Everybody's a Critic: Trends in Popular Media Criticism

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early days, not what was high-class or popular in European culture. Movies "took their impetus...from the peep show, the Wild West show, the music hall, the comic strip."[4]

"Where could we better stoke the fires of our masochism than at rotten movies in gaudy seedy picture palaces in cities that run together, movies and anonymity a common denominator? Movies – a tawdry corrupt art for a tawdry corrupt world – fit the way we feel," she wrote.[5] "If we've grown up at the movies we know that good work is continuous not with the academic, respectable tradition but with the glimpses of something good in trash, but we want the subversive gesture carried to the domain of discovery. Trash has given us an appetite for art."[6]

Critics, including Kael, developed alongside the movie business, waxing and waning as the business did, helping to challenge perceptions of culture representative of the decades in which the respective critics wrote.[7] Movies and critics came to rely on one another in a circular way, and came eventually to rely on their audiences as well. "Critics need popular recognition for legitimacy. If moviegoers cease to care about the art of moviegoing, critics cease to matter."[8]

Film as art has always been a hotly debated topic partially due to the fact that film has always been an accessible and comparatively cheap medium. Film's accessibility has only increased since the rise of the Internet, which has heightened the debate of film as art, but also has allowed audiences an unprecedented personal stake and involvement in the entertainment. When audiences are able to develop a personal connection to the media and the critics, both the audiences' interest and the quality of the criticism increase. As a result, the audience and the critic are changing with the times. The Internet has had an unprecedented effect on how critics

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[4] Lopate, Phillip, ed. American Movie Critics: An Anthology From the Silents Until Now. New York: The Library of American, 2006: 349.
[5] Lopate 337.
[6] Lopate 367.
[7] Haberski, Raymond J. It's Only a Movie! Films and Critics in American Culture. Lexington: Univ. of Kentucky Press, 2001: 4.
[8] Haberski 189.

do their jobs, and how the audiences, in turn, respond to the criticism. Anyone is able to share their opinions online, allowing everyone to be a critic.

Ironically enough, it was Kael and her influential writings that did so much to legitimize film as an art form, despite her distaste of film academics.[9] And it was this debate that would carry critics through the decades.

Moviegoing has been an integral part of American culture since the birth of movies in the late 19th century. Over time, moviegoing came to represent the redefinition of the traditional meaning of entertainment and art in American culture.

Of course, what actually can be considered criticism is a hotly debated issue, with no real answer. The word "criticize" has a naturally negative connotation, which puts critics at a bit of a disadvantage.

Writer Allan Massie sums up the conflict inherent in what it means to be a critic:

> In our time the words 'critic,' 'criticism and [criticize]' have taken on a narrow meaning, in common speech, anyway. All are imbued with the idea of hostility. They can properly bear that meaning, of course. The dictionary will tell you that a critic is 'a fault-finder' and that to [criticize] may mean 'to censure.' But these aren't the first meanings of the words, and it will be sad if they are allowed to elbow out the other older and more generous ones.[10]

The confusion, though, does not end there. There have been, and always will be, conflicting views on the best way to be a film critic and how the critic can best serve his audience. Some argue that a critic's first task should be descriptive, while others claim that a critic must always serve some sort of judgment on the piece at hand. This, of course, is all while serving the demands of the publication for which the critic is writing.

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[9] Rickey.

[10] Massie, Allan. "Cultural Arena: Good Criticism hard to find – and the devil to do." The Scotsman. 15 Jan. 2005, Saturday Ed.: 6.

While it may seem like anyone can give a description of a movie, it takes a unique skill to be a film critic.

"If all I did was rubber-stamp the verdict of the box office, I would indeed be unneeded," writes critic Peter Rainer in *The Christian Science Monitor*.

Says Massie, "The true critic's work is therefore first descriptive. This is not easy, which is why many critics neglect the duty."[11]

"Of course, there are many more bad critics than good ones," he continues. "This is not surprising. There are more bad novels and bad paintings than good ones. The bad critic rushes to judgment: the good one learns the importance of careful discrimination. This too is difficult and requires attention to the matter in hand."[12]

Washington Post critic Hornaday said that she relies on three tips to write her criticism. "A critic should…answer three questions," she said. "What is the artist trying to do? Did the artist achieve it? And was it worth doing? And the reason why I think that serves me so well is that it allows me to judge a movie on its merits rather than the biases I'm bringing to it and what I want it to be. I think it's more fair to the filmmaker and it's also more fair to the audience because it's like there's no way a critic can be all things to all people, and it's impossible."[13]

In *American Movie Critics*, Philip Lopate writes about the particular demands found with film criticism. For example, how does a film critic separate all the different aspects, such as acting, direction, writing and sound, of the filmmaking process and synthesize that into a review? The critic also has to bear in mind the history of the entertainment industry. What have the films' participants done in the past? How does the film fit in terms of its genre or its message? Does the film have any particular social or political meanings that need to be addressed? What if the

[11] Massie.
[12] Massie.
[13] Hornaday.

critic's opinion on the film is vastly different than what his audience believes?[14] "The critic should not be expected to predict which films the audience will love; the critic is only supposed to give an intelligent accounting of his or her response," writes Lopate.[15]

But of course, a journalistic critic only has a certain amount of space with which to work and must accomplish all his tasks "often within a thousand words or less, sometimes juggling three films per column," writes Lopate. "Space limitations foster a style of witty compression. The critic learns to come at a film from a distinct angle or setup…A premium is placed on the film critic's ability to translate visual representation into crisply vivid verbal descriptions."[16]

And when the film critic beings to notice recurring themes, how he find fresh comments about rather commercial and unremarkable films? When a critic is watching one, if not more, film a day, how does he create new and different things to say?[17]

But does a film critic need to be the ultimate authority on the art of film? Well, as criticism history shows, not necessarily. "In the past, it would seem that *not* knowing much about movies served as a qualification for a film reviewing post," writes Lopate. "The public, feeling already informed, resisted the notion of film appreciation as a specialized field of study that might necessitate historians, theorists, mavens. Yet however much satirists may poke fun at the snobbish devotee of 'the cinemaah,' writing well about movies does require historical knowledge and formal cultivation. How, then does a film critic assert authority in the face of the public's resistance to cinematic expertise? (The answer is: tactfully.)"[18]

In a post on his blog, critic Ronald Bergan describes an old story where a young critic, poised to take over the film critic post from a veteran, was denied the job because he knew too

[14] Lopate XX.
[15] Lopate XXI.
[16] Lopate XX.
[17] Lopate XXI.
[18] Lopate XXIII.

much about cinema. No one would ever say the same thing to a literature, theatre or ballet critic. But because film is art for the general masses, Bergan argues that film criticism is not treated as seriously as criticism of the other arts.[19]

But this, he writes, has led to deterioration in the quality of criticism. The criticism he has seen has become mostly descriptive, anecdotal and subjectively evaluative rather than analytical. "Most reviewers deal primarily with the content of a film – anybody can tell you what a film is about – rather than the style, because they do not have the necessary knowledge to do so. This leads me to believe that film critics should have some formal education in their subject, such as a degree in film studies."[20] He also calls for future film critics to have some kind of minimum education before one can call himself a film critic.[21] This includes knowing lighting terms, sound terms, music terms, director names, and be well-read on the articles of those famous directors.

Author James Monaco notes that there are two ways to go about film criticism: prescriptive, or what the film should be, and descriptive, or only what the film is. A prescriptive theory is inductive, he writes, where the critic decides on a set of values prior to writing a review, and then measures the film against the prearranged set. On the other hand, Monaco calls a descriptive theory deductive. In this scenario, the critic looks at the entire range of film activity and then draws his conclusions.[22]

But most importantly an effective critic must develop some sort of a connection with his audience. Lopate writes that critics are still human beings, who use their "autobiographical

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[19] Bergan, Ronald. "What every film critic must know." The blog film. 13 Apr 2008. 26 Mar 2007 <http://blogs.guardian.co.uk/film/2007/03/what_every_film_critic_must_kn.html>.
[20] Bergan.
[21] Bergan.
[22] Monaco, James. How to Read a Film: Movies, Media, Multimedia 3rd Edition. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000: 389.

quirks" to relate to the readers.[23] Notable critics like Andrew Sarris and Pauline Kael had certain childhood stories or deep-seeded interests that punctuated their reviews. They "willingly insert personal details in the midst of analyzing a movie, and we come to form an intimate picture of them."[24] Americans also tend to view themselves as astute judges of movies, he writes. After childhoods full of movies, by their teenage years, audiences tend to be aware of current actors, directors and genres, and they begin to use critics as something of consumer guides. Audiences will turn to a review to choose their weekend entertainment, and consequently, look to critics who mirror their own feelings.[25] As a result, after years of regularly following one particular critic, they become like trusted old friends who have opinions we value and to whom we turn to for advice.[26]

As such, film criticism is a delicate topic, as both the movies themselves and the critics who write about them are so personal. "My approach to criticism – and I've been at it since the 1970s – is simple. I write to please myself and hope that it will please you too, too. And I don't mean by this that you must always, or even often, agree with me," Rainer writes. "Movies, even trashy ones, often affect us deeply, which is why disagreements over their quality can become highly charged and personal…I want to convey why a movie matters to me, or why it disgusts me, or leaves me cold. And everybody's experience is unique. That's why there is no such thing as 'objective' criticism. Criticism is an art, not a science."[27]

The Independent's Paul Taylor puts it best: "So the best way a critic can serve posterity is by fulfilling his first duty: to communicate to those of his contemporaries who weren't there what the occasion felt like and what thoughts it provoked."[28]

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[23] Lopate XXIV.
[24] Lopate XXIV.
[25] Lopate XXIII.
[26] Lopate XXIV.
[27] Rainer.
[28] Taylor, Paul. "Postcards from the proscenium; The Critic Condition." The Independent. 16 Dec 1998: 11.

Criticism: A History

To track the development of film critics and their style, it is necessary to go back to the beginning, to understand the excitement and confusion that motion pictures created in the early part of the 20th century. Movies, as many people began to realize, had changed the world, but no one was quite sure how to approach them intellectually. "From the silent era onward, a clash arose between seeing movies as a lively universal entertainment – the people's best friend – and as a dangerously numbing, escapist drug for the masses. Both viewpoints had valid points and articulate spokespersons."[29]

However photoplay, as it was called in the beginning, was not even considered "art" by the intellectually elite for a very long time. Most drama critics considered it competition for local productions because movies were thought to be so inexpensive to produce and exhibit, with a much lower standard of quality. It was entertainment for the lower class at that time, and some argued that movies had provoked moral crises among the youth and the less educated.[30] Writes Haberski:

> "To the custodians of traditional culture, the popularity of motion pictures seemed particularly threatening to their authority to define what was good and what was vulgar. Basic concerns surfaced then and have persisted into the present day. Would movies undermine American culture? What were the implications of a democratic art form? Could art be significant even though it was vulgar? Were critics justified in praising movies simply because they served to undermine an older order?"[31]

Of course, the drama critics and culture custodians were not wrong in their assessments, as photoplays in that era had very little that resembled class. "Most early critics had few illusions about the quality of movies in general. Pictures were indeed vulgar, and the public's taste for them needed to be refined."[32]

[29] Lopate XIV.
[30] Haberski 15.
[31] Haberski 11.
[32] Haberski 21.

This job fell to the array of budding critics that were enticed by the very reason that cultural arbiters overlooked photoplay: it appealed to the masses. These writers jumped on the chance to attack those who "seemed smug in their appreciation of fine arts and hypocritical in their condemnation of movies."[33]

Most significant criticism of film between 1909 and 1919 could be found in the trade journals and entertainment periodicals, according author Myron Osborn Lounsbury. Other publications, including both well-established and avant-garde, showed only "sporadic enthusiasm for the moving picture."[34]

These early critics were "baffled" by what they saw, writes Haberski. Many of the reviews prior to 1914 look nothing like modern criticism: "Most reviews consisted either of blandly inert summations of plot and character or vaporous rhapsodizing on the 'reality' of the images."[35]

One of the moonlighters was poet Vachel Lindsay, the pride of Springfield, Ill, who is widely considered one of the earliest critics of motion pictures. After selling his poems across the country for bread, he became famous on the lecture-circuit before becoming a staunch supporter of films, writing the first work of film aesthetics in America.[36] With the 1915 release of D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*, Lindsay published what is generally regarded as the first serious pieces of American film criticism.[37] "In 1915, just as the feature film was rising to prominence, Lindsay published *The Art of the Moving Picture*, a lively, naïve often simplistic, but nevertheless insightful paean to the wild, youthful popular art," writes Monaco. "The very title of

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[33] Haberski 21.
[34] Lounsbury, Myron Osborn. The Origins of American Film Criticism 1909-1939. New York: Arno, 1973: XVII.
[35] Denby, David, ed. Awake in the Dark: An Anthology of American Film Criticism, 1915 to the Present. New York: Vintage Books, 1977: XX.
[36] Lopate 3.
[37] Lopate XIII.

his book was an argumentative proposition: he challenged his readers to consider this sideshow entertainment as a real art."[38]

"Film was viewed as pushing its way into the pantheon established for centuries-old artistic traditions such as classical music, painting and the ballet. Lindsay, an enthusiastic movie buff, tried to bridge films and the older arts by making analogies between cinematic techniques and sculpture of painting-in-motion," writes Lopate.[39] Lindsay saw the films of Griffith and Douglas Fairbanks as having the same effect that great American scholars, like Emerson, often had on the American people. He hoped that this new breed of criticism would do the same and encourage the audience to see the motion picture as a quintessentially American form of expression.[40] "Lindsay was the first writer to treat movies seriously, but he did so as a critic who hoped that as they improved they would help create a better society."[41]

By the 1920s, according to Lounsbury, criticism broadened considerably, especially as film was increasingly being accepted as a legitimate art form. This included the institution of permanent reviewing columns outside of the trade press as well as recurring essays on film in journals of political opinion, art, literature and drama. By the end of the 1920s, the first specialized film magazine, *Experimental Cinema*, was published.[42]

But by the 1930s, he writes, things were changing again. As opposed to the "flurry" amount of critic activity of the 1920s, by the middle of the thirties, film critics were more permanently established in periodical literature. "Reviewers now contribute regularly to mass-circulated magazines such as *Esquire*, to the journals of political opinion – the *New Republic*,

[38] Monaco 391.
[39] Lopate XIII.
[40] Lopate XIV.
[41] Haberski 25.
[42] Lounsbury XVII.

Nation and *New Masses* – and to drama magazines such as *New Theatre*."[43] Lounsbury calls this time a period of relative stability compared to the "heightened activity of the 1920s.[44]

As the years went on, the critics changed with the movies themselves. By the mid-1940s, movies were, for the first time, being considered as both a serious business and a serious art. Not surprisingly, this perpetuated a new generation of film critics. This breed had been raised mixed culture, both literary and filmic, taking the place of the critics who only moonlighted as film critics, but were primarily literary or art writers.[45] "A certain tendency in criticism appeared that reconceived movies as serious cultural experiences," writes Haberski. "This tendency came in the forms of manifestos, theories and feuds. It also helped to unhinge the cultural authority of the traditional critics, enabling the reevaluation of mass culture to have a real effect on artistic standards."[46]

And it wasn't just American critics who were coming of age alongside the movies. By the 1950s, a very influential group of French critics (and future famous directors) emerged from a schooling of classic American films. The *Cahiers du cinéma* group of critics, as they would come to be known, the name taken from the magazine for which they wrote, included Jacques Rivette, Jean-Luc Godard, Claude Chabrol, and François Truffaut. By noticing and identifying a movie director's personal style, what is now known as the "auteur" theory, these young critics essentially redefined both modern American film and its criticism.

These critics developed their "hyper-awareness of directorial styles"[47] by watching American classics of all genres from the '30s and '40s. They argued that, by watching a number

[43] Lounsbury XVII-XVIII.
[44] Lounsbury XVIII.
[45] Haberski 102.
[46] Haberski 102.
[47] Haberski 111.

of films by a single director an "astute" critic would discover a director's *mise-en-scene*.[48] Writes Haberski:

> "If this approach was mildly unorthodox, claiming that Hollywood productions were art was outright revolutionary. No known or accepted artistic standards had made it possible to accommodate mass culture in this way. The French critics were not simply blurring the line that divided the arts from the movies, they were suggesting that it had never existed, that movies made for commercial purposes – to entertain the masses – had always been art. The concept could be vexing to those who considered movies as anything but art. Moreover, the new language used by the French critics could seem downright ridiculous to reviewers accustomed to writing for a popular audience."[49]

The *Cahiers* critics, for the first time, claimed that style could be considered content. They encouraged their audiences to "see things in films" that had previous gone either unrecognized or had been taken for granted by critics who emphasized the social and political aspects of films.[50]

According to Haberski, French film criticism was important because of it showed a shift towards the "the intellectualization of mass culture and democratization of criticism" rather than its insight into movies. "Those who adopted the French approach were curious cultural rebels because they viewed movies from an elitist perspective but had reached that position by undermining an older cultural authority upheld by critics of mass culture. Auteur critics had rewritten cultural standards so that their criticism of movies – a popular art – had become an elite endeavor."[51]

The Sarris and Kael Debate

The effects of the *Cahiers* were distinctly felt back in America, where a young critic named Andrew Sarris emerged in the 1960s as an influential film critic. Sarris got his start in

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[48] Haberski 111.
[49] Haberski 111.
[50] Canby, Vincent. "Film View: From the Cahiers Critics, an Enduring Legacy." The New York Times. 15 Sept 1985, Late City Final Edition: Section 2 Page 15.
[51] Haberski 113.

1955 as a writer for *Film Culture* and *Village Voice*. His book *The American Cinema*: *Directors and Directions 1929-1968* (1968) earned him national attention as one of the most influential of pieces of film criticism. It was in this book that he took and adapted the *Cahiers*' auteur theory by mapping out American movies by assessing and rating directors.[52] He translated the theory for his American audience, as he, like his French counterparts, had embraced old Hollywood films and had grown tired of traditional, bland film criticism. "Critics at large daily newspapers had rarely embraced movies with any passion, or taken a chance on a director who could enchant an audience even if his movie failed to 'say' anything," writes Haberski. "Also like the French critics, Sarris had become a devotee of older Hollywood films and had taken to watching them dozens of times. His criticisms reflected an encyclopedic knowledge of movies. Before the 1950s, the world had yet to meet that kind of film buff."[53]

Sarris' goal was to incorporate both historical references and theoretical explanations into his film criticism, including why certain directors succeeded where other failed. In his articles, he discussed the creation of scenes and positioning of the cameras, and he also discussed movies' meanings through plot twists and characters.[54]

This became Sarris' own version of the more mature, European-inspired theory of *auteurism*, which put the emphasis on particular directors who had that "individual spark in the face of impersonal studio production practices."[55] Sarris interpreted this as a way to assign a main author to a film to account for its quality, using the directors' past films as evidence. Sarris called it a theory of film history, as opposed to film prophecy.[56] He expressed this fully in one of

[52] Lopate 296.
[53] Haberski 125.
[54] Haberski 126.
[55] Lopate XVII.
[56]Lopate XVII.

his most notable pieces that appeared in *Film Culture* entitled "Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962."

Sarris also made no effort to hide his low opinions of his fellow critics, saying that America lacked reputable film theorists and would therefore be unable to reject his theory. He believed that no one in America had the French critics' dedication and sensibility to provide a viable alternative. "Sarris argued that most American critics had perpetuated rather than sought to overcome the philistinism that had prevented Hollywood movies from achieving a status comparable to European films. His theory, therefore, could help Hollywood overcome its inferiority complex."[57]

Unsurprisingly, the critics he deemed inadequate did not jump on his auteur bandwagon. One in particular is most often mentioned in the same breath as Sarris: Pauline Kael. Kael, who began her career in San Francisco by working for *Film Quarterly*, gained notoriety as a critic with *The New Yorker*, one of the longest-lasting and mutually-beneficial marriages in modern magazine history.[58] She took particular offense to Sarris' theory and wrote "Circles and Squares: Joys and Sarris" in 1963 in response.

"By most historical accounts, Kael eviscerated Sarris's argument. While it might not have been difficult to poke holes in Sarris's theory, Kael also used her critique as a broadside against the rising tide of quasi-theoretical film criticism," writes Haberski. "Kael believed Sarris had done more than simply insult other critics; he had harmed American film criticism in general."[59] Kael argued that Sarris's arguments forced readers to guess what was considered art and what was not, based on some kind of hidden logic. She believed that Sarris and his fellow

[57] Haberski 128.
[58] Lopate 330.
[59] Haberski 129.

auteur critics never revealed how they found the next great director, and that was a disservice to movie enthusiasts.[60]

Kael wrote that the auteur theory elevated many of the worst characteristics in film to a level of art. She also accused auteur critics of being male chauvinists who, by championing directors above everyone else, shunned the influence of women over the movies and romanticized the figures that they tried to emulate.[61]

Kael was more than a movie reviewer. She was an important cultural critic, with the authority to shape cultural standards. She expected a lot of her movies, but at the same time, did not take herself or her culture too seriously. Kael never let her expectations become ideological or theoretical. Haberski writes that Kael was at her best as a critic when she opened the door of the cultural vacuum and allowed a "complex culture to surround movies and inform criticism of them."[62] And it was the pieces she produced during her time with *The New Yorker* that she developed her huge, mostly by following by pushing American film criticism into "a new zone of essayistic headlines" after she was given permission to write "long."[63]

Sarris and Kael related to their audiences as few critics have done before or since, though they simply related in different ways. Because of Sarris' controversial standing with other critics and filmmakers, Kael could express herself without the challenges that Sarris did. "Her arguments rose and fell on the effectiveness of her prose and the enthusiasm of her reviews," writes Haberksi. "Sarris also loved films, but he did so in an environment hostile not merely to Hollywood but to the idea of art as well."[64]

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[60] Haberski 129.
[61] Haberski 130.
[62] Haberski 137.
[63] Lopate XVII.
[64] Haberski 136.

Kael and Sarris, and their continuing debate, represented a sort of urgent heyday of film criticism that extended into the 1960s, as shown by the number of responses their debate generated.[65] "Throughout the 1960s, moviegoers were at least aware of, if not engaged with, debates among movie critics," writes Haberski. "Many people understood that Pauline Kael had profound disagreements with Andrew Sarris, and that John Simon [the critic for the *New Leader*] thought very little of either of them."[66] The appeal Sarris and Kael came from their enjoyment of playing with the conflict of movies and traditional art and speaking to audiences who wanted something between scholarly criticism and synoptic reviews.[67]

The 1960s were kind to the movie critic in general, as audiences began to display a heightened interest in the movies, beginning to respect film as an art in its own right. Subsequently, audiences began to follow their critics of choice almost religiously, respecting the critics as intellectuals who issued cinematic doctrine. "So, not only did moviegoers have a passion for cinema, they were also passionate about what others, especially critics, said about the movies. And when movies mattered to the public, then the critics, too, seemed to matter. For a brief period both the images on the screen and the words on the printed page converged in a union of fanaticism about the movies."[68]

It also helped that the moviegoing audience was changing, becoming more open to both films and their critics. "During the 1960s and early 1970s a movie culture took shape around universities, coffee houses, and art theaters showing foreign films. Out of endless conversations about directors and sleepless nights arguing over the latest landmark (probably foreign) film, thousands…of young people contracted 'cinephilia,' or as [critic] Susan Sontag explains, 'The

[65] Haberski 132.
[66] Haberski 188.
[67] Haberski 188.
[68] Haberski 2.

love that cinema inspired.'"[69] But by the end of the 1960s, intellectual discussion about movies as part of a larger debate over national culture faded from view.[70]

Instead, economic and cultural forces began to deflate "cinephilia" in the mid-1970s. To begin with, movies changed from landmark films to crass and commercial, blockbuster-style studio fare. Distribution polices were evolving as well. Companies became less willing to take risks on long shots, preventing both foreign films and independent films from a successful American run. Moviegoers were also changing, as was their interest in the product. While their parents had a sense of faith in the movie industry, this new generation had a sense of apathy. Unfortunately, there was no question why this generation felt like that, as the movies produced during this time seemed a good deal less than authentic.[71]

Regardless, the 1960s and '70s spawned a so-called golden age in American film criticism, though that could have been a product of the large number of quality films, the rising interest in film culture or both.[72] The film critics of this era particularly fought for, and succeeded, in broadening the debate over culture to include more mass arts, not, as some think, an end to criticism.[73]

The Impact of Television Criticism

Even though television first came to popularity in the 1940s, it was during this period of the 1970s that another facet of popular media criticism made its mark on the industry, though maybe less so than the explosive arguments of Pauline Kael and Andrew Sarris.

In 1978, an association for the television critics of North America was formed to, for the first time, represent the interests of the TV critic.

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[69] Haberski 1.
[70] Haberski 190.
[71] Haberski 2-3.
[72] Lopate XVII.
[73] Haberski 189.

The Television Critics Association is an organization of more than 200 journalists, columnists, and reporters from the United States and Canada who cover television programming. The bylaws state that members must be employed or contracted for legitimate organizations that are not related in any way to any television network, production company or government agency.[74]

According to the bylaws, the TCA has a number of main purposes, all intended to further the art of television criticism. They are:

> to maintain and improve the professional standards of television criticism, reporting and editing; to exchange information; to expand opportunities for complete and accurate coverage; to increase the public's understanding of television; to improve television as an important element in American life and culture; to encourage activity that adds to the value of television as a communications medium; and to conduct activities which are exclusively charitable, literary and educational.[75]

It is a fairly loose organization of writers, as, according to President Dave Walker, there are very few requirements to joining the association. The only real requirement, after the initial application (on which TCA board members vote to induct new members), is the $75 annual dues.[76]

The first TCA board, when the organization began in 1978, was made up of four executives and only three other board members. Before the TCA's founding, there were four press tours yearly, all controlled and paid for by the networks. According to Walker, the original tours, two in LA and two in NYC each year, were basically owned and operated by the networks that would pay for a most of the people to attend.

"The TCA was founded by critics who wanted to take a little more control away from the networks and move it away from the junket category and into more of a press event at which the critics paid their own way for the hotel rooms and the travel," he said in a phone interview.[77]

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[74] TCA July 2007 Orientation Guide. The TCA Summer Press Tour, July 2007, Television Critics Association, 10.
[75] Orientation Guide 10.
[76] Walker, Dave. Telephone Interview. 8 Feb. 2008.
[77] Walker.

The move from network-funded press tours to fully critic-funded tours was an on-going process, with some of the networks picking up the tabs of some travel expenses through the late 1980s. Finally, though, by 1990, even the responsibility of hotel rate negotiations moved to the TCA.[78] The current version of the tours are held for two weeks in January and three weeks in July so critics, reporters, and the television networks can all be in one place to exchange information.[79]

"The purpose is to gather the critics and reporters in one place twice a year…and then let the networks, both cable and broadcast and PBS, come through the same setting and present their upcoming programming," Walker said. On the talent end, the tours are usually attended by actors, writers, producers, and a network executive of some kind. The group takes over a hotel in Los Angeles and participates in a series of daytime events, such as question and answer sessions and panel discussions, to nighttime events, such as parties for talent and writers to mingle.[80]

Walker said that having a network executive presence at the event is a very unique thing, as movie executives do not have to face that kind of scrutiny. Because the broadcast networks must be licensed to broadcast, he says, they face more intense, regular questioning from reporters, and their constituents, all over the country.[81]

The press tours are also an incredibly efficient way to spread a lot of information about upcoming television programming among many reporters who are usually stationed across the country during the rest of the year. In this scenario, "the critics sort of stay put and the networks cascade through," Walker said. "It's a very time and cost-efficient way to convey a lot of information, in both directions. The critics can sort of pick and choose what they want and the

[78] Orientation Guide 16.
[79] Walker.
[80] Walker.
[81] Walker.

networks get a ballroom full of 100, 150 plus reporters from all over the continent to pitch their new, and in many cases, returning shows."[82]

Walker also impressed how important the TV tours are for journalists outside of the traditionally big media markets. "The critics who come and tend to get the most out of it are from cities like Kansas City, Sacramento, Austin," he said. "Cities who, for demographic reasons, may not be as comfortably serviced by the networks as the large metro papers and trade publications that operate out of New York and LA."[83] From a personal perspective, Walker works for the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* and places high value on the information he gleans from the press tours that generates material year-round for journalists.[84] He called the tours an "essential part of my work life. I can't imagine doing this job with the access I get during [the tours]."[85] He cited the desire to see the tours continue as the main reason he chose to get involved on the association's executive board.

The importance of the TV critic dates back to the early days of television. In the late 1940s, before live broadcasts, critics were only able to review television after their airings.[86] However, with the first live broadcasts which began with *I Love Lucy* in the 1950s, critics were able to preview the shows before their airing and publish their reviews before the shows were on the air.[87]

The reviews and critics that emerged at this time became influential because television executives and producers would monitor the evaluations of the programs, and, as such, the importance of professional television criticism increased.[88] Even though the critics' preferences

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[82] Walker.
[83] Walker.
[84] The TCA Website. 11 Feb. 2008 <http://tvcritics.org/>.
[85] Walker.
[86] O'Donnell, Victoria. Television Criticism. Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2007: 4.
[87] O'Donnell 5.
[88] O'Donnell 5.

often differed from that of the audiences' (for example, critics preferred fare like *Studio One*, while audiences liked *The Honeymooners*) and the influence of print criticism on programming decisions waned, government agencies would still use TV criticism to examine responses to possible government policies. And still, of course, there is no shortage of television criticism in newspapers, magazines, the trades and now, like film criticism, on the Web.[89]

Modern Criticism and the Internet

The rise and increasing pervasiveness of the Internet has put a new spin on traditional criticism within the entertainment industry. Unlike in the days of Lindsay, Sarris and Kael, the Internet has created a platform for amateur critics in new and unique ways. Fans are finding new ways to raise their voices through communities, discussion boards and blogs across the Internet.

"The reader feedback, the kind of interaction with readers has exploded," said critic Ann Hornaday. "As a critic, you kind of used to have the last word, and people might take the trouble to call, and generally when they do it's to complain, or they might take the trouble to write a letter. But now, it's so easy to email or just tap that response button."[90]

Amateur reviewers have also made their mark, using the accessibility the Internet provides to heighten the debate over television and film. "Film reviewers have swarmed onto the scene like so many cicadas in the past half-dozen years – thanks mainly to the Internet, where anyone with a website, a blog or just an e-mail address can set up shop as a cinematic pundit."[91]

Movies are still one of the most accessible and cheapest forms of entertainment, just as they were in the early 20th century when films were looked down upon for that very reason, and the similarly accessible and cheap Internet allows anyone with a computer to feel like a movie

[89] O'Donnell 5.
[90] Hornaday.
[91] Sterritt, David. "Online film critics get mixed reviews." Christian Science Monitor. 28 May, 2004: 13.

critic.[92] “Blogginess” has overtaken criticism through the Internet and its abundance of fans who want to be heard.[93]

A number of these fans have managed to become well-known throughout cyberspace, making names for themselves as viable critics on whom the major studios have started to take seriously because of the standing they have with the younger demographic. Websites like darkhorizons.com, aintitcoolnews.com and filmthreat.com, which in 2004 were three of the most visited movie sites online, are frequented by the coveted 18-to 24-year-old set, and carry more weight with those viewers than a traditional print review could. This is especially true because online critics tend to write in a style more in line with the tastes of the younger demographic, unlike the older-style print critics, who lose their power as the traditional print media loses power. The Internet critics’ “webby” style better suits a generation used to instant message- and text message-style language.[94]

Author Michael Adams writes that older readers tend to find reviewers, either professional or otherwise, with whom they not only share sensibilities, but also with whom they’ve agreed with in the past. “But among the uniquely wired youth audience (‘uniquely wired’ is meant to connote Internet use, not brain chemistry-but both meanings apply) peer reviews are even more crucial.”[95] According to a poll of moviegoers conducted by trade magazine Variety in 2000, just 28% felt critics' opinions were important. While 70% felt friends’ opinions mattered, 61% reported that they ignored the critics. And finally, “57% felt ‘critics can't relate to normal audiences.’”[96]

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[92] Rainer.
[93] Rainer.
[94] Rainer.
[95] Adams, Michael. “Cutting out the critics.” Marketing. 111.20 (2006): 19.
[96] Romney, Jonathan. “The power of the critic.” The Guardian. 22 Mar 2000: 13.

Young people are clearly now less inclined to take the word of a so-called expert about what is "in" or "good" right now. The same sentiment, however, coming from a peer their own age with the same interests, values and sensibilities will carry much more weight. This is heightened by the technology that is now available that enables young people to share their opinions among a wide circle of both friends and strangers through blogs and other self-generated tools.[97]

Of course, this does not guarantee that this new generation of Internet critics has sustaining power over their peers, or their power can be translated into box office success. Consider the 2006 film *Snakes on a Plane*, starring Samuel L. Jackson, which made a distinctive mark on the Internet after one of its screenwriters, Josh Friedman, started to blog about the film in August of that year. His blog entries, about his experiences working on the film, sparked a massive amount of Internet-born enthusiasm among communities all over the Web, well before the actual release date of the film.[98]

Fans across the Internet jumped on the bandwagon, creating their own dialogue, posters, trailers and soundtracks for the film. The interest was so widespread that director David Ellis took notice, gathering his cast and crew back together after shooting had wrapped to re-shoot the ending of the film, all based on Internet-generated opinions. The fans wanted more nudity, swearing and action and Ellis had no problem delivering, despite the price tag on re-shoots.[99]

This marked the first time that fans and critics had any real impact on a film prior to its release. Traditionally, films are reedited after critics and test audiences see the film in advanced

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[97] Adams.

[98] Usborne, David. "Snakes Alive!: Described as 'the best worst film of the decade,' 'Snakes on A Plane' is the film script influenced by bloggers. The result is a truly awful movie, so bad it may become a cult hit, says Mass hiss-teria." The Independent. 3 July 2006, First Edition: 23.

[99] Sheridan, Peter. "Is this cinema's lowest point?: In a unique experiment, Hollywood has let film-lovers 'make' their own blockbuster, rewriting scenes and adding jokes. But is Snakes On A Plane a disaster or the future of cinema?" The Express. 21 Apr 2006, 1st Edition: 30.

screenings and the audiences are confused by a plot point or don't like an ending. "But with *Snakes*, the audience has gone from being an after-thought to becoming a collaborative part of the creative process. And it's all down to the increased use of the Internet."[100]

And while some studios jump on anyone using a trademark without permission, *Snakes*' producers embraced the Internet craze by holding a contest for composers to create the song to play over the film's closing credits.[101] It may have seemed like a risky move for *Snakes*' studio, New Line, to include audiences in the collaborative process it might just be the start of a new marketing phenomenon on Hollywood.

In the end, *Snakes* performed moderately at the box office, despite the pre-release hype. It opened at the top of the box office, but it only grossed $15.3 million at North American theaters, well below the projected take based on the Internet buzz.[102] Interestingly enough, it might have been the traditional critics that contributed to the film's demise. New Line chose not to screen the movies for critics before its release, which is often considered to be a sign that something is wrong with the movie. It also resulted in a dead stop in whatever marketing momentum the film had built up.[103]

The Internet is clearly an unproven method to movie marketing, but there is no discounting the power that the Internet critics, judging by how drastically New Line changed its game plan to accommodate the Internet buzz, have over the industry. Unfortunately, as with any amateur medium, there are just as many critics on the Web who produce work of poor quality as there are those that produce exceptional work. No credentials are required, nor is an editor or any kind. As such, online film critic associations have sprouted as kind of guides to the world of

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[100] Sheridan.
[101] Sheridan.
[102] Farhi, Paul. "'Snakes' is Defanged at Box Office; Pre-Release Hype Doesn't Yield a Hit." The Washington Post. 22 Aug. 2006, Final ed.: C01.
[103] Farhi.

nonprofessional criticism on the web. Groups like the New York Film Critics Online and the Online Film Critics Society weed through the media mass by setting higher standards for membership and vetting through members' reviews.[104]

Online criticism has also made the work easier for the critic. The information that reporters used to spend large amounts of time and energy getting is now at their fingertips. *Washington Post* critic Hornaday spoke about an early job as a fact-checker for Premiere magazine. "I remember slogging through reference books, schlepping to the video store, it all just seems so archaic now. It wasn't that long ago, but there's just so much archival information that's at our fingertips now."[105]

This information, then, can be shared with the film community at large, which now tends to prefer online criticism to the traditional version. Writes Sterritt, "Simply, broadband is beating out the [newsstand] when it comes to finding a quick recommendation on a new release – especially because some websites post critiques earlier than print reviewers, often sidestepping embargoes set by the studios."[106]

However, one of the unfortunate results of online journalism is the weakening of the traditional print media, including both television and film critics.[107] Hornaday said she sees traditional criticism dying every day. "More critics are getting fired. With the instability in the newspaper industry in general, literally every day more and more long-standing, really venerated venerable movie critics are being fired from newspapers. So clearly it's in transition."[108]

With traditional newspaper budgets shrinking, TCA president Walker has also noticed that television critic jobs are often the first to get cut:

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[104] Sterritt.
[105] Hornaday.
[106] Sterritt.
[107] Sterritt.
[108] Hornaday.

> It has almost everything to do with a belt tightening and hemorrhaging of resources at daily newspapers that will probably only get worse in the short term because of the economy right now. It just seems to be an easy thing to cut, and if the choice is between cutting the TV critic and cutting someone at city hall, I think editors are making the choice to cut the TV critic now. I also see television in the same light [as covering city hall]. The choices and genres and the different ways that television burrows its way into the mass consciousness has exploded. The fact that newspapers would just completely punt on their responsibility to act as navigators to this incredible universe of entertainment, and news, and information, and brilliance and craft, I just don't get it, but its happening.[109]

Regardless of their media of choice, American critics are unique in the impact that they have on the reputation of those in the entertainment industry. "One still needs to assert that their work is the essential American literature on film. They generally write about film history better than the film historians, about film aesthetics better than the aestheticians."[110]

Media critics will always be important. It has taken them a long time to achieve the respect and power that many enjoy now, but our society will always look to critics to confirm, deny, or merely influence opinions.

In the early days of the cinema, critics were not appreciated as were their counterparts who were writing about literature or art, but movies were not appreciated as art either. When they were first presented in movie houses and cinemas, films were considered low-grade entertainment for the uneducated, uncouth masses. The designation of intellectual entertainment, for the upper class, was reserved for poetry, painting or ballet. The early critics were moonlighters from their regular jobs as critics of these elite art forms. Poet Vachel Lindsay, however, took the first step towards raising the standard of films and their critics when he published one of the first serious pieces on American film critics, entitled *The Art of the Moving Picture* (1915). While many refused to label movies as art, Lindsay's use of the term in his title sent a clear message. He believed that the great directors of early Hollywood could have the

[109] Walker.
[110] Denby XIII.

same impact as many great artists and scholars already had. Film as art is a discussion that has popped up again in the early 21st century, with the advent of the Internet and online criticsm.

In the 1920s, there was a distinct increase in critic activity, where not only did film criticism begin to recur in academic journals, but critics began to write regular reviewing columns outside of the trade press for the first time. By the 1930s, the flurry had subsided, but what emerged was regular and established film criticism, with reviewers contributing regularly to big-name, widely circulated magazines and journals. It was a stable time for film criticism, but one of much improvement from criticism in the early part of the century. As movies gained more respect, as did those who critiqued them.

By the 1940s, movies were not only a serious art, but also a serious business, and the group of film critics that emerged here grew up never doing any different. They had been raised immersed in more diverse popular culture, mixed with both literature and films, and that was evident in their criticism. The critics were writing about movies as serious experiences of culture, allowing the critics to gain even more respect and weight in their fields. Around this time, and into the 1950s, new critical theories were gaining steam in France, as well.

A group of young critics that wrote for the *Cahiers du cinéma* French film magazine began to publish pieces that would reinvent basic principles of criticism and theory. The group grew up on and was greatly influenced by American film classics of the 1930s and 1940s. They believed that a film should be judged, and should be made, based on the director's personal vision. After so many tired and clichéd movies of the era, perpetuated by the Hollywood studio system and the recycled fare it often produced, the *Cahiers* group realized that a film's individuality, creativity and uniqueness could be found in the director, often through how he

used his *mise-en-scene*. They look as style as content, and encouraged their audience to do the same.

Back in the U.S., a young critic named Andrew Sarris had embraced the *Cahiers* mentality in his piece "Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962." Like the French writers, Sarris had embraced both older movies in the face of impersonal studio offerings and the idea that the film's "author" could be held accountable for its quality.

Contrary to Sarris was Pauline Kael, one of the most famous film critics ever, who enjoyed a lengthy and productive career with *The New Yorker*. Over her career, she became one of the most influential film critics, paving the way for most critics writing today. Kael made no bones about the fact that she disagreed with Sarris and the auteur theory, saying that he had only insulted critics and forced his readers to guess what was actual art. She also believed that most auteur critics were male chauvinists who ignored the female contribution to filmmaking. Kael also played an important part in confirming film as a legitimate art. She was often seen as point to Sarris' counterpoint and their legendary battles in print were a large part of why filmmaking and film criticism hit a high in the 1960s. Many people read their reviews to keep up with their arguments and had personal stake in them.

Audiences were also developing personal investment in the movies as much as the criticism. They were more open to artistic and creative films and giving a new respect to the films, especially foreign films. Because the audiences began to care about the films, they began to care about the people who were the authority on and wrote about the films. Consequently, both the amount and the quality of media criticism increased dramatically.

However, by the 1970s, this feeling had pretty much phased out. Studio movies were becoming even more commercial, due to the fact that studios were only looking to make money

on the next blockbuster, which meant they were less likely to take chances on smaller, independent, or foreign films. As a result, interest in films and their critics waned, so that by the end of the decade a sense of apathy pervaded that generation of moviegoers.

The 1970s also saw an increase in the influence of television criticism, with the creation of the Television Critics' Association in an effort to disseminate information among reporters across the country. The TCA now holds two yearly press tours where critics that are members of the Association gather in Los Angeles to gather news, information, and interviews from stars, writers, directors, and executives, all in one place at the same time. It is the most efficient way to let the writers and the talent mingle, especially for journalists outside of the bigger media markets who have no other chance to talk with the same talent on a regular basis.

The Internet, though, is changing how critics and their audiences play the game. Unlike in the days of Lindsay, readers have the opportunity to have immediate interaction with the critics. Websites allow readers to instantly reply to a review with comments and feedback or email the author and establish contact, unlike ever before. This has resulted in a sharp debate within film and television criticism, as people can talk and connect in ways never thought of previously. As evidenced over the decades of criticism history, when an audiences' involvement in entertainment is high, that corresponds to their interest in reading, and now writing, criticism as well. The Internet has allowed the public to participate in the production and promotion of media in strikingly new ways, and media criticism has responded accordingly.

The unique new current generation has more than capitalized on the Internet, swarming it with their own brand of reviews and criticism. Writing in an informal and "webby" style, these amateur critics form their own blogs and websites and appeal more directly to their peers. Today's readers are more interested in what their peers have to say than what the professionals

think about films and TV. Some of these amateur Internet critics have even become well-know and well-respected in their own rights. On the other hand, it becomes more difficult to filter out the bad critics that may pop up online. It is left to a number of online critics associations to do the job, but there is no real way to prevent a critic from creating his or her own website.

Contributing to this phenomenon is the demise of the traditional print media. There is no argument that traditional print journalism is weakening, with critics at newspapers and magazines often being the first to be fired when the outlet runs into budgetary issues. This has allowed for a flurry of online critical activity.

A case in point is *Snakes on a Plane* (2006), which enjoyed a huge amount of Internet buzz prior to its release. Fans joined together on message and discussion boards, chat rooms, websites, and the like to talk about and critique the movie in ways the industry had never seen before. These Internet critics had such an impact on the film, that the film's studio, New Line, initiated contests to compose a song for the movie's end credits. Perhaps the most important effect the critics of *SoaP* had was that they caused the film's director to change and reshoot scenes prior to its release. Never before had critics been given the opportunity to influence a movie's storyline in such a way; previously, critics only had the chance to respond to the film that ended up in the theatres. As films become more accessible to the masses, one point against seeing film as art in the debates of the early 1900s, there seems to be an increased need for audience participation. With the Internet, though, audience participation is no longer confined to keeping up with a favorite critic. Audience participation is now as easy as creating a blog, website or discussion board and becoming one's own critic. The Internet has given fans a critical voice, partially due to the increased accessibility and involvement in today's media.

As criticism continues to evolve, there is no telling how the Internet will play a part in that. Perhaps New Line's response to Internet critics after *Snakes on a Plane* was the start of a pattern to allow critics more input into the films prior to their release. Most studios are taking full advantage of the Internet in their movie marketing strategies, using viral techniques to reach the new, web-savvy youth that is now the must-get target audiences for the studios. Just how film and TV critics will factor into that will be a big question as the 21st century continues forward.

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