

COMEDY, CULTURE, AND CRITIQUE: THE EVOLUTION OF  
FILM JOURNALISM IN THE DIGITAL AGE

by

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This thesis examines the evolution of American film criticism in form and function, tracing its early 20th-century roots in print newspapers to its contemporary digital fragmentation across blogs, review aggregates and social media platforms. What began as an exotic, exclusive profession — spearheaded by influential figures like Iris Barry, Manny Farber and Roger Ebert — has become a democratic ecosystem built on rapidity. Special attention is given to the comedy genre, considered a broad reflector of shifts in era-specific cultural taste and the ever-changing socio-political landscape of the American entertainment industry. Through case studies like Charlie Chaplin’s “Modern Times” and Gregg Araki’s “Smiley Face,” this thesis examines how evolving technologies have redefined credibility, audience engagement and the cultural value of film criticism. Aggregators like Rotten Tomatoes have compressed critical nuance, while social media has accelerated the life cycle of opinion. Simultaneously, platforms such as YouTube and Letterboxd have empowered a new generation of critics, touting inclusivity, community and financial viability. Ultimately, this thesis argues that film criticism is not in decline but is undergoing a radical reinvention — one in which passion, identity, and accessibility shape how audiences engage with cinema and each other.

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## **Chapter I: Introduction**

For as long as the medium has existed, cinema has been propelled by critical conversation. The most transformative, influential and socially relevant works, whether lauded for their mastery of new technology, visual artistry or powerful messaging, are spread via word of mouth. But how we consume, evaluate and discuss film has fundamentally transformed. In the 20th century, “film criticism had traditionally been looked upon as an exotic and privileged occupation” (Roberts, 2010, p. 15). Only the most informed film scholars were granted the agency to make a living within the industry. For generations, via print newspapers, radio and television broadcasts, trusted critics educated moviegoers on how to discern quality on the silver screen. Cinema quickly shifted from an emerging technology to an art form worthy of serious thought. Enter the digital age. In the first decade of the 21st century, seismic changes began to rattle the industry. The ubiquity of the Internet launched the world into a global network, granting public access to everything and everyone. Amateur film enthusiasts, once barred from easily staking a claim in the critical sphere, started blogs and websites dedicated to the medium. Many publications and magazines no longer required the critical lens in print issues, forcing leagues of film journalists out of business. With the means of information and opinion now instantly and constantly accessible, movie culture turned away from the so-called “expert.” In 2009, heralded film critic Roger Ebert estimated that approximately 100 people in America made their living critiquing film. The industry plummeted into crisis, with many proclaiming it unsalvageable in the face of an increasingly digital, social-media-dominated pop culture sphere — the everyman’s opinion now muddying and distorting how moviegoers determine their next watch. As we skyrocket further into the 21st century, social media’s involvement in entertainment, communication and daily life grows exponentially more vast. And with it, perhaps

an answer to the crisis at hand. Letterboxd, a social media platform designed solely for reviewing, discovering, and sharing films, has over 17 million registered users, including popular filmmakers, actors, journalists and film-oriented influencers. The sheer scope of platforms like YouTube, X and TikTok — all presenting separate criticism presentations — breeds niche spaces for cinema lovers to establish themselves as trusted sources. Reviewers can reach an audience of millions and earn tens of thousands of dollars per post, accumulating well above the threshold to consider it a full-time job. Whether such personalities can be considered true critics lies in the eyes of the beholder. The question remains: How did we get here, and what comes next?

To appropriately examine past and present means and voices of film criticism, it's crucial to narrow the search. Over 130 years of cinema equals over 130 years of consumption and conversation — a library too dense and varied to assess the broader picture. Many older films conjure feelings of disconnect for modern audiences, but not necessarily for their lack of color or retro aesthetics. Because contemporary consumers occupy a fresh socio-political climate, our perception of the past is sometimes tainted. Today's cultural norms differ from the norms of the prior decade, and increasingly so the further you turn back the clock. While other cinematic genres are considered timeless in their presentation, comedy films are discernibly more entangled with the cultural discourse of their era, reflecting the ever-changing socio-political landscape of the American entertainment industry. Such period awareness extends to various methods of film criticism, which reflect a stance on certain jokes, visual motifs or attempts at messaging. A comedic style accepted and normalized decades ago might garner a wholly opposite reception today. Films once considered merely raunchy might now be deemed sexist, with audiences decidedly more considerate of problematic material. Suppose writers want to

swing for the fences and tackle controversial, social or cultural issues in a comedic light. In that case, they are expected to communicate in an increasingly severe and earnest manner. This generational divide becomes more pronounced within the critical sphere, especially when coupled with the rapid development of internet platforms.

## **Chapter II: The Birth of Film Criticism**

“The history of film criticism, as one might expect, is very closely related to the history of motion picture film” (Battaglia, 2010, p. 7). At its conception, film was not yet considered an artistic pursuit but a technological marvel — a shiny new way to capture frames in motion. “Throughout the early silent era, information on new films, usually in the form of brief plot capsules, carried little or no opinions” (Roberts, 2010, p. 21). Because films were limited to soundless, documentary-like snippets of realism, there was no basis for qualitative criticism or comparison. Their mere existence was enough to wow an audience. Even the most mundane actions, such as a brief human sneeze, illustrated normalcy so vividly and realistically that people would flock to the theater for a glimpse. As a result, the more movement that could be crowded into each foot of film, the more newsworthy the release became. The first film review reported on the first public exhibition of a moving picture at the Koster and Bial Music Hall in New York. The celluloid compendium included images of girls dancing, surf breaking on a beach and comedians in a boxing match (Roberts, 2010, p. 21). The presentation, lacking genre or narrative structure, showcased a never-before-seen reflection of reality and was celebrated as such. A report was published in *The New York Times* on April 23, 1896, from an unsigned writer describing how “an unusually bright light fell upon the screen” (Roberts, 2010, p. 21). After briefly summarizing the images, he concluded they “were all wonderfully real and exhilarating” (Roberts, 2010, p. 21). At the time, there was nothing more spectacular than witnessing an instance of motion one was not present to view firsthand. As the medium progressed, its creative potential began to take shape. For filmmakers, experience led to experimentation. For audiences, exposure manifested in familiarity. With films growing longer and more narratively coherent, a new era of subjectivity and critique had arrived.

With limited remaining material from the era, it's hard to pinpoint the individual who spearheaded the pursuit of informed criticism as a full-time job. However, one figure is “invariably referred to by historians as *probably* the first American film critic” (Roberts, 2010, p. 17). In 1908, an adman called Frank E. Woods became infatuated with cinema. While soliciting ads for The New York Dramatic Mirror, Woods translated his newfound love into a column titled “Review of Late Films.” His writing would quickly expand beyond simple plot summaries and develop its own language of critique, often commenting on film aesthetics. Woods even penned himself a catchy byline, “The Spectator,” to establish himself as an agent of expertise — someone readers could learn from and rely on. He was the first to suggest film as a vessel for story and acting that differed from theater. The presence of a camera could capture finer details, such as subtle facial expressions or landscapes, that a stage audience couldn't see. His admiration for film eventually led to several opportunities behind the scenes, including a writing credit on 90 silent films. Thus, film criticism became integrated with film, its face now working alongside the industry's most prominent figures. Partnered with controversial cinema icon D.W. Griffith, Woods would go on to co-write the groundbreaking yet deeply abhorrent "The Birth of a Nation" in 1915. Despite the film's obvious racist ideology, which upheld the Ku Klux Klan as a mighty organization, it was celebrated for its visual complexity and scope. Now living in cinema infamy, the film is an unfortunate staple of the birth of film criticism. In 1916, The Times recognized the film's position against all that came before it.

“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” (Qtd. In Battaglia, 2010, p. 12).

In 1920, The Times introduced its first weekly film column, “The Film World,” rippling a domino effect across print media. With a growing vocabulary and a firm basis for qualitative comparison, newspapers gradually became a destination for film reporting. As the demand for published film criticism skyrocketed, publications began hiring more and more writers to cover the entertainment industry. Their work now a subject of discursive conversation available to the public, filmmakers gained an extra incentive to progress the industry and please journalists.

### **Chapter III: Charlie Chaplin and the Birth of Film Comedy**

“If convergence is the watchword of contemporary media culture, then humor is among culture’s most powerful engines” (King, 2015, p. 135). In the digital age, comedy has grown quicker, simpler, more diverse and easier to access. Thus, new mutations of comedic presentation have become mainstream. A short video clip can circulate across interconnected platforms and blossom into cultural relevance for an indefinite amount of time. Whether an absurd text-based meme or a viral video trend, humor has found a new home away from the silver screen: social media. “Humor’s very sociality is confirmed in what we now call virality” (King, 2015, p. 135).

While such comedic innovation may seem jarring to older generations, these changes have persisted for centuries. As a staple of mass culture, comedic presentation adapts as fiercely and rapidly as the social, cultural, political and technological parameters supporting it. In the early 20th century, comedy encountered a game-changing medium for mass circulation: film. Ironically, despite the wondrous capabilities of their emerging technology and growing industry, the earliest films lacked sound — a key feature endemic to the comedy of centuries prior. To quench their thirst for laughs before film, television, standup or social media’s existence, audiences flocked to the circus to spectate a traveling company of performers — an eclectic group often comprised of clowns, acrobats, magicians and exotic trained animals. In the late 19th century, a new variety show called “vaudeville” generated popularity, combining elements of circus performance, theater, song and dance. Thus, without the ability to garner laughs by speech, vaudeville comedians looking to transition had to modify their presentation to accommodate the medium. Their first step was to bolster their routine into a cultural function that extended beyond simple laughs, evolving a “low-brow” show into an artistic visual

composition. At the time, cinema's greatest hits, such as the aforementioned "The Birth of a Nation", implemented some form of social commentary, sometimes taking a political stance to amplify a filmmaker's overarching vision.

In 1924, film critic Gilbert Seldes commented on the emergence of film comedy, particularly the era-dominant slapstick genre, as a central player in greasing the wheel of media-industry convergence. In other words, film comedy became a crucial and relevant driver of American cinematic innovation and the simultaneous boom in professional American film criticism.

"For fifteen years, there has existed in the United States, and in the United States alone, a form of entertainment which, seemingly without sources in the past, restored to us a kind of laughter almost unheard in modern times. It came into being by accident; it had no pretensions to art. For ten years or more, it added an element of cheerful madness to the lives of millions and was despised and rejected by people of culture and intelligence. Suddenly — as it appeared to them — a great genius arose and the people of culture conceded that in his case, but in his case alone, art existed in slap-stick comedy" (Qtd. In Paulus, 2010, p. 1).

This "great genius" Seldes speaks of is legendary filmmaker Charlie Chaplin, who flipped the narrative for high-brow film consumers and "people of culture." The "cheerful madness" of vaudeville comedy that had existed for generations could now coexist in the same conversations as sweeping epics like "The Birth of a Nation", offering an often defiant and expository position on contemporary sociopolitical issues. Chaplin, Seldes contends, was the genre's greatest pretension to artistic merit.

In 1918, Chaplin started his own production company, writing, producing, directing, starring in and composing nine films distributed by First National Pictures. In 1921, he released his feature film directorial debut, “The Kid,” launching a prolific career spanning over 75 years. What separated “The Kid” from a vaudeville act, or even the tiny batch of relevant comedy films that preceded it, was its thorough understanding and dissection of relatable, all-encompassing human conditions. More specifically, “The Kid” posed as a social commentary “on the relationships a child has with their parents and how those bonds can sometimes be misunderstood” based on class differences (Wells, 2023). It is Chaplin in his most straightforward form, blending ridiculous slapstick bits with endearing characters and themes. Though it lacks the fervent and often controversial political edge of his later work, it establishes his enduring cinematic personality. Iris Barry, a pioneering contributor to film criticism’s rise and one of its earliest female voices, recognized Chaplin’s novel approach to comedy. Her column in *The Spectator* writes, “Beyond its ability to wring the heart, 'The Kid'...manifests [Chaplin’s] extraordinary knowledge of life, which his sensitive perceptions and comic imagination use as the raw material for laughter” (Barry, 1925). While the review lacks a considered analysis of the film’s dissection of social class, it showcases film criticism’s migration from summary to profundity. In fact, Barry’s piece completely lacks a mention of whether or not the film made her laugh; it’s entirely focused on its heart and down-to-earth charm. Because archived reviews of “The Kid” are challenging to come by via browser search, it’s hard to assess Barry’s position relative to other critics of the time. It’s possible, however, that her experiences as a mother of two influenced her gracious words. As we’ll see later down the line, film criticism’s still minuscule and exclusive inner circle often failed to recognize more controversial political subtext. Moreover, as evident by the gobsmacking acclaim of “The Birth

of a Nation,” they seemed largely undisturbed by racism and inflammatory stereotypes.

According to a 2018 USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative study for the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media, 77.8% of all film reviews on the aggregate site Rotten Tomatoes in 2017 came from male writers — 82% of which were white (Young, 2018). Suffice it to say, you can only imagine Iris Barry’s rare position in the 1920s when racial, gender and economic diversity was majorly absent from the industry.

It wasn’t until 1936 that Chaplin would release arguably his most acclaimed and influential work, “Modern Times.” By this point, the film industry was raging, and Chaplin’s robust influence had spread like wildfire. Buster Keaton and Harold Lloyd are but two of the icons who gravitated toward his unique brand of slapstick comedy. Like many films released during the Great Depression-era mediascape, “Modern Times” offered a conscious reflection of the injustice and economic hardship many Americans were collectively facing. Social theorist Michael Werner argues that the Depression era helped establish comedy’s vital position in public discourse, allowing citizens “to understand themselves as directly and actively belonging to a social entity that has consciousness of itself” (Qtd. in King, 2015, p. 137). Comedy, he contends, “provided a crucial framework through which such collective consciousness could take shape and be popularized.” But did such consciousness extend itself to film criticism? Today, “Modern Times” is well-recognized for its stout left-leaning politics, critiquing the industrialized world and the dehumanizing effects of the workforce. But at the time, though they commended Chaplin for his uproarious antics and hilarious character work, cinema’s greatest critics weren’t as in tune with the film’s political thesis. In 1936, The New York Times covered Chaplin’s long-awaited release. Frank S. Nugent, who compiled over 1000 pieces for the publication during his stint, did the honors. Nugent goes out of his way to address those who recognize “Modern Times” as a

vessel for social theme. Instead of expanding on these beliefs, he denounces their existence, even claiming Chaplin's foreword to the picture — “‘Modern Times’ is a story of industry, of individual enterprise...humanity crusading in the pursuit of happiness” — was only “part of the truth” (Nugent, 1936).

“We should prefer to describe ‘Modern Times’ as the story of the little clown, temporarily caught up in the cogs of an industry geared to mass production, spun through a three-ring circus and out into a world as remote from industrial and class problems as a comedy can make it” (Nugent, 1936).

Given his foreword, it's difficult to imagine this was Chaplin's intended reading. Chaplin's quick-witted mockery of an “industry geared to mass production” is as tautly conjoined to industrial class problems as comedy can make it. This remoteness Nugent speaks of plays dismissive of the societal issues that Chaplin critiques. He recognizes the possibility of subtext, even describing the industrial woes Chaplin's character encounters, but opts to study them as mere parameters for slapstick bits, as if the two can't coexist. “Sociological concept? Maybe. But a rousing, rib-tickling, gag-bestrewn jest for all that and in the best Chaplin manner” (Nugent, 1936). Nugent seems abundantly more concerned with giving his readers a taste of the film's comedic output rather than analyzing its unsubtle understanding of Depression-era struggle. Though his piece contains incredible, colorful writing — no doubt a result of film criticism's growing agency as an academic institution — it does not reflect a down-to-earth perspective. It's not notably deep either, mainly relying on summarization. But this was the trusted perspective shared with readers nationwide, the only writing they could access with great ease. The opinion of the consumer, the general public, was still waiting in the rafters, sidelined to word-of-mouth conversation.

## **Chapter IV: The Evolution of Print Criticism**

Exiting the 1920s and diving into the 1930s and 1940s, film culture became ingrained in the American zeitgeist. Print publications were hiring more and more writers to access the growing moviegoing demographic. But there was still a sizeable divide between consumers and reviewers — a gap that has been filled via today’s digital accessibility. Era film critics were perhaps more interested in celebrity and industry credibility than in sharing their passion for the art. In what would seem blasphemous to the leagues of passionate cinephiles posting daily reviews and updates across social media today, publications of old would shoehorn unknowing writers into the position out of necessity. Film created a position that needed filling; oftentimes, the candidates who populated such spaces didn’t have a strong love for the medium. It was too new. “Sydney Carroll, for example, who was the Sunday Times cinema critic...was described by his successor as a man who ‘didn’t know a film from a sponge’” (Battaglia, 2010, p. 13). Film had its fans. Some of them could write. What it desperately lacked — and would soon receive — was its own lexicon. Writers craved a thorough and established set of principles that could sculpt film criticism into something niche yet accessible. Pioneering works like “The Art of the Moving Picture” laid the groundwork for up-and-coming consumers to build a collective vocabulary. Written by American poet and artist Vachel Lindsay, the novel offered a long-form demonstration of cinema’s artistic capabilities. Its very existence proved that considered analysis and intellectual discussion had a place in movie talk. “Words like ‘cinematic’ and ‘montage’ helped lift articles about cinema to more than just commentary pieces on whether a film was ‘good’ or ‘bad’” (Battaglia, 2010, p.13).

One of the first figures to integrate this terminology and translate it into entertaining writing was the aforementioned Iris Barry. Her book, “Let’s Go to the Pictures,” interlaced

cinema's entertainment value with its intellectual ambition. Barry directed her writing to consumers rather than filmmakers, propelling her credibility with readers. Her work was widely read, appearing in *The Spectator*, *Vogue* and *The Daily Mail*. Like her readers, Barry's passion for cinema motivated her to track its growth. She didn't solely rely on jargon. She didn't try to sound smart. Her choices weren't a means to avoid pretentiousness but to democratize film language.

“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. The middle class, members of which were flocking to cinemas at the time, seemed to agree” (Battaglia, 2010, p. 14).

Unfortunately, Barry was popular with the middle class for a bona fide reason; other critics didn't deal with the same care and consideration for their audience.

In the middle decades of the 20th century, Hollywood operated under the star system. “Moviegoers of the day decided which films to see based on their favorite stars, genres, and plotlines rather than thematic complexity or technical achievement” (Battaglia, 2020, p. 15). Such consumer preference helps explain why Frank S. Nugent chose to puff Chaplin's comedic screen presence rather than congratulate his ardent political messaging or boundary-pushing technical achievement. We know the first American film critic, Frank E. Woods, was quickly adopted by Hollywood. His transition from news writer to insider occurred in the blink of an eye. Woods's successors — emerging mainstream reviewers — benefited from the same chance at industry integration. Producers, distributors, studios, actors, you name it, would happily capitalize on their ambition to earn a squeaky-clean review in the newspaper. The same

individuals who bylined for prominent publications were frequently invited to lavish press screenings. To maintain their status, “many newspapers and local critics had little issue with regurgitating the opinions of a film’s distributor (who gave them alcohol and press handouts) or their paper’s publisher” (Battaglia, 2010, p. 15). Despite notable exceptions within the emerging practice, film criticism was still primarily a reductive cause to cinematic innovation. In the rare instances writers swayed from summarization, they were coerced into scripting fluff material.

Unlike hard news stories, which rarely include the writer's perspective, film criticism warrants personality. To break free of this damaging industry-critic cabal, writers needed to add a distinct voice to their work. After all, part of what makes film news achieve virality is its ability to generate discourse. If every review echoes the same sentiment, readers won’t grow attached to a personality, and filmmakers won’t have a reason to improve or diversify their output. Thus, film and film criticism were thrust down similar arcs, each attempting to bridge the gap between entertaining the masses and achieving intellectual stimulation. What could be done to stand out? Who would break free of the norm? With these questions in mind, output could become more diverse, controversial, personal and noteworthy.

Some of the earliest content to talk about films differently, with more attention to opinion, was overwhelmingly personal. Longtime critic Harry Alan Potamkin unapologetically inserted his political leanings into his writing. In various pieces written for *New Freeman*, *Hound and Horn*, *The New Masses* and more, Potamkin stamped an evident liberal perspective. Although his defiant way with words was likely unpopular with many consumers, his unmistakable voice was easily recognizable. For people who gravitated toward his politics, this brand of writing achieved staying power.

Emanuel “Manny” Farber of *The New Republic* didn’t shy away from criticizing the industry, claiming big-budget Hollywood releases rarely propelled the medium forward. He got right to the point, minimizing plot summarization to nail each film’s thesis. His writing was bold, colorful and explorative, tied up in a personal bow. When you read Farber, you knew you were reading Farber.

“He is perhaps most notable for his preference for gritty, 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 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.’” (Qtd. in Battaglia, 2010, p. 16).

This is a particularly revelatory stance — one that is still implanted in contemporary film discourse. Though the blockbuster didn’t exist yet, Farber recognized Hollywood’s tendency to play it safe. He preferred the biting independent film, which had to be brave and boundary-pushing to succeed. Like him, these films were disruptive, transformative, opinionated and never-before-seen. Like him, these films are etched in the history books, not the record books. Such distinction mirrors a humongous divide in contemporary cinema. The most popular titles are rarely considered the cream of the crop (think Marvel or live-action Disney remakes). It’s the defiant, low-budget works that sweep awards season and generate passion in critics’ spheres. The masses might not appreciate them, but those who consume and read about film do. Both as a contemplative intellectual and an over-the-top personality, Farber reinvented what it means to evaluate a film’s artistic merit. He didn’t care what the industry heads had to say because he wanted them to grow.

Farber's indelible mark on criticism seeped into filmmaking as a broad institution. As a collective entity, critics moved the needle in movie production. Farber, however, was the first to implant himself individually, responsible for identifiable, ground-shaking shifts. For one, he was the first to call attention to under-the-radar projects: Hollywood's assembly line of "B-Pictures." (Roberts, 2010, p. 132). His willingness to engage with and celebrate diverse approaches "set in motion a revolution in our taste and perceptions that is still proceeding" (Roberts, 2010, p. 132). For example, he was the first critic to take action films seriously — a genre that has taken over blockbuster filmmaking. He dissected profundity from idiosyncratic projects that the establishment brushed off as cheap or unworthy. In fact, his consistent appreciation and attention to genre filmmaking resulted in an entirely fresh identification: film noir. Farber changed the game because he expanded it. He broke down the doors for smaller, risk-taking artists to get their foot in the door.

It was Farber's mentor, however, the esteemed James Agee, whose writing accumulated a readership large and passionate enough to break into the "mainstream." Though not as eclectic or challenging as Farber's, Agee's writing was just as personal and littered with a distinct, entertaining voice. Readers fell in love and admired the man like they would a dear friend. "Agee has been viewed as the great Renaissance man of film criticism" (Roberts, 2010, p. 120). He was earnest, conversational, intelligent and stern, supported by an undying love for film and a desire to spread its wonders. Thus, his work didn't read like your typical news story, comprising riffs, slang and direct references to the reader. "He had the ability to make readers believe they were in on the conversation" — a personal critic (Roberts, 2010, p. 122). This conversational approach, blending sharp writing techniques with authenticity and personality, attracted a fierce and lasting allegiance. He loved the medium so ardently that he wanted "to mold it nearer to his heart's

desire with his own hands” (Roberts, 2010, p. 122). With a platform so big and branching, trickling into homes nationwide, Agee compiled an audience eager to consume more movies, better movies. Hollywood had new critics to impress. Comedy had new demographics to appeal to. Entering the 1950s, 60s and 70s, the entertainment industry was forced to expand its product to meet rising demand. Passionate cinephiles were surrounded by opportunities to take the reins from the greats. Even before the Internet, the democratization of film criticism had begun.

## **Chapter V: Broadcast, Teenagers and the Commercialization of Cinema**

But what if there was a way to inject humor, argument, conversation, intonation and *visuals* into the critical standard — a way to transcend the limits of ink on paper? What if a movie review acted much like a movie itself? For as much detail and personality that can be packed into a newspaper column, broadcast news opens an all-new, doubly engaging and accessible can of worms. Since the invention and eventual widespread circulation of television, print newspapers have gradually declined as the dominant method for information seekers. In the late 1970s, film criticism achieved its first faces. Not its first prominent figures, but its first physical, expressive faces creeping their way into American homes. The Chicago-based duo of Roger Ebert and Gene Siskel ascended to celebrity on PBS in 1978. Their half-hour film-review program, initially named “Sneak Previews,” became the highest-rated show in the network’s history. For the first time ever, film critics were household names.

“For a half hour once a week, the Siskel and Ebert show — even through all of its essentially unvaried transformations — retained the same basic format through three decades: two guys giving their opinions on four or five films. Each man spoke his mind between film clips of the week’s release. The other critic was allotted time for a rebuttal opinion if one was called for, and an agreement, disagreement or argument ensued”

(Roberts, 2010, p. 271).

Siskel and Ebert had a chemical dynamic built on a shared love for filmmaking. Unlike a traditional film review, their broadcast was loaded with disagreement. Though just one extra voice, the tandem offered the sharp variation reflective of real-life subjectivity. Beyond being a way to catch a visual sneak preview of upcoming movies (which shouldn’t be taken for granted in a pre-Internet environment), Siskel and Ebert’s program was an easily accessible and

digestible piece of entertainment. Its incredible success was also immensely powerful. In 1987, iconic comedian Eddie Murphy noted their unprecedented influence: “Siskel and Ebert go, ‘Horrible picture,’ and I’m telling you, [they] can definitely kill a movie” (Qtd. in Roberts, 2010, p. 273). On the other hand, they possessed the might to resuscitate a movie from poor box-office performance, almost single-handedly proving the fortunes of many independent or international releases.

In many ways, however, this simplified criticism. Where the long-winded essay or 1000-word column writes with nuance and detailed analysis, Siskel and Ebert had to make their reviews briefer and more universal. It wasn’t just cinephiles or film scholars watching their program, but the general public, including children and teenagers. Thus, their opinion was accompanied by a small graphic: a thumbs-up or thumbs-down. Siskel and Ebert obviously provided thorough reasoning behind their views, but this ultimate, and somewhat rustic stamp of approval/disapproval was the typical viewer's take-away. It was the kicker influencing their decision whether or not to visit the theater, and a short notion they could share with their friends. It might seem supremely normal to us now, but this blanket rating system was among the first of its kind. The IMDb star scale, the Rotten Tomatoes Tomatometer and other numerical rating systems are tributaries flowing from Siskel and Ebert’s upturned thumbs. Though no fault of their own, Siskel and Ebert are among the many emphatic reasons why traditional film criticism (writing) isn’t as broadly consumed and appreciated as it once was.

Naturally, it wouldn’t take long for other networks and publications to follow suit. “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” (Battaglia, 2010, p. 24). What set these broadcasts apart from the Siskel and Ebert show, whose

audience knew precisely what they were in for when they sat down to watch, was their obligation to appeal to a broader base. Network viewers weren't necessarily tuning in for movie-related content; it required extra effort to keep them off the remote control. Thus, networks hired characters for their charisma and wit — entertainers who could wiz through promotional clips and dip into short, sensationalized opinions. The most lucrative form of film criticism became comedy.

“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” (Qtd. in Battaglia, 2010, p. 25).

One of the most prominent figures in this sphere was NBC's Gene Shalit, who covered film releases for “*The Today Show*.” Rocking a colorful aesthetic, an unforgettable mustache and big hair, Shalit delivered fast-paced jokes filled with puns and alliteration. His magnetic aura kept segments light on their feet, free from the more analytical brand of film criticism endemic to Siskel and Ebert. He was a riot to be sure — an endlessly amusing vessel for film coverage — but sorely lacked depth. He did not hold meaningful discussions, but painless and comedic advertising for upcoming films. In many cases, print criticism began mirroring aspects of this style, asked to inject flowery language and extreme opinions. The “rant or rave” review, accompanied by now-ubiquitous rating systems, became the most accessible and widely circulated form of criticism — it didn't matter the medium. This less challenging form of criticism, therefore, covered less challenging movies, fewer independent movies and fewer international movies. Uncoincidentally, this era marked the boom of the blockbuster.

For all intents and purposes, broadcast reviews acted more as commercials than written reviews. Major studios enjoyed any televised exposure they could get, even if the reviewer's

sentiments were negative. Getting people to the theater, landing butts in seats, was defined by exposure rather than quality. In effect, broadcast reviews illuminated the true value of blockbuster cinema and the sweeping potential of television marketing. Suddenly, the industry had a new route and a new demographic to cater to: teenagers. After all, teenagers were largely unlikely to read the newspaper, primarily invested in the continued rise of television. The “teenageification” of Hollywood began, extending its influence to era comedies, reviews and promotional material.

Beginning in the 1980s, audiences received most of their film news from commercials. Good or bad, the biggest, most expensive films attracted the most people. “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” (Battaglia, 2010, p. 29). This also marks the decade where sequels flourished, launching franchises that still release today.

The most prominent comedies in the 1980s centered around teenagers navigating relatable, all-encompassing issues like romance, friendship, school and coming of age. They were raunchy, lighthearted and relatively uncomplex to appease mass audiences, directly mirroring the trajectory of film criticism. It’s not to say excellent, artistic, never-before-seen comedies or reviewers were extinct; they simply weren’t as popular or culturally relevant. What teenagers liked, everyone got.

Take John Hughes’s 1984 teen comedy “*Sixteen Candles*.” Though beloved at the time, the film has since been criticized for frequent and notable problematic material. The film is abundantly simple and straightforward, offering a classic high school tale about crushes, school dances, and teenage love. One [promotional video](#) still available on YouTube puts it quite bluntly: “A movie about love, life, commitment, truth, and the most important day of her life.” Going off

of this short TV spot, you can't necessarily gather what the film is about, other than the simple themes it announces. To the viewer, it's just like anything else. But its inclusion in an ad spot proves its watchability — at least to teenagers of the time. If it's being circulated this heavily, it's sure to be good, right?

[Siskel and Ebert's \*Sixteen Candles\* review](#) is shockingly short and littered with clips, featuring zero references to the specific jokes or moments that made them laugh. Reflecting the “rave” review format, their quick rundown highlights no flaws, instead congratulating the film for being relatable. With plenty of summary and a smidge of analysis, Siskel and Ebert's review has more meat than a commercial but fails to capture the scope or individuality of a longer form review. While likely due to time constraints, it's additionally believable that the nature of their review stems from apathy in the film's generic, albeit quality existence.

Interestingly, a New York Times review from Janet Maslin pens a multi-faceted perspective, ridiculing “*Sixteen Candles*” for its sophomoric tone and insensitive jokes but praising its watchability.

“John Hughes's '*Sixteen Candles*' is a cuter and better-natured teen comedy than most, with the kinds of occasional lapses in taste that probably can't hurt in the circles for which it is intended. The middle of the film wastes time on a bit more house-wrecking and car-crashing than is absolutely necessary, and there are some notably unfunny ethnic jokes...When the movie goes too far, as it does with a stupid subplot about a sex-crazed Oriental exchange student or a running gag about a young woman in a body brace, at least it manages to bound back relatively soon after” (Maslin, 1984).

It's particularly revelatory that she calls out its problematic material yet still describes it as apt for its target audiences. She clearly doesn't love the film but surrenders its likability to the

masses. All in all, Maslin's words prove that the dominant and emerging style of television and commercial criticism wasn't the only method. It is doubtful, however, that her article or her sentiments made their way out of a small circle or had any impact on the film's success. It seemed the only way criticism, comedy and cinema could ever find their way out of teen-oriented, commercialized snippets was by increasing visibility for the Janet Maslins of the world. What if the amateur film buff could plant a mark that compares to an article in the New York Times or a Gene Shalit broadcast?

At the turn of the century, the entry point of the digital age, the next wave of change would arrive with even more radical consequences. Just as television revolutionized the accessibility and appeal of film criticism, the World Wide Web had arrived. The gatekeeping grip of print and broadcast began to loosen, changing not just *who* could speak but *how* we talked about film. Suddenly, the critic didn't need a column or a camera crew — just an Internet connection.

## **Chapter VI: Into the Digital Age**

“Conventional wisdom holds that the internet is a democratizing force” (Walmsley-Evans, 2018, p. 147). Within the cinephilic realm, such a force has dissolved the boundary between professional critic and amateur consumer. “Whether uttered by cyber-enthusiasts championing their newly-gained agency...or by the elegiac professional critics decrying the same, the consensus is that the internet has radically altered the landscape of criticism towards a more democratic topography” (Walmsley-Evans, 2019, p. 147). Between blog platforms, review aggregate sites and social media, more people have their foot planted in the door, providing bountiful room for the general populace and shoving the traditional critic into a suffocating trash compactor.

At the beginning of the digital age, pop culture conversation became defined by amateurism — a brand of expression once sidelined to face-to-face discussion. Anyone, anywhere, could build prominence opposite professional film critics in web-based film discussion, perpetuating a consumer school of criticism that extensively swelled the ranks of fandom (McWhirter, 2016, p. 121). This fundamentally changed the game for two key reasons. One, film critics were forced to publish and formulate their work with immediacy and expectation of instant response. Two, their work lost stature amongst an endless, swirling melting pot of opinions. For the pros, it was a damning blow; unpaid users were invading their exclusive space.

However, amateurism and fandom didn’t suddenly materialize when the Internet became widely accessible. Hardcore, informed cinephilia had been brewing for some time, particularly throughout the 1990s. Although going to the movies was immensely popular in decades prior, especially during the emergence of blockbuster cinema, film “nerdom” was secluded primarily to

the dimmed theater experience. It wasn't until home theater technologies became readily and cheaply accessible that cinephilia could reach new heights. VHS tapes, new and old, became a collectible — the kind you actually use. Anyone could waltz into the store and purchase a copy of their favorite flicks and compile a dense library of cinematic glory. More crucially, they could rewatch their library an infinite number of times, dissecting them with finer detail than they could after a one-off theater experience. “Cinephiles finally had the freedom to meticulously examine the movies on their own time and in the comfort of their homes” (Battaglia, 2010, p. 36). Still, there was no way for these individuals to express themselves to an audience without applying for a job at the paper or the local station. If they wrote, it was often confined to spatially limited readerships within fan groups and fan magazines.

Everything would change in the late 1990s, trudging into a brand new millennium; the Internet became a precursory iteration of the democratizing force it is today. Writers across limitless topics, including film, music, politics, travel, you name it, started Web logs, or blogs, to share their slice of life with the world at large. These spaces were personal sites often housed on platforms specifically designed to breed community spaces. With no previous basis for Internet writing, it began as an experimental affair. There were no parameters or rules for form or function. Personal essays, literary analysis, journalistic articles, photo logs, recipes, etc., all took shape within these spaces. Anyone in the world could start a blog; anyone in the world could read it. For many, especially the tech-savvy youth, it was time to say goodbye to the local paper. Why curb yourself to your town reviewer when you could read the work of thousands of like-minded individuals across the globe?

Having built up credibility over time at their various publications, many film critics were of older demographics. Adapting to new technologies, especially the likes of the lowly bloggers

— as they might have put it — was a difficult task. Thus, it wasn't uncommon for these individuals to believe that “more people contributing to film criticism for free [had] weakened the idea of quality, overshadowing more sophisticated forms” (McWhirter, 2016, p. 120). In some cases, they were right; out of endless contributors, not all were keyboard wizards. Plenty of amateur film buffs are responsible for poorly written, ill-researched and even inflammatory blog posts. Not to mention the often hostile, insulting and provocative commenters using desktop anonymity to spew personal attacks.

Still, “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” (Battaglia, 2010, p. 37).

It was war: scrappy amateurs versus seasoned veterans. Over time, it seemed as though blog posts might overcrowd and kick out the established reviewer. For professional critics, it was time to get with the program or wallow in the dust.

Outside of film writing, print publications started to suffer at the beginning of the digital age, laying off hordes of staff. In many cases, the entertainment writer was the first to go. It seemed their job was the easiest to replicate without the means of experience or publication resources. Famous film critic A.O. Scott unraveled the conundrum, stating “The paradox is that the Web has invigorated criticism as an activity while undermining it as a profession” (Qtd. in Battaglia, 2010, p. 38). The natural migration for laid-off individuals was freelance work. But their desired rates were far more expensive than those of amateur bloggers. As an outlet, why not hire skilled writers for half the cost? Thus, no one was making money, and job security was at an all-time low. At the same time, film passion was at an all-time high — a passion now fostered by

a wide swath of voices. They had to find a way to coexist for such passion to persist, a way to increase visibility, breed cinephilia and create engaging content. Enter the review aggregate site.

## **Chapter VII: The Rise of Review Aggregate Sites**

The digital world is a world of immediacy. How we communicate has become faster, which promotes “an aphoristic culture (at best) and a world where attention spans have suffered (at worst) (McWhirter, 2016, p. 145). If it takes precious time to read a lengthy article, why not make your moviegoing decisions based on a mass tally? Where Siskel and Ebert’s broadcasts demand your time and attention to reach a final ruling, review aggregate sites require one meager glance.

“The function of the review aggregators is to survey an array of reviews of films currently in release in cinemas, assign an overall score or value to each review, and then tally up these scores to offer a single figure that reveals the critical consensus” (Walmsley-Evans, 2018, p. 161).

Rotten Tomatoes, an undisputed titan of review aggregation, offers esteemed critics, even bloggers alike, a chance at widespread visibility. The “Tomatometer” represents a film’s quality from zero to 100%. A healthy red tomato accompanies films that draw 60-100% favorability from a chosen lot of reviewers, labeled “Fresh.” A green tomato splatter, invoking an archaic habit of disgruntled audiences, accompanies those who draw 0-59% favorability, labeled “Rotten.” In an online environment that moves at a supersonic speed, Rotten Tomatoes offers the rapid examination of a film’s quality. For some, it is the end-all, be-all of whether a movie is worth their consideration. But it’s critical to understand that Rotten Tomatoes itself doesn’t conjure these scores out of thin air; the website isn’t a critic. Instead, it takes hundreds of reviews across a multitude of platforms and publications, rounds them all together side-by-side, and determines an aggregated likability meter. These aren’t random social media posts or first-time blog affairs, but quality works from proven individuals. Despite offering a separate tally for user

reviews, it's *solely* trusted, Rotten Tomatoes-certified critics who influence the ultimate percentage. Each individual review is displayed via a small blurb attached to a “Fresh” or “Rotten” symbol. Users are provided a link to each work’s original publishing site, offering writers never-before-seen exposure.

Still, the early presence of Rotten Tomatoes and other websites cut from the same cloth did little to improve film criticism’s downfall as a fruitful and respected occupation. If anything, these websites are the grandfathers of toxic internet discourse, pitting critics against users and film buffs against film browsers — the precursors to the short, punchy sentiments meant to generate social media engagement rather than thoughtfully assess a film. The presence of respected critics on Rotten Tomatoes is almost paradoxical. Their involvement is necessary for exposure and staying power within the evolving landscape, yet their contributions are ultimately reductive to the institution. In fact, many critics despise the review aggregate’s influence on critical culture, serving as a quick-and-easy replacement for staying up to date with one’s favorite writer. Access to more opinions is a good thing, and aggregate scores are often serviceable measures of quality, but they steer people in an uncreative, uncurious direction that prevents the consumption of long-form content. In an interview with several American critics, Walmsley-Evans discovered that “many critics revile the empiricisation and aggregation of criticism...feeling the wrath of Rotten Tomatoes readers who saw the ‘Tomatometer’ as the be-all-end-all of film criticism, rather than as indicative, or a novelty” (Walmsley-Evans, 2018, p. 162). When you’re jumbled into a massive conglomeration of opinions, particularly on a site that allows user interaction, a sense of agency is lost in the sauce. Everyone is just another red tomato or green splatter, supported by a couple of sentences at best. Thus, “review aggregators produce an audience for film criticism with a warped understanding of the possibility and desirability of

‘critical consensus,’ and who see dissenting opinions as suspicious, even deviant” (Walmsley-Evans, 2018, p. 162). In the comments sections beneath veteran critic Stephanie Zacharek’s review of Christopher Nolan’s 2010 sci-fi hit “Inception,” an angry user remarked: “Jeez, if one girl can write such a negative review about such a great, successful movie and publish it, then this site cannot be legitimate or taken seriously.” Of course, Zacharek isn’t just any old “girl” as the writer deduces, but a seasoned and respected film writer. The user has chosen to accept the film’s blanket score as law to the point where they will not engage with the nuances of a negative review or the merits of the reviewer. In effect, the reader’s relationship with individual critics, once built on trust and confidence, disintegrates in the hands of aggregation.

Professional film critic David Edelstein went so far as to label Rotten Tomatoes as a threat to his occupation, claiming, “When you have Rotten Tomatoes, it’s no wonder the people say that criticism is dying, is a lost art and people aren’t interested anymore” (Edelstein, 2010). Fellow critic Armond White expressed a similar sentiment, combating users who believe Rotten Tomatoes is the sole party platforming and kickstarting its writers’ careers, stating “There are people who think I started writing once Rotten Tomatoes was put together, and so I write to be noticed by Rotten Tomatoes” (White, 2010). As one of the more prominent film-related websites on the Internet, Rotten Tomatoes indeed attracts plenty of traffic. But such congestion comprises random passersby rather than individuals explicitly searching for established writers. For Edelstein and White, it attracts an audience that isn’t necessarily familiar with them or their publication. “That is to say, they are not readers of New York Magazine or New York Press, but rather a fragmented and decontextualized audience” (Walmsley-Evans, 2018, p. 163). It’s a rare case where more publicity doesn’t equal good publicity. “It’s not always an audience that I like,” Edelstein said. “Sometimes it’s a very close-minded audience” (Edelstein, 2010). A curious link-

clicker, perhaps perturbed by the featured blurb, might gloss over the complete work. After all, the lead is what initially caught their attention. It is incredibly unlikely for them to return to a specific writer, and increasingly plausible that they will leave an inflammatory comment. Though featuring thousands of faces and opinions, Rotten Tomatoes' congested interface is devoid of the intimacy that writers crave — more about grading and fighting over art than curiously interacting with film and film journalism. As a complete package, Rotten Tomatoes offers plenty for energized readers to sink their teeth into. But its selling point — an arbitrary critical consensus represented by a fruit-themed meter — wades in the shallow depths that most users interact with hastily before leaving for dry land. Ultimately, how it's used falls drastically short of what it offers.

So, how do critics and users alike engage with comedies on the platform? Better yet, how are these engagements displayed? First, let's narrow it down to a distinct era — the late 2000s — the drifting, intermediate years of the digital age caught between the proliferation of review aggregates and the ascent of social media usage. Take Gregg Araki's 2007 stoner-comedy "Smiley Face" — an irreverent romp tracking the chaotic journey of Anna Faris's perpetually stoned Jane F. On the surface, it's a low-brow, profoundly unserious flick littered with fun gags and hilarious character work. At the same time, it possesses a rebellious edge, questioning capitalism's exploitative constraints that have encouraged Jane to lose herself — and free herself — with drugs. At 64% fresh, the film sports a modest "Fresh" consideration accumulated by mixed reviews. In a short, generic sentence below the meter lies the critic's consensus, reading: "Although many of the jokes have been done before, Anna Faris's bright performance and Gregg Araki's sharp direction make 'Smiley Face' more than your average stoner comedy." The user score, however, sits at 45%, with a bright green, tipped-over popcorn bucket sitting next to it.

Most users unfamiliar with Araki's work would likely click off immediately, noting mediocre reviews from critics and general disdain from audiences. With one brief glimpse, potential readers and watchers are already deterred from engaging further with an in-depth critique. What about those who choose to dig deeper? The first displayed critic review comes from Joshua Rothkopf of Time Out. Although he rated the film fresh, there are precisely zero words filling the blurb bubble — an unhelpful anomaly to be sure. Next, Nick Schager for Lessons of Darkness, bluntly writes, "A limp, unfunny time-waster" (Schager, 2008). These individuals are boldly labeled "Top Critics," but if you fail to click on their full reviews, which indeed offer thorough and detailed thoughts supporting their ultimate rulings, there's no reason to trust their expertise. Rotten Tomatoes poses them as random, uncreative commenters that blend in with the rest of the pack. On the flip side, the first user review from "Thiago S" gives "Smiley Face" a dreadful 0.5/5 stars.

"Bad film, the script is weak, the scenes are weak, the story is bad, the cast is so-so, but no one helps to improve the film, the characters are weak, and the film should have much better and relevant scenes, to make the film good, I don't recommend this film"

Of course, there's no link this time around. It's impossible to conclude why the user thinks this way. On Rotten Tomatoes, the why doesn't matter. Still, there's more real estate to explore. If you take the time to find it, buried amongst short summaries, praises, and wailings, one blurb hints at the film's political edge. Matt Zoller Seitz of The New York Times writes, "Despite its laid-back script, 'Smiley Face' is as prankishly political as Mr. Araki's 'The Doom Generation,' evincing a deep unease with the media-saturated capitalist nation that Jane crawls inside her bong to escape." (Zoller Seitz, 2007). The link leads to an agile, well-researched review, analyzing the film's frequently overlooked subtext. The concluding paragraph contains more

meat and wisdom than is immediately accessible on Rotten Tomatoes, despite the website's big-picture promises.

“The implication is subtle but clear: Americans fancy themselves free-willed strivers who live in the best of all possible worlds, but they're really sentient vegetables, rooted in comfort and nourished by manufactured images of bliss. Jane's apathy-as-rebellion recalls a quotation from Stella Adler: “A junkie is someone who uses their body to tell society that something is wrong.” (Zoller Seitz, 2007).

Although review aggregators are still around today, their initial rise to prominence came at a perplexing time in film criticism's storied history. Remaining employed film critics and emerging amateurs had ample opportunities and outlets to circulate thoughtful, personal writing. However, the growing involvement of random internet users, coupled with platforms designed for quick visitation, spawned a no man's land for intellectual film discussion — a reactive, uncurious environment. That prominence has been significantly subdued, replaced by the boundless democratic reaches of social media's reign.

## **Chapter VIII: The Rise of Social Media**

Now a dominant force steering a global network built on rapidity, social media was once a nascent space. The arrival of Facebook in 2004 and later Twitter in 2007, launched the debut model of a brand new mediascape where breaking stories became instantly and constantly accessible. While it's true that social media is an evolved outlet for news publications and film critics to link coverage, live stream and deliver instant information, they are grossly outnumbered by the everyman. Online, everyone is a journalist; everyone is a critic — the laws of the land: speed, engagement and majority.

In 2011, Terrence Malick's semi-autobiographical drama "The Tree of Life" premiered at the Cannes Film Festival, where it would eventually claim the coveted Palme d'Or prize. Now considered one of Malick's best, earning subsequent awards recognition and generally favorable reviews across online platforms, the film was an early beneficiary of Twitter buzz. Even before social media, the Cannes Film Festival was a promoter of knee-jerk responses. In such a prestigious, cramped circle, writers had to finish their work quickly; they were buried in competition. Once mobile phones came around, they could do so with two thumbs, instantaneously. For some, digital culture's demands encouraged writing and watching to coincide. Film writer Andrew Grant argued that 2011's "The Tree of Life" screening reached "ridiculous levels because reviews were published while the film had thirty minutes to run" (McWhirter, 2016, p. 151). At the very least, writers needed to jump on the feedback train during the credits, furiously tweeting and typing against the clock. But these responses weren't just quick; they were instrumental in evolving the film's reputation.

"Early rumors were that 'The Tree of Life' was a stinker, and there was the faint sense that even its distributors and backers were circumspect about it. But the first reviews

were, by and large, extremely positive (and even the negative ones took it seriously and praised many aspects of the film). I think this helped — both in changing the industry’s expectations for the film and also nudging it towards the Palme d’Or award” (Qtd. in McWhirter, 2016, p. 150).

On the back of sheer strength in numbers, the audience tweeted the picture to life and spearheaded a legacy that’s still alive today. Had Twitter not existed, perhaps the Palme d’Or would’ve ended up elsewhere, and the film never would’ve amounted to recognition and appreciation of a similar scale.

Still, various critics had qualms with the new model, claiming films like “The Tree of Life” warrant deeper reflection over a longer period of time. Although this instance generated a positive result for the movie, other challenging and experimental movies might not receive the same fortune. Maybe a different demographic, perhaps a less industry-adjacent body, would’ve tanked the film into the ground. After all, not every film screening is chock-full of critics, actors and filmmakers of such prestige. Does a general audience guide a movie like “The Tree of Life” to success off knee-jerk tweets? I strongly doubt it. Part of the collective critic’s hesitancy stems from the notion that studios may stop funding challenging movies entirely; they aren’t meant to be evaluated and spat out in 140 characters or less. Taking a step back from Cannes, what ultimately matters — the real threat to professional criticism — is the digital majority. In a 2011 interview with Fred Topel, director and former film critic Rod Lurie assessed the field.

“If somebody on their Twitter sees 1000 people telling them to go see a certain movie, they’re going to go regardless of what one person at The Tribune says. All opinions can now be aggregated with a democratic majority overriding critical expertise” (Qtd. in McWhirter, 2016, p. 152).

When social media was primarily text-based, short sentiments with character limits were the king of information. Unfortunately, this environment further subtracted from professional criticism as a sustainable occupation, well before the financial possibilities of the short-form video-dominated influencer era. In the late 2000s and early 2010s, crisis mode was in full effect.

But it's not all bleak. There's another side to the story. Despite all its cons, social media is the ultimate platformer, carving out spaces for marginalized voices to question problematic media. Of the films mentioned thus far, several possess glaring issues that the past couldn't illuminate. Take "The Birth of a Nation;" had it been released today, rampant backlash would have begun and ended on social media; it would have been dead in the water upon its announcement. Something a little less extreme, "Sixteen Candles," would spark rampant discourse, prompting moviegoers to boycott it entirely. These aren't just empty claims; contemporary films are under constant, watchful scrutiny of progress. For example, in 2009, Sacha Baron Cohen's comedy film "Bruno" was ousted by internet backlash. Recognizing negative stereotypes strewn throughout the film, The Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) released a statement criticizing the film's weak attempt at satire:

"Clearly, the filmmakers wanted to use satire to highlight and challenge homophobia. But their film also reinforces troubling attitudes about gay people in ways that run counter to the intentions of the filmmakers. The movie repeatedly builds entire scenes around stock stereotypes and situations that make gay people and families the butt of crude jokes. I can't help but think of all the teenage kids already getting bullied, beaten up and ridiculed for being – or for being thought to be – gay. For these kids, this movie will give their tormentors one more word in the anti-gay lexicon of slurs: Bruno." (Qtd. in Child, 2009).

Despite an overall successful opening weekend, raking in \$30.4 million at the box office, “Bruno” witnessed a massive 40% drop in ticket sales after Friday’s premiere — a plummet normal for a second weekend, not a second day. GLAAD’s statement, coupled with passionate posts from disgruntled viewers, is the only identifiable justification.

For all the distress about the decline of traditional criticism, the digital shift hasn’t just eroded old models — it’s created entirely new ones. Critics now operate in ecosystems like Letterboxd, YouTube and TikTok, where popularity, visibility and niche authority can translate into income, influence or both. What began as a cultural free-for-all has evolved into a fragmented but potent economy of taste, where criticism no longer needs the blessing of legacy publications to matter — or to make money.

## **Chapter IX: YouTube, Letterboxd and Niche Criticism**

In a fresh internet environment dominated by influencer culture, cinephilia has found new media to latch on to. Film journalism now inhabits a vast cluster of niche spaces accessible to an endless catalog of consumption preferences. Although traditional publication-based criticism, including freelance and full-time work, still exists today, an emerging route poses a more lucrative potential. Built brick-by-brick over a century of evolution, combining the intellect of Iris Barry, the personality of Manny Farber, the screen presence of Gene Shalit, the passion of Roger Ebert and the specificity of bloggers, ultra-modern film criticism flourishes on YouTube and Letterboxd. The once exotic occupation is now financially viable *and* widely accessible.

What sets these platforms apart from other sites, particularly Twitter's instantaneous, text-based brand of information, is an attention to immersion and detail. YouTube — the video sharing behemoth — houses approximately 65.3 million individual creators of all shapes and sizes, with most uploading original, personal content. Within this gargantuan space is a creative melting pot — an infinite brainstorm of video content. Pop culture, and more chiefly, film culture, shares a relatively humongous slice of that pie. When it comes to film information, including reviews, trailers, festival coverage, Oscar predictions, rankings, etc., YouTube is perhaps the world's leading destination. Here, individuals provide their unique takes, broad and niche, anonymous and identified. Just like in the past, when the most respected writers achieved steady positions and wide recognition, the most sought-after YouTube personalities achieve a permanent occupation. In some cases, they receive fame and rake in more cash than writers working for publications. Moreover, such publications, including Variety, The Hollywood Reporter and other major entertainment outlets, employ teams to establish a YouTube presence of their own. For an industry previously in decline, opportunities seem to arise in bulk nowadays

— they simply require a modern set of journalistic and technological skills. In the big 2025, those skills are more accessible than ever and have become a staple of journalistic curriculum.

Take Karsten Runquist, for example — a Chicago-born filmmaker and podcaster who makes his living uploading videos to YouTube. At over 725k subscribers, 9 years into his career, Runquist doesn't require an additional source of income. His content comprises reviews, rankings, festival vlogs, theories and miscellaneous film content. What sets Runquist apart from the rest of the pack is his extreme cinematic passion and artistic intelligence. He has grown and evolved with the times, capitalizing on a shifting environment attuned to his skills. He also has his finger on the pulse, representing and embodying a cinephile internet culture dominated by youth voices and the now mainstream social platform Letterboxd.

Though originally opened to the public in 2013, Letterboxd wouldn't ascend to prominence for several years, now sporting over 17 million users. "The app started small: the cinephile's counterpart to the bibliophile's Goodreads. It was a way for film fans to keep track of their recent watches and thoughts" (Aguirre, 2024). Now, it's responsible for spreading visibility for independent cinema, bolstering film passion in younger demographics, and providing filmmakers a peek into a budding audience culture. "We see ourselves as this little cog between the filmmakers and the audience," Letterboxd co-founder Matthew Buchanan said (Aguirre, 2024). Among the many features the app offers are a logging diary, watchlists, a review feature and an aggregated user score on a 0-5 scale. It operates as any social media platform might, only completely ingrained in the cinematic cause, allowing users to follow each other and communicate with other users via comments. Where Twitter fosters an environment of random thought from random sources, Letterboxd prides itself on community, inclusivity and shared love of film. It is perhaps the best indicator of aggregated opinion because it comprises voices

explicitly interested in the medium. This extends to actors, journalists and figures like Runquist, who also leave their mark on its interface. A staple of 2020s cinema, Daniel Scheinert and Daniel Kwan's prolific, award-winning independent dramedy "Everything Everywhere All at Once" first gained momentum because of the app.

*When Letterboxd Editor in Chief Gemma Gracewood attended the premiere of A24's 'Love Lies Bleeding' in March, she finally found herself face to face with 'Everything Everywhere All at Once' co-writer and co-director Daniel Scheinert and producer Jonathan Wang after previously only talking virtually. "[Scheinert and Wang] just said, 'You guys were amazing,'" Gracewood said. "We have so much to thank you for in terms of driving people to our movie and keeping the conversation going." (Aguirre, 2024)*

Despite its vulgar comedy, quirks and oddities, seldom recognized as award-worthy, the film captured the top prize at the 2023 Academy Awards.

Letterboxd is also a space where niche, identity-based cinema finds its footing. For example, queer cinema is especially celebrated and illuminated here in comparison to other platforms, offering a safer environment for marginalized groups to engage with and transform movie talk. Frank Jaffe, owner of LGBTQ+-focused film distributor Altered Innocence, credits Letterboxd for the staying power of "The People's Joker" — a parody origin story about the Batman villain that doubles as a trans coming-of-age tale (Aguirre, 2024).

"That's a film that I think Letterboxd has really been able to nurture. ... In a way, [the film] never went away because of Letterboxd," Jaffe said. "We see people joking, like ['The People's Joker' screening] ended, and I saw the entire audience in front of me light up with people logging in on Letterboxd." (Qtd. in Aguirre, 2024).

One of the most praised comedies of the 2020s, "Bottoms," is emphatically queer and celebrated on Letterboxd as a refreshing and hilarious win for queer representation in comedy.

At 1.4 million logs and rocking a 3.8 rating, it's the most popular pure comedy of 2023, and among the highest rated. Part of why the film succeeds is because it normalizes queerness. The main characters are disliked by others not because they are lesbians but because they are untalented. The film cultivates its own ambitious, vulgar world with zero questions or concerns about the main characters' sexuality — their queerness is wholly embraced. Director Emma Seligman recognizes and empathizes with her audience, granting the film an opportunity to comfortably take comedic risks. The film's third most-liked Letterboxd review has over 27k likes and recognizes its explicit attention to queer consumers.

*"If you thought Barbie was the best whimsical satire about feminism and the harms of the patriarchy, featuring music from Charli XCX, with a massive, choreographed fight scene between warring factions, crafted specifically for lesbians, made in the year of our lord 2023... well, guess again!!"*

On the flip side, the same film Siskel and Ebert gave a thumbs up, "Sixteen Candles," suffers in the face of Letterboxd's modern crowd. It's first review, touting a measly one star digs straight into its problematic core: "Racism, sexism, making fun of disabled kids, rape jokes, homophobic jokes...this movie got it all. Oh, the 80s."

Suffice it to say, platforms like YouTube and Letterboxd have contributed to a redefinition of how film criticism is conducted, democratizing access and opening doors for diverse voices and communities to mold the conversation. These spaces exemplify a shifting media landscape — one where passion, identity, and digital fluency are central to influence, monetization, and longevity. As this new generation of cinephiles continues to redefine film culture in real time, it becomes clear that we are not witnessing the continued decline of film criticism, but rather a radical reinvention.

## **Chapter X: Conclusion**

As we barrel forward into an unpredictable, increasingly digitized American future, one plagued by division and unrest, it's unclear how film criticism will fare as a viable occupation or cultural institution. It's unclear how the journalism industry will reckon with the monumental and aggressive rise of artificial intelligence. What we can definitely say, however, is that the current critical landscape is built on the backs of pioneering legends — individuals who convinced the American public that motion pictures are personal and political works worthy of intellectual discussion, whether serious, entertaining or somewhere in between; cinephiles and casual watchers inhabit a fast-paced, democratic environment sculpted by rapid technological advancements, including the proliferation of the Internet and the sweeping rise of social media platforms; and comedic works are under the constant, watchful eye of an evolved social ecosystem built on inclusivity.

With platforms like Letterboxd and YouTube seemingly bolstering a youth-led movement, cinematic passion is alive and more accessible than ever before. With print journalism continuously declining, the industry has received an irreversible digital makeover. It is up to the next generation of consumers — the next brood of passionate cinephiles — to uphold film criticism as a prosperous, fruitful endeavor, no matter what form, function or medium the future demands.

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