matters to successfully indicate these relationships. Romantic ideals portrayed in films aim to have cohesiveness and similarities to make the possibility of a relationship more believable. Clothing is an important addition to the character's visual appearance and often has subconscious judgments made about it from viewers (Hefner and Wilson, 2013).

A story that is supposed to demonstrate how the two leading characters have significantly different backgrounds and an inevitably doomed relationship will communicate this contrast in several ways, including clothing. For example, in the 2004 film *The Notebook*, the two leading teenage characters, Noah and Allie, come from two very different familial backgrounds. Noah is a blue-collar worker from a small town in South Carolina while Allie's parents are wealthy and are staying in one of the town's largest mansions for summer. In the scene where Allie brings Noah to brunch at her home, the nonverbal communication through clothing is exhibited. For the high-status guests in this scene, there was a general assumption that everyone knew to wear all white clothing to the meal. Noah, who is not considered of high-status, is shown seated at the middle of the table wearing dark blue, noticeably out of place in a sea of white clothing. To further communicate his ostracized presence amongst the rich folk, one of the guests later asks how much money he makes at his low-paying job. The \$0.40 he makes an hour is incomparable

to the amount of money the guests at this brunch make and further confirms, with the assistance from his clothing, that he does not fit in.

Subtleties of clothing in film scenes, like the one mentioned above, can generate a strong audience reaction. Whether the clothing is a direct communicator of status or personality, or clothing resembles the exact wardrobe of the time the film is set, both cases positively contribute to the viewers' responses that make the film commercially and/or critically successful. Clothing is a persuasive communicator as it is physically placed on the actors themselves, but the gestures actors use to further develop their characters is significant as well.

### **Gestures**

Gestures are defined as arm, hand and head movements, and a large contribution to a film's success in both regards must deal with the actors' abilities to use these movements effectively (Knapp, Hall, and Horgan, 2014). Acting is a combination of using the appropriate physical movements that fit right for each scene. Viewers' opinions are ultimately developed from how they felt when these actors used gestures in an appropriate manner for the film's scenes. Cesario and Higgins (2008) conducted a study about how message recipients were made to "feel right" and were persuaded with nonverbal cues. This study had participants rate whether they "felt right" after a video presentation with an actor intentionally using a particular style of nonverbal gestures. The goal of the study was to determine message effectiveness of nonverbal cues and ultimately, if the participants "felt right" about the overall message. Participants were separated as promotion-focus and prevention-focus recipients, and were shown two videos advocating a fictional after-school program. The content remained the same in each video, however the difference was in nonverbal delivery (Cesario and Higgins, 2008).

The first video had the actor portray an eager delivery style through his hand gestures. This was demonstrated by having palms out, face-up—loosely resembling a begging gesture to further emphasize the need of this program. The second video used a different technique called the vigilant delivery style. This style used more gestures of palms faced down with fluid movements to visualize a linear image in a “as a matter-of-fact” demeanor. In addition, the vigilant delivery style used more gestures of pinching the thumb and pointer/middle fingers together without a completely closed fist to exemplify articulation (Cesario and Higgins, 2008).

The results ultimately concluded that the vigilant delivery style was more effective in one context, but not the other, and vice versa for the eager delivery style. Either way, the study proved how those nonverbal gestures were framed to improve message effectiveness. Similar results have been found when research was conducted to determine what qualities are needed for a successful TED talk. One of the five common patterns correlated to popular TED talks lied in the hand gestures used by speakers. The top TED talks that averaged 7.36 million views had speakers use an average of 465 hand gestures during the 18-minute talk. The bottom TED talks with an average 124,000 viewer rate had speakers only use about 272 hand gestures (Van Edwards and Vaughn, 2015).

In films, actors need to apply the same concept of finding the regulatory-fit gestures that make the scene “feel right.” Ultimately the use of hand gestures is a “nonverbal way to build show and build trust,” (Van Edwards and Vaughn, 2015). Building trust means creating a relationship with audience members to further convince them how their acting exhibits authenticity to the scenes. The decisions on how to interact as characters in the film need to be made by the actors themselves and the filmmakers. The actors’ ability to consistently deliver

effective messages through their performances is proof of their talents. However, filmmakers can manipulate what the communication onscreen through editing.

Editing can further persuade audiences because the filmmaker chooses what gestures are shown and what are not. Research has been conducted on the perception of politicians by television viewers based on their nonverbal cues through editing. Haumer and Donsbach (2009) focused on the television's visual aspects of political communication since political talk shows use close-ups, nonverbal reaction shots of the host or studio audience, and shots that illustrate emotions or interpretations. As their research states, editors decide what is being televised and "how they behave nonverbally more than what they talk about," (Haumer and Donsbach, 2009).

The significance of editing is to deliberately create perceptions from audiences. For a political talk show editor, the content is directed to fabricate perceptions that appeal with the show or network's target audience. In film, editing is utilized to create perceptions of characters or context to move the story along. Though films do not show reaction shots from the audiences like the study researched, similar techniques are used to convey the overall message. Those techniques include only what the filmmakers want audiences to see in each shot.

Commercial and critical success of films relies on the acting abilities of the performers and how well they can deliver the message of the movie effectively. Though the process seems complicated and impossible to persuade audiences, success is achievable.

The Academy Award® nominated film, *Carol* (2015), was critically acclaimed and both leading actresses were nominated for their performances. From the film's official website, *Carol* "follows two women from very different backgrounds who find themselves in an unexpected love affair in 1950s New York. As conventional norms of the time challenge their undeniable attraction, an honest story emerges to reveal the resilience of the heart in the face of change,"

(2015). Three different reviews of *Carol* were analyzed to determine how the leading actresses used gestures to enhance their performances. A pattern of these reviews was the observation of the use of gestures in the film to communicate the overall story of the uncertainty, risk, and reward of falling in love.

*Carol* has been recognized as one of 2015's best films for a few reasons: editing, cinematography, directing, and acting. The reviews each comment on the emphasis of gestures from both actresses, saying, "*Carol* is focused on gestures," "It is a film composed of gestures and glances," and "every gesture is a 'bit'." (2015). In relation to the audiences witnessing the nonverbal intricacies, Taubin (2015) adds that *Carol* is a film in which "small gestures become touchstones, for characters and viewers alike, of a passion beyond words." Taubin's review further confirms the effect of gestures from film to audience. Actors must carefully execute gestures in persuasion to convince viewers of the ongoing events unfolded in the film. On the other hand, editors must carefully choose which gestures are focused on and shown onscreen to audiences. Actors then should bring their characters to life not only through gestures, but touch as well.

### **Touch**

Touch is an effective medium in human communication that serves in multiple functions. Knapp, Hall and Horgan (2014) write different meanings of touch are as influence, interpersonal responsiveness, interaction management, and to communicate emotions. For the communication of emotions, research shows at least six emotions: anger, fear, disgust, love, gratitude, and sympathy, can be communicated with touch (Hertenstein, Keltner, App, Bulleit and Jaskolka, 2006).

Per Knapp, Hall and Horgan (2014) touch is utilized to influence and persuade others. Many studies have been dedicated to the power of touch, such as Crusco and Wetzels (1985) 1984 experiment that touching the hand or shoulder increased a patrons' tipping significantly. In addition, Jones and Yarbrough coined the term *compliance touches* to define the phenomena of touching an individual to persuade the other to do something.

Films include actors who have the responsibility to utilize touch to communicate interpersonal relationships between the characters. A study was conducted that included participants communicating emotions through actual physical touch and observing touch in video clips (Hertenstein et al. 2006). In their findings, the researchers discovered that normally, participants judge "prototypical displays or those posed by actors' adept at emotional communication." In other words, past studies have yielded results that participants feel actors or other people who are simply performing these unnatural and crafted touches are believable. Though audiences cannot experience the physical touch from the actors, seeing it conveyed onscreen helps with the overall persuasion of believing the events happening onscreen.

### **Conclusion**

Nonverbal channels in films can be found in multiple forms as the environment, physical characteristics, gestures, and touch. Each channel's purpose is to either elicit emotions, influence, and/or persuade audiences. The goal of a film is to make the written story come to life in authenticity and genuineness. Every channel has been proven to play a role at achieving elicitation or stimulation in one way or another. Filmmakers make calculated decisions on how each channel will be delivered to audiences to highlight audiences' experiences. In the end, a film's commercial and critical success relies on viewers' engagement. If audiences are engaged, they will spend money or write favorable reviews on behalf of that film. A quality combination

of the nonverbal channels mentioned in this paper may be the avenue through which audiences can become engaged with a film and gives it a chance to be accomplished in both areas.

### **Discussion**

After conducting all the research, there is reason to believe that nonverbal channels, in fact, have influence on the critical success of films. There is difficulty in determining the commercial success of films because of many factors. As mentioned in the paper, a film can be a box-office hit without critical success. Films that have been critically acclaimed have been carefully analyzed to establish that recognition. Yet films can lure mass audiences into theaters simply because the film is a sequel, reboot, or another highly-anticipated project.

I would hypothesize that commercially successful films include a quality combination of these nonverbal channels, or because the films excel in one area over another. For example, research can be conducted about if visual effects, categorized in the nonverbal channel of environment, contribute to the film's success at the box-office. At least in this modern time, audiences are eager to watch highly-anticipated films because they are remakes of older films when the industry's technology lacked in visual effects, and seeing the film in a higher definition is exciting enough to build hype.

Further research can be conducted on the commercial success of films, but for now, the research suggests that critical success is related with the effective use of nonverbal channels. The highest honor a film can receive in the industry is an Academy Award®, and now, there are not any Oscars for films that break box-office records and make millions (or billions) of dollars. However, there are Oscars for cinematography, sound editing/mixing, visual effects, acting, costume design, and more that can be categorized in the nonverbal channels covered in this paper.

I also believe films receive these highly-esteemed awards because those films effectively persuaded audiences. Audiences were so invested in the films, captured by the storytelling, visuals, sounds, and actors' performances, that they reviewed them favorably. In the end, I believe the final question could be not only about influence, but persuasion. I would propose research on the audiences' physiological responses to films and if those responses indicate persuasion in any way. In my opinion, critical success is based on the audience's immersion into the film and if those viewers believed the events that unfolded onscreen. In conclusion, my final thoughts are films can achieve critically-acclaimed status with the intricate execution of nonverbal channels, but there is no clear answer about those channels affecting box-office success.

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