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Through History and Into the Digital Age**

Item Type	thesis
Authors	Battaglia, James
Download date	10/12/2024 05:13:55
Link to Item	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12648/6777">http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12648/6777</a>

**Everyone's a Critic:  
Film Criticism Through History and Into the Digital Age**

A Senior Honors Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for graduation in the College Honors Program

By

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The College at Brockport  
May 2010

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*A good movie can take you out of your dull funk and the hopelessness that so often goes with slipping into a theatre; a good movie can make you feel alive again, in contact, not just lost in another city. Good movies make you care, make you believe in possibilities again. If somewhere in the Hollywood-entertainment world someone has managed to break through with something that speaks to you, then it isn't all corruption. The movie doesn't have to be great; it can be stupid and empty and you can still have the joy of a good performance, or the joy in just a good line. An actor's scowl, a small subversive gesture, a dirty remark that someone tosses off with a mock-innocent face, and the world makes a little bit of sense. Sitting there alone or painfully alone because those with you do not react as you do, you know there must be others perhaps in this very theatre or in this city, surely in other theatres in other cities, now, in the past or future, who react as you do. And because movies are the most total and encompassing art form we have, these reactions can seem the most personal and, maybe the most important, imaginable. The romance of movies is not just in those stories and those people on the screen but in the adolescent dream of meeting others who feel as you do about what you've seen. You do meet them, of course, and you know each other at once because you talk less about good movies than about what you love in bad movies.*

~Pauline Kael: Trash, Art, and the Movies

For as long as visual art and the written word have existed side-by-side, art criticism has existed in one form or another. With the invention of film and motion picture techniques in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, a new medium emerged, ripe for subjection to criticism. Writers, however, were slow to realize the immense potential of this stunning new format, and many treated it as a novelty or worse. By the time movies were seen as worthy of serious critical thought, the public had already fallen in love with the new technology.

In late December 1895, two brothers, Auguste and Louis Lumiere, began publicly screening their series of projected motion pictures for paying audiences in France. Though a number of other visionaries, including Eadward Muybridge and Thomas Edison, are also credited with the invention of cinema, the Lumiere brothers are considered the first to utilize the cinema as a mass medium, meant to be enjoyed by a paying public. They toured with their short films (the longest, *Blacksmiths* and *The Gardener*, were each 49 seconds) throughout 1896, stopping at Bombay, London, New York, and Buenos Aires. That year, a new art form was introduced to the world, and it was called film.

By the time film and the cinema began to grow, art criticism had solidified its place in both the writing and art communities. Film, however, was not yet seen as a potential art form. Motion picture technology was instead seen as a means to faithfully record reality. This may be because the earliest films, including those of the Lumiere

brothers, were little more than brief documentaries. Still, very few saw the medium as having any sort of an artistic future.

In the early 1900s, a film commentary industry began to emerge. *The Optical Lantern and Cinematograph Journal* was the first of its kind- a cinema trade paper. In 1908, *The Bioscope* joined the fray as the *Journal's* first competitor. Though the magazines' content was made up mostly of film and film equipment advertisements as well as brief plot descriptions and release information, light subjective commentary occasionally broke through in the writing. In newspapers, the medium was treated as a source of news rather than fodder for critique.

Beginning in the early 1920s, select publications started offering film commentary that treated the medium as more than just entertainment. For the first time ever, writers judged films based on not only their entertainment value, but also their artistic merit. Readers finally had somewhere to turn to help them better understand the stories and images projected on cinema screens. A number of prominent newspapers began employing film critics in this time, and the general public was finally introduced to serious film criticism.

In the 1930s, film found its voice. Actors achieved stardom as the Hollywood fame culture formed around the industry. The actors were not the only ones to benefit from the rise of film fandom, however. Critics and journalists were mainstays at extravagant press screenings, where they mingled with their favorite movie stars, drink in hand. These pampered critics often regurgitated the distributor's own opinions or those of their editors rather than offering any hard critical assessments.

By the mid-1940s, film criticism had evolved. Sure, there were still the same types of critics as before, light on critique and heavy on summary, but a new kind of critic had also emerged. This new genre of criticism was heavy, personal, and most importantly, intelligent. These were the essayists. More than simple reviewers, they analyzed and criticized films with a sense of charm, wit, and candor that their colleagues utterly failed to match.

This style of film criticism caught on in highbrow magazines like *Time*, *The Nation*, and *The New Yorker* over the next two decades as film finally achieved what many consider the pinnacle of its recognition as an artistic medium with the emergence of auteur theory in the 1960s. Critics like James Agee, Andrew Sarris, and Pauline Kael surfaced as trusted voices in a sea of opinion.

In 1975, a weekly film review show called *Sneak Previews* debuted on television in Chicago. Hosted by Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert, the show was picked up by PBS for national distribution in 1978. In 1982, the two moved to syndication with *At the Movies with Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert*. With film criticism exploding from newspapers to television, critics like Siskel and Ebert were rocketed to their own brand of stardom.

The profession did not necessarily benefit from its newfound popularity, however. Even before Siskel and Ebert began giving movies their famous “thumbs up/ thumbs down” ratings, critical writing started to suffer from a lack of originality. Editors noticed that readers were drawn to letter or star-grade rating systems, which didn’t require as much careful reading as the thoughtful work of the essayist writers. Catchy buzzwords and attention-grabbing phrases were featured more and more as Hollywood began mining

reviews for critic quotes to use in their film trailers. Eventually, a formula emerged which favored light, inoffensive criticism over the more substantial criticism of the 40s-70s. That formula, which treats film criticism as entertainment rather than informative writing, continues to dominate newspaper and magazine Arts sections to this very day.

Now, with the declining state of print journalism and increasing popularity of social media, it looks like that dominant formula may be on its way out. Readers are turning away from printed or online reviews in favor of aggregator Web sites that compile all professional critical opinion into a single number score. Meanwhile, bloggers are saturating the Web with their own amateur reviews, desensitizing modern readers to critical writing. Hollywood, seeing that it can gain free advertising by winning over these amateur bloggers, –generally a much easier task than winning over the critics- no longer has any need at all for reviewers. As a result, professional critics are forced to pander; either to the studios, who will only use the most sensationally positive quotes in their trailers; or to the Internet readers, who will call for the heads of any critics in the minority of aggregator opinion.

To make matters worse, the problems of the print media industry are directly affecting the future of criticism, as well. Many papers, short on funds, are firing their arts critics, instead turning to syndicated columns. With Hollywood, papers, and even readers turning their backs on the movie review, what kind of future is there for professional film criticism?

## I

**The Past**

***A man watches a movie, and a critic must acknowledge that he is a man.***

- Robert Warshow

The history of film criticism, as one would undoubtedly expect, is very closely related to the history of motion picture film. Through the early experimental work of pioneers like Eadweard Muybridge and Thomas Edison, film was able to exist –at least for a short time- without the need for critical thought or writing. Films of the time were soundless, seconds-long clips, often depicting scenes of documentary quality normalcy and realism (as in Edison's iconic Fred Ott's Sneeze, in which Edison employee Frederick Ott is shown taking a pinch of snuff and sneezing). Viewers were wowed by these moving images seen through the tiny lenses of kinetoscopes in the parlors and exhibitions of the mid-1890s.

Perhaps the reason serious criticism was absent during this period is simply because no one had enough experience with the medium to offer any sort of qualitative critique. The technology was so new to the people experiencing it that the mere sight of a man's sneeze, captured on film and viewed by squatting adults through a tiny peephole, was enough to drive them to viewing parlors in droves. Take this 1891 New York Sun report on the first public demonstration of a kinetoscope:



“In the top of the box was a hole perhaps an inch in diameter. As they looked through the hole they saw the picture of a man. It was a most marvelous picture. It bowed and smiled and waved its hands and took off its hat with the most perfect naturalness and grace. Every motion was perfect.”<sup>1</sup>

The film described in the above excerpt is *Dickson's Greeting*, a three second long clip of 1890s filmmaker William Dickson holding a hat in front of his chest with one hand and moving to grab it with the other, all while slightly bowed. A modern viewer would no doubt write a far less glowing 'review'. When the kinetoscope was finally made available for the general public's use, however, everyone who saw one in person had the same first time experience. Wonder and amazement at the sight of moving images, no matter how boring or mundane those images may seem today, were what early viewers took away from the films they watched. Besides, they did not yet offer the types of plots, narratives, sets, or costumes that theater critics of the time might have recognized as worthy of critique.

Meanwhile, in Britain, an electrician and scientific instrument maker named Robert Paul was working hard to forever change the way people experience film. After opening and operating a successful kinetoscope parlour at the Earls Court Exhibition Centre in West London, he came up with an industry-making idea: moving images projected onto a screen in front of an audience. In France, the Lumiere Brothers patented their cinematograph, an all-in-one filmmaking device that could record, develop, and project motion pictures. The Lumieres' first commercial, public screening of

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<sup>1</sup> Qtd. In Robertson, pg.5

cinematographic films –the first in the world of its kind- happened on December 28, 1895 in Paris.<sup>2</sup> The cinema had arrived.

The introduction of the cinema was a transformative event in the early history of film. Motion pictures, no longer limited to peepshow-style viewing through kinetoscopes lining the parlor walls like slot machines in a casino, gained an invaluable air of legitimacy through the new projected methods. Crowded cinemas and bustling audiences evoked images of the theatre, an established form of art and entertainment hundreds of years old.

Critics, however, were slow to consider film a medium with any sort of artistic future. Even as the Lumieres' cinematograph gained widespread acclaim, it continued to be seen as a method for capturing images of, as one 1896 *New Review* article suggests, "life moving without purpose, without beauty, with no better impulse than a foolish curiosity...the complete despair of modern realism."<sup>3</sup> The faithful reproduction of lifelike moving images was apparently realistic and, more importantly, new enough to blind all but the most experimental of filmmakers to film's artistic potential.

Though artistic potential may have been overlooked at first, business potential certainly was not. Newspaper and magazine publishers, not keen on missing out on such a broad and new subject, was quick to pander to the cinema's burgeoning fan base. Founded in 1889, *The Optical Magic Lantern Journal* became *The Optical Lantern and Cinematograph Journal* in 1904, later changing its name to *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly*, the first cinema trade paper of its kind in Britain. "Everyone in the

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<sup>2</sup> Fielding pgs. 49-51

<sup>3</sup> Qtd. In Brown, *Birth*

profession,” the paper’s first editorial states, “should obtain the latest data of what is practically a new business.”<sup>4</sup> Little did these early publications know that this “practically new business” would one day earn over \$2 billion with one film, like 2009’s three-dimensional *Avatar*.<sup>5</sup>

While *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly* and papers like it were certainly taking huge strides towards the type of film coverage and critical writing we are used to seeing today in magazines like *Cineaste* or *Entertainment Weekly*, they still had a long way to go. The articles in those early papers were primarily made up of basic plot descriptions. Occasionally, the writers would encourage readers to see the film using barely critical phrases like “another good comic subject” or “one of the prettiest child studies we have seen for many a long day.”<sup>6</sup> These complimentary summaries appeared between pages filled with advertisements for film equipment and for the films themselves.

Though early film writing mostly served as free advertising for filmmakers, *The Kinematograph* had carved out a new niche, and other publications soon followed it in. One such publication, *The Bioscope*, was not above including negative criticisms between its pages. In March of 1909, for example, its writers found Witness Nordisk’s *A Day in York*, “A rather commonplace travel subject, the quality of which does little to relieve its drabness,” tersely adding, “Nordisk can do better than this.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Qtd. In Brown, *Birth*

<sup>5</sup> Coyle

<sup>6</sup> Qtd. In Brown, *Birth*

<sup>7</sup> Qtd. In Brown, *Birth*

Magazines and weekly tabloids weren't the only sources of film writing at the time, though. Newspapers, as well, played a major role in this early stage of the history of film. Their coverage was nowhere near as vast (or formulaic) as it is today, but the increasing accessibility of a completely new technology was certainly a newsworthy event. Papers at the time treated film releases as straight news items, and the articles written about them were meant to offer information rather than critique. Writers, using basic plot synopses sent by film production companies to newspaper publishers, were able to give the readers a general idea of what the films were about and what sorts of characters were involved. Opinion, at least in the beginning, was entirely out of the picture.

Longtime *Time* magazine critic Richard Schickel credits Frank E. Woods as the first American film critic worthy of the title. At a time when most films were one reel (about 10 minutes) long, Woods wrote some of the earliest film articles to take a distinct point-of-view rather than simply rehash plots. He was the first American critic to suggest that movie acting could be different than stage acting, since the camera could capture subtler facial expressions and movements than an audience in a stage theater could see.<sup>8</sup> Though complex storylines in movies were unheard of at the time, Woods also openly recognized the great artistic potential of the medium and took a special liking to the early works of director D.W. Griffith, with whom he eventually co-wrote the groundbreaking (for many reasons) *The Birth of a Nation* in 1915.

When *The Birth of a Nation* premiered in Britain, the nation's earliest film critics were ready for it. Longer, more spectacular films of its kind provided an entertainment

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<sup>8</sup> Nafus

value that writers and readers alike found was no longer possible to ignore. A 1916 *The Times* article about the movie speaks volumes as to how film writing had to catch up with the increasing complexity and scope of the films themselves.

“Extraordinarily fine entertainment, instructive, thrilling, amusing, pathetic. It has grandeur. It makes one realize more than any film before – more than *The Miracle*, more than *Cabiria* – the amazing things that this machine, with an ambitious and skilled producer, can achieve.”<sup>9</sup>

By comparing the film in question to others before it –in this case *The Birth of a Nation* to *The Miracle* and *Cabiria*- this anonymous reviewer exhibits critical techniques that would have been unheard of in film writing as many as 10 years earlier. Readers found that if they had enjoyed either of the movies mentioned in the review, they likely would have enjoyed the reviewed film as well. Slowly but surely, people started turning to the newspapers not only to find out if new movies’ plots seemed interesting, but also for opinions and recommendations. *The Times* debuted its first weekly film column, ‘The Film World’, in 1920.

As the demand for published and accessible film criticism grew throughout the 1920s, newspapers hired more writers to cover the movies. Unfortunately, not all of these writers were as passionate about film as they could have been. In what would seem like a cruel joke to today’s aspiring film critics, many got the position back then because it was the only writing job available. Sydney Carroll, for example, who was the *Sunday Times*

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<sup>9</sup> Qtd. In Brown, *Newspaper*

cinema critic from 1925 to 1939, was described by his successor as a man who “didn’t know a film from a sponge.”<sup>10</sup>

Still, devoted film critics of the time found themselves in a unique position. The demand for accessible film criticism was very much present, but the cinema did not yet have stable conventions or a long history against which to judge new films. The writers recognized the need for a film vocabulary that everyone could use to judge all movies by (more or less) the same standards, but little existed that could help them develop a whole new set of principles and terminology.

Luckily, an American poet and artist named Vachel Lindsay had beaten them to the punch. In 1915, his *The Art of the Moving Picture* –the first American book to discuss film as a serious art form- laid the groundwork for the pioneer critics of the 1920s to build their vocabulary upon. Using terms like “space-music” and “sculpture-in-motion,” he created a volume that quickly became required reading for anyone who wished to write about cinema as if it were or could be art.

The writings of Russian director Sergei Eisentein also aided early critics in developing some of the vocabulary used to talk about film to this very day. Words like “cinematic” and “montage” helped lift essays and articles about the cinema to more than just commentary pieces on whether a film was ‘good’ or ‘bad’. By gaining a set of terms for movies completely independent of those used for theater, the cinema had finally opened its doors to intellectual thought and discussion.

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<sup>10</sup> Qtd. In Brown, *Criticism takes wing*

With all the support of a brand new vocabulary, a new kind of film commentary – one that fully considered both the entertainment and artistic qualities of the medium – found its way into print. The most widely read columnist of the time was Iris Barry, a British woman who wrote for *The Spectator*, *Vogue*, and the *Daily Mail*. Though she wrote for British publications, she generally preferred American films; much to the dismay of the owner of the *Daily Mail*. Her 1926 book, *Let's Go to the Pictures*, was instrumental in popularizing the idea that intellectual ambition and entertainment value are not mutually exclusive. She used terms like “tone value” and “related time and space rhythms” alongside enthusiastic discussions of directors and stars to keep general readers from feeling alienated by the increasing complexities of film and film language. “Going to the pictures is nothing to be ashamed of,” she wrote.<sup>11</sup> The middle class, members of which were flocking to cinemas at the time, seemed to agree.

At first, one might imagine the Great Depression and beginning of World War II that came along in the 1930s could have dissuaded the growing number of film fans from spending their hard earned and dwindling cash on the movies they loved. In fact, the opposite occurred. This was the era in which the Big Five Hollywood studios (RKO Pictures, Loew's/MGM, Paramount, Fox, and Warner Bros.) were peaking in their ability to produce, distribute, and exhibit their films in the theater chains they spread across America. Big downtown movie palaces, small local theaters, and cheap ticket prices helped make the cinema one of the most accessible means of escape from the economic woes many Americans suffered.

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<sup>11</sup> Qtd. In Brown, *Criticism Takes Wing*

Moviegoers of the day decided which films to see based on their favorite stars, genres, and plotlines rather than thematic complexity or technical achievement. Mainstream reviewers, frequent guests at lavish press screenings, were all too happy to respond to such simple demands. Many newspaper and local critics had little issue with regurgitating the opinions of a film's distributors (who gave them alcohol and press handouts) or their paper's publisher. Most film criticism of the time consisted, once again, of simple plot summaries and fluff material. In 1933, John C. Moore of the magazine *film art* called such reviewers amateurish, saying they had an "inborn dislike" of emergent film style and used cinematic terms "in the wrong connection."<sup>12</sup>

Intellectually stimulating film criticism did have a place, however- mostly in the pages of liberal American publications. Harry Alan Potamkin, a longtime critic for the *New Freeman*, *Hound and Horn*, *The New Masses*, and more, was notable both for his affinity for the complexities of European films and for the official Red (communist) funeral accorded to him at the time of his death. Like many leftist intellectuals of the time, he strove to close the gap between politics and art through film. Otis Ferguson, critic for *The New Republic*, wrote about film in new ways, citing Hemingway and detective novelists as stylistic influences.

When Ferguson was killed in action during World War II, an enthusiastic critic named Emanuel "Manny" Farber filled his spot at *The New Republic*. According to Farber, his writing style "circumvented describing story and plot and dived right into the center of the movie."<sup>13</sup> He is perhaps most notable for his preference for gritty,

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<sup>12</sup> Qtd in Brown, *The 1930s*

<sup>13</sup> Qtd. In Nafus



edgy film (which he called “termite art”) over flashy, predictable Hollywood films (which he called “white elephant art”). His unique voice is apparent in a 1962 Film Culture essay in which he describes his idea of “Termite-tapeworm-fungus-moss art,” which, he says, “goes always forward eating its own boundaries, and, like as not, leaves nothing in its path other than the signs of eager, industrious, unkempt activity.”<sup>14</sup>

Not all intellectual film critics were as edgy or over-the-top as Farber, however. In Britain, the novelist Graham Greene made his living for a time on the regular wages he earned as a film critic for *The Spectator*. His comprehensive experience with character, setting, atmosphere, and plot development gave him an edge over many of his colleagues. As a novelist and reviewer, he was able to use film terminology in knowledgeable storytelling critiques to provide a distinctive angle on film discussion.

In America, Steven Talty of Film Comment reserves the title of first Great American film critic for James Agee. An incredibly talented aspiring screenwriter, poet, and novelist (who won a posthumous Pulitzer Prize), Agee wrote movie reviews for *Time* magazine and the *Nation* from 1942 to 1948, and in that time became one of the most influential critics of all time. His reviews read like the works of a genius writer imprisoned by a job that requires he waste his time watching hundreds of downright bad films, only occasionally stumbling across something worth remembering. It is partly because his reviews palpably reflected his biting despair over the time and talent he felt he was wasting that Agee is such a readable critic. Take this excerpt from his piece on the 1948 film, *I Walk Alone*:

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<sup>14</sup> Farber, pg.135

“Good performances by Wendell Corey and Kirk Douglas; a sharp scene about an old-fashioned gangster’s helplessness against modern business methods. Some better than ordinary night-club atmosphere. Otherwise the picture deserves, like four out of five other movies, to walk alone, tinkle a little bell, and cry “unclean, unclean.”<sup>15</sup>

“Agee had a very clear sense of what he looked for in a movie,” says the introduction to the first volume in his collection of film writings, *Agee on Film*; “and he felt strongly that the movie (essentially an industry for entertainment) had within it the obvious potential of a virile modern art form, yet one only occasionally fulfilled.”<sup>16</sup> He recognized the odds against any truly great film succeeding against the business of Hollywood and making it to theaters. Mindful of how very badly those involved in the business end of a film’s production tended to ruin good movies by meddling with its creative direction, Agee attributed good filmmaking to the directors. Before there was ever an auteur theory, he realized that “The best films are personal ones, made by forceful directors.”<sup>17</sup>

The most ardent proponent of auteur theory was<sup>18</sup> Andrew Sarris, the *Village Voice* and *New York Observer* writer who coined the term. Much like Agee, Sarris struggled with his role as a film critic. Their issues, however, were polar opposites. “The traditional view in the past on people like Agee is that there are these fine individuals who are wasting their lives in this trivial medium,” he said in one 1976 interview. “I feel

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<sup>15</sup> Qtd. In Talty, pg.10-11

<sup>16</sup> Agee, Introduction

<sup>17</sup> Qtd. In Nafus

<sup>18</sup> As of this writing, Sarris is a film professor at Columbia University

that the medium, itself, is marvelous, but that I'm not worthy of it. I'm not really good enough to convey all of the material that's there, all of the effort that went into it, all of the magic that's happened.”<sup>19</sup>

Sarris' 1968 book, *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions*, helped overhaul American film criticism with his introductions and explanations of two integral French terms into the American critical vocabulary: Auteur and *Mise-en-scene*. Picking up on what the French periodical *Cahiers du Cinema*<sup>20</sup> called *la politique des auteurs*, refined the French filmmaking policy and used it in his industry-changing auteur theory. Sarris, who considered his theory “a collection of facts,” knew that it could be applied retrospectively as “a reminder of movies to be resurrected, or genres to be redeemed, of directors to be rediscovered.”<sup>21</sup> His revolutionary book served as much more than a new tool for examining old films, however. It was a manifesto for the revolution of American film discussion. “The auteur idea not only elevated the film director (excessively and insupportably, some said) but also the viewer-reader and the critic-exegete.”<sup>22</sup> In focusing his critique on the efforts of the directors, he brought the average moviegoer's focus away from the individual stars and towards a film's Big Picture, whatever that may have been.

Andrew Sarris was not the only influential film critic of the 1960s, however. Pauline Kael, who died in 2001, reviewed films for *The New Yorker* from 1968-1991. After publishing a surprisingly popular collection of criticism entitled *I Lost It at the*

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<sup>19</sup> Barrett, Pg. 3

<sup>20</sup> The English version of which he went on to become Editor-in-Chief

<sup>21</sup> Qtd. In Jones

<sup>22</sup> *Cineaste*, 'Symposium' (2000)

*Movies*, Kael's first review for the magazine in enthusiastic support of the now-classic *Bonnie and Clyde*. "No critic ever loved good movies more, nor had a higher time trashing bad ones," one obituary read. "And no critic was ever, or maybe ever will be, as much fun to read."<sup>23</sup> Indeed, her eclectic critical style and Quixotic writing style have made her into one of the most unique and irreplaceable voices in the profession's history. As an advocate of many unpopular films and opponent of many popular ones, she never pulled any punches in her highly opinionated, often scathing reviews, although she almost always kept a conversational tone.

In 1963, that conversation turned into an all-out argument; one that would go down into the annals of film history and launch film criticism and the critics themselves into the mainstream. That year, Kael published *Circles and Squares*, which, among other things, was a direct attack upon Sarris and the auteur theory. Her attack on "the cult of the director...launched two birds with one screed –her own as a hit woman not to be crossed, and her target's, who suddenly found the obscure pieces he published in the low-circulation *Film Comment* the manifesto of a new credo."<sup>24</sup> In her essay, 'Trash and Art', Kael directly challenges the "auteur boys'"<sup>25</sup> entire perspective of and approach to film criticism:

"We generally become interested in movies because we enjoy them, and what we enjoy has little to do with what we think of as art... and for the greatest movie artists where there is a unity of technique and subject, one doesn't need to talk about technique much because it has been subsumed in the art. One doesn't

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<sup>23</sup> Shales, Pg. 4

<sup>24</sup> Doherty

<sup>25</sup> Qtd. In Nafus

want to talk about how Tolstoi got his effects but about the work itself. One doesn't want to talk about how Jean Renoir does it; one wants to talk about what he has done. One can try to separate it all out, of course, distinguish form and content for purposes of analysis. But that is a secondary, analytic function, a scholarly function, and hardly needs to be done explicitly in criticism.”<sup>26</sup>

Kael and Sarris had extremely differing opinions not only on the quality of films, but also on the very basis by which to judge them. Kael's reviews were playful, and her critical approach valued gut reactions. She famously shared that she only watches a movie one time before passing judgment. Sarris, on the other hand, approached his criticism with what could be perceived as far more seriousness, analytically cataloguing and studying both films and their directors before formulating his reaction pieces. Their spirited debate in the pages of their respective publications over the following years may very well end up being the most widely read intellectual (film) critical exchange of all time. “We were so gloriously contentious, everyone bitching at everyone,” he said in one recent interview. “We all said some stupid things, but film seemed to matter so much.”<sup>27</sup>

Thanks in large part to Sarris and Kael, the critics were not the only ones to whom film –and film criticism– seemed to matter for long. In his documentary, *A Brief History of American Film Criticism*, Gerald Peary labels the period from 1968-1980 “When Criticism Mattered”<sup>28</sup> for good reason. With the Vietnam War raging on and students leading the protests, young people were more politically conscious and involved than ever before, and they started alternative newspapers and magazines all over the country to

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<sup>26</sup> Kael

<sup>27</sup> Qtd. In Powell

<sup>28</sup> Qtd. In Nafus

prove it. An explosion of fresh, young critical voices was unleashed among the pages of these new publications. Theirs was a generation to which film had been firmly established as a serious and legitimate art form, and editors gave critics plenty of space to write about it. Their analyses provided entirely new points of view on uses of the medium.

The most prominent critic to emerge from this golden age of film criticism did not get his start in any such alternative outlet, however. In 1967, a 25-year-old Roger Ebert started his professional critic career at the *Chicago Sun-Times*.<sup>29</sup> His style of critique, rating films on a four star scale relative to their prospective audiences, proved more useful to readers than earlier critics, who treated each new movie like a battleground on which to passionately skewer audiences with their erudite opinions. “The plain-spoken Midwestern clarity of Mr. Ebert’s prose and his genial, conversational presence on the page may, in the end, make him a more useful and reliable companion for the dedicated moviegoer,” A.O. Scott of the *New York Times*, a formidable critic in his own right, writes.<sup>30</sup> “With his open-minded tastes, his erudition, and his inviting style, Ebert is a powerful force for cinematic literacy, leaving no ticket buyer behind.”<sup>31</sup> By expertly weaving personal experience, emotional responses, and unflinching honesty in with a nearly unparalleled knowledge of film history and technical and aesthetic terminology, Ebert has become the most well-known and universally accessible film critic of all time.

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<sup>29</sup> As of this writing, Ebert continues to be a major presence in the paper and draws a massive following to its web site.

<sup>30</sup> Scott

<sup>31</sup> Schwarzbaum

Ebert owes his popularity to more than just his writing talent, however. On September 4, 1975, a PBS affiliate in Chicago began airing *Opening Soon at a Theater Near You*, the first American film review television show ever. The monthly show featured two critics, Gene Siskel of the *Chicago Tribune* alongside Ebert, who presented brief clips of currently or soon-to-be released movies before debating the value of each film. Viewers were initially attracted to the show by its informative upcoming film previews. They returned for the spirited, often heated discussions between Siskel and Ebert whenever they disagreed. In 1978<sup>32</sup>, the show went into biweekly production and was aired nationally as *Sneak Previews*.

The program would go through one more incarnation –as *At the Movies* with Tribune Entertainment- before hitting its stride in 1990 as the Disney-owned (therefore high profile and heavily promoted) *Siskel and Ebert and The Movies*. If Sarris and Kael initiated the popularization of film criticism through lively, informed debate in print, Siskel and Ebert finished the job by projecting their arguments into the homes and onto the televisions of families across the country. To the average American, film criticism had never before been as genuinely entertaining as these two passionate cinephiles made it. Their undeniable chemistry, differing opinions, convincing arguments, and natural rapport made them a perfectly balanced team. After Siskel's untimely death in early 1999, the show would never be the same. Though other critics –most notably Richard Roeper, Ben Lyons, Ben Mankiewicz, A.O. Scott, and Michael Philips- would go on to replace Siskel and, after a series of debilitating surgeries, Ebert as well, *At the Movies* had made its mark long before any personnel changes. As soon as it had been put into

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<sup>32</sup> Doherty

national syndication, the mainstream mouthpiece of professional film criticism set the course for the next three decades of reviews, both in print and on TV.

## **PART II**

### **Stagnation**

*Film criticism is two guys (and usually it is guys) arguing: shifting in their seats, rolling their eyes, pointing fingers and interrupting, and*



***every now and then agreeing. Or that's the way it looks on television at least.***

~A.O. Scott

The introduction of *At the Movies* brought more exposure to film criticism than ever before. Siskel and Ebert became household names, and suddenly film buffs weren't the only ones interested in movie reviews. For the first time, people with no interest in film were devouring televised critiques just to decide which movie to see on the weekend. *At the Movies* forced film criticism to appeal to general audiences, and it didn't take long for other shows to jump on the bandwagon.

When television executives caught wind of Siskel and Ebert's early popularity, local stations all across the country began employing resident film critics to provide brief film previews with *At the Movies*-esque 'good or bad' assessments for fast and easy newscast segments. Reviews broadcast during a news program had to appeal to a much wider audience, though, and to keep that audience from changing the channel, stations hire critics who are loud, witty, clever, funny, and all around entertaining. Tom Shales describes the average such entertainer/critic as "a hokey jokester who's there to add cheap laughs, lighten up the newscast and make himself famous."<sup>33</sup> Time constraints kept all but the most essential *At the Movies* segments –those which the network perceived as most popular- from making it on the air. More often than not, an entertainer/critic has only seconds to comment on a film between action-packed promotional clips, bad movie jokes, and sensational raves about anything even

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<sup>33</sup> Shales

slightly positive. “The way one becomes rich writing film criticism,” says The Chicago Reader’s Jonathan Rosenbaum, “is learning how to speak in sound bites on TV –which in effect means to shut up and let the clips do most of the talking.”<sup>34</sup>

The most prominent such entertainer/critic is Gene Shalit, who has been reviewing films for NBC’s *The Today Show* since 1973. With his oversize moustache, colorful bowties, giant glasses, and frizzy hair, Shalit is a far cry from the gentlemanly and knowledgeable professionalism of Siskel and Ebert. His fast-paced reviews in *Today*’s Critic’s Corner are filled to bursting with puns, alliteration, catch phrases, and witticisms. Where Siskel and Ebert provided rich, informative, meaningful, and entertaining expressions of deeply held opinions, Shalit provides 90 seconds of joke-filled filler as entertainment. His critiques, weighed down by his clownish antics, his ridiculous voice, and a restrictive time limit, leave no room for serious or meaningful film discussion.

Producers don’t hire entertainer/critics for meaningful film discussion, however. In the fast-paced world of broadcast journalism, segments like Shalit’s Critic’s Corner are meant only to keep as many people watching the show through to the next segment as possible. Producers know that they aren’t in a situation like *At the Movies*, where the entire audience tuned in specifically for film criticism. The entertainer/critics have to capture the attention of viewers who aren’t actually looking for film criticism, and to do so they rely on over-the-top personalities, extreme opinions, sensational phrasing, and comedy. If critic were to get too serious

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<sup>34</sup> *Cineaste*, Symposium (2000) Pg. 39

about a film or use too much cinema vocabulary, disinterested viewers would waste no time in switching to a competitor's less abrasive broadcast.

Similarly, published film critics felt *At the Movies'* influence. When the show made it clear just how big the audience for film criticism could be, newspapers and magazines rushed to make their reviews as accessible as possible. Ratings-based reviews, which were already rather popular by the time the show debuted, became the standard review format at most local and national publications. As rave or rant reviews are often the most entertaining to read, some editors even asked critics to utilize more colorful language and extreme ratings. In a 2000 *Cineaste* symposium on the state of professional film criticism, David Denby, critic for *The New Yorker* since 1990, explains:

"Newspapers are in desperate competition with other media merely to survive, and editors and writers at some papers may come under tremendous pressure to stupefy their movie coverage. A talented critic who is instinctively honest can get trapped as completely as a mediocrity. Editors, perhaps pressured by publishers...may ask critics to shorten and punch up their reviews, assign star or letter grades to the movies, omit qualifying paragraphs, lines of reasoning, evocation- everything that makes a review criticism and not thumbs-up or thumbs-down hackwork... Frightened that readers will feel outclassed by a strongly worded opinion, [the publishers] may tell the critic that he's 'lost touch' with the audience, or they may publish opinions by ordinary folk or students to reveal the voice of 'the people. What

they really want –what they think readers need- are not reviews at all but endless feature coverage’s of movies”<sup>35</sup>

With more critics in more papers trying to appeal to more readers, it’s no surprise that many publications seek to appeal to their reader demographic. Pauline Kael once said that critics “tend to exalt the works that we’re emotionally and intellectually ready for. And we expect the audience to be in the same spot in their lives that we are.”<sup>36</sup> Today, the opposite is true. Editors want lively reviews that their readers can enjoy and agree with rather than lengthy essays that could challenge a reader’s perception of a film or its message. Critics are often encouraged to write from their audience’s –rather than their own- perspective. As Mike Clark, critic for USA Today, puts it, “in this kind of ‘general interest’ publication, readers will let editors know in a blink that they don’t want any movie critic’s politics rammed down their throats.”<sup>37</sup> Publishers, then, settle for reviews that are written specifically to assure readers that they have good taste in movies. In the words of Roger Ebert, “this makes the public into a ventriloquist, and the critic into a dummy sitting on the public’s knee.”<sup>38</sup>

Furthering their efforts to prevent film critics from alienating their publications’ audiences, editors began demanding coverage of more mainstream films. Independent films, which rarely go into wide release, are often seen as a waste of space that could be better used for reviews of films that the audience is more likely to see. Slowly but surely, foreign, independent, and art films were afforded

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<sup>35</sup> *Cineaste*, Symposium (2000) Pg. 31

<sup>36</sup> Sawhill, Pg.94

<sup>37</sup> *Cineaste*, Symposium (2000) Pg. 29

<sup>38</sup> *Cineaste*, Symposium (2000) Pg. 33

less and less critical exposure. As of this writing, 215 critics are cited in the Rotten Tomatoes (see Part III) rating of Tim Burton's heavily publicized *Alice in Wonderland*. Compare that number to the 23 critics who have rated Lucien Castaing-Taylor's relatively unknown *Sweetgrass*, a lower budget film that is also in current release, and the difference between critical coverage of mainstream films compared to that of independently released films becomes apparent. It doesn't matter that *Sweetgrass*, with a 96% fresh rating, is a much greater critical success than *Alice in Wonderland*, which has a 53%, publishers think their readers would rather see a generic review of a bad film they've already been heavily exposed to than a genuine and thoughtful recommendation of a good film they've never heard of.

Of course, the majority of audiences throughout the 1980s and 1990s did not look to thoughtful or genuine reviews for movie recommendations anymore. After *Star Wars* was released in 1977, Hollywood noticed the enormous earning potential in the teenage demographic, which had largely been ignored before then. Suddenly, movies were made specifically for teenagers with expendable cash and nothing better to do on the weekend than go to the theater. Movies like *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, and *Ghostbusters* rode the blockbuster boom of the late 1970s on a wave of youth audiences, and sequels were often more successful. What one critic calls the "15 year old male in a shopping mall"<sup>39</sup> became Hollywood's new most valuable demographic, and the entire industry was changed by the shift in focus.

This teenage demographic did not get its film information from newspapers or magazines, though. After a successful ad campaign in which 30-second trailers for *Jaws*

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<sup>39</sup> Qtd. In Nafus

ran during primetime in 1975, studios recognized the true value of television marketing. The teenage demographic was exposed to many more commercials than professional reviews. Word of mouth alone was often enough to bring audiences flocking to the theaters. While broadcast film criticism with Siskel and Ebert and entertainer/critics was at the height of its influence, published film criticism declined even more. Grasping to capture the attention of Hollywood's new focus demographic, all but the least compromising publications (*The New Yorker*, *The New Republic*, *The Nation*, to name a few) dumbed their movie coverage down to bare-bones articles full of sensationalized one-liners and star or letter grade ratings systems. With a big "3.5 out of 4 Stars" at the top of the page, readers don't even have to read the review to find out what the critic thought of the movie.

But film reviews were not simplified as a result of television promotion alone. Since before Rex Reed was quoted in the 1974 *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* trailer as calling the movie, "the most horrifying motion picture I have ever seen," promotional teams scoured film reviews for usable bits of positive, out of context critical opinion. Studios wanted to put these blurbs in their television ads to make their movies –especially the bad ones- look like they were met with critical praise. Some critics saw writing as many quotable nuggets as possible into each review as an easy way to gain exposure for themselves or their publications. Richard Roeper, Siskel's immediate replacement, called *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*:

"One of the funniest movies of the decade. I want to get down on my knees and declare my undying love for this movie ... An instant classic. I laughed out

loud 20 times... I don't think I can oversell this, I loved it. One of the funniest damn movies I've ever seen."<sup>40</sup>

There is a difference between overselling good movies and overhyping bad ones, however. Some critics, like *Rolling Stone*'s Peter Travers, choose to regularly insert usable blurbs into his reviews for any films with flowing advertising budgets. "The FX is killer," he writes in his 2009 review of *2012*, a movie he also called "the biggest turd in the bowl" and ultimately gave only one star out of four.<sup>41</sup> Jim Ferguson of ABC-TV praised *Speed Racer* as "One of the most exhilarating movies you'll ever see" and *The Love Guru* as "Hilarious!" Both films were critically panned commercial failures. Nick Digilio of WGN Radio Chicago saw *George A. Romero's Diary of the Dead* and raved, "I bet I don't see a better film in 2008."<sup>42</sup> He said this in the middle of February, 2008, rather early in the year *The Dark Knight*, *There Will Be Blood*, and other critically lauded films would be released.

Other critics go out of their way to supply favorable quotes for movie marketing executives. Paul Fischer praises even the worst films, calling the 2006 remake of *The Pink Panther* "a wonderfully funny comic gem" and Adam Sandler's *Click* one of the "most extraordinary films of the year."<sup>43</sup> These examples are nothing in comparison to what was done for the sake of a Super Bowl ad for *Hannibal Rising* in 2007, though. The Weinstein Co. wanted to quote *Maxim* magazine's Pete Hammond in their article, but his blurb calling the film "the most terrifying thriller

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<sup>40</sup> Qtd. In Gray

<sup>41</sup> Travers

<sup>42</sup> Qtd. In Gray

<sup>43</sup> Qtd. In Parry

of the new year” was deemed too risqué for family viewing. Producers were worried about the effect the word “terrifying” would have on younger audiences. Harvey Weinstein asked Hammond for permission to change his quote to “the year’s most electrifying thriller,” and that is how it ran in the ads. All over the country, millions of viewers were shown a positive quote about the film as written by Pete Hammond of *Maxim*, even though it was actually written by the movie’s marketing panel.<sup>44</sup> Expressing an opinion no doubt shared by many of his colleagues, *Slate Magazine’s* David Edelstein said, “There’s too much tolerance within the critical profession for the buffoonish cheerleaders and blurb whores.”<sup>45</sup>

Adding to the new pressures felt by professional film critics throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Hollywood amplified its reliance on big opening weekend box office returns. The blockbuster formula had proven successful, but it relied on blanket marketing and persistent hype-machines for the biggest returns. Huge advertising budgets became the norm as studios worked to build excitement for new releases. These releases almost always occur on weekends, when 15-year-old males don’t have school and their parents can drive them to the movies. Opening day box office returns became so important in studio and public perception that many people now consider a film a success or failure immediately after its release based on opening weekend ticket sales alone.

The opening weekend hype machine pressures film critics to publish their reviews on a film’s release day at the very latest. Before a release, critics can utilize the hype to gain prominent positioning for an upcoming blockbuster. After opening day, however,

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<sup>44</sup> Hayes

<sup>45</sup> *Cineaste*, Symposium (2000) Pg. 34



the audience for a review shrinks exponentially. “The opening weekend has become so crucial to a film’s survival that if you don’t run a review immediately, to can’t help the film or serve your readers,”<sup>46</sup> says Mahnola Dargis of LA Weekly. A thoughtful and well-written review of a Hollywood movie, published after a its opening weekend, is unlikely to have any effect on public opinion or box office at all. To make matters worse, according to Denby:

“There is a loud, agitated, relentless, and wearying quality now to the cycle of movie publicity, release, and withdrawal, a powerful disgust built into the operation of the huge machine itself. Whirlwinds of promotion often lead to a sudden collapse –all to be repeated the following week with a new movie, the instant monumental dissolved and reborn. Critics want to stop the world and get off, but they can’t. The marketing cycle controls most of them –us- as well.”<sup>47</sup>

To maximize readership, most editors demand reviews in time for a film’s release date. Unfortunately for the critics, Hollywood “tends to control access to films and filmmakers with a ferocity more suited to the Pentagon,”<sup>48</sup> and movies are regularly screened only two or three days before deadline. With multiple reviews due every week and some appearing in publications on a daily basis, busy critics rarely have more than a day to write for each movie. If a studio knows that it’s newest big-budget blockbuster is really a stinker, it will refuse to screen the film

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<sup>46</sup> *Cineaste*, Symposium (2000), Pg. 30

<sup>47</sup> *Cineaste*, Symposium (2000), Pg. 31

<sup>48</sup> Dargis Qtd. In *Cineaste*, Symposium (2000), Pg. 30

early for critics. They think more people are likely to see the movie if its negative reviews are kept out of the papers until after opening day.

Critics may exert much less influence over big budget blockbuster box office returns than Hollywood thinks. On August 7 2009, Paramount released *G.I. Joe: The Rise of Cobra* and Sony released *Julie & Julia*. Sony's film was screened for critics and received largely favorable reviews for its star, Meryl Streep. Paramount, however, only screened its film for a very limited number of critics, and the rest of its mainstream reviews were overwhelmingly negative throughout opening weekend. Despite its critical buildup, *Julie & Julia* only made \$20 million that weekend compared to *G.I. Joe: The Rise of Cobra*'s \$54.7 million.<sup>49</sup>

But the evidence against a critic's power to sway an audience goes further than mere box office numbers. Paramount did, after all, keep its film away from critics for as long as possible. Still, audience members under the age of 25 went on to give *G.I. Joe* an A rating from CinemaScore even after the negative reviews started rolling in. Mainstream critics were obviously quite removed from the film's target demographic. According to Gregg Kilday of The Hollywood Reporter, "The young men who volunteered for 'Joe' weren't about to take marching orders from middle-aged film critics."<sup>50</sup> Thanks to prolific marketing, they knew exactly what to expect from the film before ever setting foot in the theater. The critics never stood a chance against Paramount's multimillion dollar, carefully targeted marketing campaign.

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<sup>49</sup> Kilday

<sup>50</sup> Kilday

One 1999 study, however, finds that film critics can in fact influence their audience's perceptions about a movie, as long as certain criteria are met. In their paper, "Consumer Evaluations of Movies on the Basis of Critics' Judgments", Alain d'Astous and Nadia Touil assert that a number of specific factors can give a movie review more influence over an audience than it might otherwise have had. Their study determined that consumers are more likely to agree with the judgment of a film critic "when the judgment does not conform to the critic's style, when the judgment is inconsistent with the critic's predisposition toward the film director and when other critics' judgments show favorable consensus."<sup>51</sup> In other words, readers are most likely to take a review seriously when the critic's opinion of a film is uncharacteristic. If a critic who usually hates action movies and Spike Lee joints writes a glowing review for a new action movie directed by Spike Lee, readers are going to take notice. It also helps, of course, when many critics agree about the film.

Critics do still retain a huge influence over some of the movies that are released every year, though. Without money for advertising, independent films rely on critics and word-of-mouth alone to find their audiences. Readers, in kind, rely on critics to recommend such films honestly and reliably. Hollywood may be able to put enough money into marketing to render professional critics unnecessary, at best, but independent films, many of them struggling for even a limited national release, often live or die by the critic's pen. "A pan from the *New York Times* of a foreign art

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<sup>51</sup> d'Astous & Touil, Pg. 677

film can not only kill the movie in New York,” says David Ansen; “it also may mean the movie never opens anywhere else in the country.”<sup>52</sup>

For the vast majority of the movies released these days, however, it is becoming increasingly the case that critic’s opinions just don’t matter much anymore. Constant exposure to television promos, marketing tie-ins, and now the Internet has given audiences more access to information about a film before its release than ever. Contemporary moviegoers are familiar with all the tropes and genre conventions of Film as art simply because they have spent their entire lives watching movies. They can tell what to expect from a film, accurately predicting whether it will live up to their individual tastes, based on what it’s about and who is in it. Critics have been demoted from voices of influence and knowledge to sources of affirmative or dissenting opinion; people to agree or disagree with, but entirely unconvincing. Modern audiences already know what they want, and the balance of power and sway in Hollywood has largely shifted in their favor. Now, thanks to the Internet, professional film criticism is perilously close to completely irrelevant.

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<sup>52</sup> *Cineaste*, Symposium (2000) Pg.27

### Part III

#### Survival of the Fittest in the World Wide Web

*Given the present environment of enforced journalistic mediocrity and corporate line-toeing, I suspect that if Kael, Sarris, and Farber were producing their most influential work today, they would have had to start blogs to do it.*

~Michael Sicinski<sup>53</sup>

The proliferation in accessible, amateur film criticism hardly came about overnight. By the early 1990s, home theater technologies were cheap and easy to come by. VHS tapes flooded the markets, and thousands of new and old movies became available to consumers. Film buffs found themselves suddenly able to buy copies of their favorite movies and build libraries of their very own. They could study their films obsessively, without having to worry about paying for tickets, getting to the theater on time, or waiting to catch limited rereleases. With the power to pause, fast forward, and rewind, the audience finally had ultimate control over the viewing experience. Cinephiles finally had the freedom to meticulously examine the movies on their own time and in the comfort of their homes.

The previously unheard of accessibility of home movies, both for purchase and through rental companies like Blockbuster, meant anyone who was interested in film could study it as obsessively as they wanted. As one would expect, many of these fresh cinephiles were inspired to express their theories and opinions in writing. An explosion of

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<sup>53</sup> Cineaste, Symposium (2005), Pg. 44

amateur film fanzines, modeled after those that had already established themselves in alternative music scenes, gave these young writers places to publish their lively, opinionated work. Still, the individual fanzines were only able to maintain narrow, geographically limited readerships.

Once the Internet became affordable and was adopted by the general public, however, readership limitations stopped being an issue entirely. Writers started Web logs, or blogs, as personal sites used to compile essays, articles, opinions, and reviews. Suddenly, anyone in the world could post their writing to the Web, where anyone else could read it. An outlet's audience was no longer limited to subscriber lists. "On that initial front," says Zach Campbell, film writer for Elusivelucity Blogspot, "broadening the readership of writers who would otherwise have been contained to a certain geographical network- the Internet has been a huge boon."<sup>54</sup>

Professional critics, many of whom were much slower in adopting the new technology than less credentialed and more tech-savvy bloggers, found themselves overwhelmed by the sheer number of amateur film writers online. "There are an estimated 113 million blogs out there," says *Cineaste*'s Robert Cashill, "and 112 million seem to be about film."<sup>55</sup> While it is certainly true that a large number of blogger critics contributed ill-informed, poorly written, and often inflammatory reviews, interested Web surfers were able to find those bloggers who wrote skillfully, knowledgably, and with authority. As these commentators' readerships grew, their voices in the online film discussion got louder.

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<sup>54</sup> *Cineaste*, Symposium (2005), Pg. 30

<sup>55</sup> *Cineaste*, Symposium (2005), Pg. 31

With many print publications struggling to break even in the digital age, employed film critics are often some of the first writers laid off at their respective publications. The abundance of film commentary online makes writing about film seem like a job just about anyone can –and online, does- do. As A.O. Scott put it, “The paradox is that the Web has invigorated criticism as an activity while undermining it as a profession.”<sup>56</sup> The situation has become so grim that, in January of 2009, Movie City News posted a list of “The Last 126 Film Critics In America,” crossing off names as pink slips were handed out. The page has not been updated since March 2 2009, when 121 critics were left standing. Still, the fact that such a list even exists is an indication of the perceived condition of contemporary professional criticism.

It hardly helps that, for every print critic who gets fired, legions of bloggers appear. Some of them prove to be every bit as insightful and passionate as the professionals whose jobs they threaten. Web outlets have an easier time paying these skilled “amateur” bloggers for freelance work rather than negotiate fees with seasoned professionals, who are used to salaries. Many of them are paid in pennies for their online content. “If talented writers are prepared to accept assignments for what’s basically Ramen money,” says *Esquire*’s Mike D’Angelo, “ clearly there’s no earthly reason for anyone to shell out premium wages, much less a medical plan.”<sup>57</sup>

Of course, it could be argued that the current model, while making job security an issue for professional critics, provides a multitude of opportunities for amateurs and enthusiasts who are passionate about what they do. All it takes to make content available

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<sup>56</sup> Qtd. In Cieply

<sup>57</sup> *Cineaste*, Symposium (2005), Pg. 32

to millions of readers today is a computer, an Internet connection, a free blog, and the time and energy to contribute entertaining and informed writing. Cinema Scope's Andrew Tracy writes, "for all the changes that the online critical community has introduced to the nature of film discourse and the practice of film criticism, those changes are, on the whole, more ones of method than matter."<sup>58</sup> Indeed, it's easy to draw parallels between the uninhibited vigor of Internet film communities and that of the early film fanzine and movie club cultures.

But for all the opportunities the World Wide Web has to offer, it has always had one near fatal flaw: Internet commentators. The most intelligent, carefully thought out, and meticulously written online reviews are all too often overshadowed by the uncensored rantings and ravings of morons. "What I see of Internet reviewing," says Time's Richard Schickel, "is people of just surpassing ignorance about the medium expressing themselves on the medium."<sup>59</sup> Some of them even take pride in their lack of formal knowledge. One such blogger defines the fundamental divide in his own terms. "What sets me apart from the Siskel and Eberts of this world is a simple truth: I don't read books!"<sup>60</sup>

To make matters worse, many Web writers' contributions are often crude beyond the point of vulgarity. The ability to comment on blog posts and online articles has proven to be particularly troublesome. Though insightful commenting can help readers connect with their favorite writers, often leading to excellent digital discussions, many Web users take advantage of the voice the Internet gives them by spewing vitriol in every

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<sup>58</sup> Cineaste, Symposium (2005), Pg. 44

<sup>59</sup> Qtd. In Doherty

<sup>60</sup> Qtd. In Doherty



direction. The reality is that for every film review posted online, dissenting opinion will be represented in as rude a fashion as possible. “Did you even watch the movie!?” a commenter wrote in response to David Edelstein’s unflattering *Mission Impossible 2* review. “It was awesome. Next time watch it instead of sticking your dick in your gay lover’s ass. And don’t publish anything that isn’t true.”<sup>61</sup> Personal attacks of this kind are hardly unusual.

These days, blogging has become an essential part of film criticism. Most professional critics maintain blogs on their publication’s Web site, interacting with readers as part of their job. Some take particularly well to the digital medium. Roger Ebert, for example, who lost the ability to speak after a 2007 surgery, has become one of the most vocal critics on the Internet. *Cinema Scope*’s Adam Nayman notes, “the sheer space that an online venue affords can sometimes bring out the best in print critics accustomed to fighting for column inches.”<sup>62</sup> Those who maintain their blogs effectively are able to attract traffic to their publications’ Web sites from all over the world.

But the thread connecting a critic to his or her publication on the Web is being weakened by the emergence of online film review aggregators. These Web sites scour the Internet to collect professional and amateur reviews. They then standardize and average the ratings for each film, via individual site standards, into a single numerical score. “It’s like a sports score,” says Shannon Ludovissy, general manager of the most popular review aggregator, Rotten Tomatoes.<sup>63</sup> The site, which attracts roughly four million

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<sup>61</sup> Qtd. In *Cineaste*, Symposium (2000), Pg. 34

<sup>62</sup> Qtd. In *Cineaste*, Symposium (2005), Pg. 39

<sup>63</sup> Qtd. In Cieply

viewers a month<sup>64</sup>, deems reviews either negative or positive before averaging them together. The film is then given a ‘Tomatometer’ score out of 100%. Anything above 60% is considered “Fresh,” and anything below is considered “Rotten.”

Rotten Tomatoes and sites like it (Metacritic, for example, which covertly weights reviews depending on publication before assigning a score, pulls 2 million visitors a month<sup>65</sup>) do, however, negatively affect the critics they depend on in a few important ways. Culled from the opinions of every critic worth Googling, aggregate scores create the illusion of a critical consensus that simply does not exist. General readers who would previously have turned to their local critic or their favorite famous ones now have the option to check a movie’s aggregate score. Why take the time to read lengthy and subjective reviews when an objective-looking numerical value is available? Advocates of these sites claim they expose new and young readers to critical work, but those readers are not always reading further than the review excerpts on the film’s main score page. Aggregators do provide handy collections of writing for people interested in reading film criticism, but they also give those who aren’t an all-in-one reason to look no further.

Review aggregators affect critics as much as they affect readers, though. The illusion of critical consensus these Web sites create actually leads to pressure in the critical world to come to a consensus. When all critics’ opinions are put on a single page, those who disagree begin to stand out. If a film has a 98% fresh rating on Rotten Tomatoes, then the few critics who gave it negative reviews can’t help but appear at best wrong and at worst out of the loop. Diehard fans and vulgar commentators will email the

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<sup>64</sup> Cieply

<sup>65</sup> Cieply

editors and spam the blogs of anyone who tarnished their favorite new film's rating. "I know too many critics who now think it's their job to serve the collective," said Entertainment Weekly's Owen Gleiberman. "The fanboys can be merciless."<sup>66</sup>

Now social media has made it easier than ever for the fanboys –and anyone else for that matter- to make sure their voices are heard. Web sites like Twitter and Facebook allow users to instantly share their thoughts and opinions with global networks of "followers" and "friends" from anywhere in the world via even the most basic text-enabled cell phones. When a movie is released today, the Internet is flooded with audiences' judgments seconds after every screening. "Two or three years ago, you might see a movie and go home and blog about it, and a few people would read it," said Moroch Entertainment's Michelle Langston. Critics with established readerships and sneak preview privileges still had the advantage. "Now," Langston said, "you can tweet from your iPhone the minute the credits start to roll and, depending on the number of people on your Twitter account, you can reach hundreds of people in a micro-second."<sup>67</sup>

When word of mouth opinion became so up to date and easy to track, it was easy to understand why Hollywood started to take notice. The first film to experience what has since been dubbed the Twitter Effect was *Bruno* in 2009. Despite pulling in \$30.4 million in its opening weekend, the comedy saw almost a 40% drop in ticket sales from Friday to Saturday, and lost even more momentum going into Sunday.<sup>68</sup> The only thing that changed between that Friday and Saturday was that people actually saw the movie, and

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<sup>66</sup> Qtd. In Cieply

<sup>67</sup> Qtd. In Solnik

<sup>68</sup> Van Grove

they carpeted the Internet with warnings to stay away. The Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation was an especially vocal opponent of the film.

Now Hollywood knows to use the Internet to its advantage. Movie trailers are released online far in advance to help build up early buzz. The trailer for the comedy, *The Hangover*, for example, got over 1,000,000 views on YouTube and had more than 200 fan groups on Facebook in the weeks leading up to its theatrical debut. “The Hangover was huge on these Web sites,” said theater owner Jay Levinson, “and the picture went through the roof.”<sup>69</sup> Online buzz is crucial because the effects of each article, positive or negative, are multiplied through pass-on readership. Every tweet or blob post has the potential to be retweeted or linked to on someone else’s blog, where it can be seen by a whole new set of readers; some of whom are likely to continue the trend by reposting it themselves.

It would be incorrect to say that professional critics are left in the dust by these new technologies. Many of them have Twitter accounts, Facebook pages, and blogs of their own, and their opinions still hold a lot of water- even online. Roger Ebert, for example, has more than 130,000 Twitter followers. Every time he posts a link to one of his reviews for the *Chicago Sun-Tribune*, many of those followers can be counted on for traffic to his publication’s Web site. Some of them will even retweet his link, multiplying its effectiveness. Still, the vast majority of film critique that comes from these sites has nothing to do with the professional critics. Most opinions come from the general public: ordinary people who just saw a movie and want to tell their friends what they thought about it. “Today, social media sites have put the success of a film in the hands of the

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<sup>69</sup> Qtd. In Solnik

moviegoer,” Levinson said.<sup>70</sup> Online, everyone’s a critic, and the professionals are no longer the largest or most influential source of criticism. In the sea of online public opinion, instant, honest, and straight from the audience, the professional critics can hardly make a splash.

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*The Web is helping make film criticism stronger, more interesting, more accessible, more vital, and more difficult to corral and define. Which are more reasons not to be gloomy.*

~Robert Koehler

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<sup>70</sup> Qtd. In Solnik

Paradoxically, the future of professional film criticism depends entirely on its survival on the Internet. Today's professionals are some of the most widely read and highly regarded voices on the Web, but few are as proficient with social networking as they could be. Some, like Roger Ebert, maintain loyal followings through prolific Tweeting and blogging to supplement their film reviews. Others, like A.O. Scott, upload video reviews and classic recommendations to the iTunes store, where anyone with an Internet connection can subscribe to their channel. Still, it's rare to see a critic with a robust online identity than encompasses all the Web has to offer.

Criticism-based online communities could offer intelligent discussions and worthwhile opinions for people who are looking specifically for film criticism. Film critics could also learn from online television critics, whose episode reviews don't skirt around plot spoilers and are targeted towards readers who have already seen the show. Many cinephiles wait until after seeing a film to read its reviews anyways, and allowing more open discussion about revealing plot points might help revitalize the film review formula for the first time since *At the Movies*. Through audience interaction, critical content stands a chance of becoming more substantial and encourages direct relationships with the writer. No matter what happens, however, it seems apparent that the future of professional film criticism is in the hand of the next generation of critics. If the new, young, tech-savvy professionals that emerge in the coming years are able to fully utilize Web services to supplement their print material with strong online presences and thoughtfully interact with their readers, the profession will always have a home on the Internet. Until then, though, everyone's a critic.

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