

Rules Were Meant to be Broken: Len Cella's *Moron Movies* (1983) Provokes Love, Hate, and Confusion from the MTV, YouTube, and TikTok Generations

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15664/fcj.v21.i0.2704>



Frames Cinema Journal

ISSN 2053-8812

Issue 21 (2023)

<http://www.framescinemajournal.com>



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Rules Were Meant to be Broken: Len Cella's *Moron Movies* (1983) Provokes Love, Hate, and Confusion from the MTV, YouTube, and TikTok Generations

By Ted Fisher

As Len Cella's *Moron Movies* (1983) reaches its 40th birthday, a place in any film canon—mainstream or alternative—still eludes it. Rehabilitating the film as a cinematic milestone has become implausible, complicated by the film's surface similarities to today's social media filmmaking practices. Reviewers evaluate Cella's film as if it were a series of TikTok posts. They miss ample evidence that it should be considered as something more: an example of a parallel mode of cinema, exploring new territories pioneered by the video artists of the early 1980s.

A close study of the film, and its sibling *More Moron Movies* (1985), reveals that Cella's work emerges from visual arts practice rather than moviemaking conventions. His art-informed approach, channelled through his one-person, do-it-yourself “amateur” filmmaking practice, is misunderstood by present-day viewers. A film that humbly made a huge cultural splash in its day is thus dismissed in our present moment, as if its only value is in its role as a precursor to social media videos. The result is a diminishment of *Moron Movies*, and of its importance as an artifact marking a moment in film history.

What happens if we grant Len Cella his due and take seriously his imperfect and beautifully strange collection of 18-second films? Is his work simply the product of technical advances in home moviemaking technology, or does it really explore new ways of thinking about media production and artmaking? What does the mixed, complex, and shifting public reception of his film tell us about generational changes in the limited audience that would seek out a film called

Moron Movies? And where, if we are brave enough to make a prediction, will the film be on its 50th birthday?

Provenance

Just before midnight on December 11, 1984, *The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson* (1962) returned from a commercial break. Johnny Carson said: “Before Buddy Hackett comes out, this might be a good place to do the ‘Moron Movies’ because they’re a little off the wall also. They’re short, homemade, off-the-wall, bizarre little episodes.”¹

I saw, on my parent’s television, Carson’s brief introduction and the nine films that followed: *GETTING RID OF THE RAISINS*, *THE CHEAT*, *A COOK’S PUNISHMENT IN HELL*, *HOW TO STRIKE OUT*, *THE CHICKEN COMEDIAN*, *POOR MAN’S REMOTE CONTROL*, *HOW TO DISCOURAGE PICKPOCKETS*, *HOW TO KNOW IF YOU’RE UGLY*, and *RULES WERE MEANT TO BE BROKEN*.

I was dumbstruck. No wonder Carson was at a loss as to what to call these films. They were funny enough to air on the steadfastly mainstream *Tonight Show*, but the laughter built slowly, and the studio audience was perplexed.

Moviemaking Conventions

If Cella’s film defies moviemaking conventions, which conventions are involved, and how, specifically, is this achieved? If rules are meant to be broken, what rules does *Moron Movies* break?

¹ “Johnny Carson Full Episode: Buddy Hackett, John Lithgow, Moron Movies, Tonight Show, 12/11/1984.” YouTube, December 13, 2013. <https://youtu.be/7mlvQYZfJ58>.

To consider Cella's practice in relationship to traditional cinematic editing, a brief review of two classic texts can help clarify conventional practices and where Cella's editing diverges.

I teach editing at a university, helping students understand the use of conventional / "standard" film shots and how these can be cut together. To deliver an initial conceptual framework of these ideas to my students, I refer to Sergei Eisenstein's essay "The Cinematographic Principle and the Ideogram,"² and I very carefully balance this material with concepts from André Bazin's "The Evolution of the Language of Cinema."³ For advanced students, these can be assigned readings. For beginning students, I present the key ideas through lectures and demonstrations.

Eisenstein posits montage as the central element of filmmaking, presenting its use as the filmmaker's primary tool to control an audience's attention. He also claims its use as a method for creating emotional effects. Eisenstein proposes that meaning emerges in "conflicts" that occur at the instant of change from one image to another—the actual edit point—and in the patterns that develop in an edited series of shots.

Eisenstein describes his debate on editing theory with Vsevolod Pudovkin, a discussion on the specific nature of montage-based meaning-creation: "A graduate of the Kuleshov school, he [Pudovkin] loudly defends an understanding of montage as a linkage of pieces. Into a chain. Again, 'bricks.' Bricks arranged in a series to expound an idea. I confronted him with my viewpoint on montage as a collision. A view that from the collision of two given factors arises a concept."⁴ Eisenstein calls the psychological effects arising from these collisions "sensations."

² Sergei Eisenstein, "The Cinematographic Principle and the Ideogram," *Sergei Eisenstein Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, ed. and trans. Jay Leyda (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977), 28-44.

³ André Bazin, Hugh Gray, Jean Renoir, and François Truffaut, "The Evolution of the Language of Cinema," *What Is Cinema?* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 23-40.

⁴ Sergei Eisenstein, "The Cinematographic Principle and the Ideogram," 37.

In opposition to Eisenstein, André Bazin considers the use of montage to “force” the viewer’s gaze to be a crude, artificial approach. He suggests letting the viewer’s eye study a deep-focus shot. Bazin claims that “depth of focus brings the spectator into a relation with the image closer to that which he enjoys with reality.”⁵ The value of this, Bazin believes, is that “while analytical montage only calls for [a viewer] to follow his guide, to let his attention follow along smoothly with that of the director who will choose what he should see, [in a deep-focus shot] he is called upon to exercise at least a minimum of personal choice. It is from his attention and his will that the meaning of the image in part derives.”⁶

These two texts provide a theoretical framework clarifying traditional approaches to cinematic montage—conventional moviemaking theory. Cella is seemingly not familiar with, or not engaged with, these ideas. Whether that is from a lack of training (he is self-taught and did not go to film school or work with other filmmakers) or if it demonstrates a pragmatic set of choices emerging from his home-based, solo production of ultrashort films, the result is the same. Whether Cella is rejecting tradition, or simply disregarding the “cinematic” approach and replacing it with production techniques similar to those a teenager with a cell phone might use for a TikTok video, he films and cuts minimally and simplistically. He delivers the minimum information needed for his films. Eisenstein and Bazin give us a baseline to discuss the specifics of his filmmaking.

⁵ André Bazin, “The Evolution of the Language of Cinema,” 35.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 36.

Visual Arts Practice

To examine the idea that Cella's work emerges from visual arts practice rather than moviemaking conventions, Arthur C. Danto's *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*⁷ and *Remarks on Art and Philosophy*⁸ provide needed definitions and a conceptual framework regarding the nature of art. Specifically, Danto proposes a definition of art focused on meaning and embodiment, two characteristics useful for understanding the specifics of video art—circa 1980—as distinct from traditional filmmaking practice. If one wants to consider how Cella's work is aligned with that of early 1980s video artists, rather than independent filmmakers from that period or earlier, Danto's definition is useful. As well, Danto's foregrounding of "embodiment" is helpful if we wish to comprehend the nature of Cella's hybrid practice of combining home movie tools (his Super 8 camera) with home video / VHS finishing techniques.

Danto's definitions, and the conceptual ideas around those definitions, were developed and refined in iterations from 1981's *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* to the end of his life. "I knew that I was going to have to give a definition of art that would hold water," Danto explained in an address about his writing on art philosophy and criticism. "I managed to come up with two necessary conditions. ... The first one was that it's got to be about something. It's got to represent something. It's got to have a meaning."⁹ While it might seem silly to ascribe the rather heavy word "meaning" to some of Len Cella's ridiculous and extremely short jokes, the distinction here is between Cella's work and our present-day use of the term "content." Even Cella's basest jokes can

⁷ Arthur C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press, 1981).

⁸ Arthur C. Danto, *Remarks on Art and Philosophy* (Mount Desert Island, Maine: Acadia Summer Arts Program, 2014).

⁹ *Ibid.*, 113.

be seen to “mean” something, especially in contrast with our contemporary approval of posting “content” that marks the existence of the content creator but does little else.

“And then I came up with this idea that there are many things that have meaning, but the interesting thing about artworks is that they embody their meanings,”¹⁰ Danto continues. “So I came up with the thought that for X to be a work of art, X has to have meaning, and embody it. But different objects will embody their meaning in different kinds of ways, and the meaning picks out the properties of the physical object that consist in the embodiment of that meaning.”¹¹

As we will see later, Cella’s *Moron Movies* does not present as “a film” despite having been initially screened in theatres. It is read as “a video” or “a videotape.” Depending on the audience, that embodiment has included a range of specific outlets—from nationwide broadcast on NBC to being discovered on a VHS tape found in the trash—but *Moron Movies*’ visual characteristics and format coincide with the “embodiment” associated with the videotapes of museum-based video artists presenting circa 1980.

Research Gaps

We can draw from the writings of Eisenstein, Bazin, and Danto, and thereby theorize the specific characteristics of *Moron Movies* and Len Cella’s practice, but there is a massive research gap beyond that baseline task. No academic writing seems to exist that addresses the film or the filmmaker. Casual writers (for example, bloggers) have made their thoughts available, but these documents mainly push the idea of Cella as somehow anticipating social media—despite significant evidence to the contrary.

¹⁰ Ibid., 114.

¹¹ Ibid., 114.

As well, the ratings that exist for the film are primarily from the United States and Canada. The film does not seem to have been released, sold, or broadcast anywhere else. While opportunities to view the film expanded with YouTube and other online venues, there has never been any reason for significant interest about the film outside of North America.

The MTV, YouTube, and TikTok Generations

In April of 2023 I presented at the national conference of the Popular Culture Association in San Antonio, Texas. I discussed how the filmmaker Wim Wenders had made a social media commercial for the Salvatore Ferragamo fashion line, and I examined how Wenders and his editor had adapted their editing techniques to match the taste and attention span of the specific generation that was now Ferragamo's expected clientele. As well, I discussed changes I saw in my younger university students and their comprehension of the ideas of continuity editing.

My presentation was placed under the rubric of "Generational Studies," and I learned a great deal from other conference presenters. They addressed the current academic thinking in that field. I realized that while the accepted generational guidelines they used—based generally on technological change rather than world events—seemed correct, the fields of video production and media studies had slightly different relevant milestones to consider. I realized that my own bingeing of music videos in MTV's heyday was different than the media diet of someone whose teen years coincided with YouTube's early expansion or with the growth of TikTok.

The term "Generational Studies" can refer to the generational theory of William Strauss and Neil Howe, but in recent years has been primarily associated with the writing of Dr. Jean M.

Twenge. A C-SPAN hosted video and educational site¹² featuring Twenge places generational milestones in these groups: “Silents (1925-1945), Boomers (1946-1964), Gen. X (1965-1979), Millennials (1980-1994), Gen. Z (1995-2012), and the “Polars” (2013-today).” It is unproductive to simply expect everyone in a given generation to react the same way, but my students, who are from Gen. Z, turn out to be infinitely forgiving of Len Cella’s technical issues. As well, they are quite comfortable with Cella’s 18-second format.

A Changing Grammar of the Edit

Does *Moron Movies* reveal how frail our assumptions about cinematic language are? We have privileged the ideas of Eisenstein and Bazin to the point where their conception of editing provides the basic theory and starting point for much of our mainstream cinema production. University students watching the early “reels” of William Wegman¹³ remark on the “lack” of editing, since the default assumption is that film and video should be shaped and refined in some way if the end product is something other than a social media clip.

As Deirdre Boyle explains in *Subject to Change: Guerrilla Television Revisited*,¹⁴ the early use of portable video cameras, from 1965 to 1968, involved documenting artist-instigated “happenings,” a mode of production that did not focus on editing. Access to editing technology lagged behind, leaving community-based activists and documentarians waiting. Artists moved ahead. Boyle describes a key moment, again associated with art and artists and unedited videotape:

¹² “American Generations: C-SPAN Classroom.” C. Accessed July 25, 2023. <https://www.c-span.org/classroom/document/?20840>.

¹³ “William Wegman.” Electronic Arts Intermix: William Wegman. Accessed July 25, 2023. <https://www.eai.org/artists/william-wegman/titles>.

¹⁴ Dierdre Boyle, *Subject to Change: Guerrilla Television Revisited*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 4.

One version of the birth of portable video begins on an October day in 1965 when Korean-born artist Nam June Paik purchased one of the first portable video cameras and recorders at the Liberty Music Store in New York City. Hopping in a cab and pointing his half-inch, black-and-white video camera out the window, as the story goes, he recorded the arrival of Pope Paul VI in New York on his way to address the United Nations. That evening Paik played his tape at the Cafe au Go Go in Greenwich Village and circulated a video manifesto declaring this new electronic medium would revolutionize art and information....¹⁵

It is notable, then, that *Moron Movies* does not feel like a documentation of performance art, but instead like an evolved continuation of the “actualities” of the Lumiere Brothers. In an alternate timeline where cinematic editing was never invented, *Moron Movies* makes perfect sense. Cella has little interest in using traditional establishing shots or working with the scale of shots in the way an independent filmmaker would. He points the camera at the next bit of information he needs for his joke, the same way a cellphone filmmaker might. Today Cella’s direct-to-camera presentation and disregard for continuity editing suits the aesthetic a new generation embraces.

Then again, if we look at *Moron Movies* with the same toolset we use for “serious” cinema, we discover a rigorous structure in it. With title cards at the beginning of each of the 189 segments that make up the film, Cella disrupts any possibility of cinematic immersion, breaking the conceits of traditional cinematic editing. The result is closer to a stand-up comedy routine than to a traditionally-edited comedy feature. There is a set up in each title card, and then the film segment itself is the punch line.

Cella’s purposeful rejection of mainstream filmmaking is easily missed. Public reactions to the film assume this is simply a clumsy effort, but that one might love or hate the film anyway, depending on one’s sense of humour. Cella has been lauded as the first YouTuber, a primordial TikTokker, and an amateur filmmaking legend, yet his work is often dismissed as a collection of

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

“dad jokes.” What happens if we treat his work in the same way that we would the museum-targeted videos of William Wegman or Ilene Segalove?

If *Moron Movies*—seen by millions through its *The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson* (1962) broadcasts and its long run as a video rental—is to be considered as part of a 20th century film canon, we need to understand its evolving relationship with a public audience that is only now becoming brave enough to watch the film in an unironic way.

Collecting and decoding public reactions to *Moron Movies* allows us to look at what it contains at its heart—beyond our nervous laughter. With these reactions as background, we can consider the film’s production techniques as an alternative approach, rather than as a failed or naïve approach. If we accept the film in this way, it can be argued that *Moron Movies* is an unpretentious reminder that cinema is only a century old, shaped by quickly-changing technology, and built on a fragile set of assumptions about editing and human comprehension. Is there room for work that exists somewhere between cinema and art?

Public Reaction, Then and Now

The mixed reaction experienced by *Tonight Show* viewers has been echoed over decades by reviewers on public forums from discussion boards to IMDb to Letterboxd. Accessing IMDb on May 16, 2023, we find that there are 21 IMDb user reviews available, posted from April 28, 2001, to December 1, 2018. There is an intriguing gap between that 2018 review and the previous review, dated October 20, 2010. For nearly eight years, *Moron Movies* seems to have been forgotten, at least by IMDb reviewers. Still, this collection of reviews spans almost 20 years, the traditional measurement for a “generation.”

These 21 reviews exist alongside a larger set of “user ratings” in a system that allows scoring from one to ten. With 180 user ratings, averaging 5.6 out of 10, we see a breakdown where the highest rating (10) has 21.7% of the vote (39 votes) and the lowest rating (1) has 26.7% of the vote (48 votes). The highest and lowest possible ratings dominate.

This notable split—which seems to indicate a “love it” or “hate it” reaction rather than an evaluative score—is demonstrated in another way if we break the scores down into three rating categories. We find an even split between high, medium, and low ratings.

If we consider a rating of 10, 9, or 8 as a “high” score, we see:

10	39 votes
9	13 votes
8	8 votes

If we consider a rating of 7, 6, 5, or 4 as a “medium” score, we see:

7	17 votes
6	15 votes
5	17 votes
4	7

If we consider a rating of 3, 2, or 1 as a “low” score, we see:

3	8 votes
2	8 votes
1	48 votes

An even division is evident:

60 votes in the HIGH category
56 votes in the MEDIUM category
64 votes in the LOW category

There is no consensus on *Moron Movies*. The scores are split toward the voting extremes (the most common scores are 10s and 1s), indicating a polarity in audience reaction. No viewpoint wins out: we see an even division between high, medium, and low score categories indicating an overall divided response from the self-selecting audience that voted.

Note that IMDb shows no external reviews, and no Metacritic reviews, for *Moron Movies*. The film is abandoned by conventional reviewers. That makes sense, as it is not available on any streamers or networks. You must seek it out, and only a tiny audience does.

Letterboxd reveals a similar pattern, though more generous in scoring. The average is 3.3 stars out of 5, which could be considered a 6.6 out of 10 on IMDb.

If we consider a rating of 5, 4.5, or 4 as a “high” score, we see:

5	9 votes
4.5	5 votes
4	14 votes

If we consider a rating of 3.5, 3, 2.5 or 2 as a “medium” score, we see:

3.5	5 votes
3	14 votes
2.5	7 votes
2	9 votes

If we consider a rating of 1.5, 1 or .5 as a “low” score, we see:

1.5	4 votes
1	4 votes
.5	3 votes

These divisions seem to skew positive compared to the IMDb results:

- 28 votes in the HIGH category
- 35 votes in the MEDIUM category
- 11 votes in the LOW category

The Letterboxd reviews begin November 27, 2014, but there is a gap to February 11, 2018. They then continue into May 10, 2023. These reviews are mostly recent, which reminds us that IMDb and Letterboxd offer a limited, imperfect sample of public reception.

With no pre-2001 online archive of viewer posts for comparison, any hope to consider audience reception to *Moron Movies* over time (especially from its release until 2001) must rely on additional personal statements. Interestingly, the anecdotes that do exist clarify the specific nature of the notably mixed reactions seen in online reviews and the “love it” or “hate it” reaction

seemingly inherent in the *Moron Movies* viewing experience. For example, Philadelphia artist, musician, and collector Perry Shall describes discovering the film when he was ten, and then rediscovering it a decade later:

We would go to Blockbuster when they still would carry stuff that was a little bit out of the ordinary, which eventually they stopped doing.... And so I saw this thing on the shelf and it was called “Moron Movies.” ... So we get it. I go home, I start playing it, and I go, “Huh?” I don't know if it clicks with me. ... Fast forward to high school. ... I walked the street and there were boxes of VHS tapes in the trash at a neighbour's house. ... So I'm flipping through and I pull out this homemade VHS tape and it says on it “Scarface / Moron Movies” on one tape. I ran back to my friend's house ... I put it on and watched everybody's reactions. ... You could see without words: they go, “I don't get it.” And I'm watching it, and I'm going, “Oh my God, I am so thankful to discover this at this moment in my life, or to rediscover it. This is the funniest, most brilliant thing I've ever seen.”¹⁶

Generational Shifts in Reception?

In recent years, concepts from the field of “generational studies” have been used in hope of better understanding audience reception for film and video works. Real and measurable differences can be seen when we compare large groups of people born in different time periods. Each generation's experience with technology (and the media ingested through that technology) shapes their expectations and reactions enough to matter. Individuals vary greatly, but my undergraduate students—who grew up watching YouTube in their formative years—have a different experience with the rules of cinematic continuity than someone my age.

I grew up watching Hollywood-made theatrical films. My students watched online videos that emphasized direct-to-camera address and de-emphasized continuity cutting. The millions in Johnny Carson's audience on the nights where *Moron Movies* clips were shown came from four defined generations. In 1984, members of “The Greatest Generation” would have been between

¹⁶ “Cinepunx Episode 127: Moron Movies with Perry Shall.” Cinepunx, February 2, 2021. <https://cinepunx.com/cinepunx-episode-127-moron-movies-with-perry-shall/>.

57 and 83, “The Silent Generation” between 39 and 56, “The Baby Boom Generation” between 20 and 38, and “Generation X” between 4 and 19.¹⁷ The age groups that were too young to see those original Tonight Show broadcasts—specifically “The Millennial Generation,” “Generation Z,” and “Generation Alpha”—have experience with phone cameras and publishing homemade videos on social media outlets. It is likely they are less impressed by Cella’s work ethic, and less willing to credit him just for the act of making something.

Moron Movies has migrated to YouTube.com and archive.org, so its audience is now primarily viewers familiar with social media. Consider this 2022 Letterboxd review, in which reviewer “Callisto” gives the film ½ star. Note how often the review addresses TikTok and a concept of “TikTok humour.”

Immediately from its first frame I burst out laughing, nearly in tears, and I had to pause because I couldn't stop. It's so stupid. *Moron Movies* is the perfect title. The jokes don't start out as bad taste, but he eventually brings in more and more potty humor. Children could certainly come up with some of these stupid jokes, but they just wouldn't hit as hard as Len Cella's writing and line delivery. It truly is remarkable what moronic things the human mind can come up with. The jokes are so stupid that if he put these out during the TikTok era on TikTok, he would be the most famous and successful TikTok comedian among people who love this stupid humor. I have only seen a handful of TikToks from watching streams or videos, but this was like watching them for 83 minutes (for both movies without any credits) (how do people do this on a daily basis in real life?!), only much better thanks to the old 80s shot-on-video quality and deliver of this genius. It also helps they're filmed in 4:3 rather than that awful portrait mode crap, whatever that aspect ratio is.

I admire this man's dedication for producing this himself in the mid-80s, but over an hour of TikTok is not for me. That's enough TikTok for my whole life and not only do I not use TikTok, but I have the sequel to watch after this. I laughed so much in the beginning, but now I can't wait until it ends. It also doesn't help that the jokes progressively get less and less funny (perhaps stupider?). If this were instead a short, it would be much more tolerable. The biggest lesson this film teaches you is that moronic (TikTok) humor has always

¹⁷ Sarah Cottrell, “A Year-by-Year Guide to the Different Generations,” Parents, January 29, 2023. <https://www.parents.com/parenting/better-parenting/style/generation-names-and-years-a-cheat-sheet-for-parents/>.

existed, and this is 30 years before TikTok and before widespread use of the Internet, for that matter!¹⁸

An April 2023 review is more generous, giving 4 and ½ stars, but again locking Cella's work into the prison of TikTok. Reviewer "thecodyguy" writes:

They called Len Cella crazy. You'd call him crazy now. But look at all of you people today watching stupid skits and videos on YouTube and TikTok. This movie did that well before those existed and it's a miracle. It's a series of TikTok sketches for the generation raised on the funnies and Mad Magazine. It's a singular exercise in absurdity.¹⁹

It is interesting to see the concept of "absurdity" appear in this review. For the reviewer, the point is Cella's embrace of a certain kind of comedy. There is another association, however, more relevant to understanding Cella's filmmaking.

Cella's *A COOK'S PUNISHMENT IN HELL* appears at 44 minutes and 18 seconds into *Moron Movies*. (It was one of the nine selections I saw on Carson's December 11, 1984 broadcast.) It begins, as all the segments do, with a shot of white plastic letters spelling out the title. Cella presents this text on the diagonal, slanting down on the left, leaning backwards away from the camera. This an amateur set up. One could use a copy stand, put the camera directly above the text, square it up ... but this is good enough, as it was for many hobbyists making home movies. The background is azure blue, but unevenly lit, lighter at screen left and darker at screen right. This stays on the screen briefly, then cuts to a shot of a frying pan, centred with the handle extending out of the frame on screen right. The countertop, serving as a background to the frying pan, is a pinkish red.

¹⁸ Callisto, "Moron Movies," review of *Moron Movies*, by Len Cella (1985), Letterboxd. Accessed May 24, 2023. <https://boxd.it/3bNqhD>.

¹⁹ thecodyguy, "Moron Movies," review of *Moron Movies*, by Len Cella (1985), Letterboxd. Accessed May 24, 2023. <https://boxd.it/49CHql>.

The key visual element is that this pan has been modified. It has about eighty tacks glued onto it, point-side up. After a few seconds, two hands ease in at the top of the frame, cracking and spilling an egg into the pan. The hands recede, then appear again, spilling a second egg. We are left to imagine the impossible task of sliding anything under the eggs to flip them, scramble them or to take them out of the pan.

Cella's pan is a visual relative to Man Ray's sculpture *Cadeau (Gift)*, an object demonstrating the Dada movement's fascination with the absurd. Consider this description, presented with the object at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, conveniently located just eleven miles from Cella's home:

On December 13, 1921, the day of his first solo exhibition in Paris, Man Ray purchased an ordinary flat iron, a box of tacks, and a tube of glue. He glued the tacks onto the iron, titled it *Cadeau*, and added it to the exhibition. This iconoclastic object exemplifies Man Ray's emphasis on the juxtaposition of two completely unrelated elements in his assemblages, which he explained were "designed to amuse, annoy, bewilder, mystify, inspire reflection, but not to arouse admiration for any technical excellence usually sought or valued in objects classified as works of art."²⁰

Certainly Cella could have seen the Man Ray sculpture and stolen the idea, or unconsciously reimagined it. He might simply have been inspired. The audacity of bringing a Dada worldview into his 1980s homemade video practice makes all forgivable, even laudable.

Is it wrong to credit Cella, the man behind *ANIMALS SHOULD WEAR UNDERWEAR*, with the subtle wit of our best Dada artists? Perhaps. It turns out *A COOK'S PUNISHMENT IN HELL* is not Cella's first version of this joke. Earlier in *Moron Movies*, at 10 minutes and 56 seconds into the program, we have already seen *CARPENTER'S PUNISHMENT IN HELL*. In this,

²⁰ Man Ray, *Cadeau (Gift)*, 1921. Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, accessed May 24, 2023. <https://philamuseum.org/collection/object/293203>.

Cella also presents an absurd object—a hammer held by a string instead of a wooden handle—and its broken functionality becomes a diabolical punishment. And, at 34 minutes and 59 seconds, we have *A CHEF'S PUNISHMENT IN HELL*, another version of the concept where the pan was modified with a central bolt. We watch our tormented chef try to pry out what appears to be a pork chop. Cella's repetition of ideas is rare in mainstream cinematic practice—where the goal is generally to make a single long-duration film—but in line with visual arts practice, where Claude Monet painted thirty evolving views of Rouen Cathedral. Perry Shall, a *Moron Movies* fan who would eventually become Cella's friend, observed Cella implementing a similar strategy of making, testing, and selecting individual films as components of his master collection:

And so this guy was just creating endless content, hundreds, I would say, or at least over 100 videos that were only ending up to be 15 seconds. Probably spent a day each filming them, you know, and writing them and all that stuff. And he's just so naturally hilarious. So what he did was he'd have people come over, they'd watch the movies. If he didn't get a laugh, he would pull that movie out of the final product. And he continued, he would continue to do that for years, even after it got great reactions. If one joke stopped landing, he would remove it because he wanted this perfect piece of work...²¹

Cella's path to filmmaking began after his exploration of other visual arts. Simon Mercer's *King Dong* documentary reveals Len Cella's painting, drawing, and process of refining the interior of his home. "Yeah, everything in my apartment was done by me," Cella says. "I just feel more comfortable, you know, making things. I mean, to me, any work of art, it has to be pure. You have to do everything."²²

Categorization

²¹ "Cinepunx Episode 127: Moron Movies with Perry Shall." Cinepunx, February 2, 2021. <https://cinepunx.com/cinepunx-episode-127-moron-movies-with-perry-shall/>.

²² Len Cella quoted in Simon Mercer, *King Dong*, Vimeo, May 18, 2023. <https://vimeo.com/23233796>

How much of the work of early 1980s video artists have you watched and taken seriously? Is this work within our concept of “cinema,” or is it contained only in our notion of “art”? Is our categorization shaped by the tools of production, the function of the work, or something else?

Before one places Cella’s *Moron Movies* into any category, it is prudent to consider the work of artists Ilene Segalove and William Wegman. Like Cella, these artists presented works based on autobiographical material, embraced technologies less refined than Hollywood’s 35mm cinema cameras, and used quirky, sly humour. We put their production into the category of video art. We read their videos as aimed at museum exhibition, though we do this against evidence in the work itself, which hints at a goal of television broadcast. Segalove’s *Why I Got Into TV and Other Stories* (1983) and *More TV Stories* (1985) are certainly ready for broadcast.

Wegman screened *Man Ray and Mic* (1981)²³ on *Saturday Night Live* (1975) two years before Cella’s films made it to television. It is hard to ignore the visual and structural similarities to the Cella films. Wegman’s film opens with a title card (yellow on blue rather than white on blue, but similar enough), then reveals Wegman placing a microphone on the ground in front of his dog, moving offscreen, and then telling the dog to “drop it.” When Man Ray (Wegman’s dog, not the 1920s artist) obeys, we hear the startlingly clear sound of the object being dropped in front of the microphone. The film presents its tiny joke in 30 seconds, using a set up / punchline structure. Wegman has adapted his gallery-oriented 1970s video work for 1980s television, where brevity is essential. One wonders if Cella happened to catch this broadcast.

The problem with categorizing this type of work—and therefore the work of Cella—through its intended outlet is that we exacerbate the false narratives that relying on “the artist’s

²³ “Wegman Film - Saturday Night Live,” YouTube, October 9, 2013.

<https://youtu.be/tMCdzBzG8pk>.

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intent” can create. If we imagine three works filmed with identical equipment but distributed into three distinct silos—cinema, video art, television—then we are likely to resolve our categorization dilemma by seeking out or claiming to know the artist’s intention. This is an unreliable approach. If you have not considered the problem of “intentionality” before, begin with W. K. Wimsatt, Jr. and M. C. Beardsley’s critique of focusing on an artist’s claimed or imagined intent.

In “The Intentional Fallacy” they write: “The poem is not the critic’s own and not the author’s (it is detached from the author at birth and goes about the world beyond his power to intend about it or control it). The poem belongs to the public.”²⁴ If, instead, we primarily consider the work of art itself, leaving intention and function as secondary factors, less important and less trustworthy, we realize that “cinema,” “video art” and “television” are arbitrary categorizations. These categories can be useful, but lead to subdividing works based on styles, traditions, personal taste, or commercial trends.

Is *Moron Movies* some sort of hybrid work, triangulating art, cinema, and television? It is shot on film, so it is cinema. Yet it dismisses editing conventions, so it is not. It breaks up time into rigid informational chunks, so it is television. Its content, however, is personal, absurd, and dreamlike, so it is video art. Or, one wonders, is it simply naïve cinema? David Bordwell’s *On the History of Film Style* provides helpful context:

The history of cinema is most commonly understood as a narrative that traces the emergence of film as a distinct art. Call this the Basic Story. Stretches of the Basic Story are now questionable, but, tacitly or explicitly, it has been the point of departure for the historical study of film style. The Basic Story tells us that cinematic style developed by modifying the capacity of the motion picture camera to record an event. According to the Story, in the course of the 1910s and 1920s particular film techniques were elaborated that made cinema less a pure recording medium than a distinct means of artistic expression.

²⁴ W. K. Wimsatt, Jr. and M. C. Beardsley, “The Intentional Fallacy,” *The Sewanee Review*, Vol. 54, No. 3 (Jul-Sept, 1946): 470.

The saga begins with cinema as a record of everyday incidents, as in the actualité films of Louis Lumiere.²⁵

If we make the effort to consider *Moron Movies* as a 1983 actuality film, with Cella recording “everyday incidents” in 189 films, a comparison to the Lumiere actualities is not entirely ridiculous. At least, no more so than any other academic effort to comprehend *JELLO MAKES A LOUSY DOORSTOP* or *THE PERVERTED CAMERAMAN*.

Cella attempts only minimal editing in *Moron Movies*. More advanced techniques are applied in *More Moron Movies*, but Cella’s edits remain at the level university students achieve at the midpoint of their first editing class. Cella depends on putting something fascinating in front of the camera, usually himself or an art object created for use on camera.

Cella’s craft, beyond editing, is limited, parallel to that of the Lumieres circa 1895. There is no creative use of depth of field, no camera movement, no crafted lighting. Consider, as a comparison, The Lumieres’ *L’Arroseur Arrosé* (1895). It is very short, has no cuts, no closeups, and no camera movement.²⁶ An editor making it today would want to cut to a close up, hoping to increase the impact of the humour when we see the main character squirted by a hose.

Comparing *Moron Movies* to this Lumiere actuality seems fair. Is *Moron Movies*, then, not just old-school cinema, but an example of the oldest-school cinema? Has Cella taken the Lumieres’ approach, added sound and colour, and embraced a minimal practice to match his minimal jokes? Does *Moron Movies* embody its meaning?

²⁵ David Bordwell, *On the History of Film Style* (Madison, Wisconsin: Irvington Way Press, 2018), 13.

²⁶ It is worth noting that, like Len Cella’s reuse of ideas in several of his films, there is more than one Lumiere actuality film using the basic concept of *L’Arroseur Arrosé*.

Keep in mind that Cella is not choosing minimalism as an aesthetic. His craft and his tools are simply limited—and limiting. Cella’s equipment consists of a Super 8 film camera, a hobbyist text board for making his omnipresent title cards, and a minimal lighting kit with no evident diffusion modifiers. Ironically, this is a step above the 8mm gear young Sammy Fabelman starts with in Steven Spielberg’s autobiographical *The Fabelmans* (2022).

Yet Cella is not the prodigy Spielberg/Fabelman is. He uses his equipment in a way that exhibits a lack of technical skill, or a distaste for it, resulting in poor exposure, poor framing, poor focus, etc. Is this a punk aesthetic? An anti-cinema stance? Or simply a man who is a house painter by trade, self-taught and working alone, primarily focused on delivering a set of jokes in his own fashion? It is worth noting that no reviewers comment on these technical issues. The perceived lack of technical quality in the *Moron Movies* films only adds to the humour, or the audacity of delivering that humour.

Construction

One tool for understanding the construction of *Moron Movies* is to examine its title cards. There are 190 cards, beginning with “THE MORNING AFTER” at 26 seconds in and ending with “THANK YOU” at 57 minutes and 20 seconds. The 189 films in the program, from that first title card to the final card, last for 56 minutes and 54 seconds. If we include the opening graphic and dedication credit in our timing, the film is exactly fifty-seven minutes long. That is 3,420 seconds. If we divide that by our 190 title cards, we find an average duration of 18 seconds of content for each card.

Imagine this as a filmmaking task: from the instant where the title card appears until the next card appears on you have 18 seconds, and three seconds are taken up by the title card. Cella

is therefore working with 15-second-long films, in 1983, decades before an army of TikTokers would explore this length.

Do not, however, credit Cella with precision timing. The rigorous timing seems accidental, a by-product of his process. The fine details of his craftwork, if you look closely, turn out to be ragged. For example, the title cards vary in duration in an arbitrary manner. “THE MORNING AFTER” is 2 seconds, 11 frames long, “HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF” is 3 seconds, 14 frames long, “HOW TO KNOW IF YOU’RE A NERD” is 4 seconds, 26 frames long. It is possible these durations are just how long Cella happened to run his Super 8 camera when filming title setups, rather than the more traditional approach of filming longer clips and editing them down to some chosen duration. Cella takes his roles of writer, actor, and set designer seriously, but is more relaxed about his role of editor. It is not his metier.

The seemingly elegant timing of the *Moron Movies* collection happens despite the inclusion of *KING DONG*, which runs 55 seconds. Next to last in the program, *KING DONG*, Cella’s earliest work included in the *Moron Movies* set, is a troubling film. According to Cella:

Somewhere around 1968 or 1969, my brother came home with this ... this bomb shell, the casing of a bomb. The thing was like six feet long, and I said, “Oh, Christ, I got to do something with that.” So I thought of the idea of chasing this maid with this big dong. And I called it “King Dong.” So I painted the thing pink. I painted this bombshell pink. But it was so heavy I had to, uh, I had to put a rope around it to hold as I’m going after the maid. In the film, in “King Dong,” I actually rest the dong on a trash can. And wipe my brow because the fucking thing is so heavy. But that was the origin of “King Dong.”

This explanation, presented in *King Dong* (2011), Simon Mercer’s documentary on Cella, is mystifying.²⁷ Most of *Moron Movies* demonstrates a wiseass, dad-joke vibe. It is a specific worldview, mocking the human tendency to take shortcuts or cheat, to practice laziness, stupidity,

²⁷ Simon Mercer, *King Dong*.

or cheapness. It is sometimes questionable, yet never reads as extreme. But Cella's *KING DONG* has a different tone, harsher and genuinely offensive despite Cella playing both attacker and victim. Why include it? Why salvage it from 1969 and use it? *KING DONG* is literally an attempted rape scene. Perhaps Cella would say that comedy should not be overly self-censoring. I expect I am not alone, however, in feeling *KING DONG*'s humour misses the mark and crosses the line. My university students are in "Generation Z," and call out what they find offensive. I cannot show them the full version of Cella's *Moron Movies* because of the inclusion of *KING DONG*.

I like to imagine that if I did, they would suggest ways to rework it. Perhaps they would transform it into a spoof of the early Godzilla movies, with Cella using his six-foot pink appendage to knock down cardboard buildings on a set meant to look like Tokyo. I expect *The Tonight Show* would decline to broadcast that—they did not include *KING DONG* on the broadcasts—but it would be an improvement over the problematic current version.

Dissemination

How did Cella's work get to *The Tonight Show* and its millions of viewers, anyway? The show was notoriously tough to book, especially for those not already in the public eye. Johnny Carson explained Cella's inclusion to his audience:

We read an article about a man in Philadelphia who makes his own movies. Apparently, he would make these eight millimeter home movies and have them transferred to tape. Then I understand he hired a theater, or started to show them in a theater in Philadelphia. These are not normal movies, you understand?

Where does our appreciation of Cella and his "not normal" movies end up? Simon Mercer's *King Dong* (2011) documentary reveals more about Cella's determination to get his films shown. Cella says:

I'd read a book about El Cordobés. El Cordobés was a matador, kind of a renegade matador. And he was having trouble getting to go in the ring. They wouldn't let him in the ring, to do his thing. So he built his own bull ring. I said, that's it. I'll get my own theater. Fuck 'em. So I started shopping around for places to rent. And there was a second floor of a Lansdowne theater.²⁸

Sophistication and its Discontents

Is Cella a genius, using visual arts strategies to amplify his homemade films? Is he an autodidact, learning from Man Ray and William Wegman (with his dog, Man Ray)? Is he a nightclub comedian? Do his jokes land?

There is growth between *Moron Movies* (1983) and *More Moron Movies* (1985). I have downplayed Cella as an editor, but in his second film his practice enters a more sophisticated phase. Cella learns to cut to reaction shots, and to use shots that reveal new information or a second character. He has developed a comedic language, and he is using it with gusto.

The most surprising development, however, is that he begins to build on ideas in the films he has already made. He explores the possibilities of the serial nature of his films. For example, in *Moron Movies*, at about 8 minutes and 17 seconds in, we see *HOW TO KNOW IF YOU'RE COCKEYED*. After the title card, we see a profile view of Mr. Cella looking at two small paintings on the wall. One is obviously crooked, its right side twisted upwards so that it is now diagonal rather than aligned with a level horizontal line. He looks over to the painting on the right, which looks level to us, reaches up and ... twists up its right side. His fix for the problem makes the paintings match, but now both are diagonal. The joke has taken us in to a problem, given us an expectation, and then revealed an unexpected solution.

²⁸ Len Cella quoted in *King Dong* (2013).

In *More Moron Movies*, Cella doubles down. At 43 minutes and 32 seconds into the program, we see *HOW TO MURDER YOUR WIFE*. After the title card, we have a squared up view of two paintings similar to the ones in *HOW TO KNOW IF YOU'RE COCKEYED*. This time they are vertical instead of horizontal, and they feature blue and green areas rather than just black and white lines. They are level, aligned with an imagined horizon line.

Instantly we see a problem: at the bottom right of the shot, a pair of hands holds a gun. The hands rig the gun on a small string attached to the painting. The hands now carefully lower the gun so it will hang below the frame, and then adjust the painting so that it tilts down to the right. The hands let go and move out of the shot. We realize someone will come along, adjust the painting, and thus pull the gun's trigger. In seconds, someone does enter our shot. The "wife," Mr. Cella in a blonde wig, walks in, looks at the paintings, and ... adjusts the painting on the left so that it also tilts to the right. The plot is foiled. The wife leaves the frame, letting us fully appreciate the two slanted paintings.

If we only watch *More Moron Movies*, the joke is pretty good. If one is a loyal Cella fan, and has seen *Moron Movies* first, it is incredible. It is just a comedic "call back," but it is a sophisticated one. The universe Cella's characters live in is consistent, and the rules of that universe persist from film to film.

Cella as a Video Artist

Our conception of Cella as a video artist begins with the visual characteristics we observe in his work as it comes to us today. The look created by the cheap video transfer methods he used, and the fact that his work has been "preserved" through digitization of video tapes rather than from

a scan of original film material, leads us to forget that he shot on Super 8 film and endeavoured to project his films in a theatre in front a live audience. He is not intentionally a video maker.

Yet even Johnny Carson mentioned Cella's transfer to tape, so the technical characteristics and "VHS look" reviewers see in the work are inherent in it and present from its first television broadcast. Lacking cinematography skills, and unable to achieve a quality video transfer, Cella manages to get the worst of both worlds into each frame of his movie. Is that funnier, or hard to watch? Generation Z likes the VHS look, but they would rather just add a filter to achieve it.

In the end, for Cella's practice video is a just a distribution tool, just as TikTok is a distribution tool for a segment of today's filmmakers. His eventual distribution in video rental outlets relied on VHS tape. The version of his film that is preserved at archive.org has a significant video glitch or tape repair at about 46 minutes and 45 seconds, wiping out one of his short films. It is safe to assume this digitization was from a VHS cassette.

Cella was never one of the artists set free by video production techniques. He is not exploring the durational possibilities videotape offers. Conversely, he seems uninterested in the possibilities of traditional cinematic assembly, the act of building meaning from many carefully planned shots. Cella is simply doing everything in his own way. Cella is doing Cella.

Canons and Cult Status

Where will Len Cella's *Moron Movies* be on its 50th birthday?

Reading David Bordwell's account, in *On the History of Film Style*, of the establishment of early film canons, we gain an insight that practical matters and institutional choices play a major role in this process. Bordwell notes:

In 1939 MOMA opened in new quarters on 53rd Street, and as part of the occasion the Film Library launched a cycle of seventy films surveying “the main body of film-making from 1895 onwards.” The thirty programs presented an overview of the Basic Story, including “The Development of Narrative” (1895-1902), programs on early American masters, “The German Film: Legend and Fantasy,” “The Swedish Film,” and ending with a potpourri of sound-film genres. Now that MOMA had a theater of its own, Barry began daily screenings from the collection, thereby making the Film Library the first archive to offer regular public exhibition.²⁹

Certain films were available for public screenings, others were not, and only a select set of films fit the narrative the Museum of Modern Art (and Iris Barry, head of its Film Library) intended to construct and promote.

Inevitably, vagaries of availability and notoriety slanted the MOMA canon. The Film Library had access to relatively few films from the major French silent directors, so Feuillade, Delluc, and their contemporaries were scantily represented. Whereas some archivists believed in seeing and collecting as much as possible, Barry was highly selective. Eisenstein, Pudovkin, and Dovzhenko formed MOMA's great Soviet troika, while Dziga Vertov, Boris Barnet, Lev Kuleshov, Sergei Yutkevich, and the Fex collaborators Grigori Kozintsev and Leonid Trauberg were virtually ignored.³⁰

To be included in any canon, a film must be available, and it must have strong champions that take up its cause. Are there champions for *Moron Movies*?

Perry Shall, who has a tattoo claiming “WE GET IT / THEY DON’T” across his wrists, provides us with a personal story that positions *Moron Movies* as something like a cult film rather than as a mainstream comedy. The dynamic described in Shall’s experience is not one where half the audience finds it funny and half does not. Shall is the only viewer in his group of friends to find the film minimally interesting. His positive reaction is intense. The film motivates him to find others with a *Moron Movies* mindset—and eventually he seeks out Cella himself. “From there on out, all I wanted to do was rewatch *Moron Movies* over and over again and study this and try to

²⁹ Bordwell, *On the History of Film Style*, 25.

³⁰ Ibid.

understand ... how does this exist? What is the deal? Is Len still alive? Len Cella, the creator? And so that had kind of been my mission for a long time ... until I became friends with him.”

Following Shall’s lead and engaging with *Moron Movies* as a cult film is a challenging task. There is no significant academic literature directly addressing the film in any way, let alone calling for canonization—not as cinema, not as television or pop culture, not as art. If we broaden our search to find similar films that function as cult films, the most relevant academic writing addresses the function of these films in the context of sociological study. This approach, defining and clarifying the characteristics of movies that persist under a “cult film” rubric, excludes many films called “cult films” in popular culture. In “Toward a Sociology of Cult Films: Reading ‘Rocky Horror,’” Patrick T. Kinkade and Michael A. Katovich differentiate “cult films” from “popular re-releases, fad films, films with cult qualities, and critical cult films.”

Cult films have persistent followings who treat them as cinematic experiences that inspire reverence (see Studlar 1989; Chute 1981, 1983). Devotees often champion the merits and values of these films independently of traditional sources of cinematic criticism and analysis. Audiences, moreover, construct ritual and belief systems through their viewing experience. Cult film attachments, therefore, become obsessions and enduring shared foci for habitues. Adherents claim that cult films transcend their entertainment, artistic, commercial status, and are significant regardless of advertisement, critical acclaim, or mainstream acceptance. Part of the cult film's value to its following is that it is not for everyone and exists outside the category of both popular and elite taste cultures.³¹

Moron Movies is not necessarily excluded under these definitions, but even Shall’s viewing experience hardly demonstrates any sort of transcendent “reverence.” (Or even the fun of the irreverent sing-along central to *Rocky Horror* (1975) screenings once that film attained cult status.)

³¹ Patrick T. Kinkade, and Michael A. Katovich. “Toward a Sociology of Cult Films: Reading ‘Rocky Horror,’” *The Sociological Quarterly* 33, no. 2 (1992): 191–209.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4121141>.

The choppy, repetitive structure of *Moron Movies* clearly gets in the way of any extended emotional reaction. The film is not designed or edited with a cathartic release in mind.

Still, Shall indicates an obsession with *Moron Movies*, and the film presents a number of the elements Kinkade and Katovich discuss as emblematic of cult films. *Moron Movies* posits Len Cella as a version of himself, a subversive yet relatable character in atypical situations, pushing against authority as he copes with the aggravation he finds in society. He invents strange—and funny—solutions to the problems he sees in society. This matches the structure Kinkade and Katovich claim for cult cinema: “Cult films contain themes that (1) place typical people into atypical situations, (2) allow for narcissistic and empathic audience identification with subversive characters, (3) question traditional authority structures, (4) reflect societal strains, and (5) offer interpretable and paradoxical resolutions to these social strains.”

Yet Shall’s obsession with the film, and with Cella, seems to be an outlier. Most of the positive reactions that can be documented as personal anecdotes are much milder. An advertisement for a 2015 “Moron Movies Retrospective” at the Cinedelphia Film Festival described a “cult following,” for the film, but sporadic retrospective screenings hardly make for a sustainable cult. No one is dressing as Len Cella and singing along.

Preservation

While interested viewers in 2033 will probably be able to find an online version of Cella’s work, how will they know to look? What will motivate them to do so?

Cella’s position in 2023 is tenuous. He is a lone outsider, not part of any movement. There is no money to be made, it seems, from streaming or distributing his work. Most importantly, the reviews we have seen so far are all over the place. For each one that embraces the inherent “fun”

in *Moron Movies*, we find something as harsh as this IMDb review that user “jmillhouse20,” posted in May 2002:

Worst Movie Ever

This is truly the worst movie I have ever seen. It is not even remotely funny. The skits are stupid, the premise is stupid. The only reason I laughed was because I could not believe I was sitting through this movie. Watching this movie is a complete waste of time. Anyone responsible for making or releasing this movie should be fired if not arrested.³²

I have invoked generational studies in this discussion as a tool to predict what future viewers might think of *Moron Movies*. There is no age-related data in our sources of reviews and ratings, however, so is a fair study even possible? Future perceptions of Cella’s work are unlikely to be shaped by age. Perry Shall’s peers were disinterested in *Moron Movies*, despite his enthusiasm. Yet it is obvious to those of us who have taught long-term in fields like editing that the reception of time-based media has changed, and that it will continue changing.

Generations are shaped by technology, and high levels of exposure to the seductive flows of media that technology allows will transform our viewing expectations. The endless flow of MTV music videos, when MTV had videos, was exciting to one generation but soon enough boring to the next. These second-generation viewers expected to choose the next video, following the flow of a personalized playlist. Later, viewers sought the more intensely personal connection they found in a flow of direct-to-camera YouTube videos and Twitch livestreams. These still resonate for some, but others seek the quick jolts of reward they find scrolling the overflowing content that newer, shorter social media formats offer.

³² “User-Submitted Review of ‘Moron Movies.’” IMDb. Accessed May 24, 2023.
<https://www.imdb.com/review/rw0802388/>.

Formats evolve. Now we are at an inflection point. We see, in real time, unexpected changes in our audience. In the May 23, 2023 article, “Social Media Can Be a ‘Profound Risk’ to Youth, Surgeon General Warns,” we discover concerning, measurable effects from media.

The report noted that “frequent social media use may be associated with distinct changes in the developing brain in the amygdala (important for emotional learning and behavior) and the prefrontal cortex (important for impulse control, emotional regulation, and moderating social behavior), and could increase sensitivity to social rewards and punishments.” The report also cited research indicating that up to 95 percent of teens reported using at least one social media platform, while more than one-third said they used social media “almost constantly.” In addition, nearly 40 percent of children ages 8 to 12 use social media, even though the required minimum age for most sites is 13.³³

In the same way popular snacks in the grocery store have changed, decade by decade, toward more intense bursts of salt, fat, sugar, and raw emotion, popular video evolves.

Can *Moron Movies* measure up? Despite its reputation as a series of TikToks, it is not really that. It drags, for many, unable to deliver huge shocks, tears, or a warm floating feeling. How can it survive?

Sentiment against *Moron Movies* has toned down over the last decade. Today’s young people, exposed to more YouTube than mainstream cinema, seem quite forgiving of *Moron Movies*’ technical and aesthetic flaws. Perhaps the film just needs a glowing, hyped-up introduction, positioning Cella as a revolutionary genius? Maybe its fifty-seven minutes should be broken up and delivered in tiny video groupings that stop before you get bored? Could an unexpected VHS glitch obliterate *KING DONG*, letting the film end on a gentler note?

³³ Matt Richtel, Catherine Pearson and Michael Levenson. “Surgeon General Warns That Social Media May Harm Children and Adolescents,” *The New York Times*, May 24, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/23/well/family/social-media-mental-health-surgeon-general.html>.

I do not think *Moron Movies* will die from poor reviews. I worry it will die from disinterest. It seems unlikely to thrive in mainstream culture, or even in an alternative film canon.

My suggestion, if you decide you want to preserve this film, is to break the rules. Find the worst things about it: its offensive title, the terrible fifty-five seconds that KING DONG occupies. Play up Cella's misogynistic plan to shoot his wife, and the film's many cultural insensitivities. Make lists of these offenses, publish these lists on social media, and organize protests against the film. Propose laws banning it. At the end of your press release, include a link to where people can watch it for themselves, but only to see exactly how awful it is, of course. Something like this:

<https://archive.org/details/moron-movies>

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