

**Film Discourse on the Praised and Acclaimed:
Reviewing Criteria in the United States and United Kingdom***

Annemarie Kersten

Department of Media and Communication

Erasmus University, Rotterdam

(NL)

Denise D. Bielby

Department of Sociology

University of California, Santa Barbara

(USA)

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Annemarie Kersten, Department of Media and Communication, ESHCC, Erasmus University, P.O. Box 1738, NL-3000 DR, Rotterdam, the Netherlands. Phone: +31 10 408 2504 Fax: +31 10 408 9135 E-mail: kersten@eshcc.eur.nl

*This research was supported by the Erasmus Trustfund and by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research as part of the VICI project Cultural Classification Systems in Transition (NWO project #277-45-001).

**Film Discourse on the Praised and Acclaimed:
Reviewing Criteria in the United States and United Kingdom**

ABSTRACT

This research examines the aesthetic elements of contemporary film criticism. Although a restricted field of film production has arisen beside the large-scale field since the 1950s, including an elite critical discourse that was crucial to the medium's ascent on the cultural ladder, the film industry remains relentlessly oriented to its goal of producing commercial products that achieve widespread popular appeal. This differentiation becomes apparent in the types of films validated by publics, peers, and critics. Our exploratory analysis examines whether the prevailing dichotomy of artistic versus popular forms of criticism still captures the emergent complexity of films produced by cultural industries confronted with increased commercialization, globalization, and digitization. We inductively analyzed nearly 200 reviews published in four newspapers of record in the United Kingdom and the United States of films released in 2007 that received the utmost popular, professional, and critical recognition in these countries. Our findings reveal that contemporary film criticism incorporates aesthetic elements that draw from popular interests as well as elite art considerations, thereby complicating the aesthetic systems deployed by film critics and the classificatory schemes of cultural analysts.

Key words: film critics, film criticism, aesthetic disposition, popular aesthetic, cultural classification

INTRODUCTION

In present-day western society, film appears as art and as entertainment, serves cinephiles and escapists alike, and can be divided into many genres, subgenres, and niches. This differentiation did not always exist; during film's early decades in the United States motion pictures were regarded as mere entertainment for the masses (Bordwell & Thompson, 1997). Nevertheless, this cultural form evolved into one that can be approached and appreciated as art, following European example. Cultural analysts have concluded that the intellectualization of film discourse by professional critics played a major role in film's ascent on the cultural ladder. In seminal work on this transition, Baumann (2001, 2007) found that a legitimizing intellectual ideology for film's higher standing, coupled with critics' utilization of devices, concepts, and vocabulary traditionally belonging to discourses associated with highbrow art, assisted film in attaining a new status, that of a product with artistic potential and merit. Also paving the way for the development of film as art were a changing opportunity space for film production from an open field to a more restricted one (Bourdieu, 1993), and the institutionalization of industry resources and practices such as festivals and awards that conveyed value to its goods (English, 2005).

A great deal has changed in media industries since Baumann's important work on film's evolution. First, expanded commercialization, alongside globalization, and digitization have extended the opportunity space for film production and consumption and shifted the institutionalization of its resources since his analysis, which covered films produced only through the mid-1980s (Anderson, 2006; Keen, 2007; McDonald & Wasko, 2008; Wasko, 2001). Second, ever-more complex business strategies have been devised to maximize film's revenue-generating potential, including a deeper reliance upon selected release dates and diverse viewing platforms, publicity campaigns to enhance opening weekend box-office revenue, productions targeted to particular audience niches and demographics, and word-of-mouth efforts among audiences and industry members (De Vany & Lee, 2001; Horn, 2011). Third, research (Allen & Lincoln, 2004; English, 2005) has shown that a triad of parties – publics, peers, and critics – influence the

recognition, merit, and position a film can claim, albeit from different vantage points; however, the interests of these parties may vary even as the selections they attend to overlap. Given these developments, how can present-day film criticism as a form of popular communication be characterized and understood? In particular, are films that are ultimately consecrated by popular, professional, and critical recognition appraised by similar or different criteria?

FILM CRITICISM TODAY

Critics function as cultural intermediaries between artistic goods and their audiences not only because of their central role as cultural authorities who enact aesthetic standards but because of their ability to transform those standards and contribute to elevating (or lowering) entire fields of cultural goods, as was demonstrated in Baumann's (2007) analysis. Not only did Baumann's research clarify that over time film critics have emphasized an increasingly analytical, interpretive approach to film over a more facile, entertainment-minded one, it also ascertained that their expanding vocabulary of critical devices and concepts in the context of a new ideology for film allowed, in turn, for a more complex discussion of a film's achievements. These developments led to an even more nuanced appraisal of film, including recognizing its positive and negative elements, merit in failure, and whether it was too easy to enjoy, as well as its meaning and significance, location in the overall film canon, placement within a category of films, and contribution artistically versus experientially. This growing vocabulary coincided with and was bolstered by the expanding adoption of auteurism, the increased focus upon the naming of the director as creative artist and originator of serious film (Sarris, 1962).

Nevertheless, while changes in the film world, developments in its wider societal context, and the founding of a legitimizing ideology have resulted in the possibility of film to be regarded as elite art, of course not all films are. Bourdieu (1993) proposed that a field of cultural production contains a restricted portion in which artistic merit and prestige is aimed for and a large-scale portion in which financial gain is goal. Although there is now compared to a century ago a more restricted field of film production (e.g., *Lars and the Real Girl*; *4 luni, 3 saptamâni si 2 zile: Le Scaphandre et le papillon*) with an elite discourse to match, for the most part the film industry remains relentlessly oriented to its goal of producing commercial products that achieve

widespread popular appeal (e.g., *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*; *Spider-Man 3*; *American Gangster*), and not all filmmakers aim to produce films with artistic merit. Therefore, a question remains whether the prevailing dichotomy between art and commerce still reflects the emerging complexity of 21st century cultural industries (Heise & Tudor, 2007; Hesmondhalgh, 2006; Prior, 2005; Tudor, 2005), or whether a more nuanced understanding of film criticism is called for. Are contemporary changes within the film industry once again being met by shifts in critical discourse that can be understood as reflecting ongoing developments in the field?

Aesthetic Position and Cultural Goods

The idea that criticism of cultural forms may be regarded in distinctive manners can be traced back to Bourdieu's writings on the field of cultural production (1993) and on taste and audiences (1984). According to Bourdieu, an aesthetic disposition is required to truly appreciate a work of art, a disposition that translates into a detached manner of observing and evaluating the form, of distancing oneself from the artwork and the mundane of everyday life. This disposition entails a focus on form rather than function, a so-called "pure gaze" that rejects all things too human, common, or easy, and refers to the Kantian aesthetic that separates "that which pleases" from "that which gratifies" (Bourdieu, 1984). This stance is distinct from a popular aesthetic in which a cultural good is appreciated in the here-and-now, positioned in everyday life, and remains close to the audience (Bielby & Bielby, 2004; van Venrooij & Schmutz, 2010). The popular aesthetic is defined in relation to its viewer, wherein the distance between audience and cultural good is minimized. Regarded as the "naïve gaze," this aesthetic recognizes continuity between everyday life and art, which implies function over form. Because participation matters in the popular aesthetic, familiarity and easy identification are preferred to formalism, symbolism, and ambiguity. These two dispositions – embodied in the pure and the naïve gazes – represent distinct systems of criteria wielded by different, albeit more or less culturally legitimate, socially defined taste groups.

Although Bourdieu's distinctions provided considerable clarity for differentiating elite from non-elite art and audiences, it is uncertain to what extent his classification reflects the complexity of contemporary cultural consumption and appraisal. Over a decade ago audiences

were found to be more omnivorous than traditionally presumed, particularly among elites (Peterson and Kern, 1996; Hesmondhalgh, 2006), and while the media have expanded coverage of popular culture in order to keep pace with the preferences of the general public (Janssen, 1999; Janssen et al., 2008; 2011), one can only speculate how the film industry's ongoing evolution may have further complicated reviewers' as well as filmgoers' tastes.

At least three trends have had a potential impact on the field of film in recent decades that may be of some consequence to contemporary film criticism. First, while the emergence of a restricted art world for film resulted in more differentiation in the film field's overall output, its commercial large-scale counterpart developed evermore strategically creative ways to satisfy the popular tastes of the general public. This has meant developing production strategies that rely upon narrative sequels of box office hits and adopting proven concepts from other media, as well as devising marketing and distribution strategies designed to appeal to large numbers of moviegoers, all in order to sustain the expensive, blockbuster mode of film production that took over the film industry in the 1970s (Baker & Faulkner, 1991; Bordwell, 2006). However, these developments, which are clearly designed to generate the largest possible audience, do not preclude the potential for artistic originality in popular films; indeed, novelty is just as important to popular art forms as it is to elite ones (Cawelti, 1973).

Second, cultural globalization – “the growing international diffusion, exchange, and intermingling of cultural goods and media products” (Janssen, et al., 2008) – is increasingly noticeable in the film field. Although American dominion of the Western market has been developing steadily ever since WWII, a global event that undermined European film industries and caused some to stagnate (Bordwell & Thompson, 1997; Scott, A.J. 2000),¹ cultural globalization has transformed many national industries into international enterprises, increasing their tendency to resemble if not altogether mirror each other's organizational structure, products, and appeal (Janssen, et al., 2008). As a result, film critics now work in a context of global culture in which locally produced films may resemble products from other parts of the globe while at the same

¹ For a discussion of the U.S. film industry's dominance in the international market see Barthel-Bouchier (2011).

time benefit from potential cross-fertilization of proven artistic elements. This would suggest modes of reviewing that result from the incorporation of traits of international film discourse rather than discourse strictly differentiated by the dichotomy between the art house film and the blockbuster.

Third, the digitization of media has introduced different modes of production as well as different outlets for film work (McDonald & Wasko, 2008), and the resulting democratization of access to media production and consumption has brought with it new challenges to choosing what to watch (Hesmondhalgh, 2002; Keen, 2007). Named blogs, e-commerce websites, and amateur critics now publicly compete with the professional critic in offering recommendations and advice about cultural products, often while lacking requisite expert knowledge (David & Pinch, 2006). While audiences can, of course, still discerningly choose where to seek information about movies, the impact of user-generated content on film criticism has not been examined in depth, although studies into online review systems in other cultural fields have pointed to the pervasiveness of their influence (Chatterjee, 2001; David & Pinch, 2006; Tancer, 2008; Verboord, 2010). Debates about the effect of these changes upon the valuation of arts and culture range from fear of the destruction of Western economy, culture, and values (Keen, 2007) to anticipation of an unprecedented cultural richness (Anderson, 2006).

To what extent these trends may have affected the ways in which contemporary critics appraise film remains unknown. At the very least, Bourdieu's notion of analytical detachment versus immersion in the familiar may be too limited, as was found to be the case in the television industry when industry transformation created an opportunity space for artier television (Bielby, Moloney, & Ngo, 2005). Because of the many changes the film field has seen in recent decades, our study relies upon an exploratory analysis to determine the extent to which film criticism may have become more differentiated in the 21st century. We anticipate finding that the components that comprise contemporary film criticism retain the complex discursive elements found in earlier scholarship but that contemporary film reviewing has also been further complicated by the interests of the multiple parties to and sources of critical opinion on film.

ANALYSIS

Data

Given our interest in cultural globalization generally, and how the U.S. and the U.K. are central contributors to a vigorous linguistically-defined region in the global media marketplace (Bielby and Harrington, 2008), our sample encompassed reviews from four newspapers of record in these two countries to allow for an international comparison of film discourse with the English language as a constant factor. The newspapers we sampled from were *The Times*, *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, and *Los Angeles Times*, which were chosen because they employ professional film critics, have wide-ranging national and international readerships, and, as elite newspapers with middle- to highbrow readerships, play a leading role in present-day discourse on artistic and popular culture.

In order to capture the range of factors that affect contemporary film criticism, we drew our sample from all films released in 2007 rated as PG-13, NC-17, or R by the Motion Picture Association of America that were consecrated through popular, peer, and critical recognition. The twenty highest revenue-generating movies formed the sample of films with popular recognition. The winners and nominees of the most prestigious categories of the BAFTA Awards, British Independent Film Awards, Sundance Festival Awards, and Academy Awards were selected for professional recognition.² The movies with the most critical recognition were made up of films most highly regarded by the London Film Critics Circle, *The Times*, *The Guardian*, the New York Film Critics Circle, *The New York Times*, the Los Angeles Film Critics Association, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the Golden Globe Awards of the Hollywood Foreign Press Association. Our final sample is presented in the Appendix, which lists 50 unique titles for both the U.K. and the U.S. For each film title in each country, we analyzed two reviews from two national newspapers. Because not all

² Prize categories of institutes rewarding professional and critical recognition were, in this order: Best Picture, Best Director, Best Original Screenplay, Best Actor in a Leading Role, Best Actress in a Leading Role, Best Foreign Language Film, Best Adapted Screenplay, Best Actor in a Supporting Role, Best Actress in a Supporting Role, and Best Newcomer.

movies were reviewed in all papers, and because of overlap between film categories, we ended up with a sample of 194 film reviews.

Coding

We conducted an inductive content analysis of all film reviews in our sample using Atlas.ti. Each film review was divided into text segments; in general there were five to six segments per review. Total word count per review varied between nearly 100 and 1300. While the length of reviews did not show significant differences among film types, reviews of films with critical recognition tended to be longest. A total of 1,245 quotations were then examined to determine the topics they addressed. Topics included, for example, discussion of the director's accomplishments or career, the actors' performances or trademarks, interpretation of the film's plot, and the film's special effects or its screenplay.^{3,4} We then merged or split the topics to eliminate redundancies, resulting in 137 separate codes. The analysis of relations among codes led to their distribution into fifteen overarching code groups, or *themes*. All codes belong to only one

³ A ten percent random sample of reviews was coded by an independent third party in order to provide a measure of validity and reliability. Comparing these recoded reviews with our initial coding proved that the codes were well defined.

⁴ Because some films received critical as well as professional recognition, or popular recognition as well as professional recognition, or, in some instances, all three types of validation, we inductively re-evaluated and reassigned overlapping categories in order to execute an unambiguous comparison among review practices. Final assignments were determined by evaluating the overall focus of a review. The overlap between professional and critical recognition was largest. Any combination of types of recognition that included popular recognition was recoded as "popular," combinations including critical recognition were coded as "critical," and in combinations containing "popular" as well as "critical" recognition the eventual category was set to "popular." The latter decision was based on the general prevalence of commercial influences over aesthetic ones in the film field at large.

theme, and all themes addressed a particular question or issue. After establishing the fifteen themes, we then observed for their respective prominence within reviews of popularly, professionally, and critically acclaimed films. Films that received popular recognition comprised 41% (n = 79) of our sample of film reviews, those with critical recognition 38% (n = 74), and those with professional recognition 21% (n = 41). Finally, we factor analyzed the fifteen themes using oblique rotation to ascertain which ones clustered together into fundamental review components, and then, how those essential components were associated with each type of film recognition.

FINDINGS

Review Strategies

Criticism's elements

With our goal being to ascertain the composition of contemporary film criticism our first basic question is: What do critics focus on in their reviews? Overall, film reviews present a balanced evaluation of a film's principal features through positive and negative commentary in which specific details as well as the general picture are considered. Consistent with the conventions of interpretive practitioners whose central activity is to disclose implicit meanings (Bordwell, 1989), our content analysis found that critics attend to that goal through consideration of the following fifteen themes: Actors, Complexity/Depth, Context/Background, Credibility, Director, Film as product, Film content, Film experience, Film material, Formal/Filmic elements, Interpretation, Mood, Novelty, Position in art/entertainment, and Position in film context/canon. When discussing an aspect, critics generally drew upon a readily observable illustration within a film and couched its discussion syntactically in parenthetical phrases, visual adjectives that were combined with an active voice, and other rhetorical strategies in order to analytically elevate description to meaning, significance, and interpretation. For example, the codes assembled for the theme of Credibility contain information with regard to the believability of a film's plot and characters. Credibility does not necessarily mean that the film's storylines could have come to

pass in real life and are therefore believable, but points toward the believability of the film in itself, within its suspension of disbelief: Can the audience buy into the story? Accordingly, the plot receives the most attention, as was illustrated in the *Los Angeles Times* review of *The Bourne Ultimatum*, a film that achieved popular recognition in both countries as well as critical recognition in the UK:

In other words, the series has always felt remarkably true-to-life for something as defiantly far-fetched. But as long as Damon keeps his focused intelligence and Greengrass continues to stay away from flaming CGI fireballs, Bourne will be able to continue to walk away unscathed from car crashes that could pulverize a rhino at half the speed with his credibility intact. They've earned it (Chocano, 2007).

Evidence of a direct effect of an expanded opportunity space for film production and consumption – such as the influence of the wider social context in which a film was made, creative access brought about by changing production technology, or the impact of Hollywood's hypercompetitive business climate – was not prominently reflected in our data. In fact, evidence of such considerations seldom occurred even as the film industry has become increasingly attentive to the tastes of expanding ethnic audiences (McClintock, 2011), the appeal of evermore sophisticated graphic effects (Fritz, 2010), and the relevance of distribution strategies designed to grab public attention (Horn, 2011). Thus, it would appear that, as of now, such matters are still regarded by critics as more relevant to the marketing of a finished product than as aspects pertinent to the creative vision that went into a film. Instead, critics remain primarily focused upon appraising the integrity of a film's narrative and its creative execution overall, as well as the artistic contributions of individual project members, and they pay less attention to the relevance of factors that shape the selection of projects, even as these factors play an increasing role in film production. We return to a discussion of this finding in greater detail below.

Following identification of the corpus of themes that critics focus on, we were interested in how individual themes vary across reviews of films that received the three types of recognition – popular, professional, and critical – so we calculated the distribution of the use of each theme within and across this triad. These results, which are reported as percentages in Table 1, reveal that eight of the fifteen themes do not vary much in application across type of recognition; that is,

they were equally important to reviewers regardless of a film's potential recognition. These consistently appearing themes are: Actors, Complexity/Depth, Credibility, Film content, Film experience, Mood, Novelty, and Position in film context. The remaining seven themes -- Context/Background, Director, Film as product, Film material, Formal elements, Interpretation, Position in art/entertainment -- show modest to significant variation across the types of recognition. Below, we describe, first, some of the consistently deployed themes to illustrate how their use regularizes a foundation for interpretation within contemporary film criticism, followed by a discussion of those that show variation across types of recognition. Taken together, these findings reveal how the types of film a critic addresses -- with our concern being those types merited by different consecrating constituencies -- affects the content of criticism in systematic ways.⁵

(Insert Table 1 here)

Consistencies in use of themes. We randomly selected three examples from among the eight consistently used themes in order to illustrate the topics that register as equally important to critics in their reviewing practices regardless of the type of film discussed. One central theme is Actors, who are an important box-office draw. The credibility of their characterizations, which establishes resonance with audiences, as well as assessment of an actor's particular skills or talents, holds a key position in film criticism, as we see in this excerpt from a *Guardian* review of *There Will Be Blood*:

When Day-Lewis gives his first speech, a quiet, faintly impatient peroration to a crowd of smallholders on why they should trust him as a real "oil man," it is mesmeric for no reason other than the actor's natural charismatic presence. Day-Lewis's virtuoso displays of technique, occasionally denounced as hamminess, are for me all the more superbly enjoyable for being so rare in an age of naturalism. He has also found a remarkable walk:

⁵ All fifteen themes are described and examples are provided in an Appendix that is available upon request from the authors.

a slow purposeful scuttle, bow-legged. Maybe it's because of a terrible fall we saw in the first reel – or perhaps, well, it's just a great actor's walk (Bradshaw, 2008a).

Another consistently used theme is Complexity/Depth, which addresses the extent to which the writer or director has explored and thought through the film's material, and it raises questions about whether the filmmaker has an eye for narrative contradictions, consequences, and complications. Films that present events with less complexity than the plot or characters call for are criticized for not doing so, as seen in this *New York Times* review of *Into the Wild*:

“If you want something in life, reach out and grab it,” Chris says to Tracy (Kristen Stewart), a teenage girl who develops a crush on him, collapsing Self-Reliance into something like an advertising slogan. But the movie's theme, thankfully, is not so simple or so easily summed up in words. [...] *Into the Wild* is, on the contrary, alive to the mysteries and difficulties of experience in a way that very few recent American movies have been (Scott, A.O., 2007).

A final example reveals that reviewers consistently assign films a comparative location in the existing film field, which is captured by the theme of Position in film context/canon. Placement occurs on various dimensions that include other films by the same director, within a genre, and within the overall film canon, and it displays the critic's knowledge of the medium of film and its history. Positioning a film within the canon signals to the audience what to expect, as is demonstrated in this review of *Notes on a Scandal*:

With some audacity, the spirits of both Hitchcock and Nabokov are invoked in this delectable adaptation of Zoe Heller's Booker-shortlisted novel (Bradshaw, 2007a).

Among the eight consistently used themes identified by our content analysis, there were two others, Mood and Film experience, that registered as equally important to reviewers but upon closer inspection revealed some subtle differences in their use across the three types of recognition, with each showing up as more prevalent in films that ultimately received critical recognition. Mood – the tone of voice in which a story is told – may be described with terms as simple as “funny” or “full of suspense” or with more interpretative and abstract ones such as “brooding,” “haunting” or “unassuming,” and it is mostly viewed as determined by the director. Mood is understood as a film's particular “feel,” and critics expect just the right balance between

drama and emotion. In contrast, the theme of Film experience – the emotional effects of viewing a film – contributes to understanding the significance and depth of a film’s narrative – its cultural resonance. Although it, like the others discussed so far, is used consistently across all three kinds of recognition a film may receive, we had anticipated that this theme would belong almost exclusively to the discourse of popular recognition given the close relationship between emotional experience, emotional authenticity, and popular culture (Bielby and Bielby, 2004). But that was not the case, and just as interesting is that it is least pronounced in reviews of films that were rewarded by industry peers. We view this particular pattern of variation as suggesting a different level of attention to critics’ search for the elements that contribute to a film’s implicit meanings in criticism attended to by industry peers.

Differences in use of themes. In contrast to the themes that were used consistently across film recognition categories, the findings reported in Table 1 show that three among the remaining seven revealed highly statistically significant differences in use by critics: Film material, Interpretation, and Position in art/entertainment. Taken together, these three themes address a film’s quality and significance, and they were most heavily used in reviews of films that received critical recognition. When considered as a group, these themes reveal the important role film critics play not only as arbiters and interpreters of culture but their important constitutive role in its construction. We discuss each of these three themes in turn.

The first, Film material, focused attention on scripts or screenplays and adaptations of existing material; screenwriters are often named, and attention gets paid to their accomplished reputations and oeuvres, as seen in the following example, a *Guardian* review of *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*:

As for Schnabel, it is an exhilarating breakthrough, and for screenwriter Ronald Harwood the movie is another triumph of responsive, creative intelligence (Bradshaw, 2008b).

The second theme, Interpretation, which was pronounced in reviews of films with professional as well as critical recognition, reveals the meanings the reviewer uncovers, which can be presented as a coherent whole or as separate aspects. Developing skill with this particular theme figures centrally in scholarly training on film criticism. We find an example of its use in the *Los Angeles Times* review on 4 luni, 3 saptamâni si 2 zile:

Set in 1987 in the last days of the Ceausescu dictatorship [...], the film demonstrates with off-handed power how complete a corrupt society can dehumanize its citizens and almost destroy those trapped in it (Turan, 2007).

The third theme, Position in art/entertainment, captures the characteristics of and opposition between artistic and popular film, and it appears most often in critically rewarded movies and to a lesser extent in professionally recognized ones. This theme serves to insulate critics' favorites from the lower ranks of entertainment through testimonies of artfulness and use of intellectual terminology:

Syndromes and a Century is a poem on screen: a film of ideas and visual tropes that upends conventional narrative expectations, not out of a simple desire to disconcert but to break through the carapace of normality, to give us the knight's-move away from reality that the Russian formalists said was the prerogative of art (Bradshaw, 2007b).

More modestly statistically significant differences occurred in the remaining themes – Director, Formal elements, Film as product, and Context/Background. Not unexpectedly, the Director is considerably more prominently featured in reviews of films that received critical acclaim, as the emphasis on auteurism in film would predict. Discussion often focuses on a director's career path, unique trademarks, and accomplishments in the film under review, and the film is often described as the director's property or accomplishment, signified by use of possessive pronouns. Formal elements, which also figured prominently in reviews of critically acclaimed films, encompassed appraisal of a film's technical elements, and included attention to casting, costume design, dialogue, editing, form, photography, runtime, score, special effects, and the like. A most important aspect of this theme is plot development, because, as has already noted, critics pay a lot of attention to the ways stories are told.

Reviews of popular, ultimately commercially successful films tend to address Film as a product that generates revenue. Comments within this theme point toward budgets, franchises, box office results, brands, distribution, product placement, and intended audiences. Context/Background contains commentary that refers to the film field or wider society in which the film was made. Mostly, these are remarks on the film industry at large, today or in the past. The workings of Hollywood are discussed, as are the response to a film in society or the private

lives of actors or directors. This is where direct evidence of the expanded opportunity space for film production and consumption appears, but as was noted earlier, the codes that comprise it did not occur very often in reviews.

Critics' essentials

With fifteen different themes to account for, we conducted a factor analysis to extract the essential components of film criticism that would more accessibly reveal the focus of contemporary critics. This analysis revealed four influential factors, shown in Table 2. Four of the fifteen themes loaded heavily onto Factor 1, which we named “Auteurism”: Director, Film content, Interpretation, and Mood. This factor focuses on the universe of the director as creative visionary. The second factor, named “Experience,” includes the themes of Film experience, Novelty, and Position in art/entertainment; these touch upon aspects of what one experiences while watching a film, either literally, in relation to other film experiences, or as something typical of art or entertainment more generally. Three themes loaded into Factor 3, which we dubbed “Processes”: Actors, Film material, and Formal elements. These themes mostly consider creative processes that went into making a film and the manner in which the storylines, characters, or look of the movie came about. The last factor, which we dubbed “Context,” contains the themes Context/Background, Credibility, Film as product, and Position in film context; this factor points to considerations that link a film to contexts both within and beyond the film world, either as a commodity or insofar as the film’s content is concerned. When taken together, these four factors reveal the dominant substantive considerations contemporary film critics as a whole engage in their work.

(Insert Table 2 here)

Given our interest in the relationship of contemporary criticism to popular culture and communication, we then analyzed the extent to which these four factors vary across reviews of films ultimately consecrated by popular, professional, and critical constituencies. The results,

which are reported in Table 3, reveal that there was systematic variation in their use across the three different types of recognition – a finding that is consistent with the results reported above – but they also reveal that their use varies more in degree than kind. In short, all four factors were present regardless of the kind of recognition a film ultimately received, but their prevalence depended on the particular constituency that engaged their work.

For example, whereas comments related to Auteurism are encountered in reviews of all kinds, this factor proved to be significantly more prominent in reviews of films that received critical recognition. Specifically, criticism that focuses on the director as creative visionary and the interpretation of the universe he or she presents is used the least in reviews of popular films, more so in those of professional prizewinners, and most in reviews of films that achieve critical acclaim.⁶ At the same time, the distribution of the factor Experience, which consists of critical appraisal of the quality of the emotional engagement of a film, is also significantly more pronounced in reviews of films with critical recognition.⁷ While one might have expected this component to be more consistently used in reviews of films that call for a naïve gaze or popular aesthetic, instead it is deployed to a large extent in reviews of all film types but mostly in those that are critically acclaimed; this is an important finding that reveals that contemporary film criticism incorporates aesthetic considerations that draw from popular interests as well elite ones.

⁶ Results of the analysis of variance for Auteurism are $F(11,9) = 13.55, p = <.001$. Post hoc analyses using the Games-Howell criterion to assess the difference in use between critical recognition and the other two forms found the greatest difference to lie between critical and popularly recognized films ($p = <.001$) and a marginal difference to exist between critical and professional ones ($p = <.10$). There was no significant difference in use of the factor between professionally and popularly recognized films.

⁷ Results of the analysis of variance for Experience are $F(4,7) = 9.06, p = <.001$. Post hoc analyses found the greatest difference to lie between critical and professionally recognized films ($p = <.001$), and a smaller difference to exist between critical and popular ones ($p = <.01$). There was no significant difference in use of the factor between professionally and popularly recognized films.

The factor of Processes shows slightly significant variation among review types but is stronger in reviews of films with both popular and critical recognition and less so in those that achieve professional awards.⁸ This finding also reveals the complexity of contemporary film criticism, in which the same criteria are applied differentially to films that are differently valued. Finally, the finding of the statistically significant difference in the use of Context can be accounted for by the greater likelihood of this component appearing in reviews of films that receive popular recognition.⁹ That is, the anticipated shift in contemporary criticism to include reflection on contexts of production – the social and industrial milieux – shows up, but (still) mostly in reviews of films that are granted popular recognition. In sum, reviews of various kinds of film reveal similar approaches to criticism but those of movies that receive popular and critical recognition appear to share particular elements to a stronger degree, whereas those of films with professional recognition occupy an intermediate position.

(Insert Table 3 here)

CONCLUSION

We aimed to clarify the criteria that contemporary film critics deploy to review films. Relying upon seminal work on how the transformation of film as a product of mass appeal to one

⁸ Results of the analysis of variance for Processes are $F(11,3) = 4.30, p = <.05$. Post hoc analyses found the only difference in the use of this factor to lie between critical and professional recognition.

⁹ Results for the analysis of variance for Context are $F(6,3) = 7.89, p = <.001$. Post hoc analyses found the greatest difference to lie between professionally and popularly recognized films ($p = <.001$), and a smaller difference to exist between critical and popular ones ($p = <.05$). There was no significant difference in the use of the factor between critically and professionally recognized films.

that is an art form was aided by the evolution of film criticism though its expanded discursive complexity, we went beyond that foundational scholarship to understand how recent changes in the film industry have affected contemporary film criticism. To encompass the varied parties of publics and peers that now comprise the critical community alongside professional critics, we identified the top films in three established categories of film recognition – films that have achieved top ranking at the box office, those that are recognized as recipients of top honors in industry awards, and those that achieve the most critical acclaim. We found that reviews consist of four essential components, Auteurism, Experience, Processes, and Context, and that while all four are present in reviews of films that garner different kinds of recognition, we also found that the components are utilized to different degrees, depending on the kind of recognition a film ultimately receives. Critically acclaimed films tend to be appraised with a strong emphasis on auteurism as well as with an eye for the culturally meaningful viewing experience. The finding that reviews of films that end up receiving popular and critical acclaim share many of the same substantive considerations is equally interesting, because it reveals that film criticism is not bound by a strictly detached or pure gaze even as film has become a more elite art form, and similarly, that the appraisal of films that ultimately achieve popular recognition is not constrained by a solely naïve aesthetic. The intermediate position of criticism of films that achieved professional recognition points to the possibility of less distinctive properties of such reviews, but we also note that the fewer number of reviews in this category may have made their distinctiveness more difficult to discern. Further research should provide greater clarity on this matter.

Our interest in conducting this exploratory research was motivated by our broader concern about the ways in which scholars rely upon cultural classification schemes alongside other social constructions that, when left unexamined intensify, if not outright reify social distinctions that may be only minimally present, or that may have been more extensive at some point but have begun to shift, transform, or collapse in ways that should be taken into account in order to reach a deeper understanding of contemporary cultural classification. Given the now recognized complexity in cultural consumption reported over a decade ago (Peterson and Kern, 1996), which exists alongside the impact of more recent shifts in the changing production and cultural contexts of film making, the question remains to what extent cultural arbiters like film

critics have begun to expand the scope of their interpretative focus in light of these changes. Critics are cultural intermediaries who contribute in important ways to public discourse about popular culture, and in so doing continue to play an important role in popular communication about socially influential media like film. While the role of film critics, which is to ascertain film's "implicit and symptomatic meanings" (Bordwell, 1989, p. 17; A.O. Scott, 2010), has not changed, the substance and form of their criticism is bound to shift if they are to continue to reach the audiences they aim to speak to.

Appendix: Sample

Film sample - United States

Popular recognition	Critical recognition	Professional recognition
1. <i>Spider-Man 3</i>	1. <i>No Country for Old Men</i>	1. <i>Padre Nuestro</i>
2. <i>Transformers</i>	2. <i>There Will Be Blood</i>	2. <i>Rocket Science</i>
3. <i>Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End</i>	3. <i>Away From Her</i>	3. <i>Grace is Gone</i>
4. <i>Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix</i>	4. <i>Das Leben der Anderen (The Lives of Others)</i>	4. <i>Teeth</i>
5. <i>I Am Legend</i>	5. <i>Gone Baby Gone</i>	5. <i>Four Sheets to the Wind</i>
6. <i>The Bourne Ultimatum</i>	6. <i>The Savages</i>	6. <i>No Country for Old Men</i>
7. <i>300</i>	7. <i>La Vie en Rose</i>	7. <i>Juno</i>
8. <i>Wild Hogs</i>	8. <i>4 luni, 3 saptamâni si 2 zile (4 Months, 3 Weeks, and 2 Days)</i>	8. <i>There Will Be Blood</i>
9. <i>Knocked Up</i>	9. <i>Before the Devil Knows You're Dead</i>	9. <i>La Vie en Rose</i>
10. <i>Juno</i>	10. <i>Atonement</i>	10. <i>Die Fälscher (The Counterfeiters)</i>
11. <i>Rush Hour 3</i>	11. <i>Le Scaphandre et le papillon (The Diving Bell and the Butterfly)</i>	11. <i>Michael Clayton</i>
12. <i>Live Free or Die Hard</i>	12. <i>Once</i>	12. <i>Atonement</i>
13. <i>American Gangster</i>	13. <i>Into the Wild</i>	13. <i>Le Scaphandre et le papillon (The Diving Bell and the Butterfly)</i>
14. <i>Superbad</i>	14. <i>Lady Chatterley</i>	14. <i>Lars and the Real Girl</i>
15. <i>I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry</i>	15. <i>Zodiac</i>	15. <i>The Savages</i>
16. <i>Blades of Glory</i>	16. <i>Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street</i>	16. <i>Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street</i>
17. <i>Ocean's Thirteen</i>	17. <i>I'm Not There</i>	17. <i>In the Valley of Elah</i>

18. <i>Ghost Rider</i>	18. <i>Starting Out in the Evening</i>	18. <i>Eastern Promises</i>
19. <i>Norbit</i>	19. <i>Juventude Em Marcha</i> (<i>Colossal Youth</i>)	19. <i>Elizabeth: The Golden Age</i>
20. <i>The Bucket List</i>	20. <i>Lars and the Real Girl</i>	20. <i>Away From Her</i>

Film sample - United Kingdom

Popular recognition	Critical recognition	Professional recognition
1. <i>Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix</i>	1. <i>No Country for Old Men</i>	1. <i>This is England</i>
2. <i>Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End</i>	2. <i>There Will Be Blood</i>	2. <i>Atonement</i>
3. <i>Spider-Man 3</i>	3. <i>Das Leben der Anderen</i> (<i>The Lives of Others</i>)	3. <i>No Country for Old Men</i>
4. <i>The Golden Compass</i>	4. <i>The Bourne Ultimatum</i>	4. <i>Juno</i>
5. <i>I Am Legend</i>	5. <i>La Vie en Rose</i>	5. <i>There Will Be Blood</i>
6. <i>The Bourne Ultimatum</i>	6. <i>Atonement</i>	6. <i>La Vie en Rose</i>
7. <i>Transformers</i>	7. <i>Away From Her</i>	7. <i>Das Leben der Anderen</i> (<i>The Lives of Others</i>)
8. <i>Hot Fuzz</i>	8. <i>Michael Clayton</i>	8. <i>Le Scaphandre et le papillon</i> (<i>The Diving Bell and the Butterfly</i>)
9. <i>Stardust</i>	9. <i>Control</i>	9. <i>Michael Clayton</i>
10. <i>Live Free or Die Hard</i>	10. <i>Sang sattawat</i> (<i>Syndromes and a Century</i>)	10. <i>Control</i>
11. <i>300</i>	11. <i>Stellet licht</i> (<i>Silent Light</i>)	11. <i>Notes on a Scandal</i>
12. <i>Ocean's Thirteen</i>	12. <i>Zodiac</i>	12. <i>Eastern Promises</i>
13. <i>St. Trinian's</i>	13. <i>Iklimler</i> (<i>Climates</i>)	13. <i>Die Fälscher</i> (<i>The Counterfeiters</i>)
14. <i>Atonement</i>	14. <i>Inland Empire</i>	14. <i>Lars and the Real Girl</i>
15. <i>Run Fatboy Run</i>	15. <i>Apocalypto</i>	15. <i>The Savages</i>
16. <i>P.S. I Love You</i>	16. <i>The Painted Veil</i>	16. <i>Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street</i>
17. <i>Rush Hour 3</i>	17. <i>4 luni, 3 saptamâni si 2 zile</i> (<i>4 Months, 3 Weeks, and 2 Days</i>)	17. <i>In the Valley of Elah</i>

18. <i>American Gangster</i>	18. <i>Babel</i>	18. <i>Elizabeth: The Golden Age</i>
19. <i>The Pursuit of Happyness</i>	19. <i>A fost sau n-a fost?</i> (12:08 <i>East of Bucharest</i>)	19. <i>Away From Her</i>
20. <i>Music and Lyrics</i>	20. <i>Letters from Iwo Jima</i>	20. <i>Beaufort</i>

Table 1. Distribution of use of themes across all 194 reviews as percentages by type of film recognition

Theme	Popular recognition	Professional recognition	Critical recognition	N	X ²
Actors					ns
0	1	2	4	5	
1-5	56	68	53	111	
6+	43	30	43	78	
Complexity/Depth					ns
0	38	41	36	74	
1-5	62	59	61	118	
6+	-	-	3	2	
Context/Background					*
0	35	61	39	82	
1-5	64	38	55	106	
6+	1	1	6	6	
Credibility					ns
0	49	58	61	108	
1-5	51	42	39	86	
6+	-	-	-	-	
Director					*
0	19	20	8	29	
1-5	75	63	68	135	
6+	6	17	24	30	
Film as product					**
0	30	61	54	89	
1-5	66	39	45	101	
6+	4	-	1	4	
Film content					ns
0	6	2	-	6	
1-5	82	81	80	157	
6+	12	17	20	31	

Film experience					ns
0	14	27	7	27	
1-5	84	71	91	162	
6+	2	2	2	5	
Film material					***
0	22	22	21	42	
1-5	76	73	53	129	
6+	2	5	26	23	
Formal elements					*
0	11	20	5	21	
1-5	66	63	57	120	
6+	23	17	38	53	
Interpretation					***
0	33	24	9	43	
1-5	65	51	57	114	
6+	2	25	34	37	
Mood					ns
0	19	20	9	30	
1-5	79	80	81	155	
6+	2	-	10	9	
Novelty					ns
0	35	39	32	68	
1-5	65	61	65	124	
6+	-	-	3	2	
Position in art/entertainment					***
0	52	34	20	70	
1-5	48	66	77	122	
6+	-	-	3	2	
Position in film context					ns

0	5	10	13	18	
1-5	79	80	76	151	
6+	16	10	11	25	

*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001; ns: not significant (two-tailed chi-square tests).

Table 2. Obliquely rotated component loadings for fifteen themes (N=194)

	Auteurism	Experience	Processes	Context
Component	1	2	3	4
Actors	.283	.065	.747	.428
Complexity	.416	.246	.426	.273
Context/Background	.149	.477	.115	.683
Credibility	.089	-.094	.262	.653
Director	.648	.547	.445	.257
Film as product	-.366	.468	.164	.514
Film content	.596	.050	.534	.305
Film experience	.214	.672	.404	.154
Film material	.188	.157	.774	.123
Formal elements	.216	.575	.660	.243
Interpretation film	.837	.292	.196	.233
Mood	.673	.411	.351	.272
Novelty	.206	.638	.107	.245
Position art/entertainment	.448	.671	.151	.240
Position film context	.312	.299	.232	.686
Eigenvalues	4.725	1.451	1.283	1.021
Percentage of total variance	31.501	9.677	8.550	6.805

Table 3. Percentages of reviews linked to factors by type of film recognition

	Popular recognition	Critical recognition	Professional recognition	N	χ^2
Auteurism					***
0	4	-	-	3	
1-5	20	12	27	36	
6-10	39	19	17	52	
11-15	24	19	20	41	
16 <	13	50	37	62	
Experience					ns
0	3	1	5	5	
1-5	70	51	73	123	
6-10	21	38	20	54	
11-15	5	8	2	11	
16 <	-	1	-	1	
Processes					**
0	-	-	2	1	
1-5	17	18	24	36	
6-10	29	28	39	60	
11-15	35	15	20	47	
16 <	19	39	15	50	
Context					**
0	-	8	5	8	
1-5	39	45	66	91	
6-10	35	34	27	64	
11-15	19	12	-	24	
16 <	6	1	2	7	

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$; ns: not significant (two-tailed chi-square tests).

References

- Allen, M., & Lincoln, A. (2004). Critical Discourse and the Cultural Consecration of American Films. *Social Forces*, 82(3), 871-894.
- Anderson, C. (2006). *The Long Tail. How Endless Choice is Creating Unlimited Demand*. London: Random House Business Books.
- Baker, W. & Faulkner, R. (1991). Role as Resource in the Hollywood Film Industry. *The American Journal of Sociology*, 97(2), 279-309.
- Barthel-Bouchier, D. (2011). Exportability of Films in a Globalizing Market: The Intersection of Nation and Genre. *Cultural Sociology*, published online June 2011. 1-17.
- Baumann, S. (2001). Intellectualization and Art World Development: Film in the United States. *American Sociological Review*, 66, 404-426.
- Baumann, S. (2007). *Hollywood Highbrow: From Entertainment to Art*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Bielby, D. & Bielby, W. (2004). Audience aesthetics and popular culture. In R. Friedland & J. Mohr (Eds), *Matters of Culture: Cultural Sociology in Practice* (295-317). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Bielby, D. & Harrington, C.L. (2008). *Global TV: Exporting television and culture in the world market*. New York: NYU Press.
- Bielby, D., Moloney, M., & Ngo, B. (2005). Aesthetics of Television Criticism: Mapping Critics' Reviews in an Era of Industry Transformation. In C. Jones & P. Thornton (Eds), *Transformation in Cultural Industries* (1-43). Oxford, UK: Elsevier Ltd.
- Bordwell, D. (2006). *The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Bordwell, D. (1989). *Making meaning: Inference and rhetoric in the interpretation of cinema*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Bordwell, D. & Thompson, K. (1997). *Film Art: An Introduction*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: a social critique of the judgment of taste*. London: Routledge.

- Bourdieu, P. (1993). *The Field of Cultural Production*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Chatterjee, P. (2001). Online Reviews: Do Consumers Use Them? Paper presented at the Association for Consumer Research, Provo, UT.
- Cawelti, J. (1973). The concept of formula in the study of popular literature. In R. Browne (Ed), *Popular Culture and the Expanding Consciousness* (109-119). New York: Wiley.
- David, S. & Pinch, T. (2006). Six Degrees of Reputation: The Use and Abuse of Online Review and Recommendation Systems. *First Monday*, 6.
- De Vany, A. and Lee, C. (2001). Quality signals in information cascades and the dynamics of the distribution of motion picture box office revenues. *Journal of Economic Dynamics & Control*, 25, 593 - 614.
- English, J. (2005). *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Fritz, B. (2010). 3-D proves its value. *Los Angeles Times*, December 28, B1-3.
- Heise, T. & Tudor, A. (2007). Constructing (Film) Art: Bourdieu's Field Model in a Comparative Context. *Cultural Sociology*, 1(2), 165-187.
- Hesmondhalgh, D. (2002). *The Cultural Industries*. London, Sage Publications Ltd.
- Hesmondhalgh, D. (2006). Bourdieu, the media and cultural industries. *Media, Culture and Society*, 28, 211-231.
- Horn, J. (2011). Finding just the right platform. *Los Angeles Times*, January 6, D1-D4.
- Janssen, S. (1999). Art journalism and cultural change: The coverage of the arts in Dutch newspapers 1965-1990. *Poetics*, 26(5), 329-348.
- Janssen, S., Kuipers, G., & Verboord, M. (2008). Cultural Globalization and Art Journalism. The International Orientation of Arts and Culture Coverage in American, Dutch, French, and German Newspapers, 1955-2005. *American Sociological Review*, 73(5), 719-740.
- Janssen, S., Kuipers, G., & Verboord, M. (2011). Comparing Cultural Classification. High and Popular Arts in European and U.S. Elite Newspapers, 1955-2005. *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie*, 63 (Sonderheft 51).

- Keen, A. (2007). *The Cult of the Amateur. How Blogs, MySpace, YouTube, and the Rest of Today's User-generated Media are Destroying Our Economy, Our Culture, and Our Values*. New York: Doubleday.
- McDonald, P. & Wasko, J. (2008). *The contemporary Hollywood film industry*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publicaitons.
- McClintock, P. (2011). The Hispanic effect. *The Hollywood Reporter*, January 26, 36-37.
- Peterson, R. & Kern, R. (1996). Changing Highbrow Taste: From Snob to Omnivore. *American Sociological Review*, 61(5), 900-907.
- Prior, N. (2005). A question of perception: Bourdieu, art and the postmodern. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 56(1), 123-139.
- Sarris, A. (1962). Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962. *Film Culture*, 27(1).
- Scott, A.J. (2000). French Cinema. Economy, Policy and Place in the Making of a Cultural-Products Industry. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 17(1), 1-38.
- Scott, A.O. (2010). A Critic's Place, Thumb and All. *The New York Times*, March 31, obtained at <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/04/movies/04scott.html>
- Tancer, B. (2008). *Click: What We Do Online and Why it Matters*. UK: Harper Collins Publ.
- Tudor, A. (2005). The Rise and Fall of the Art (House) Movie. In D. Inglis & J. Hughson (Eds), *The Sociology of Art: Ways of Seeing* (125-138). Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- van Venrooij, A., & Schmutz, V. (2010). The evaluation of popular music in the United States, Germany and the Netherlands. *Cultural Sociology*, 4(3), 395-421.
- Verboord, M. (2010). The Legitimacy of Book Critics in the Age of the Internet and Omnivorousness: Expert Critics, Internet Critics and Peer Critics in Flanders and the Netherlands. *European Sociological Review*, 26(6), 623-637.
- Wasko, J. (2001). *Understanding Disney : the manufacture of fantasy*. Cambridge, MA: Polity Press

Source material

- Bradshaw, P. (2007a). Blackboard jungle. *The Guardian*, February 2.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2007/feb/02/drama.periodandhistorical>

Bradshaw, P. (2007b). Bewitched, bothered and bewildered. *The Guardian*, September 21.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2007/sep/21/worldcinema.drama?INTCMP=ILCNETTXT348>

7

Bradshaw, P. (2008a). Black magic: Paul Thomas Anderson's strange and potent epic about oil and greed pushes at the boundaries of cinema. *The Guardian*, February 8.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2008/feb/08/paulthomasanderson.drama>

Bradshaw, P. (2008b). Tissue, please. *The Guardian*, February 8.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2008/feb/08/worldcinema.drama?INTCMP=ILCNETTXT34>

87

Chocano, C. (2007). Engaging *Bourne Ultimatum* sets a frantic pace. *Los Angeles Times*, August 3.

<http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/la-et-bourne3aug03,0,194441.story>

Scott, A.O. (2007). Following His Trail to Danger and Joy. *The New York Times*, September 21.

<http://movies.nytimes.com/2007/09/21/movies/21wild.html>

Turan, K. (2007). "4 Months": raw but rewarding. *Los Angeles Times*, December 21.

<http://articles.latimes.com/2007/dec/21/entertainment/et-4Months21>