

# The Running Time of a Film: The Evolution and What to do about it Today

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**Abstract:** ‘Hey, how long is this movie?’ - It is common for us to know the runtime or running time of a movie before we begin watching it. We either actively inquire about it or are just casually provided the information. But do we care about how long or short a film is? And if so, why do we care? This paper looks at the possible impact of the running time of a film from the audience/moviegoer perspective, and the role it plays in our cinematic experience. The focus is also on discussing possible relationships between the modern lifestyle and how it may or may not impact the average runtimes of films. © 2018 Pranav Goel

## 1. Introduction

Running time of a movie is simply its duration, usually in minutes. For theatrical releases, the timing begins from the first distributor logo and ends at the last frame of the end credits. If there are any mid or post-credits scenes, they get included in the running time [1].

The notion of ‘an ideal running time’ is in a constant state of flux. The evolution of the average running time is discussed as well as the possible reasons for recent changes in trend. The ‘shorter runtime’ faction argues how longer movies tend to have dull bits, and how the point is to get the point across in a precise and compact manner. Most of the highest grossing films over the past few years are longer than 2 hours, yet, the longer does not mean better for many movie critics, who love to see efficient plot development [2]. In fact, there are reports that Hollywood film-makers are actively cutting down the film lengths in recent times, a trend which seems set to continue [9]. The ‘longer runtime’ faction argues that it takes time for to get the audience emotionally invested and to set up characters and sophisticated plot points that define an ‘epic’. A shorter runtime may excite some moviegoers who prefer crisp flicks that do the job without taking a toll on their mental faculties. On the other hands, fans of a novel are often excited if the movie adaptations have longer running times since they become more hopeful of the movie doing justice to the source [4].

How does this debate tie into the modern lifestyle? With technology and social media obsession, there are claims of reducing attention spans as well as increasingly hectic lifestyles. Fewer people are actually going to theaters [5] - is runtime a factor? Can changes in average running times help draw out more people, or is there no relation at all between movie success and running time? How does the runtime factor into the movie versus TV show debate? This paper discusses runtime from an audience viewpoint and aims to set up a solid base for the reader to introspect and find answers to these questions themselves.

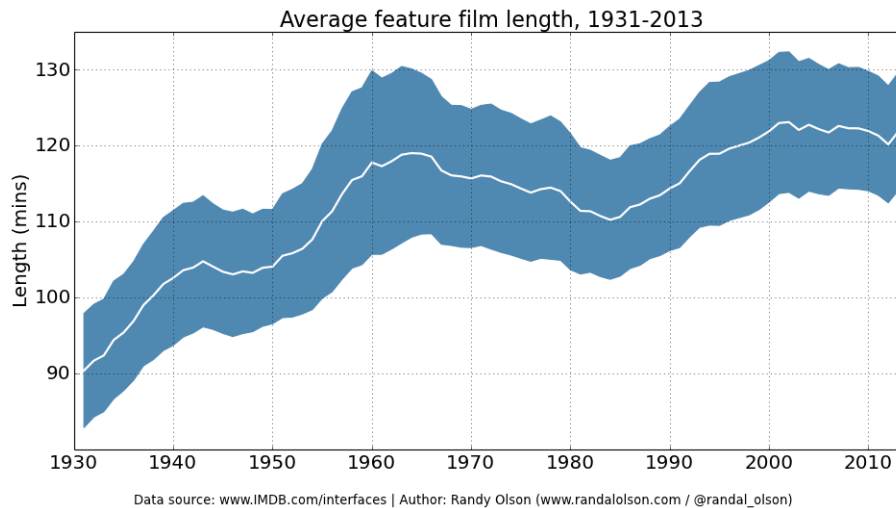


Fig. 1. **The average feature film length for the 25 top grossing films from 1930-2013.** Plot created by Randy Olson [7], using data collected from IMDb [6].

## 2. Evolution of the Runtimes: Are Movies Getting Longer?

There seem to be consistent complaints about longer movies, and some studies have shown that the turn of the 21st century has witnessed longer running times [10]. However, some analyses reveal that that might not really be the case [7]. Before looking at the trends, it is important to understand the dichotomy that lies at the heart of such analyses and studies (including this paper): are shorter movies preferable over longer or vice-versa?

Looking at the highest grossing movies of the past decade shows that 9 out of 10 movies are over two hours [10]. And yet the longer run times seem to be a common complaint among various moviegoers, especially the casual watchers and millennials [7]. The Lord of the Rings franchise gained massive critical acclaim ‘despite’ incredibly long durations. In fact, the movies being recognized by the academy (especially the Oscars) have again been consistently long movies, clocking well over two hours. So, should filmmakers ensure long durations in order to be taken seriously by the critics, lest they be thought of as ‘lacking enough substance’? It is not nearly that straightforward. As argued by [2] and [9], shorter movies are often preferable. The classic French crime drama ‘Pickpocket’ (72 minutes) and recently, the Hindi drama ‘Teaspoon’ have been lauded extensively for their compelling and *compact* storylines. To faithfully adapt the last part of the epic Harry Potter series (Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows), the filmmakers chose to go with two parts instead of one long finale. Many films (including the Hobbit and the Lord of the Rings franchise) often release extended cuts, choosing to reduce the theatrical versions by about 30 minutes. This does indicate that shorter movie lengths could be more appealing to the casual moviegoers. For an exact idea of how the average running times have changed, actual IMDb data [6] can be plotted as done in [7]. Such an analysis clarifies the trend while lending some interesting insights.

Looking at the data for the top grossing films every year (**Figure 1**), the average length increases and decreased in periods, but the length in post-2010 era is actually almost equivalent to the length observed as far back as the 1960s. Breaking it down, there is a massive addition of roughly 30 minutes in average film length from 1931 to 1960 which could be down to the competition from televisions, which forced the production of longer ‘epics’ [7], eventually leading to the blockbuster phenomenon [8]. A strange period of reduction from 1960 to 1980, but then a steady increase from the nineties onwards continuing to 2010 explains why many

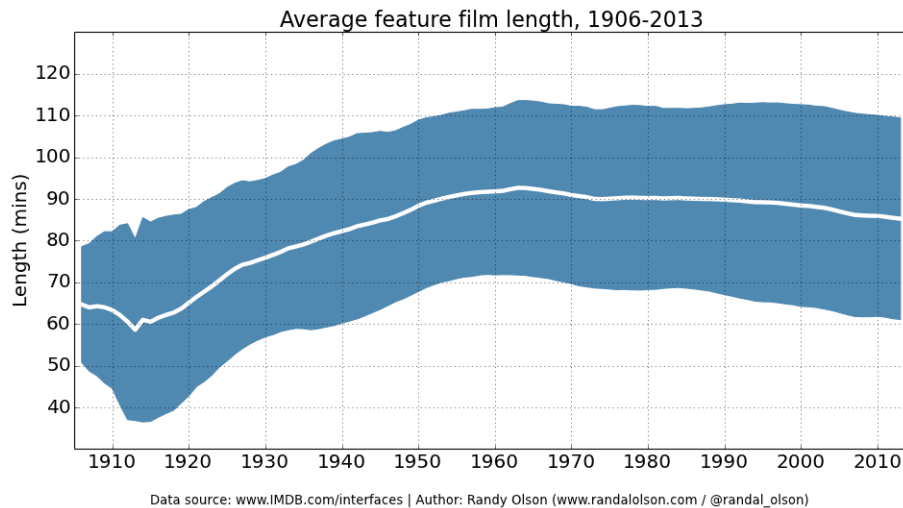


Fig. 2. **The average feature film length for the *all films* from 1906-2013, available in the IMDb database.** Plot created by Randy Olson [7], using data collected from IMDb [6].

young adults feel that movies have become longer. The overall picture, though, indicates that the movie lengths have not really increased since the sixties.

Data for the top grossing movies can often be biased, since, as discussed before, the ‘epics’ tend to be longer. **Figure 2** looks at *all* the films from 1906 onwards, and clarifies that the average feature film lengths have indeed not increased much. More interestingly, there seems to be a **slight decrease in the average film length over the past 5-8 years**. In the subsequent sections, we look at a couple of possible reasons for this apparent decrease.

### 3. The Possible Impact of Reducing Attention Spans

Attention span is defined as “the amount of concentrated time on a task without becoming distracted”. It is a fact now that the human attention span is rapidly declining. A study from Microsoft in 2015 revealed just how rapid the decline is - the average attention span has gone from 12 seconds in 2000 to just 8 seconds in 2015 [15]. Our device based and social media driven lifestyle is much to blame, with the leaning towards instant gratification increasing by the day [12]. Microsoft’s CEO Satya Nadella says that human attention is set to be the true scarce commodity in near future. And while Microsoft’s particular interests for conducting this study might be under scrutiny, there is no doubt that the constant use of the Internet and social media has rewired our brains [12, 15]. This leads to restlessness which is becoming increasingly common among our generation [14], and has also caused a massive drop in reading habits of people - with many finding it too hard to concentrate on all the words, sentences, paragraphs, pages and chapters [17, 18]! It is hard to even stand in a line without taking out a device. Couple the reduced attention span with modern lifestyle preaching us how being ‘idle’ is bad, and the need to be doing something all the time, and we end up doing multiple things at a time with constant switching.

But what does this have to do with movies and running times? Well, movies are like books, requiring concentration on plot points, dialogue, visuals and more. Though watching a movie takes much less time than reading novels and also places much less burden on our imagination, the reduced attention spans and increased restlessness can easily instigate the same trend as with books - a reducing audience. Studies suggest that people now find it hard to listen to a complete

song without their minds wandering off [17], and more and more people gravitating towards short, sub-minute clips on Youtube instead of longer videos (with a 2015 study claiming that nearly two-thirds of consumers prefer videos of length 60 seconds or less [20]). When faced with multiple options, we give up thinking and choosing very early and may decide to just drop the idea of watching the movie altogether [13]. It is not a stretch to imagine that such people will have trouble watching the same thing continuously for over 2 hours and are very likely to stop paying attention in between. Movies with innovative plots might not make much sense to such an audience, leading to unfairly negative audience reviews. Thus, filmmakers might be motivated to make short movies in the fear that longer movies will repel many potential viewers and increase the likelihood of them getting restless and bored. While shorter duration is one possible result of reducing attention spans, a more frightening one is a drop in quality or reduced number of 'bold' initiatives when it comes to making films. A formulaic film will require less attention from the audience but more complicated films, even if they are done well, might fail to make the required impression simply because its beauty lied in the detail. Ensuring that the audience is not bored might take precedence in an era of reducing moviegoers, and it is certainly becoming difficult to expect patience from the audience when it comes to build-up in a story [16]. On the other hand, all this might force filmmakers to 'up their game' and work harder on constructing engaging and compelling cinematic experiences [19].

#### **4. The Increasing Preference for TV: Is Runtime a Factor?**

People are using streaming websites like Netflix to watch TV shows in droves, and reports indicate that our generation does prefer TV shows over movies [21, 22]. On one hand, whole TV shows are actually much longer than a movie, which can give audiences more time to bond with the characters who are fleshed out over a longer duration. For example, in the popular American show F.R.I.E.N.D.S, the audience becomes familiar with the history, quirks and other detailing of the main characters allowing the later seasons of the show to exploit this familiarity to generate more humor. This effect is just not possible in a self-contained movie. But, on the other hand, there is something to be said about the shorter duration of *one episode* compared to one movie. Per the reducing attention span as discussed in the previous section, it seems reasonable to assume that a person is likely to be more willing to sit down for a 20-60 minute episode instead of a two-hour movie, and their attention is less likely to wander due to the shorter duration. It might also be more difficult to watch something for 2 hours on a mobile device, and then there is the issue of time. We are much more likely to do everything 'on the go', and people often watch TV while commuting. A 20-minute episode is more convenient for such purposes. In fact, the number of episodes in a season are getting shorter [23], which again indicates audiences wanting to consume less in one go. The trend of highly popular media applies to TV shows as well, with many critical and financial hits being longer in total length. In fact, for more popular TV shows, large running time of an episode can actually increase the hype for the particular episode, as seen recently for Game of Thrones [24].

In contrast to TV, movies are a more sustained time commitment. Going to movies also mean considerable expenditure (with ticket prices going by about one-third since 2000). The convenience of streaming websites is a major reason for the shift, and the diminishing theater audience trend is set to continue.

#### **5. Conclusion: Deciding the Running Time**

The highest grossing movies as well as the Oscar-winning movies in recent times always tend to have long running times. However, the average running time has not really increased (for

Hollywood), at least when compared with the 1960s. Interestingly, the trend for the last few years when *all* movies are observed is a reduction in average movie length. The reducing attention spans and preference for TV shows with shorter episode count seem to indicate that audience prefer consuming less, are likely to have their minds wander off in longer movies and get restless more easily, and are increasingly complaining about ‘long’ movies. This poses a dilemma to a filmmaker - should they put in the effort to trim down their movies or is it not too big a concern? Or rather, should they make sure that their film has longer duration to be taken seriously at the box office and the Oscars?

The market is heading in a direction where shorter movies are set to draw more casual audiences but the frequent moviegoers are likely to remain unaffected. Recently, Warner Bros. Studio forced their directors to keep the length of Justice League to two hours instead of the initially planned runtime nearing 3 hours. Christopher Nolan’s Dunkirk was again surprisingly shorter than most of his other acclaimed directions by about 30 minutes [9]. This is a move that is set to be adopted by more and more directors and production houses in Hollywood. However, criticism works in both ways, and shorter movies can be chastised for not giving enough time to the plot when it demanded more. For the critics, the runtime should probably be justified by the content whether long or shot. So, the movie should be such that there is nothing extra - everything has a purpose with compact narratives. Longer, slow-moving sequences must add some thought or new directions to film. It is important to cut out the dull bits, keep the audience engaged, and trim down any unnecessary content. However, this cutting down part in the final editing of a film is set to come under more scrutiny than ever.

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