

## Claremont Colleges Scholarship @ Claremont

---

CMC Senior Theses

CMC Student Scholarship

---

2018

# 21st Century Film Criticism: The Evolution of Film Criticism from Professional Intellectual Analysis to a Democratic Phenomenon

Asher Weiss

---

### Recommended Citation

Weiss, Asher, "21st Century Film Criticism: The Evolution of Film Criticism from Professional Intellectual Analysis to a Democratic Phenomenon" (2018). *CMC Senior Theses*. 1910.  
[http://scholarship.claremont.edu/cmc\\_theses/1910](http://scholarship.claremont.edu/cmc_theses/1910)

This Open Access Senior Thesis is brought to you by Scholarship@Claremont. It has been accepted for inclusion in this collection by an authorized administrator. For more information, please contact [scholarship@cuc.claremont.edu](mailto:scholarship@cuc.claremont.edu).

Claremont McKenna College

21<sup>st</sup> Century Film Criticism:  
The Evolution of Film Criticism from Professional  
Intellectual Analysis to a Democratic Phenomenon

Submitted to  
Professor James Morrison

By  
Asher Weiss

For  
Senior Thesis  
Spring 2018  
April 23, 2018

“In the arts, the critic is the only independent source of information. The rest is advertising.” – Pauline Kael

“Good films by real filmmakers aren’t made to be decoded, consumed or instantly comprehended.” – Martin Scorsese

“Firms and aggregators have set a tone that is hostile to serious filmmakers, suggesting that they have conditioned viewers to be less interested in complex offerings.”  
– Martin Scorsese

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my reader, Professor James Morrison for his continued mentorship and support over the last four years which has greatly improved my film knowledge and writing. Thank you Professor Morrison, for always challenging me to look at films in new ways and encouraging me to express my true opinions.

I would also like to thank the late Arden Reed, a longtime Art History professor at Pomona College. We lost Professor Reed this past year, but his legacy as a teacher, mentor, and friend lives on. During my time in Claremont, I had the opportunity to take *Art and Time* with Professor Reed, which completely changed my outlook on art and film. I will always be grateful to him for inspiring me and challenging me to think about art in new ways.

Finally, I would like to thank my parents for their continuous support. Without them, I never could have come to my dream school Claremont McKenna and studied a subject I have always loved, film. I love you both very much and thank you for being such amazing parents and friends.

## Table of Contents

|  |           |
|--|-----------|
| <i>Introduction</i> .....  | <b>5</b>  |
| <i>Chapter 1 – The King: Rotten Tomatoes</i> .....                               | <b>17</b> |
| Origins and Methodology .....  | <b>17</b> |
| Acquisitions and Their Significance .....  | <b>21</b> |
| Influence and Studios Fight Back .....   | <b>23</b> |
| The Benefits of Aggregation and Increased Access .....                           | <b>25</b> |
| The Oversimplification of Film and Other Flaws .....                             | <b>29</b> |
| Case Studies .....   | <b>34</b> |
| <i>Chapter 2 – The Challengers: Other Players in Online Film Criticism</i> ..... | <b>42</b> |
| IMDb – The People Have Spoken .....  | <b>43</b> |
| Metacritic .....   | <b>55</b> |
| Other Film Criticism Sites.....  | <b>60</b> |
| The Impact of Social Media on Film Criticism .....                               | <b>61</b> |
| <i>Conclusion</i> .....  | <b>66</b> |
| <i>Works Cited</i> .....   | <b>73</b> |

## Abstract

Film criticism has changed since its inception and will continue to change moving forward. The evolution of film criticism has largely been a story of the shift from an elite field of intellectual exploration by a few knowledgeable experts to a democratic phenomenon where expert analysis is aggregated and averaged, and the lines are blurred between true expertise and the random opinions of the masses. This paper will address the transition from the birth of film criticism to its popularization through the 90s, to what it has become today. By exploring the nature of film criticism historically and reviewing the key elements of its growth from Victorian times through its emergence as an established field in the 1930s, 40s and 50s and its heyday in the 60s and 70s, we can understand the context of its evolution. This will provide a perspective to view today's approach to film criticism with a clearer eye and a thorough analysis of film criticism in the digital age. It will demonstrate that more is not always a good thing, and the democratization of film criticism has not necessarily been all good.

## Introduction

Since the beginning of film, there has been film criticism. This paper will address the transition from the birth of film criticism to its popularization through the 90s, to what it has become today. By exploring the nature of film criticism historically and reviewing the key elements of its growth from Victorian times through its emergence as an established field in the 1930s, 40s and 50s and its heyday in the 60s and 70s, we can understand the context of its evolution. This will provide a perspective to view today's approach to film criticism with a clearer eye and a thorough analysis of film criticism in the digital age.

The evolution of film criticism has largely been a story of the shift from an elite field of intellectual exploration by a few knowledgeable experts to a democratic phenomenon where expert analysis is aggregated and averaged, and the lines are blurred between true expertise and the random opinions of the masses. Much of the intellectual depth and wisdom of expert film criticism has been lost in the digital age, as technology continues its unrelenting march to aggregate content and crowdsource opinions. Thoughtful consideration, contextual discussion and intellectual discourse has given way to the desire to obtain more opinions from more sources in record time and to simplify complex analysis into quick and easy "thumbs up or thumbs down" assessments of the value of films.

This paper will review how film criticism has evolved to its present form and review the critical impact of the digital age on the fundamental nature and state of criticism. It will demonstrate that more is not always a good thing, and the democratization of film criticism has not necessarily been all good. Today there is more

accessibility to more opinions from more critics, but that does not mean that it is easier for film audiences to choose what films they see or predict which ones they will enjoy most.

As motion picture techniques were invented in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, a new artistic medium was created. Yet despite this fascinating invention, journalists and critics of the time did not know what film would eventually become and in the early years, for the most part, did not believe that film was worthy of intelligent discussion. The first published film review was in 1895 in *The New York Times*, which discussed a Paris exhibition of the Lumière brothers' films.<sup>1</sup> Again in 1896, the Times published another review of a movie exhibition at Koster and Bial's Music Hall in New York. These two reviews had no credited authors and were much more focused on descriptors of cinema technology than the films themselves.

In the early 1900s, formal film commentary began to emerge, and *The Optical Lantern Journal* changed its name to *The Optical Lantern and Cinematograph Journal* to become the first cinema trade paper in 1904, as lantern operators moved over to the new medium of film. This journal included “notices of new films, news, issues of the day, information on new patents, interviews, advice columns, correspondence, and information on magic lantern practice as well, providing a fascinating picture of an industry in transition.”<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that this early publication was more focused on the technology associated with the moving image and less concerned with

---

<sup>1</sup> Thetfts Bergstrom, Aren. “A Very Brief History of Film Criticism.” *The Toronto Film Scene*, [thetfs.ca/article/brief-history-film-criticism/](http://thetfs.ca/article/brief-history-film-criticism/).

<sup>2</sup> Bioscope Urbanora. “The Optical Lantern and Cinematograph Journal.” *The Bioscope*, 23 Dec. 2011, [thebioscope.net/2011/08/21/the-optical-lantern-and-cinematograph-journal/](http://thebioscope.net/2011/08/21/the-optical-lantern-and-cinematograph-journal/).

reviewing the works that were created using this technology. Today, there is still some emphasis on the ever-changing technology of film, but film criticism is much more focused on plot, character development, and cinematography than it was in its early stages.

It was not until near the end of the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that writers began to actually discuss the films themselves instead of the technology. In 1908, Frank E. Wood became the first dedicated movie critic in America, with a page dedicated to his reviews in *The New York Dramatic Mirror*.<sup>3</sup> However, it is largely recognized that the first serious work of American film criticism was *The Art of the Moving Picture*, written by Vachel Lindsay in 1914. In his voluminous anthology titled *American Movie Critics: An Anthology From the Silents Until Now*, Phillip Lopate describes Vachel's piece as "a summary of what the movies had done so far as of 1914 and were capable of in the future."<sup>4</sup> It was truly groundbreaking at the time, as Vachel Lindsay introduced the concept of categorizing films by their nature, such as 'The Action Film' or 'The Intimate Film'. However, other than Lindsay, many writers did not see the true potential of film at first and therefore treated it with little respect. Lopate mentions, "early film reviewers (when not simply acting as plot-summary skills for the studios), embarrassed to be seen wasting their energies on this upstart novelty, adopted a facetious, condescending tone, lest the writer be seen as taking such sentimental hogwash too seriously."<sup>5</sup> It is ironic to think that film criticism could transition from underappreciated with little influence, to

---

<sup>3</sup> Thefts Bergstrom, Aren. "A Very Brief History of Film Criticism." *The Toronto Film Scene*, [thetfs.ca/article/brief-history-film-criticism/](http://thetfs.ca/article/brief-history-film-criticism/).

<sup>4</sup> Lopate, Phillip. *American Movie Critics: An Anthology From the Silents Until Now*. The Library of America, 2008. p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> Lopate, p. XIII

highly regarded by the world's top publications in a matter of just a few years. Lopate even remarks that, "in the past, it would seem that not knowing much about movies served as a qualification for a film reviewing post. The public, feeling already informed, resisted the notion of film appreciation as a specialized field of study that might necessitate historians, theorists, and mavens."<sup>6</sup> Perhaps we have returned to this notion in the present day, where anyone with a smartphone or access to a computer has the ability to give their opinion on film and even skew ratings.

In the 1920s, as film continued to pick up steam, some publications began to write real commentary, instead of the traditional discussion of pure entertainment value. By the 1930s, critics were a central part of the film industry and were invited to press screenings and treated like celebrities in their own right. With this sustained growth, certain papers began to employ dedicated film critics. Writers like Otis Ferguson, James Agee, and Manny Farber started to write film reviews for major publications like *The Nation* and *The New Republic*. In his compendium, Lopate refers to Agee as the "most compulsively readable of the 1940s critics" and discusses how "his rich, metaphorical prose nudged film reviewing in a more classical-essay direction."<sup>7</sup> Until James Agee, film criticism was generally more descriptive and generic, but Agee and others of his time helped push film criticism towards becoming an art form of its own. He paved the way for critics like Andrew Sarris, Pauline Kael and Roger Ebert to work in an industry that had already been introduced to more in-depth and artistic film reviews.

---

<sup>6</sup> Lopate, p. XXIII

<sup>7</sup> Lopate, p. XV

One of the most prominent critics of the 1950s was Andrew Sarris, who was also groundbreaking in the world of film criticism. Lopate writes about Sarris, mentioning that “in attempting to bring order to American film history, he ranked directors in categories of achievement, positing a new canon that provoked considerable disagreement.”<sup>8</sup> No previous critic ranked directors in the same way that Sarris did, making him an important and unique figure in film criticism history. Also essential to film criticism in the 1950s was the French group of critics that wrote for the magazine *Cahiers du Cinéma*, which included André Bazin, Jacques Doniol-Valcroze and Joseph-Marie Lo Duca. The *New World Encyclopedia* emphasizes the importance of this magazine, mentioning that “in addition to expressing their opinions and prejudices, Cahiers’ writers attempted to find criteria by which to evaluate films, film acting, cinematography, film structure and editing, especially film directing. Among other accomplishments, Cahiers re-invented the basic tenets of film criticism and theory.”<sup>9</sup> They expanded what it meant to review films and provided writers with fresh aspects of film to focus on and discuss.

The 1960s was what many have referred to as the prime time for film criticism. In his anthology, Lopate quips, “the 1960s and 70s, whether because of the remarkable bounty of good films, or the rising interest in film culture, or both, spawned a golden age in American movie criticism.”<sup>10</sup> The critics in these years held diverse and well-rounded opinions, who all seemed to focus on different aspects of film. From Jonas Mekas who focused on avant-garde films, to Parker Tyler who discussed questions of sexuality and

---

<sup>8</sup> Lopate, p. XVII

<sup>9</sup> “Cahiers Du Cinema.” *New World Encyclopedia*, [www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Cahiers\\_du\\_Cinema](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Cahiers_du_Cinema).

<sup>10</sup> Lopate, p. XVII

gender, each critic of this period had their own distinct voice and brought something unique and important to the film criticism landscape.<sup>11</sup>

Pauline Kael was one of the most prominent film critics of this time, as she began to popularize the notion of film critic as an artist with her work in *The New Yorker*. In the documentary *Life Itself*, about the late Roger Ebert's life as a film critic, Ebert is asked how his career was influenced by Pauline Kael. He answers, "Kael's influence shaped how critics looked at movies and how people read them."<sup>12</sup> Before Roger Ebert, she was arguably the most influential film critic the film industry had ever seen, and audiences, as well as other critics, listened to what she had to say. Lopate comments that she "made it exciting to go into film criticism as a profession, and her influence on the next generation of film critics has been enormous."<sup>13</sup> Kael is widely considered as the major influence on generations of film lovers who became critics after learning from her that they could write about film as a full-time profession. She paved the way for film critics like Janet Maslin and today's A.O. Scott of *The New York Times*, who despite the massive changes of the digital age, continues to have a following of readers who look to him for the ultimate word on film criticism. Kael's dual influence on both professional critics and audiences increased interest in film and provided an early indication of what was to come decades later as digital technology provided platforms where audience members could share their opinions, blurring the lines between professional and amateur criticism and leading to the democratization of criticism.

---

<sup>11</sup> Lopate, p. VVII

<sup>12</sup> James, Steve, director. *Life Itself*. Magnolia Pictures, 2014.

<sup>13</sup> Lopate, p. 330

Yet of all the critics throughout American film history, one stands out above the rest as the most innovative, talented and far reaching film critic: Roger Ebert. Ebert was the youngest daily film critic ever in America, as he quickly transitioned from part-time writer to full-time film critic in a span of only five months at the *Chicago Sun Times*. In the documentary about his life, *Life Itself*, many of his colleagues mention that he could crank out reviews in a matter of 30 minutes, that were well thought out and interesting. He was a savant of sorts in the world of film criticism, as he understood the medium and knew how to write about it in a way that most could relate to.

In addition, Ebert often encouraged film discussion with everyday viewers, through avenues like his interactive panels at an annual conference in Boulder. At this conference, he would screen films and allow anyone in the audience to yell ‘stop’ when they had a question or wanted to make a point. Allowing any member of the audience to lead the discussion was an attempt by Ebert to democratize film by encouraging all to share their opinions. However, despite providing opportunities like these to viewers, there was a limit to his democratizing of film criticism. *Life Itself* recalls a year at the conference where a young man questioned Ebert’s privilege to review films and tell others what to think about them. The young man questioned, “who do you think you are that you get to have all these opinions?”, mentioning that he too had opinions of films, followed by the query, “why don’t I get to talk about it?” Ebert responded with ease, mentioning he had two main justifications. First, he said, “Marshall Field, owner of the Sun Times, appointed me film critic” and second, “would you want to listen to you?”<sup>14</sup> Though Roger Ebert welcomed educated and in-depth film discussion, he no doubt

---

<sup>14</sup> James, Steve, director. *Life Itself*. Magnolia Pictures, 2014.

believed that his opinions and experience made him more qualified than the average film viewer. He seemed to understand the true separation between those writing professionally and those discussing film as a hobby, without formal employment. There was still room for both parties, but critics played a different role than those who discussed film as a sideline. He appeared to understand that moving forward, film criticism would have room for both parties just in different capacities.

Perhaps one of Ebert's largest contributions to film criticism, was his weekly film review show with Gene Siskel. This show was especially influential as it prompted the spread of criticism from print into other mediums, like television. The show started in 1975 under the title *Sneak Previews* and was picked up three years later by PBS for national distribution. In 1982, they changed the name of the show to *At the Movies with Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert*.<sup>15</sup> This show was the first of its kind and allowed film criticism to reach new levels of mass awareness. Thousands of viewers across the U.S. would tune in to watch the two famed critics dispute the industry's most recent and important films. Their heated discussions and unique insights helped to seed the modern notion of people getting worked up about films on the internet and the idea that anyone can have opinions and should be able to share them. Today, many sites provide forums for controversial, multi-participant discussions regarding films. However, unlike Roger and Gene, two people now can argue back in forth from their living rooms, half way across the world. The internet has expanded the reach of film discussion and provided more opportunities for those wishing to discuss films on a larger scale.

---

<sup>15</sup>James, Steve, director. *Life Itself*. Magnolia Pictures, 2014.

There is a logical progression from the approach of two professionals with often differing opinions debating on a mass medium like TV, to millions of filmgoers feeling empowered to share their own opinions with the world at large once technology provided a platform for crowd discussion. Film criticism started with individuals who had a particular interest in understanding how a new medium worked and explained that to film viewers. Then came individuals who developed criteria for categorizing, assessing, comparing and understanding films to develop special expertise they could share with audiences who were interested in not only viewing films, but learning more through newspapers (which were considered unimpeachable sources of accurate information and informed opinion). After that arose a pair of individuals who created friction, debate and entertainment by sharing opposing opinions with the ever-growing mass audience of TV viewers. Finally, a global network of millions of people who have a platform for sharing their opinions in multi-participant virtual conversations emerged. In this new world of democratization, anyone can share their opinion, create content and be perceived as an expert. This is not surprising given societal changes – people trust other people like themselves and the opinions of the majority more than they revere experts – in many areas of their lives, whether it is health advice or what products to buy.

In addition to their show, Ebert was an early and massive adopter of social media late in his career. *Life Itself* mentions that he had 800,000+ followers on twitter and 100,000 followers on Facebook.<sup>16</sup> As Ebert battled with cancer he shifted his focus towards his blog, where readers could access his film criticism back to the year 1967. He no doubt embraced new technology, as a way to continue writing and communicating

---

<sup>16</sup> James, Steve, director. *Life Itself*. Magnolia Pictures, 2014.

with viewers internationally and understood that these online forums could maintain his legacy and help his work live on well after his passing. Though he spent most of his career writing in a period without internet, he understood that with its introduction, film criticism would no doubt change.

Another important aspect of Ebert's reviews that has lived on, is the thumbs up/thumbs down approach to movie reviewing. This simple classification does not require as much careful consideration or reading time as the long, in-depth essays typical of previous film critics. It simplifies criticism, treating it almost fully in terms of entertainment, as opposed to informative analysis. When Rotten Tomatoes was created in 1998, it employed a similar technique of 'fresh' vs 'rotten', simplifying films into one of two categories, and the founder even admitted to being influenced by Siskel and Ebert's long running show.<sup>17</sup>

In an article on *Toronto Film Scene*, the author refers to Roger Ebert as "the last great film critic in its traditional form. He's both the art form's popular peak and its swan song"<sup>18</sup> During the time in which Ebert was still working as a critic, IMDb was created by a British man obsessed with the film industry. Then came Rotten Tomatoes in 1998 and other similar sites rose from the ashes. As social media grew, it became another forum for film discussion and soon the internet was home to a wide range of film criticism and discussion platforms. With this continued expansion, more and more people took to their computers and phones to join the discussion and film criticism became

---

<sup>17</sup> Rogers, Adam. "Rotten Tomatoes and the Unbearable Heaviness of Data." *Wired*, Conde Nast, 6 July 2017, [www.wired.com/story/is-rotten-tomatoes-ruining-movies/](http://www.wired.com/story/is-rotten-tomatoes-ruining-movies/).

<sup>18</sup> Bergstrom, Aren. "A Very Brief History of Film Criticism." *The Toronto Film Scene*, [thetfs.ca/article/brief-history-film-criticism/](http://thetfs.ca/article/brief-history-film-criticism/).

increasingly democratized, as full-fledged reviews began to take more of a secondary role in the modern film landscape. Though most major newspapers still employ full-time film critics, now everyone can be a film critic and get people to listen to them, regardless of whether someone pays them to provide their opinion or not.

Today's film criticism and discussion sites provide easy access to a wide range of both professional and hobbyist reviews, discussion platforms for online film conversations and simplified classifications of film using score averages or percentages. However, with these benefits come some drawbacks. As the sheer quantity of film criticism has increased, the quality of this criticism has suffered. Another concern with these sites is that they oversimplify by suggesting that the value of a film is this quantifiable rating, leaving out the nuances and description that is at the heart of film appreciation.

Yet, perhaps the most important challenge of today's online film criticism sites is the lack of transparency regarding their calculated ratings. The internet has democratized film criticism, by enabling people everywhere to share their opinions on film forums, etc. Although Rotten Tomatoes seems to contribute to the democratization of film criticism, they have not. Their audience ratings are a good example of the democratizing of film criticism, but the actual film critics aggregate scores are not transparent. Sites like Rotten Tomatoes and Metacritic refuse to disclose how their ratings are calculated, raising the question of how much viewers can trust their ratings. If film criticism and discussion is to be truly democratized, an important step is to eliminate the lack of transparency on these sites.

This paper will provide an overview of the major players in today's film criticism landscape and discuss their origins, benefits, and flaws, in an attempt to answer these questions: How has film criticism changed since its origin? Has it, in fact, become democratized? Compared to traditional film criticism, what is working and what is not? Given these analyses of emerging film criticism and discussion platforms, I will attempt to answer the question: where do we go from here?

## Chapter 1 – The King: Rotten Tomatoes

### Origins and Methodology

Senh Duong's favorite actor of all-time was Jackie Chan. Growing up, he would beg his older brother to take him to Chinatown in San Francisco just to see Jackie Chan movies and whenever a new Chan movie opened, he would scour newsstands and the internet for any reviews of the movie he could find.<sup>19</sup> After spending a lot of time following Jackie Chan movies and their reviews, Duong decided to create a site to catalogue these reviews, along with other film reviews from a wide variety of critics.

In a piece describing the origins and motivation behind Rotten Tomatoes, Duong mentioned that his "goal was to create a site where people can get access to reviews from a variety of critics in the US."<sup>20</sup> Duong's site would pull reviews from different critics across the country and present them in a way that everyone could easily access them from the comfort of their own homes. "The problem with reviews from newspapers" Duong

---

<sup>19</sup> Duong, Sen. "Rotten-Tomatoes.com." *Asianconnections.com*, v1.asianconnections.com/entertainment/rotten\_tomatoes.php.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

said, “is that you usually only get one review to base your opinion on. It's not practical for a publication to hire 30 critics to review one movie. So to get a critical consensus, one would have to undergo the laborious task of searching for, and reading through, numerous reviews from newspapers around the country.”<sup>21</sup> By gathering and organizing many different reviews, Duong’s site not only provides access to these reviews, but highlights a general consensus among critics nationwide.

On August 18, 1998, the date *Rush Hour* was scheduled to be released, Duong launched Rotten Tomatoes. Almost immediately after launch, the site had attracted 600-1000 daily unique visitors and just 16 months after launch, it had grown to 250,000 unique visitors. In a September 2017 *New York Times* article, it was disclosed that “the site has surged in popularity, attracting 13.6 million unique visitors in May, a 32 percent increase above last year’s total for the month, according to the analytics firm comScore.”<sup>22</sup> With these numbers, Rotten Tomatoes is one of the biggest players in the today’s world of film criticism.

The main focus of the Rotten Tomatoes website is on the wide range of critic reviews aggregated on the site. The rating system for critics is called the Tomatometer, where films that receive 60+% positive reviews are classified ‘fresh’ and films with less than 59% positive reviews are deemed ‘rotten’. Films that obtain a score of 75% and higher, with at least 80 reviews, are classified as ‘Certified Fresh’ by the site. When Rotten Tomatoes scores a movie, it classifies each review as negative or positive, creates

---

<sup>21</sup> Duong, Sen. “Rotten-Tomatoes.com.” *Asianconnections.com*, v1.asianconnections.com/entertainment/rotten\_tomatoes.php.

<sup>22</sup> Barnes, Brooks. “Attacked by Rotten Tomatoes.” *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 7 Sept. 2017, [www.nytimes.com/2017/09/07/business/media/rotten-tomatoes-box-office.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/07/business/media/rotten-tomatoes-box-office.html).

an aggregate score based on all reviews compiled and then posts a short summary of each review used. If users choose to do so, they may access the full-form reviews through click-throughs, but emphasis is placed on the overall score.

Rotten Tomatoes prides itself on creating aggregate scores based on reviews from professional film critics. Not just any person calling themselves a film critic can be featured on the site and directly affect the rating; they must be verified as a working film critic and be regularly writing reviews. An article in *Vox* further clarifies this distinction, emphasising, “Rotten Tomatoes only aggregates critics who have been regularly publishing movie reviews with a reasonably widely read outlet for at least two years, and those critics must be ‘active,’ meaning they've published at least one review in the last year.”<sup>23</sup> This brings some assurance to the viewer that the critic scores are at least reliable in the sense that the scores come from reviews written by specialised film critics, who are watching films and publishing reviews on a consistent basis.

Despite the seemingly strong vetting process for critics, the method used to calculate overall ratings is not as straightforward as it might appear to the general public. In terms of how the actual ratings are created, some critics upload their own reviews, choose their ‘pull’ quotes to be featured, and designate their own reviews as ‘fresh’ or ‘rotten’, whereas others let Rotten Tomatoes do the work and classify the reviews. According to the *New York Times*, “only about half of critics self-submit reviews and classifications to the site.”<sup>24</sup> This means that Rotten Tomatoes is left to classify the rest,

---

<sup>23</sup> Wilkinson, Alissa. “Rotten Tomatoes, Explained.” *Vox*, Vox, 31 Aug. 2017, [www.vox.com/culture/2017/8/31/16107948/rotten-tomatoes-explainer-critics-movies-aggregation](http://www.vox.com/culture/2017/8/31/16107948/rotten-tomatoes-explainer-critics-movies-aggregation).

<sup>24</sup> Barnes, Brooks. “Attacked by Rotten Tomatoes.” *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 7 Sept. 2017, [www.nytimes.com/2017/09/07/business/media/rotten-tomatoes-box-office.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/07/business/media/rotten-tomatoes-box-office.html).

which could be particularly concerning when film reviews are not clearly positive or negative and therefore cannot be easily labeled. An article in *Wired Magazine* mentions that to combat this potential confusion and conceivable wrongful classification, “some critics have adapted to the binary distinction, sending along word as to how Rotten Tomatoes should code their possibly more subtle review.”<sup>25</sup> This helps Rotten Tomatoes when deciding how to classify certain reviews, eliminating some of the potential for the site to misread certain reviews. The overall percentage rating (score on the Tomatometer), therefore comes from a combination of self-classified and Rotten Tomatoes-classified categorizations of ‘fresh’ and ‘rotten’ reviews and is simply the percentage of critics who gave the film a seemingly more positive than negative review.

As the site evolved, it grew to also include audience ratings. However, these audience ratings are not calculated or vetted the same way that critic reviews are on the site. The audience review score is based on the percentage of viewers who rated a movie 3.5 stars or above and anyone on the internet can contribute to the audience score. Unfortunately, this includes people who may have not even seen the film or have strong emotional ties to the subject. This audience bias, and therefore lack of accuracy, will be discussed in more depth later on.

The site has found a way to turn thousands of movie reviews into simple, binary pass/fail assessments, similar to the thumbs up or down approach that Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert used many years before. With this simplified and informal approach to film

---

<sup>25</sup> Rogers, Adam. “Rotten Tomatoes and the Unbearable Heaviness of Data.” *Wired*, Conde Nast, 6 July 2017, [www.wired.com/story/is-rotten-tomatoes-ruining-movies/](http://www.wired.com/story/is-rotten-tomatoes-ruining-movies/).

criticism, Rotten Tomatoes has continued to grow and has become the main source of film criticism for audiences worldwide.

### Acquisitions and Their Significance

Despite the lack of press covering the company's progression and rise to the top, Rotten Tomatoes has undergone various acquisitions over the years. Just six years after launching in 1998, Rotten Tomatoes was acquired by IGN Entertainment, an American video game and entertainment media company. Then, less than a year later, IGN was bought by News Corp's Fox Interactive Media and being a subsidiary, Rotten Tomatoes went with. In 2010, IGN sold Rotten Tomatoes to Flixter and in 2011, when Flixter was bought by Warner Brothers, Rotten Tomatoes became a part of one of the studios that released movies that the website scored. Most recently, in 2016, Flixter was sold to Comcast's Fandango, along with Rotten Tomatoes. Shortly after being acquired by Fandango, the ticketing site began to post Rotten Tomato scores next to its listings.

Following Rotten Tomatoes viewership through its several acquisitions, unearths an interesting, but expected trend. The most noticeable is the immense growth Rotten Tomatoes has experienced over the last eight years, most of which has been while owned by Warner Brothers and Fandango. In 2009, while still owned by IGN, Rotten Tomatoes attracted around 1.8 million unique visitors per month. In 2017, that number had been multiplied drastically and Rotten Tomatoes was averaging as many as 14 million unique visitors a month.<sup>26</sup> It is hard to believe that the site would have been able to grow so

---

<sup>26</sup> Barnes, Brooks. "Attacked by Rotten Tomatoes." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 7 Sept. 2017, [www.nytimes.com/2017/09/07/business/media/rotten-tomatoes-box-office.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/07/business/media/rotten-tomatoes-box-office.html).

quickly without first being acquired by Flixter, then by Warner Brothers, and most recently by Fandango. These large media giants have no doubt elevated the reach of Rotten Tomatoes over the years.

When discussing ownership, the main question everyone wants to know the answer to is: can we still trust Rotten Tomatoes when it is owned by studios/people making films that are featured on the site? The answer appears to be yes. Rotten Tomatoes does not write reviews, it simply aggregates them. None of the critics with reviews featured on the sites are employed by Rotten Tomatoes. Their reviews are posted on other platforms, before being combined on Rotten Tomatoes and given a positive or negative tag. Additionally, it would be very difficult for Rotten Tomatoes to 'rig' the scores regardless, as the short review clips featured on the site always have links to the original reviews. There is no way for the site to control the critics' sentiments and reviews, even if they wanted to.

There is, however, one potential way in which Rotten Tomatoes could technically skew a film's rating slightly. Since the site tags about half of the reviews as 'positive' or 'negative' without the input of the authoring critics, it is possible that borderline reviews could be deemed positive when they may have been more negative in reality. Yet most reviews clearly skew one way, so even if a few reviews were on the fence, this likely would not have a noticeable impact on the overall score.

### Influence and Studios Fight Back

Rotten Tomatoes has received a lot of industry pushback in recent years and as filmmakers continue to complain about how Rotten Tomatoes is ruining the industry, the real question becomes: How much of an influence does Rotten Tomatoes really have? The answer is definitely not straightforward. In a 2017 study, the National Research Group found that seven out of 10 people said they would be less interested in seeing a movie if the Rotten Tomatoes score was 0 to 25.<sup>27</sup> Another study in 2017 found, “in 2014, 28 percent of all moviegoers said they were checking (Rotten Tomatoes). In 2016, it’s 36 percent.”<sup>28</sup> This indicates that a third of the entire movie viewing population checks Rotten Tomatoes before they decide to see a film.

There is also an interesting trend in the role of age on the influence of Rotten Tomatoes’ scores, as discovered by Fizziology, which tracks most major Hollywood releases. In a 2017 analysis, they exposed that Rotten Tomatoes has the most influence on moviegoers 25 and younger.<sup>29</sup> To further emphasize Fizziology’s findings, the 2017 study in *Vanity Fair* mentioned above, found that between 2014 and 2016, “Teens went from 23 [percent] to 34. That’s an enormous jump.”<sup>30</sup> It comes as a little surprise, that the

---

<sup>27</sup> McClintock, Pamela. “Studios Fight Back Against Withering Rotten Tomatoes Scores.” *The Hollywood Reporter*, 2 Aug. 2017, [www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/studios-fight-back-withering-rotten-tomatoes-scores-1025575](http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/studios-fight-back-withering-rotten-tomatoes-scores-1025575).

<sup>28</sup> Lee, Chris. “How Hollywood Came to Fear and Loathe Rotten Tomatoes.” *Vanity Fair*, Vanity Fair, 9 June 2017, [www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2017/06/how-hollywood-came-to-fear-and-loathe-rotten-tomatoes](http://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2017/06/how-hollywood-came-to-fear-and-loathe-rotten-tomatoes).

<sup>29</sup> McClintock, Pamela. “Studios Fight Back Against Withering Rotten Tomatoes Scores.” *The Hollywood Reporter*, 2 Aug. 2017, [www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/studios-fight-back-withering-rotten-tomatoes-scores-1025575](http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/studios-fight-back-withering-rotten-tomatoes-scores-1025575).

<sup>30</sup> Lee, Chris. “How Hollywood Came to Fear and Loathe Rotten Tomatoes.” *Vanity Fair*, Vanity Fair, 9 June 2017, [www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2017/06/how-hollywood-came-to-fear-and-loathe-rotten-tomatoes](http://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2017/06/how-hollywood-came-to-fear-and-loathe-rotten-tomatoes).

younger generation of viewers relies on Rotten Tomatoes most for their movie viewing advice.

Given these findings, Rotten Tomatoes would seemingly have a large effect on box office numbers. However, according to an analysis done in 2017, this is not the case. *Variety* mentions that their recent study found that there is no positive or negative correlation between Rotten Tomatoes scores and box office numbers.<sup>31</sup> This statistic confirms the sentiments of some writers who believe that studios are blaming Rotten Tomatoes for a negative effect on the success of movies it is not even responsible for. An article from *Quartz Media* states, “Rotten Tomatoes has become a scapegoat for Hollywood’s problems. But it was Hollywood that gave Rotten Tomatoes its enormous influence over moviegoers to begin with.”<sup>32</sup> An article in the *New York Time* similarly quips, “if Rotten Tomatoes is a monster, the studios helped create it. As much as they fear and loathe low scores, they love high ones. Sony recently ended its trailer for ‘Baby Driver,’ a heist thriller, by flashing the Rotten Tomatoes logo and ‘100 percent,’ the film’s Tomatometer score at the time.”<sup>33</sup> There seems to be a hypocritical undertone to the negative comments thrown at Rotten Tomatoes in recent years. Given the lack of correlational evidence between scores and box office success, it is possible that the studios just need someone to blame for film failures and Rotten Tomatoes is an easy target.

---

<sup>31</sup> Wallenstein, Andrew. “Rotten Tomatoes Scores Don’t Impact Box Office, Study Finds.” *Variety*, 11 Sept. 2017, [variety.com/2017/film/news/rotten-tomatoes-scores-dont-impact-box-office-study-finds-1202554546/](http://variety.com/2017/film/news/rotten-tomatoes-scores-dont-impact-box-office-study-finds-1202554546/).

<sup>32</sup> Rodriguez, Ashley. “How Hollywood Created Its Own Worst Enemy in Rotten Tomatoes.” *Quartz*, Quartz, 26 Sept. 2017, [qz.com/1073208/how-hollywood-created-its-own-worst-enemy-in-rotten-tomatoes/](http://qz.com/1073208/how-hollywood-created-its-own-worst-enemy-in-rotten-tomatoes/).

<sup>33</sup> Barnes, Brooks. “Attacked by Rotten Tomatoes.” *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 7 Sept. 2017, [www.nytimes.com/2017/09/07/business/media/rotten-tomatoes-box-office.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/07/business/media/rotten-tomatoes-box-office.html).

As Rotten Tomatoes' audience continues to grow, studio executives continue to pay more and more attention to the scores. Many of them have begun to adopt new strategies to combat the possibility of a poor Rotten Tomatoes' score tarnishing their film. A recent *Vox* article discusses one tactic that seems to work as a short-term solution: limiting critics access to films before release. The article mentions, "when a studio suspects it has a lemon on its hands, it typically hosts the press screening only a day or two ahead of the film's release, and then sets a review 'embargo' that lifts a few hours before the film hits theaters."<sup>34</sup> This is one way that studios can avoid negative reviews for at least the release day and hope to overcome those negative reviews through positive audience word of mouth. Other than that, there is little the studios can do to prevent Rotten Tomatoes from potentially discoloring their film. Film critics have been negatively reviewing films for over a hundred years, but with the rise of the internet and the compilation tactics of Rotten Tomatoes, negative (and positive) reviews have never been so powerful and widespread as they are today.

### The Benefits of Aggregation and Increased Access

There are few resources available that discuss the positive aspects of the Rotten Tomatoes platform. However, there are some clear strengths of the site that will be overviewed briefly in this section. In Mattias Frey's book titled *Film Criticism in the Digital Age*, Frey discusses the main goals of Rotten Tomatoes. He writes, "Rotten Tomatoes aims to overturn traditional media hierarchies and promote a more democratic

---

<sup>34</sup> Wilkinson, Alissa. "Rotten Tomatoes, Explained." *Vox*, Vox, 31 Aug. 2017, [www.vox.com/culture/2017/8/31/16107948/rotten-tomatoes-explainer-critics-movies-aggregation](http://www.vox.com/culture/2017/8/31/16107948/rotten-tomatoes-explainer-critics-movies-aggregation).

experience of film culture by offering (1) a more objective experience of criticism; (2) greater access to a more diversified selection of criticism; and (3) an increased degree of participation and community.”<sup>35</sup> The first point seems to suggest that by compiling a wide range of critics’ views into a single forum, Rotten Tomatoes is attempting to provide easy access for the general public to consider a much broader pool of opinions when reading film criticism. The second point is about offering the general public access to reviews they either did not previously have access to or might have had access to before but were not aware of. This could be everything from local newspapers across America to international critics with little access to the American market. Finally, to achieve the goal of increased participation and community, Rotten Tomatoes has tried to encourage viewer participation through their viewer ratings, as well as the ability for viewers to submit full-form reviews on the site. These three goals, if fully accomplished, are the main benefits of Rotten Tomatoes that differentiate it from other sources of film criticism.

One of Rotten Tomatoes’ biggest advantages is that it provides viewers with succinct pieces of information often needed to make spur of the moment decisions regarding which films to see. The site is not afraid to highlight this strength, mentioning, “life before RT and our Tomatometer was fairly tough when it came to organizing weekends of movie watching at the local Cineplex. Sure, we could rely on our local critics or word of mouth, but where was the consensus? Why should we rely on a single critic who may have a particular taste in film different from ours? Couldn’t we organize

---

<sup>35</sup> Frey, Mattias, and Cecilia Sayad, editors. *Film Criticism in the Digital Age*. Rutgers University Press, 2017. p. 87.

and collect all of the reviews from various sources (newspaper, online, magazines) and average them into a single score? We could and did.”<sup>36</sup> Since its inception, Rotten Tomatoes has made it its focus to pull reviews from critics across the internet and bring them together to create a readable consensus for viewers looking to make a decision on which film to see. It makes it possible for viewers to get a good range of information on a film and hear from many different critics, without having to spend time researching many different reviews separately. This saves viewers time, while still providing them with a wide range of material condensed into a single score.

On a similar note, another interesting benefit Rotten Tomatoes provides is greater access to criticism on a more diversified selection of films. Before Rotten Tomatoes, it was hard for lesser known filmmakers and films to gain public attention and viewers were missing out on a lot of film being produced outside of mainstream cinema. While many critics have been writing about non-mainstream films for decades, lack of access to these reviews has limited mass awareness. Rotten Tomatoes has the ability to point out indie/lesser-known films that most viewers would not be aware of through other forms of publicity or criticism. Film critics see lots of films other than the ones featured in the movie section of the paper, but those reviews might go unnoticed by the general public. Only the films with major releases and big marketing campaigns will gain the attention of viewers who do not use Rotten Tomatoes. By providing access to reviews about all kinds of movies, it allows viewers to expand their viewing preferences and see things they maybe would not have even heard about before. By doing this, Rotten Tomatoes is putting emphasis back on film critics as educated commentators. Frey mentions in his

---

<sup>36</sup> Frey and Sayad, p. 87.

book that, “unlike IMDb, or even Variety, Rotten Tomatoes is a celebration of criticism and actually validates the basic tenet of the critical project: that critics’ judgments can and should matter to the reception and consumption of film and other culture products.”<sup>37</sup> It is not clear if this claim is entirely true, but it seems difficult to argue against the idea that film critics can act as a resource to introduce viewers to new works, new directors, even new genres. Rotten Tomatoes provides the opportunity for people with little knowledge of film to make better screening decisions and build opinions around film, with film critics as their easily accessible guides. This does not necessarily mean that visitors of the site will agree with film critics’ thoughts on a film, but at least they will have expanded their film library by being introduced to new titles.

This increased access to film criticism compared to traditional print distribution, will ideally spark an interest in intelligent film conversation among audiences over time. As Frey points out in his book, “not only does Rotten Tomatoes provide a “scientific” survey of opinions that disregards cultural distinctions among media; it is thereby also unhinging the traditional hierarchies of the authoritative critic and the passive ‘follower’.”<sup>38</sup> With increased access to criticism, visitors to the site can begin to see that there are so many different ways to watch a film and so many distinctive aspects to comment on. They are no longer limited to the few main reviews of the most mainstream critics, which only extends possibilities. For viewers wishing to engage long-term with specific critics, the My Critic function is an interesting feature. Frey describes, “with a few clicks of the mouse the reader can instantly access and ‘follow’ the critic or critics

---

<sup>37</sup> Frey and Sayad, p. 88.

<sup>38</sup> Frey and Sayad, p. 88.

whom he or she feels more corresponds to his or her taste; the user is provided with an instant archive of the chosen critic's writings."<sup>39</sup>

There is also, of course, the option to create your own criticism and post it in the audience score section of the site. Anyone has the ability to create film reviews and post them on the site, which is seemingly both a benefit and a flaw. The downside of this will be examined later on, but for now this ability for everyone to write criticism and be heard, allows viewers to feel empowered, to create meaningful commentary on the art form of film and also connect with fellow film buffs and enthusiasts that are likewise working to develop their own critical voices. Rotten Tomatoes is democratizing film criticism, so that everyone has the opportunity to not only access more criticism than they were able to before, but also create and share film criticism of their own. The challenge with this becomes, if everyone is creating and sharing film criticism, what role does the film critic play?

### The Oversimplification of Film and Other Flaws

Though there are undoubtedly several positive aspects of Rotten Tomatoes, the online conversation regarding Rotten Tomatoes has been significantly more negatively skewed, especially in recent years. The biggest controversy surrounds the site's oversimplification of film criticism. The simple act of dumbing a movie down to a single percentage and tagging it either 'fresh' or 'rotten' suggests that there is one right way to evaluate a movie. This emphasizes herd mentality, where if a bunch of people say a film is not good, it is immediately assumed that you will not like it. However, what makes art

---

<sup>39</sup> Frey and Sayad, p. 89.

interesting is that everyone can have their own opinion about it and speak freely. Film is no exception and since the beginning of film as an artistic medium, viewers have butted heads when discussing film. No two people will see every detail of a film exactly the same way, so it does not make sense to try to simplify opinion or analysis to a simple thumbs up or thumbs down, which is exactly what Rotten Tomatoes is doing.

As Rotten Tomatoes has gained popularity, studio execs and filmmakers across the world have voiced their concerns about the platform. An article in *Wired Magazine* sums up this frustration nicely, mentioning, “the people speaking for studios say that Rotten Tomatoes' danger is not that it's data, but that it looks like data. Which is to say, it quantifies the unquantifiable.”<sup>40</sup> Scores on Rotten Tomatoes simply indicate whether a film is good or bad, however, they do not leave room to accentuate positive elements of bad films. Generally, even the worst films show some signs of filmmaking success, from strong actor performances to beautiful scores. Yet the platform does not easily display these positive aspects that might make the film worth seeing, despite other off-putting elements that cause the negative score. One director, Brett Ratner, who became increasingly fed up with Rotten Tomatoes, went as far as saying, “the worst thing that we have in today’s movie culture is Rotten Tomatoes. I think it’s the destruction of our business.”<sup>41</sup> Ratner went on to expand his thoughts on the matter, stating, “when I was growing up film criticism was a real art. And there was intellect that went into that. And you would read Pauline Kael’s reviews, or some others, and that doesn’t exist anymore.

---

<sup>40</sup> Rogers, Adam. “Rotten Tomatoes and the Unbearable Heaviness of Data.” *Wired*, Conde Nast, 6 July 2017, [www.wired.com/story/is-rotten-tomatoes-ruining-movies/](http://www.wired.com/story/is-rotten-tomatoes-ruining-movies/).

<sup>41</sup> Miller, Julie. “Hollywood Producer Blames Rotten Tomatoes for Convincing People Not to See His Movie.” *Vanity Fair*, Vanity Fair, 23 Mar. 2017, [www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2017/03/brett-ratner-rotten-tomatoes](http://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2017/03/brett-ratner-rotten-tomatoes).

Now it's about a number."<sup>42</sup> It is ironic that one of Ratner's films, *Rush Hour*, was behind Duong's inspiration to create Rotten Tomatoes in the first place, and if *Rush Hour* had not been delayed a month, Rotten Tomatoes would have launched on the day of the opening.

Ratner is not alone in voicing his concerns with the now largescale film criticism platform. Martin Scorsese, one of the most accomplished directors of film history, recently weighed in on the challenges of Rotten Tomatoes. In a piece published in the *Hollywood Reporter*, he points out that with Rotten Tomatoes, there is little room for people to form their own opinions and there is a focus on fully understanding a movie in just a few seconds. However, "good films by real filmmakers aren't made to be decoded, consumed or instantly comprehended", he mentions.<sup>43</sup> The best films are those that challenge conventions and make us think, however, we are turning into audiences that want to go into a movie knowing they are going to see something good and leave the movie having a good understanding of what they saw, along with a clear view on the film. He goes on to discuss how Rotten Tomatoes has nothing to do with real film criticism, stating, "they have everything to do with the movie business and absolutely nothing to do with either the creation or the intelligent viewing of film. The filmmaker is reduced to a content manufacturer and the viewer to an unadventurous consumer."<sup>44</sup> It is

---

<sup>42</sup> Miller, Julie. "Hollywood Producer Blames Rotten Tomatoes for Convincing People Not to See His Movie." *Vanity Fair*, Vanity Fair, 23 Mar. 2017, [www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2017/03/brett-ratner-rotten-tomatoes](http://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2017/03/brett-ratner-rotten-tomatoes).

<sup>43</sup> Scorsese, Martin. "Martin Scorsese on Rotten Tomatoes, Box Office Obsession and Why 'Mother!' Was Misjudged (Guest Column)." *The Hollywood Reporter*, 10 Oct. 2017, [www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/martin-scorsese-rotten-tomatoes-box-office-obsession-why-mother-was-misjudged-guest-column-1047286](http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/martin-scorsese-rotten-tomatoes-box-office-obsession-why-mother-was-misjudged-guest-column-1047286).

<sup>44</sup> Scorsese, Martin. "Martin Scorsese on Rotten Tomatoes, Box Office Obsession and Why 'Mother!' Was Misjudged (Guest Column)." *The Hollywood Reporter*, 10 Oct. 2017,

likely that as more and more people look to Rotten Tomatoes for simplified reviews and easy to digest insights, less filmgoers will take the time to form unique opinions on a film and then challenge those opinions through discourse with others around them.

Exploring these concerns further uncovers the problem that Rotten Tomatoes might be changing the way viewers interact with film critics. Instead of taking the time to read full reviews online or in the paper, many viewers now head directly to the site and focus on the aggregate score of each film. However, any respectable critic who analyzes and critiques film on a daily basis, would no doubt struggle to fully classify film simply as good or bad. Rotten Tomatoes places the emphasis on whether a reviewer has given it a rotten or fresh review, along with a very short clip from their full review. To access full reviews on the site, visitors have to click through to the original content, but few are willing to spend time combing through a film review, especially when the short summation is extremely negative. This leads viewers to usually ignore full-fledged reviews and just look at whether they have been tagged positive or negative.

As discussed earlier, Roger Ebert and Gene Siskel's show revolutionized film criticism over forty years ago. Yet looking at Siskel and Ebert's show, one of the main sources Duong listed as an influence for Rotten Tomatoes, it is hard to find many significant similarities between the two. Other than the thumbs up/thumbs down simple classification used by the two legends, the show stood for many aspects of film criticism that Rotten Tomatoes has ignored. In a 2017 *IndieWire* article, the author discusses how Rotten Tomatoes has ruined film criticism and brings up Siskel and Ebert's show in

comparison. He writes, “the centerpiece of their show wasn’t their thumbs; it was the passionate discussion that preceded their up/down judgments.”<sup>45</sup> Though on the surface level, they did use a quick and easy categorization method, Siskel and Ebert were two of the most talented and qualified film critics to ever live. Given the sheer depth of their reviews, it is almost insulting that Duong would suggest that Rotten Tomatoes is in any way similar to their show, as it purposely moves away from in-depth analysis towards easily classification.

The IndieWire article continues, “most critics love arguing about movies, because they often find that disagreeing with their colleagues is what makes their job fun. It’s fine to disagree with others about a movie, and it doesn’t mean you’re ‘wrong’.”<sup>46</sup> There is no doubt that Siskel and Ebert rarely saw eye-to-eye on films and when they disagreed, they were never afraid to voice their opinion and oppose their colleague. It seems that this tension between them and the different mindsets that they brought to films was what made their duo so successful. Rotten Tomatoes does not successfully show tension and discourse between critics and instead suggests that a half and half split would mean the film is not good.

There is also seemingly flawed logic in the way Rotten Tomatoes classifies the films as positive or negative. Due to the fact that Rotten Tomatoes classifies reviews as either negative or positive, all positive reviews could theoretically consist of reviews that were not necessarily positive, just more positive things were said than negative things. It

---

<sup>45</sup> Brueggemann, Tom. “Studios Are Right: Rotten Tomatoes Has Ruined Film Criticism - Opinion.” *IndieWire*, 23 June 2017, [www.indiewire.com/2017/06/rotten-tomatoes-film-critics-transformers-1201845002/](http://www.indiewire.com/2017/06/rotten-tomatoes-film-critics-transformers-1201845002/).

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

is pointed out in a *Vox* article that, “theoretically, a 100 percent Rotten Tomatoes rating *could* be made up entirely of middling-to-positive reviews.”<sup>47</sup> If this is the case, then movies that are average might be overly hyped by the site, simply because the reviews are slightly more positive than negative. This will be discussed in more depth below in the case studies section, by evaluating films that have seemingly been under hyped or over hyped by their scores on the site.

## Case Studies

### *Ladybird*

2017 was the year of *Blade Runner 2049*, *Wonder Woman* and *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*, all backed by large studios and all of whose budgets exceeded \$150 million. Yet of all the films released in 2017, an independent film with a budget of \$10 million, about a struggling high school student in Sacramento, was the most highly-rated film of the year on Rotten Tomatoes. Not only did *Ladybird* receive the site’s highest overall rating at 99% fresh, it had the longest consecutive streak ever of positive reviews on the site, with 170 “fresh” reviews being submitted before one critic finally published obvious disapproval of the film. Since that negative review, the film continued to receive almost all positive reviews on the site and currently the film has 304 ‘fresh’ reviews and only 4 ‘rotten’.

One possible explanation for why *Ladybird* was such a success with the critics, is that true stories are usually much easier to relate to, because they are both films about real people, but also about events that have actually happened and could happen again.

---

<sup>47</sup> Wilkinson, Alissa. “Rotten Tomatoes, Explained.” *Vox*, Vox, 31 Aug. 2017, [www.vox.com/culture/2017/8/31/16107948/rotten-tomatoes-explainer-critics-movies-aggregation](http://www.vox.com/culture/2017/8/31/16107948/rotten-tomatoes-explainer-critics-movies-aggregation).

Knowing that a film is based on a true story before viewing, completely changes the viewer's experience of the film. Instead of being distracted by whether something is feasible or not, which is easy to do when watching a film, the viewer can let their guard down and allow themselves to become fully immersed in the story. The fact that *Ladybird* portrays everyday life in Sacramento suburbia, makes it a film that hundreds of thousands of people living in similar situations can relate to. Even those who do not live in similar situation can see these cultural dead zones in America, regardless of their background or family relationships. Despite the fact that a large percentage of the American population lives in suburban areas, few movies are made about these areas where life is often mundane and boring, and people are working hard just to get by. *Ladybird* embraces this lifestyle and is about everyday people, people that the viewer can relate to, whether they are that person or know that person, making it exciting and interesting to watch, despite its seemingly mundane subject matter.

It makes sense that this film was so popular among critics, but the film's overall Rotten Tomatoes rating is overinflated, receiving an almost perfect 99%. This ties back to the earlier discussion of some flaws of the Rotten Tomatoes' rating methodology. For example, if we used Rotten Tomatoes to see what the best film of 2017 was, the answer would appear to be *Ladybird*. However, in reality, *Ladybird* was not the film of the year, *Shape of Water* was, which ended up winning the Oscar for best picture as well as several other awards along the way. In addition, several other films made this year were arguably more visionary, ground-breaking, and well-acted than *Ladybird*, including *Get Out* and *Three Billboards Outside Ebbings Missouri*. This is not to say that *Ladybird* is a subpar film and therefore should receive bad reviews, but a 99% approval rating seems to

suggest a pretty much perfect film with no areas for improvement. This film is a great example of how the Rotten Tomatoes rating system is completely flawed when it comes to giving filmgoers clear and accurate movie going advice.

At first glance, it is quite natural to assume that Rotten Tomatoes' scores represent an average rating based on all reviews submitted about the film. However, in reality the score is not an average, but instead a percentage of critics that found the film more good than they did bad. This is similar to giving a restaurant a 100% rating, because critics decided that the food was more good than it was bad, or getting 100% on an exam, because the answers were closer to being right than they were to being wrong. These other disciplines of review do not use this methodology, because it simply does not make sense. This is not an accurate way to review films and can lead to viewers believing that certain films are much better than they actually are. This flawed rating system has allowed for countless middling films on Rotten Tomatoes to receive extremely high ratings without actually deserving them. A few examples that come to mind are *Spy* with a 94% rating (same rating as *Arrival*, a 2017 Oscars contender) and *Star Trek Into Darkness* at 86% (same as *Lion*, also 2017 Oscars contender).

Though Rotten Tomatoes creates ratings using a split of positive and negative reviews, other areas of review like food criticism and academic judgment do not work this way. If they did, how would one differentiate good restaurants from the bad or smart students from the not as smart. When viewers go on Rotten Tomatoes to see how a film is rated, they likely end up comparing rankings from two to three different films they are deciding between. It is only natural to rank films when trying to make a decision on which one to see, because without deciding which film is likely better than the other, how

would one ever make a decision? However, Rotten Tomatoes does not show critic preference or their comparative ratings (i.e. their thoughts on how one film compares to another). This means that it is possible that every reviewer who gave *Ladybird* a positive review, still liked other films made this year more. For example, the 92% of critics who gave *Shape of Water* a ‘fresh’ review could have liked it more and even given it a better review than *Ladybird*, however, because 8% of critics gave it a ‘rotten’ review, the film ends up looking worse on Rotten Tomatoes.

### *Suicide Squad*

On the other end of the spectrum, are films that have received seemingly misguided and overly negative ratings on the site. DC recently had amazing success with its release of *Wonder Woman*, which received high praise from critics and earned a high Rotten Tomatoes rating of 92%. However, another recent member of the DC universe had the opposite response on the site. *Suicide Squad*, a highly anticipated film about DC villains saving the world, was crushed on Rotten Tomatoes, receiving a measly 27%, despite its all-star cast, complex visual effects, and heavy advertising and marketing campaigns.

It appears ironic, and perhaps significant, that a film released by Warner Brothers (who owns DC) would be hit hard by the site, just a few months after Warner Brothers sold Rotten Tomatoes to another massive industry player, Comcast’s Fandango. Is it possible that the site intentionally tagged some reviews on the fence ‘rotten’ instead of ‘fresh’ to bring the overall rating down? This could potentially have happened, but it seems unlikely that the film would have enough reviews on the fence for this to be

possible. Though it is an interesting coincidence that Rotten Tomatoes was sold shortly before this film's release, it is doubtful that it could affect the rating of *Suicide Squad* without it being obvious and easy for the public to uncover, simply by reading the reviews submitted on the site.

Another interesting insight with *Suicide Squad*, is that critics were significantly harsher on the film than the average viewer, according to both their aggregated ratings on the site. The viewer rating on Rotten Tomatoes was 60%, with over 140,000 reviewer reviews, which is much more favourable and suggests that the majority of people actually liked the film. In addition to this positive viewer rating, the film also developed quite a cult following, many of whom quickly became very upset with Rotten Tomatoes after its posting of the film's rating. One fan even started a petition to try and shut down Rotten Tomatoes because of the negative reviews posted about the movie. The fact that a fan of the film could get over 10,000 people to agree with him that the film was falsely deemed 'rotten', suggests a flaw in the platform's rating system. How could so many people agree that the film was good, yet Rotten Tomatoes give it such a negative rating? This surfaces another potential issue with the site's ratings. If the reviews that film critics submit about a film are that polarizing from those submitted by the viewers, then critic's ratings do not have much importance in the scheme of things. The majority of films made for distribution today are made to please the viewer and to make money, so if the viewers like the film, it does not really matter what the critics think.

The film critic's role is further diminished by the fact that in the case of *Suicide Squad* for example, the film's Rotten Tomatoes rating did not have a noticeable effect on the film's box office success. Despite the 27% score and the onslaught of negative

reviews, *Suicide Squad* had an opening weekend of \$133 million and has grossed over \$700 million to date. It is an example of a film that is seemingly immune to a bad Rotten Tomatoes rating. This suggests that though Rotten Tomatoes no doubt does provide a way for viewers to access real film criticism, viewers do not care about critic's opinions as much as they once did. They might glance at a Rotten Tomatoes score to make a decision about which movie to see, but after viewing a film, their overall opinion of that film is likely independent of critic reviews. This does not mean that film critics and viewers cannot agree on whether a film was good or bad, in fact, they could always agree. Instead, it means that the viewers likely do not decide how they feel about a film solely based on how qualified professionals rated the film.

It also seems important to discuss the fact that expectations often vary from film to film. Viewers don't go to see *Suicide Squad* for the same reasons they go to see *Call Me By Your Name*, for example. The two films serve extremely different purposes for the average viewer. *Suicide Squad* is almost purely a movie for sheer entertainment. Though it might have good dialogue, an engaging plot, or a heartening message/goal, the real reason people go to see a movie like it is to be entertained and wowed by visual spectacle and exciting action scenes. *Call Me By Your Name* on the other hand, is an important social commentary discussing issues of sexuality, love, and life progression. Unless a viewer did not read about the film at all, they would likely be looking for something more thought-provoking and emotionally-charged when choosing to see the film. A film could receive a horrible rating on the site, but a viewer could still love it if that is what they were in the mood for. Part of what makes *Suicide Squad* good, is that it knows what it is

and what it is going for and focuses on executing that. It knows it is an action superhero movie with fun characters and seemingly unstoppable villains and it delivers just that.

### *Movie Franchises*

Interesting insights arise when we focus in on movie franchises that have been hit hard by Rotten Tomatoes. For example, *Transformers: The Last Night*, received a measly 16% on Rotten Tomatoes and had an opening weekend of \$60 million, compared to other previous movies in the series that brought in upwards of \$100 million in their opening weekends.<sup>48</sup> Another storied franchise, *Pirates of the Caribbean*, saw its lowest opening for a Pirates movie in 14 years, bringing in \$46 million.<sup>49</sup> Rotten Tomatoes scores have not been a fan of the series as it has progressed. The original movie received a 79%, but it has been all downhill from there, scoring 54%, followed by 45%, 32%, and most recently a 30%. Perhaps this is just indicative of how film critics feel about series; however, Rotten Tomatoes has brought these negative reviews to the foreground, making it harder and harder for studios to continue to produce series.

A possible explanation for why movie series do not receive high scores on the site is that they lack something that other original films do not, novelty. This is not to say that the second or third film in a franchise does not add new characters or explore new territory, it just means that a lot of the focus is on the same characters and world created by the first film. Critics see hundreds if not thousands of films each year, in turn making

---

<sup>48</sup> Brueggemann, Tom. "Studios Are Right: Rotten Tomatoes Has Ruined Film Criticism - Opinion." *IndieWire*, 23 June 2017, [www.indiewire.com/2017/06/rotten-tomatoes-film-critics-transformers-1201845002/](http://www.indiewire.com/2017/06/rotten-tomatoes-film-critics-transformers-1201845002/).

<sup>49</sup> Lee, Chris. "How Hollywood Came to Fear and Loathe Rotten Tomatoes." *Vanity Fair*, Vanity Fair, 9 June 2017, [www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2017/06/how-hollywood-came-to-fear-and-loathe-rotten-tomatoes](http://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2017/06/how-hollywood-came-to-fear-and-loathe-rotten-tomatoes).

them the hardest audience to impress and entertain. Because of this, it does not seem surprising that critics would give franchise films decreasingly good reviews as these franchises continue to produce films. The second film in the series would have to do enough new or different for a critic to be impressed, but rarely does a sequel do either of those things, as it instead focuses on staying true to its original film which audiences loved.

As discussed in the influence section above, a recent study found that there is no significant correlation between a film's Rotten Tomatoes ratings and box office success. Yet when it comes to franchises, there appears to be a correlation. One potential explanation for this relationship is that because these films are not novel, they do not have the same obvious draw that other films have. In today's overly viral and connected world, viewers have increasingly less tolerance for lack of novelty. Film viewers are no different and are focused on the newest concept or world, so films that play off films that have already been released naturally are not as interesting. It seems that to avoid seeing something repetitive or boring, viewers would check Rotten Tomatoes and other reviews before wasting their time and money watching a sequel or latter film of a series. With other films not part of a franchise, the viewer is not as worried about protecting themselves from wasting time or money, as they will always be able to find something novel about the new world that is being created or the characters on screen.

## Chapter 2 – The Challengers: Other Players in Online Film Criticism

Behind Rotten Tomatoes, the next two most important players in online film criticism aggregation are IMDb and Metacritic. Though many other sites providing film criticism exist, Rotten Tomatoes, IMDb and Metacritic rule. By searching a film on Google, you will quickly find these three website scores next to each other, just below the movie poster and title. The scores from these three sites come before the link to the trailer, the brief plot description, the director and a section on critic reviews that pulls from different prominent sources. This Google placement seems to suggest the continuously increasing influence of these sites on the film industry. It has never been easier to access three of the most prominent sources of film criticism available today.

In addition to these three sites, there are a few other criticism aggregation sites that focus on aggregating viewer reviews. Letterboxd and The Movie Db only amass ratings and reviews written by filmgoers who aren't professional film critics. Both platforms have some very interesting features that allow for educated film discussion within your already existing friend network, while also providing the opportunity to explore reviews and interact with other viewers who have similar or different tastes in and views on films. Unlike Rotten Tomatoes, these two sites place their emphasis on the average viewer instead of on the film critic, creating a platform where viewers can discuss their true opinions about film, without feeling wrong or restricted by the presence of professional reviewers.

Finally, though not built for the purpose of discussing film, several social media platforms, including Twitter and Facebook, have become prime locations for audiences to

share their thoughts, regardless of what those thoughts may be. Facebook currently has over two billion active users, or a quarter of the world's population. It is the biggest social network ever created and is home to social conversations about pretty much any topic. With this many people all present on one site, it is hard to think of there ever being a bigger audience to discuss film. Facebook users have caught on and now frequently share their viewing habits and personal reviews of film on their pages. Additionally, studios and filmmakers use the platform to market their work and therefore create larger online conversations. Twitter also has quite a large social presence, with around 262 million active users worldwide. Similar to Facebook, users often share their views about films in tweets. The biggest difference here is that tweets can only be 280 characters (used to be only 140), which greatly limits the extent to which someone can express their opinions on a film. It also is not the best platform for having back and forth conversations and substantial discussion. Facebook seems a lot more fitting of this task.

This section will attempt to outline these additional and greatly varying sources of film criticism in the digital age and discuss how they are having both positive and negative impacts on film criticism and the film industry as a whole.

### IMDb – The People Have Spoken

*Origins and Methodology*

Similar to the unexpected origins and growth of Rotten Tomatoes, IMDb was also started by an unassuming film buff. Colin Needham, a middle-aged British man, “began the Internet Movie Database (IMDb) in 1990 as a hobby.”<sup>50</sup> He had always been a film

---

<sup>50</sup> “Revealed: How the World's Biggest Movie Website Is Run by a 'Self-Confessed Geek' from a House in Bristol.” *Daily Mail Online*, Associated Newspapers, 31 Dec. 2010,

fanatic and “his film obsession peaked in the mid-1990s when he was watching over 1,000 films a year.”<sup>51</sup> As he watched the films, “he would record the credits at the end of a film and then note down every detail.” Knowing that he had already put in a lot of work to gather details on a wide variety of films, he launched the very first version of IMDb on October 17, 1990.<sup>52</sup> Perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of site’s success, is that its initial launch came before the launch of the world wide web itself. This means, that the original site published, was “a series of scripts which allowed you to search a list of credits collected by a wonderful USENET group.”<sup>53</sup> USENET groups were essentially forums where users in different locations using the internet could post. Before the invention of the web, USNET groups were the most popular way to communicate and distribute information on the internet. *Time* described the power of USENET system further, commenting, “the Usenet system of discussion groups allowed tech-savvy people with similar interests to communicate”, which made it a great initial forum for film discussion.<sup>54</sup>

In an interview with the *LA Times*, Needham mentions that “in 1995, we really started to take off. People were going online in the millions. All of a sudden in a two-week period our traffic doubled, then two weeks later it doubled again.”<sup>55</sup> The site saw

---

[www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-1342663/IMDb-run-self-confessed-geek-Colin-Needham-house-Bristol.html](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-1342663/IMDb-run-self-confessed-geek-Colin-Needham-house-Bristol.html).

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> King, Susan. “IMDb Founder Col Needham Talks about His Famous Website and His Favorite Flicks.” *Los Angeles Times*, Los Angeles Times, 18 Nov. 2016, [www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/moviesnow/la-ca-mn-conversation-col-needham-20161108-story.html](http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/moviesnow/la-ca-mn-conversation-col-needham-20161108-story.html).

<sup>53</sup> Rothman, Lily. “IMDb Is Turning 25. How Is It Older Than Web Browsers?” *Time*, Time, 16 Oct. 2015, [time.com/4068036/imdb-history-25th-anniversary/](http://time.com/4068036/imdb-history-25th-anniversary/).

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> King, Susan. “IMDb Founder Col Needham Talks about His Famous Website and His Favorite Flicks.” *Los Angeles Times*, Los Angeles Times, 18 Nov. 2016,

incredible growth from then on and a year later, in 1996, the site was properly incorporated and made an inevitable move over to the World Wide Web. The initial employees of the site in 1996, were volunteers without salaries.<sup>56</sup> Instead, they were given shares of the company, which became much more valuable than their salaries likely would have been when Amazon later purchased the company. One man's interest in film, quickly became a worldwide sensation and the only site of its kind at the time.

Despite the site's incredible fast growth and success in its early years, the early version of IMDb was not the same as the site that lives today. For its time, however, it was extremely progressive, where "users could search several fields that are still in use today, like character name and production company, or browse curated features like a user-selected list of the top 250 movies and a column called 'The WASHED-UPDATE' about stars of the '70s and '80s."<sup>57</sup> At the time, this was the only recognized name for film criticism and provided a place to research information regarding a film, read articles and professional discussion, as well as a forum for discussion with other film buffs. Though the site has progressed greatly over the past 20 years, even the original version of the site was a valuable and progressive resource for the international film community.

As Frey discusses different forms of digital criticism in his book, he classifies IMDb as "primarily designed to communicate information about films", while it "also

---

[www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/moviesnow/la-ca-mn-conversation-col-needham-20161108-story.html](http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/moviesnow/la-ca-mn-conversation-col-needham-20161108-story.html).

<sup>56</sup> "Revealed: How the World's Biggest Movie Website Is Run by a 'Self-Confessed Geek' from a House in Bristol." *Daily Mail Online*, Associated Newspapers, 31 Dec. 2010, [www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-1342663/IMDb-run-self-confessed-geek-Colin-Needham-house-Bristol.html](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-1342663/IMDb-run-self-confessed-geek-Colin-Needham-house-Bristol.html).

<sup>57</sup> Rothman, Lily. "IMDb Is Turning 25. How Is It Older Than Web Browsers?" *Time*, Time, 16 Oct. 2015, [time.com/4068036/imdb-history-25th-anniversary/](http://time.com/4068036/imdb-history-25th-anniversary/).

provide forums for users to comment on them”<sup>58</sup> The site provides in depth information on most of the films posted, including everything from a full list of cast and crew, to videos and photos, to similar movies. There’s even a ‘Did You Know?’ section, with trivia, quotes and other interesting information regarding each film. If we look at *Shape of Water* for example, we can see the true depth of material provided on the site. The film’s IMDb page has 29 videos posted on the site, including all available trailers and interviews with the director and cast. It furthermore includes 350 photos, of action shots from the film, shots outlining the costume design process and some behind the scene shots. It is fascinating and powerful that this site has such depth to each film that lives on the site.

In addition to the pure informational aspect of the site, another central component is the ‘User Ratings’ section. The site combines all reviews submitted on the site and averages them to give an overall rating out of ten. When you click on the rating of a film, the site takes you to a page where you can view an in-depth analysis of the score, from the actual distribution of votes within each rating, to ratings by age and gender, to specific ratings of subsections, like ‘IMDb staff’ or ‘Top 1000 voters’. According to an article in *Wired Magazine*, “all registered IMDb users can submit a single rating – a number between one and ten – for any film on the website. These votes are then re-jigged so that certain demographics (newly-registered users, for example) don’t disproportionately influence the overall ranking of the film.”<sup>59</sup> *Wired* goes on to point out

---

<sup>58</sup> Frey and Sayad, p. 84.

<sup>59</sup> Reynolds, Matt. “You Should Ignore Film Ratings on IMDb and Rotten Tomatoes.” *WIRED*, WIRED UK, 10 Nov. 2017, [www.wired.co.uk/article/which-film-ranking-site-should-i-trust-rotten-tomatoes-imdb-metacritic](http://www.wired.co.uk/article/which-film-ranking-site-should-i-trust-rotten-tomatoes-imdb-metacritic).

that “IMDb doesn’t disclose how it re-jigs these votes, but what it does mean is that a film’s ranking is not quite an overall average of all its user scores, but it’s probably quite close.”<sup>60</sup> The fact that the exact method of how the score is calculated has never been exposed, is one of the main points of controversy for the site and will be outlined further in the flaws section below.

1998 was a hugely important year for the site, as Needham sold his film database to Amazon for an undisclosed sum. Though the specific amount paid for IMDb was not released publicly, “the sale was part of three buy-ups by Amazon that year including Bookpages and Telebook, which totaled \$55 million.”<sup>61</sup> It is safe to assume that IMDb was bought for at least a third of that sum. After the acquisition, Needham stayed on as CEO, as he wanted to make sure that his site stayed on track and true to its initial goal. In the same year of the acquisition, “TIME dubbed the ‘astonishing’ site ‘the most awesome movie database you’ll ever peruse.’”<sup>62</sup> Today, the site continues to grow and acts as one of the top players in online film criticism and as a centralized hub of film information. According to the site’s own statistics, they currently have 4,734,693 titles, with around 600,000 of those being films. They also claim to have more than 250 million unique monthly visitors, making it an extremely popular website worldwide.

---

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> “Revealed: How the World’s Biggest Movie Website Is Run by a ‘Self-Confessed Geek’ from a House in Bristol.” *Daily Mail Online*, Associated Newspapers, 31 Dec. 2010, [www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-1342663/IMDb-run-self-confessed-geek-Colin-Needham-house-Bristol.html](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-1342663/IMDb-run-self-confessed-geek-Colin-Needham-house-Bristol.html).

<sup>62</sup> King, Susan. “IMDb Founder Col Needham Talks about His Famous Website and His Favorite Flicks.” *Los Angeles Times*, Los Angeles Times, 18 Nov. 2016, [www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/moviesnow/la-ca-mn-conversation-col-needham-20161108-story.html](http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/moviesnow/la-ca-mn-conversation-col-needham-20161108-story.html).

*Benefits: Film Information Source and Voice of the Viewers*

Given its sheer depth of information and resources, as well as its emphasis on crowdsourced criticism, IMDb has several key benefits that make it a top player in online film criticism and discussion. One of its main benefits is the information aspect, which is much more in depth when compared to other film criticism sites, especially Rotten Tomatoes. When discussing IMDb in relation to Rotten Tomatoes in his book, Mattias Frey writes “the information side of Rotten Tomatoes is still much less detailed and comprehensive than IMDb. Here the clear priority is the criticism, in contrast to IMDb, where reviews are collected as an archive of hyperlinks to external sites.”<sup>63</sup> This additional information on films, that is not provided in this level of depth on any other sites, is central to the success of the site. True film criticism requires in-depth knowledge of the film being discussed. Without access to all necessary information regarding a film, it is difficult for anyone to make insightful and substantiated claims. IMDb allows for users to access any information they choose in regard to a film, before even beginning their analysis or critique of it. The hope is that given the ease in accessing this information, self-proclaimed film critics can create more insightful commentary than they would be able to, without the informational section of the site.

Unlike Rotten Tomatoes, IMDb focuses completely on user generated reviews, as opposed to professional film critics. This aspect could be argued as a benefit or a flaw, depending on which criticism you value more. However, for the sake of this section remaining unbiased, IMDb’s effectiveness will be judged based on its true goal, to provide a forum for everyday film lovers to post their opinions publicly and discuss film

---

<sup>63</sup> Frey and Sayad, p. 85.

with others internationally. With this goal in mind, it is hard to argue that the site does not do a good job of this. Not everyone who submits a rating has to write a review of the film. In fact, the majority of users on the site just submit a rating. Ratings provide a nice overview of the general sentiment of movie viewers. The user reviews provide more in-depth analysis for those who wish to learn more about the film or see why the rating was low or high. Though there is no requirement in terms of length of the reviews submitted, the majority of user reviews submitted on the site are substantial and at least somewhat thought out.

Another interesting benefit of the site, is that ratings are updated in real-time. Therefore, as more people see a movie and rate it, the score for that film changes accordingly. This allows for films to receive more and more ratings, as distribution of the film increases and more people see it. It also allows for people to review and change their ratings as many times as they would like. This provides opportunities for re-watching and changing your opinion on a film. Once you go in and change your rating, your previous rating is overwritten and disappears from the site completely. This is very fitting, seeing as film is an area where people often change their opinions overtime. By allowing people to change their ratings in real-time, IMDb has created a current picture of how films are being received, even if those films were released 10 or even 60 years ago.

The discussion regarding IMDb would not be complete without examining its influence and power over the success of actor's careers. IMDb "has information on over 3.2 million actors and industry professionals"<sup>64</sup>, which gives it the ability to make or

---

<sup>64</sup> "Revealed: How the World's Biggest Movie Website Is Run by a 'Self-Confessed Geek' from a House in Bristol." *Daily Mail Online*, Associated Newspapers, 31 Dec. 2010,

break an actor's success. In addition to ranking films, the site also ranks actors as part of its IMDbPro section. Using a ranking system called STARMeter, all actors are given a ranking on the site compared to other actors. When you click on a specific star's ranking, you can see an in-depth view of how their ranking has fluctuated over time. Brad Pitt for example, is currently ranked 109 on the STARMeter, down 12 in the past year. In an interview with *The Daily Mail*, IMDb's founder mentions, "I have been told that when people ring up for an appointment with someone important in Hollywood the personal assistant or secretary checks where they are ranked on IMDb before their call is put through."<sup>65</sup> This IMDbPro section has become influential in the film industry, when filmmakers are choosing who to cast or sign to a large studio deal. A surging actor on the list could find unexpected fame just by outranking other artists at a certain point in time. For example, the top-rated actor on the site currently is Karen Gillan, who is a name likely unknown to the average viewer. Also in the top three, is Olivia Cooke, who is definitely no household name, like Brad Pitt for example.

*Flaws: Content Quality and Biased Reviews*

Despite the many aspects of IMDb that make it a valuable addition to the landscape of film criticism and discussion, there are several aspects of the site that are not as favorable. The main flaw is regarding the overall quality of the reviews and discussion that occur on the site. Seeing as there is not much of a vetting process to submit reviews, it is quite simple for anyone to create an account, write reviews and participate in

---

[www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-1342663/IMDb-run-self-confessed-geek-Colin-Needham-house-Bristol.html](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-1342663/IMDb-run-self-confessed-geek-Colin-Needham-house-Bristol.html).

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

discussions with other users on IMDb. This provides a major issue, as there really is not a good way for the site to ensure that those submitting the reviews have actually seen the film. Someone with personal issues against a movie concept, specific actors in the film, or something else bugging them, could easily create an account and trash the film without making any substantiated claims.

A great example of this is a little-known film named *Gunday*, a Bollywood film that has the worst rating ever on the site. The film received a 1.4 out of 10, based on more than 44,000 ratings. A curious reporter did some digging into possible causes for this horrendous rating and uncovered some interesting insights. What he discovered is that people protested the film, “because of the film’s reference to the Bangladesh Liberation War as the Indo-Pak war. In its first 11 minutes, the movie claims that India alone defeated Pakistan, and implies that an independent Bangladesh was simply a result of the fight.”<sup>66</sup> Thousands flooded to the site to submit excessively negative reviews of the film, quickly pushing it to the lowest level the site has ever seen. This likely included many people who had never before posted a review on IMDb. Some even went as far as to spread the word online using “the hashtag #GundayHumiliatedHistoryOfBangladesh to get the word out about the protests and to ask supporters to bury the film on IMDb”<sup>67</sup> This is an example of a film where reviewers on IMDb may have not even seen the film or saw it with a biased perspective. This could prove to be a very important issue as the site tries to provide accurate and objective coverage of films regardless of how controversial their subject matter may be.

---

<sup>66</sup> Goldenberg, David. “The Story Behind the Worst Movie on IMDb.” *FiveThirtyEight*, FiveThirtyEight, 21 Sept. 2014, [fivethirtyeight.com/features/the-story-behind-the-worst-movie-on-imdb/](http://fivethirtyeight.com/features/the-story-behind-the-worst-movie-on-imdb/).

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

The reality of film criticism is that there is always going to be individual bias. However, in the case of *Gunday*, thousands turned Rotten Tomatoes into a place to protest, by bringing their existing political opinions to the site and ignoring the artistic value of the film. Actions like this diminish the credibility of reviews when people let their political opinions and emotions get overly involved. Yet given the nature of film criticism, there is really no way around it because there is no way to eliminate personal viewpoints and biases.

Perhaps related to *Gunday* and other similar incidents, in 2017 IMDb made a controversial decision to shut down the message boards section. On February 20<sup>th</sup>, they cited that the boards were no longer providing a “positive, useful experience.”<sup>68</sup> This decision was met with anger from thousands of users of the site. A user named Dan L even started a petition to get them to reopen the message boards and received over 10,000 signatures. Despite being upset with the site’s decision, Dan seemed to realize the issue with the boards, mentioning in his interview that “the message boards have become a liability in terms of their credibility, and this might lead to less companies wanting to advertise with them.”<sup>69</sup> This seems to be the main issue with IMDb retaining this part of their site. The message boards were supposed to exist to provide avenues for free speech about films, making it difficult for IMDb to even attempt to control all content published on their site. If they cannot monitor all content posted in real time, then they are not always fully aware of what is being posted on their site. For example, someone could be

---

<sup>68</sup> Williams, Lara. “Why IMDb Should Rethink the Decision to Close Its Message Boards.” *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 17 Feb. 2017, [www.theguardian.com/film/2017/feb/17/why-imdb-should-rethink-the-decision-to-close-its-message-boards](http://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/feb/17/why-imdb-should-rethink-the-decision-to-close-its-message-boards).

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

posting anti-Semitic comments on a WW2 film's message board without the site noticing until days or even months later. This is not a risk a continuously growing company wants to take, especially one owned by a tech giant like Amazon.

There has also been some controversy regarding the actual number of consistent users that the site has. An article in *The Guardian* talks more about Dan's attempt to save the message board and discusses his views on the overall credibility of the site's data. Dan mentions, "they make bold claims such as 250 million monthly users worldwide. If IMDb really had 250 million users how come the movie with the most ratings, *Shawshank Redemption*, only has 1.7 million votes? I don't see how they can have 3.3% of the world's population regularly using the site."<sup>70</sup> He makes a valid point, as it seems unlikely that they would have such a large user base. However, it is interesting to discuss this in terms of using the site versus actually interacting with it. It is possible that 250 million people use the site and the majority of them do not post their own ratings or reviews. It could just be that IMDb is more of a site for accessing information, as opposed to actually contributing. If this is the case though, the sites ratings are definitely not as widespread as the 250 million users number suggests. 1.86 million reviews for *The Shawshank Redemption* is the most of any films on the site, while many others only have a few thousand ratings submitted.

Another main issue with IMDb is the high level of male members who post ratings on the site. When looking at a female-centered film's ratings on the site, there seems to be a similar bias due to significantly more male reviewers. Considering the

---

<sup>70</sup> Williams, Lara. "Why IMDb Should Rethink the Decision to Close Its Message Boards." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 17 Feb. 2017, [www.theguardian.com/film/2017/feb/17/why-imdb-should-rethink-the-decision-to-close-its-message-boards](http://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/feb/17/why-imdb-should-rethink-the-decision-to-close-its-message-boards).

site's top-ranked film, *The Shawshank Redemption* reveals interesting insights. An article in *Wired* discusses the gender split. "Its score of 9.3 is based on the votes of around 1.86 million IMDb users. 1.2 million of those votes came from men. IMDb does tweak its rankings to lessen the influence of particular demographics, but men often make up over 70 per cent of the voters for any film."<sup>71</sup> *The Shawshank Redemption* is no doubt one of the best films ever made, however, the fact that it has a male-centered cast and received a high rating on the site from mostly male viewers is hard to ignore.

To look at if this applies to female-centered film's ratings on the site, we can take a look at the the 2017 female remake of *Ghostbusters*. This remake of *Ghostbusters* featured an almost entirely female cast and received just a 4.1 out of 10 on the site. Breaking this ranking down further, it is revealed that the film received just 3.6 out of 10 with 7,547 male reviewers and almost double that with a score of 7.7 out of 10 among 1,564 female reviewers. With both these films receiving the majority of their reviews from male reviewers and the male-centered film receiving significantly more positive reviews, it is quite possible that the site has too many male users for films to receive accurate ratings for all viewers. Perhaps that is an issue with film reviewing in general. The person reviewing the film is likely not the same as the person reading the review. Young women read reviews from old white men, making it seemingly unlikely that the two would see eye to eye on films based on age, sex and cultural differences.

---

<sup>71</sup> Reynolds, Matt. "You Should Ignore Film Ratings on IMDb and Rotten Tomatoes." *WIRED*, WIRED UK, 10 Nov. 2017, [www.wired.co.uk/article/which-film-ranking-site-should-i-trust-rotten-tomatoes-imdb-metacritic](http://www.wired.co.uk/article/which-film-ranking-site-should-i-trust-rotten-tomatoes-imdb-metacritic).

## Metacritic

### *Origins and Methodology*

Metacritic is another powerful player in the world of film criticism, launched in 2001 by three former attorneys. The site converts reviews in all formats (0-5 stars, A-F grading, etc.) into a 100-point equivalent scale. Once reviews are put in the 0-100 scale, some scores receive more weight than others. The site's website describes its 'Metascore' as "a weighted average in that we assign more importance, or weight, to some critics and publications than others, based on their quality and overall stature."<sup>72</sup> Metascores are then classified as either green (75-100) for good, yellow (40-74) for average, or red (0-39) for bad. Unlike IMDb, the site calculates its scores only using the reviews of professional film critics. The site does have a section for viewers to submit reviews for films, but these scores are not included when calculating the Metascore.

Metacritic has taken some heat over the past few years for refusing to reveal the formula they use to produce their scores. They admit that they place greater influence on the scores of certain reviews but refuse to reveal exactly how this process of prioritizing and weighting works. Metacritic's film editor, Keith Kimbell, responded to questions regarding this process with a simple "That's our little secret formula. I'll just leave it at that."<sup>73</sup> Given the higher recognition and respect that established critics like Peter Travers or A.O. Scott have compared to other critics, one would assume that they would receive more gravitas and weighting on the site. However, we do not and may never know if this is the case. In addition to weighting certain reviews more than others, the site also admits

---

<sup>72</sup> "How We Create the Metascore Magic." *Metacritic*, [www.metacritic.com/about-metascores](http://www.metacritic.com/about-metascores).

<sup>73</sup> Rogers, Adam. "Rotten Tomatoes and the Unbearable Heaviness of Data." *Wired*, Conde Nast, 6 July 2017, [www.wired.com/story/is-rotten-tomatoes-ruining-movies/](http://www.wired.com/story/is-rotten-tomatoes-ruining-movies/).

to using a sort of grading curve approach to their overall ratings. On the site's 'About' section, they write, "in addition, for music and movies, we also normalize the resulting scores, which prevents scores from clumping together."<sup>74</sup> There seems to be a lot of work going on behind the scenes to create the Metascores that viewers see when they visit the site. The site obviously speaks very highly of its own scoring methods, referring to the Metascore on their site as "a weighted average of the most respected critics writing reviews online and in print."<sup>75</sup> The remaining parts of this section will discuss both the benefits and flaws of this popular film criticism site.

*Benefits: Nuanced Scoring and Predictive Properties*

Unlike Rotten Tomatoes, Metacritic takes a much more obvious and direct approach to their rating method. Instead of simplifying the classification of films as fresh or rotten, the site creates an actual average of the critical scores submitted. It does not try to classify ratings itself and instead focuses on creating scores that make sense to site visitors. An article on *Screenrant* discusses how scores on the site are much more nuanced than other criticism sites, especially Rotten Tomatoes. The author writes, "while Rotten Tomatoes tells you the degree of consensus amongst critics, Metacritic actually provides a better indication of quality beyond rotten/fresh."<sup>76</sup> To ensure that users are not totally left to their own devices, it classifies these average scores into three categories, red, yellow, and green. This way, visitors can see the overall rating as well as an indication of where the film sits in terms of how likely a viewer is to like it.

---

<sup>74</sup> "How We Create the Metascore Magic." *Metacritic*, [www.metacritic.com/about-metascores](http://www.metacritic.com/about-metascores).

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> Colbert, Stephen M. "Rotten Tomatoes, Metacritic, IMDb & CinemaScore Explained." *Screen Rant*, 19 Sept. 2017, [screenrant.com/rotten-tomatoes-metacritic-imdb-cinemascore-explained/](http://screenrant.com/rotten-tomatoes-metacritic-imdb-cinemascore-explained/).

The fact that the site creates a weighted average, as opposed to a normal average, can be viewed as a great benefit to filmgoers seeking guidance from the site. By giving more weight to certain critics, it ensures that the score a film receives is more heavily influenced by critics who have been in the industry longer, work for more respected publications or are regarded more highly in the industry. This means that the final score a film receives is largely based on top film critics, while still taking into the account the reviews of other still-knowledgeable, but less influential writers. The same Screenrant article also mentions that, “the weighting also ensures that the curve isn’t thrown by critics that have a tendency of being overly positive or overly negative.”<sup>77</sup> Metacritic’s weighted average methodology is its key strength, as it offers a more accurate representation/picture of what the best film critics think. Even though viewers do not know exactly how this weighting method works, they can be confident that Metacritic ranks the more prominent film critics higher and that the ratings are not affected at all by regular filmgoers, since there is no place for audience ratings or opinions in the weighting.

This weighted average methodology gains credibility with the discovery that unlike Rotten Tomatoes, Metacritic ratings can seemingly predict box office success for major releases, both in opening weekends and beyond. A study posted on Metacritic’s blog, finds “a surprisingly strong correlation between film quality and opening weekend grosses.”<sup>78</sup> Films with scores in the 81 to 90 range, on average, have opening weekend sales of \$49.6 million, compared to films in the 40-50 range, that typically only bring in

---

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Dietz, Jason. “Can Metascores Predict Box Office Performance?” *Metacritic*, 12 Apr. 2016, [www.metacritic.com/feature/film-quality-vs-box-office-grosses](http://www.metacritic.com/feature/film-quality-vs-box-office-grosses).

\$21.4 million on opening weekend.<sup>79</sup> An example this year was the new *Tomb Raider*, with a Metacritic score of 48 and an opening weekend of \$23.6 million. *Tomb Raider* received a significantly higher rating on IMDb, scoring a 6.8 out of 10, further proving that professional film critics are more accurate than average viewers when predicting what films will succeed in theaters.

In addition to finding a correlation between Metacritic score and opening weekend success, the study also made an interesting discovery of a correlation between Metacritic scores and second weekend box office declines. For films with scores in the 81-90 range, they typically see second weekend declines of 38.8%. However, for films with a rating between 40-50, they should expect a decline of 49.5%.<sup>80</sup> *Batman vs. Superman* is a great example of this, as it received a 44 on Metacritic and saw a second weekend decline of 70% at the box office. In contrast, the IMDb score was a 6.6 out of 10, suggesting that its second week box office figures would still be relatively strong. With this example, Metacritic's ratings were a better indicator of the ongoing success of a film at the box office than IMDb for example.

#### *Flaws: Limited Selection and the "Secret" Formula*

Despite seemingly finding a nice balance through weighted averages and creating easy-to-understand and digest scores, the site also has a few drawbacks. One of the biggest challenges that Metacritic faces is that it includes a more limited selection of critics on the site than its main competitor, Rotten Tomatoes. A Screenrant article points

---

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Dietz, Jason. "Can Metascores Predict Box Office Performance?" *Metacritic*, 12 Apr. 2016, [www.metacritic.com/feature/film-quality-vs-box-office-grosses](http://www.metacritic.com/feature/film-quality-vs-box-office-grosses).

out that “it’s unlikely your favorite writer or YouTuber is factored into their score.”<sup>81</sup>

This could be a disappointment for those filmgoers who wish to see a collection of some of their favorite film critics all in one place. However, the author goes on to mention that “that doesn’t mean the score isn’t accurate, it just means the voice you trust the most may not be influencing the overall score.”<sup>82</sup> Viewers who are very particular about where their film criticism comes from, might be dissatisfied with the selection of critics that Metacritic has to offer.

Another major challenge the site has had to deal with is the fact that they refuse to fully disclose how their formula works to produce scores. In 2013, a professor from Full Sail University decided to explore the site’s ratings further and did an investigation attempting to uncover the true formula behind the site’s scores. His results showed a system that “categorized outlets in six different ‘tiers’ and gave heavy weight to sites like *IGN* and *Wired* (and significantly less weight to other big sites like *Giant Bomb*).”<sup>83</sup> Despite seemingly identifying a formula that explained the ratings produced on the site, Metacritic was quick to respond. Metacritic posted on Facebook in response to the study and shot down the formula “calling it ‘wildly, wholly inaccurate,’ and accused Gamasutra of running a misleading headline.”<sup>84</sup> There have since been other researchers to disprove his findings by testing his methodology. The original goal of the study was to prove that it is possible to determine the weight of each review on the site.

---

<sup>81</sup> Colbert, Stephen M. “Rotten Tomatoes, Metacritic, IMDb & CinemaScore Explained.” *Screen Rant*, 19 Sept. 2017, [screenrant.com/rotten-tomatoes-metacritic-imdb-cinemascore-explained/](http://screenrant.com/rotten-tomatoes-metacritic-imdb-cinemascore-explained/).

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> Schreier, Jason. “The Case Of The Flawed Metacritic Study.” *Kotaku*, Kotaku.com, 29 Mar. 2013, [kotaku.com/the-case-of-the-flawed-metacritic-study-463147686](http://kotaku.com/the-case-of-the-flawed-metacritic-study-463147686).

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

Since Metacritic refuses to fully disclose how it calculates its score, there will always be doubt regarding accuracy due to the lack of transparency. This is not necessarily something the site must disclose, but it is something that will prevent certain visitors from trusting the site's ratings.

### Other Film Criticism Sites

In addition to IMDb and Metacritic, sites like The Movie Db and Letterboxd are a couple other rising players in online film criticism. The Movie Db focuses on user scores, giving film's a percentage rating from 0 to 100. However, when visiting the site, you can only see the score, not how it was calculated or the reviews that went into it. In addition to this score, the site also provides information on the cast and crew, trailers and video clips and a discussion section, where users can share their thoughts with other viewers of the film. This discussion platform seems to be well-used for popular films, like *Black Panther*, but pretty much untouched for less-known indie films like *The Florida Project*. If the site is only creating conversation surrounding films that are being widely discussed already outside the site, then it is not adding much value to the overall film criticism and discussion landscape.

Letterboxd is more of a social network for sharing film tastes with others. Users can use the website as a diary-like platform to keep track of all the films they have seen and write reviews on them. If you visit a specific film page on the website, there is a distribution of ratings on a scale of 1 to 5 stars, with number of ratings clearly visible and an average of the scores calculated. Clicking on the distribution of scores reveals all the users that rated the film sorted by their rating. Once users have developed a library of

films they have seen, they can showcase their favorite films on their profile and create lists of whatever types of films they choose (i.e. favorite comedies of the last 5 years or top Tarantino films). The platform also allows users to find and follow friends to share their reviews and see what their network is enjoying. Letterboxd is one of the newer players in the online film discussion and criticism space and seems to be finding a nice way to promote cultured and productive discussion regarding film, while not being exclusive in any sense of the word. It emphasizes the social aspect of film and uses modern technology to allow film lovers everywhere to connect and discuss. Given the direction that film criticism seems to be moving, it is likely that Letterboxd will continue to grow and play a larger and large role in the overall online film landscape.

### The Impact of Social Media on Film Criticism

This chapter outlining other players in online film discussion and criticism, would not be complete without also discussing the role of social media platforms. Of all existing social media platforms, Facebook and Twitter have the most users, naturally making them the best place for a wide range of discussions. Film has always been a topic of discussion amongst friends, but these two platforms have greatly expanded the reach of film discussion to users' international networks. Social media platforms provide an opportunity for studios to increase the coverage their films receive, while interacting with the viewers to determine what they really want. These sites also provide a place for viewers to talk about upcoming and current movies, and easily share their opinions with friends at the tips of their fingertips. The film world has never been so connected.

Sites like Facebook and Twitter play a large role in several areas of film success, providing a direct channel for studios to communicate with viewers. Social media is the ultimate marketing tool, as it allows for studios to interact with their viewers in ways that were not previously possible. *The Huffington Post* discusses the role of social media in film success, reminding us that “social media was what made it possible for the *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* trailer to garner over 1 million views in the first 23 minutes.”<sup>85</sup> It is seemingly unheard of that a trailer could spread this fast to such a wide audience. Before social media, it would take significant market research for studios to decide how and where to market their films. However, social media has made it possible to easily monitor social conversations and specifically target groups of people with similar interests to your film. It makes engagement with fans seamless and affordable, and by creating online conversations with fans, films can build excitement leading up to their release.

So just how influential is social media for film? The answer is very. According a recent poll, upwards of 72% of social media users write online comments about the films they see.<sup>86</sup> Not only do people post about movies after they see them, what they see is influenced by what they read on social media platforms. A survey conducted by the consulting firm Penn Schoen & Berland and *The Hollywood Reporter*, uncovered that a third of social media users had decided to see a film in theaters because of a post they had

---

<sup>85</sup> Kirby, David M. “The Role Of Social Media In Film Marketing.” *The Huffington Post*, TheHuffingtonPost.com, 7 Dec. 2017, [www.huffingtonpost.com/david-m-kirby/the-role-of-social-media-b\\_10571026.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-m-kirby/the-role-of-social-media-b_10571026.html).

<sup>86</sup> Luna, Taryn. “Movies Depend on Social Media Support for Staying Power at Box Office.” *Bostonglobe.com*, 13 Mar. 2013, [www.bostonglobe.com/business/2013/03/12/movies-depend-social-media-support-for-staying-power-box-office/mDRqLV2AaS1xqmLdFV1N5O/story.html](http://www.bostonglobe.com/business/2013/03/12/movies-depend-social-media-support-for-staying-power-box-office/mDRqLV2AaS1xqmLdFV1N5O/story.html).

seen on a social network<sup>87</sup>. It is crazy to think that these platforms could have such a large effect on the film decisions viewers make.

Twitter has an especially large influence on viewing decisions. It is interesting to note that on average, Twitter users go to the cinema 25% more than the average moviegoer.<sup>88</sup> This is likely due to the fact that twitter users are very connected to pop culture and current news and are therefore more likely to both hear about films earlier and receive more information on those films. Viewers without access to Twitter, have less access to information regarding a film and are therefore less likely to go and see it. A 2014 Nielsen study uncovered that 87% of Twitter users claimed that their most recent decision to see a film in a movie theater was influenced by tweets they saw on the social media platform.<sup>89</sup> This shows that not only are Twitter users more likely to see films in theaters, but also that they almost always make their decision based on other people's content on the site.

Seeing as Twitter can have such a large influence on people's movie-going habits, it is no surprise that social media has been a driving force in the box office success of many movies in recent years. There are a wide range of films that have been greatly endorsed by social media and seen incredible box office success because of it. In a study

---

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Robehmed, Natalie. "For Movies, Twitter Users Are A Key Audience." *Forbes*, Forbes Magazine, 27 Apr. 2015, [www.forbes.com/sites/nalierobehmed/2015/04/27/for-movies-twitter-users-are-a-key-audience/#4d6414395300](http://www.forbes.com/sites/nalierobehmed/2015/04/27/for-movies-twitter-users-are-a-key-audience/#4d6414395300).

<sup>89</sup> Robehmed, Natalie. "For Movies, Twitter Users Are A Key Audience." *Forbes*, Forbes Magazine, 27 Apr. 2015, [www.forbes.com/sites/nalierobehmed/2015/04/27/for-movies-twitter-users-are-a-key-audience/#4d6414395300](http://www.forbes.com/sites/nalierobehmed/2015/04/27/for-movies-twitter-users-are-a-key-audience/#4d6414395300).

done by analysis company Crimson Hexagon, they found that *The Hunger Games* was mentioned in 930,000 tweets during its \$152.5 million opening weekend.<sup>90</sup>

This high volume of tweets can likely be explained by the intended audience of this film. The fact that *The Hunger Games* was based on a young adult novel, indicates that the target audience was younger women, who are greater users of Twitter. This justifies why the film received so many tweets compared to films with older target audiences for example. The same study referred to above, found that *Lincoln* was tweeted only 19,000 times in its \$21 million opening weekend<sup>91</sup>. This is likely due to the fact that this film was not meant for viewers as active on social media platforms as fans of the *Hunger Games* for example.

Though this is not the only factor that affects box office success, it is hard to ignore this seemingly strong correlation between social media reach and box office numbers. To dive even deeper into the power that a single tweet can have, a new study by Networked Insights found that a single tweet has the power to add \$560 on average to a film's opening weekend.<sup>92</sup> This further emphasizes the impact of posts on the platform. Every person that spends just a few seconds to craft a short post on the site, has the power to greatly influence the success of a film.

As studios began to realize the true power of social media over the success of their films, they realized that they should monitor social conversations to ensure their

---

<sup>90</sup> Luna, Taryn. "Movies Depend on Social Media Support for Staying Power at Box Office." *Bostonglobe.com*, 13 Mar. 2013, [www.bostonglobe.com/business/2013/03/12/movies-depend-social-media-support-for-staying-power-box-office/mDRqLV2AaS1xqmLdFV1N5O/story.html](http://www.bostonglobe.com/business/2013/03/12/movies-depend-social-media-support-for-staying-power-box-office/mDRqLV2AaS1xqmLdFV1N5O/story.html).

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Graser, Marc. "How Much Is a Tweet Worth to Hollywood? \$560 at the Box Office." *Variety*, 27 Feb. 2015, [variety.com/2015/digital/news/the-power-of-twitter-on-a-movies-box-office-and-why-its-not-what-you-might-expect-1201442361/](http://variety.com/2015/digital/news/the-power-of-twitter-on-a-movies-box-office-and-why-its-not-what-you-might-expect-1201442361/).

marketing campaigns have the right messaging and adjust accordingly. Realizing this growing need, Fizziology, a social media research firm was founded to address this exact revelation. Fizziology provides studios with reports based on online conversations. In an interview with *Forbes*, their cofounder mentioned, “we have over 2 billion social media feeds related to media and entertainment in our data warehouse”<sup>93</sup> The company uses software that connects to Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, Instagram and other blogs to closely monitor conversations about films.

After gathering all online conversations about a film, they can send this information to those in charge of the film’s marketing efforts. With this information, marketers can change their strategies to please social media users and reach a wider audience. The cofounder of Fizziology explains, “if a studio sees its first trailer is performing poorly from Facebook comments or that people don't like a particular actor on Twitter, they can alter the second trailer and refocus marketing to save the box office fortunes of a flick.”<sup>94</sup> Having access to this data can save film marketers thousands of dollars on ineffective marketing and refocus efforts if a campaign is not going as planned. This data is updated on a daily basis, allowing studios to pivot in real-time if they deem necessary, to ensure that their marketing efforts are succeeding/reaching set goals. Most studios with major releases have decided to use Fizziology’s technology to monitor their film, with Fizziology working on over 70% of the major releases that came out in 2015.<sup>95</sup>

---

<sup>93</sup> Robehmed, Natalie. “For Movies, Twitter Users Are A Key Audience.” *Forbes*, Forbes Magazine, 27 Apr. 2015, [www.forbes.com/sites/nalierobehmed/2015/04/27/for-movies-twitter-users-are-a-key-audience/#4d6414395300](http://www.forbes.com/sites/nalierobehmed/2015/04/27/for-movies-twitter-users-are-a-key-audience/#4d6414395300).

<sup>94</sup> Robehmed, Natalie. “For Movies, Twitter Users Are A Key Audience.” *Forbes*, Forbes Magazine, 27 Apr. 2015, [www.forbes.com/sites/nalierobehmed/2015/04/27/for-movies-twitter-users-are-a-key-audience/#4d6414395300](http://www.forbes.com/sites/nalierobehmed/2015/04/27/for-movies-twitter-users-are-a-key-audience/#4d6414395300).

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

This number has no doubt increased since then, as social media platforms continue to grow and expand their reach and influence.

## Conclusion

With all these sites and case studies in mind, it seems appropriate to return to the important question: Has the internet democratized film criticism? The answer appears to be that in some ways it has, but in others not. There is no doubt that the internet has provided a way to connect people globally and provide a place to discuss film on a larger scale. Unlike the early days of film criticism, today anyone can grab their phone or computer, create their own content and share their opinion with a mass network of people all over the world. In *Film Criticism in the Digital Age* several critics discuss their opinions on the internet's ability to positively affect film discussion and criticism. Kevin B. Lee points out, "this to me is the full potential of online cinema culture: to be expansive and connected all at once."<sup>96</sup> Another mentions how the Internet has allowed him to connect with people he previously could not have. He writes, "I started a blog and gradually acquired readers, and now I can go back-and-forth with people ranging from renowned academics like David Bordwell, to director Raymond de Felitta, to professional critics like Kim Morgan and Jim Emerson, to the self-taught and fiercely intellectual Girish Shambu."<sup>97</sup> This success story illustrates the potential of the internet to connect average viewers, regardless of their film knowledge and training, to professional critics all over the world.

---

<sup>96</sup> Frey and Sayad, p. 235.

<sup>97</sup> Frey and Sayad, p. 237.

Rotten Tomatoes has played a minor role in this democratization, as it includes public ratings but places much more emphasis on the scores of professional critics. The aggregate score created by reviews from viewers, is often ignored and is not the number that arises when you search a film on google. Metacritic also does not seem to care much about how the viewers react to a film. They too have a place for users to submit their ratings, but their Metascores are really the priority. IMDb is doing the best job of contributing to the democratization of film criticism. IMDb focuses solely on user ratings, with its scores that average out 0 -10 star ratings from its viewers. They also provide the option for viewers to submit written reviews on the site, along with their star rating. These reviews can then be seen by other visitors to the site, allowing viewers to receive guidance from other viewers who have seen the film, as an alternative to reading professional critics' reviews.

Finally, social media channels have played an important role in democratizing film criticism. Both Twitter and Facebook have huge reach and allow for film discussion on a previously unimaginable scale. Any given person can post a tweet about a film and in minutes be involved in a discussion with thousands of people internationally.

The main issue does not appear to be whether the internet has democratized film criticism, but instead that not everyone agrees that the internet democratization of film commentary is a positive progression. Mervi Pantti, a professor of Media and Communication Studies at the University of Helsinki, discusses that “there exists a significant divergence of opinion about film criticism in the digital age”.<sup>98</sup> She mentions that “although many critics have not welcomed the new journalistic practices, many

---

<sup>98</sup> Frey and Sayad, p. 181.

readers have found them desirable or necessary.”<sup>99</sup> One example of a dissident is Armond White, a film critic for the National Review, who argues that the criticism on the internet today should not be viewed as real criticism. He writes, “today’s criticism isn’t real conversation; on the Internet it’s too solipsistic and autodidactic to be called a heart-to-heart. Viral criticism isn’t real; it’s mostly half-baked, overlong term-paper essays by fans who like to think they think.”<sup>100</sup> Though everyone is able to create and post film-related content, that does not necessarily mean they should. There is an inherent reason that film critics have been given the privilege to write about films as a career, which is the fact that they have committed their lives to it through intensive study and experience and developed knowledge and expertise that could never be matched by someone reviewing films as a hobby. Professional film critics add depth that can only be created through full commitment to film.

The goal of this paper so far has been to outline all the main sources of film criticism in the digital age and discuss their main strengths and weaknesses. In this section of the paper I will attempt to take a more general approach and consider all forums simultaneously to discuss what I think is working and what is not. It is quite clear from my research that both professional and non-professional critics can still play important roles, but their roles will change moving forward. For example, A.O. Scott at *The New York Times* still has a large following (*The New York Times* has 3.5 million paid subscribers today and over 130 million monthly readers<sup>101</sup>). The readers are comprised of

---

<sup>99</sup> Frey and Sayad, p. 181.

<sup>100</sup> Frey and Sayad, p. 222.

<sup>101</sup> Tran, Kevin. “The New York Times Soars Past 3 Million Subscribers.” *Business Insider*, Business Insider, 8 Dec. 2017, [www.businessinsider.com/the-new-york-times-soars-past-3-million-subscribers-2017-12](http://www.businessinsider.com/the-new-york-times-soars-past-3-million-subscribers-2017-12).

an older generation, that did not grow up in the world of Rotten Tomatoes and are not digital natives. Clearly the top film critics in the highly respected outlets will continue to have readership in the age of democratization albeit with older consumers. People who grew up in the 1980s, with exposure to sites like IMDb and Rotten Tomatoes, likely do not have the same level of respect for or awareness of film reviews in *The New York Times* or other traditional outlets. The future belongs to digital natives, so it is likely that professional film critics' importance and therefore influence will diminish. I will discuss some possible options for what film criticism could and should look like moving forward and what types of forums/sites should exist to fit the inevitable future landscape.

Film critics need to write less. Today, as people rush from one activity to the other and spend hours a day looking at their phones, demand for condensed and easy to digest content has greatly increased. People want information they can read and process quickly, because many do not have time to sit down and read full articles anymore. Film needs to change with the times and focus more on scores, in addition to some short content/main highlights. Rotten Tomatoes has attempted to do this, but I would argue they have not yet found a sweet spot. Their main issue is the scoring method they use, which leads me to my next point.

Ratings should be based on intentions of the film. As discussed briefly in the *Suicide Squad* case study, when a viewer chooses what film to see, their decision is usually based on what they are in the mood for. For example, people go to see *Suicide Squad* to be entertained by a big-budget action hero movie, with crazy fight scenes and stunning visual effects. Yet film ratings do not take a film's goal into account. *Suicide Squad* never intended to be an Oscar contender, so we should not be rating it as if it did.

If a film is successful in accomplishing its intended goal for its intended audience, then it should receive a high rating. Though it may be a controversial opinion, I enjoyed *Suicide Squad*, because I went into it knowing what I was likely going to get. With the only goal of being entertained, *Suicide Squad* exceeded my expectations. Despite that the acting, dialogue, plot, etc. were unsuccessful and poorly done, the film itself should be deemed a success because it accomplished what it set out to do.

Scores should be standardized for all critics. Despite the many sites discussed here, that have attempted to aggregate film scores into one digestible number, there is still a major issue in that different critics use different scoring methods. Some use 4 stars, others use 5. Some use letter grades, others a simple thumbs up or thumbs down. There are even many critics that to this day do not use anything quantifiable at all. This provides an incredible challenge when sites like Metacritic, for example, create all of their Metascores by combining a wide range of film reviews. They are forced to convert all different forms of ratings into a single number out of 100, despite the fact that different rating formats do not easily transfer onto different scales. For example, how do you transfer 3 out of 4 stars to a 100-point scale. When a reviewer gives a film a 3 out of 4, that does not necessarily mean we can assume that is a 75% rating. A 3 might be a really great rating, whereas a 4 may rarely be used, as it signifies the top of the top. An appropriate solution would be to have a standardized scoring system for all reviewers internationally. Though it would seemingly be quite difficult to have reviewers all agree on the same rating system, it might be the only way to save film criticism as we know. As mentioned, the majority of viewers do not seem to want full-fledged, essay-like criticism anymore. They are much more interested in scores. However, in order for these scores to

be truly accurate and effective averages of all film critics, critics across the globe need to come to somewhat of an agreement, using the same quantifiable scale.

Viewers should weight critics to meet their own preferences. This is another issue that no current film criticism sites seem to be addressing, as both Rotten Tomatoes and Metacritic decide how to weight the reviews of specific critics. When it comes to film specifically, viewers seem to care most about what the people they trust think. This is usually a combination of people in their immediate network (i.e. friends and family), as well as professional/online sources of film criticism. It is only natural to want advice from viewers that have similar tastes to your own. Therefore, instead of Rotten Tomatoes or IMDb determining which reviews you should pay more attention to, viewers should be able to rate who they trust the most, in order to get reviews based on their specific network. This would mean that when you get a rating of a film, this rating would be an average of the scores of the people you have chosen, whether it be friends or critics, which would ensure that the ratings you are receiving are relevant to you.

These are just a few suggestions I have for film criticism of the future. Given my research on the current state of online film criticism and discussion, it appears as though these are important flaws that must be addressed by critics and viewers alike. If these challenges are ignored, it seems possible that professional critics will eventually disappear from the film landscape completely. Though some might argue that we no longer need film critics, in the traditional sense of the word, they provide valuable insights and knowledge that the average viewer could not match, unless they chose to commit their life to film. Film would be reduced to a lower level of intelligent discussion, which would likely lead to studios and filmmakers only being able to survive with highly

entertaining, high budget films. However, if these concerns are properly addressed and contested, it is possible that both professional and hobbyist critics could bring film criticism to new levels of prominence and success, by each adding different and valuable insights to the complicated and ever-changing film landscape.

## Works Cited

- Barnes, Brooks. "Attacked by Rotten Tomatoes." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 7 Sept. 2017, [www.nytimes.com/2017/09/07/business/media/rotten-tomatoes-box-office.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/07/business/media/rotten-tomatoes-box-office.html).
- Bergstrom, Aren. "A Very Brief History of Film Criticism." *The Toronto Film Scene*, [thetfs.ca/article/brief-history-film-criticism/](http://thetfs.ca/article/brief-history-film-criticism/).
- Brueggemann, Tom. "Studios Are Right: Rotten Tomatoes Has Ruined Film Criticism - Opinion." *IndieWire*, 23 June 2017, [www.indiewire.com/2017/06/rotten-tomatoes-film-critics-transformers-1201845002/](http://www.indiewire.com/2017/06/rotten-tomatoes-film-critics-transformers-1201845002/).
- "Cahiers Du Cinema." *New World Encyclopedia*, [www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Cahiers\\_du\\_Cinema](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Cahiers_du_Cinema).
- Colbert, Stephen M. "Rotten Tomatoes, Metacritic, IMDb & CinemaScore Explained." *Screen Rant*, 19 Sept. 2017, [screenrant.com/rotten-tomatoes-metacritic-imdb-cinemascore-explained/](http://screenrant.com/rotten-tomatoes-metacritic-imdb-cinemascore-explained/).
- Dietz, Jason. "Can Metascores Predict Box Office Performance?" *Metacritic*, 12 Apr. 2016, [www.metacritic.com/feature/film-quality-vs-box-office-grosses](http://www.metacritic.com/feature/film-quality-vs-box-office-grosses).
- Duong, Sen. "Rotten-Tomatoes.com." *Asianconnections.com*, [v1.asianconnections.com/entertainment/rotten\\_tomatoes.php](http://v1.asianconnections.com/entertainment/rotten_tomatoes.php).
- Frey, Mattias, and Cecilia Sayad, editors. *Film Criticism in the Digital Age*. Rutgers University Press, 2017.
- Goldenberg, David. "The Story Behind the Worst Movie on IMDb." *FiveThirtyEight*, FiveThirtyEight, 21 Sept. 2014, [fivethirtyeight.com/features/the-story-behind-the-worst-movie-on-imdb/](http://fivethirtyeight.com/features/the-story-behind-the-worst-movie-on-imdb/).

Graser, Marc. "How Much Is a Tweet Worth to Hollywood? \$560 at the Box Office." *Variety*, 27 Feb. 2015, [variety.com/2015/digital/news/the-power-of-twitter-on-a-movies-box-office-and-why-its-not-what-you-might-expect-1201442361/](http://variety.com/2015/digital/news/the-power-of-twitter-on-a-movies-box-office-and-why-its-not-what-you-might-expect-1201442361/).

"How We Create the Metascore Magic." *Metacritic*, [www.metacritic.com/about-metascores](http://www.metacritic.com/about-metascores).

James, Steve, director. *Life Itself*. Magnolia Pictures, 2014.

King, Susan. "IMDb Founder Col Needham Talks about His Famous Website and His Favorite Flicks." *Los Angeles Times*, Los Angeles Times, 18 Nov. 2016, [www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/moviesnow/la-ca-mn-conversation-col-needham-20161108-story.html](http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/moviesnow/la-ca-mn-conversation-col-needham-20161108-story.html).

Kirby, David M. "The Role Of Social Media In Film Marketing." *The Huffington Post*, TheHuffingtonPost.com, 7 Dec. 2017, [www.huffingtonpost.com/david-m-kirby/the-role-of-social-media-\\_b\\_10571026.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-m-kirby/the-role-of-social-media-_b_10571026.html).

Lee, Chris. "How Hollywood Came to Fear and Loathe Rotten Tomatoes." *Vanity Fair*, Vanity Fair, 9 June 2017, [www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2017/06/how-hollywood-came-to-fear-and-loathe-rotten-tomatoes](http://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2017/06/how-hollywood-came-to-fear-and-loathe-rotten-tomatoes).

Lopate, Phillip. *American Movie Critics: An Anthology From the Silents Until Now*. The Library of America, 2008.

Luna, Taryn. "Movies Depend on Social Media Support for Staying Power at Box Office." *Bostonglobe.com*, 13 Mar. 2013, [www.bostonglobe.com/business/2013/03/12/movies-depend-social-media-support-for-staying-power-box-office/mDRqLV2AaS1xqmLdFV1N5O/story.html](http://www.bostonglobe.com/business/2013/03/12/movies-depend-social-media-support-for-staying-power-box-office/mDRqLV2AaS1xqmLdFV1N5O/story.html).

- McClintock, Pamela. "Studios Fight Back Against Withering Rotten Tomatoes Scores." *The Hollywood Reporter*, 2 Aug. 2017, [www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/studios-fight-back-withering-rotten-tomatoes-scores-1025575](http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/studios-fight-back-withering-rotten-tomatoes-scores-1025575).
- Miller, Julie. "Hollywood Producer Blames Rotten Tomatoes for Convincing People Not to See His Movie." *Vanity Fair*, Vanity Fair, 23 Mar. 2017, [www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2017/03/brett-ratner-rotten-tomatoes](http://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2017/03/brett-ratner-rotten-tomatoes).
- "Revealed: How the World's Biggest Movie Website Is Run by a 'Self-Confessed Geek' from a House in Bristol." *Daily Mail Online*, Associated Newspapers, 31 Dec. 2010, [www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-1342663/IMDb-run-self-confessed-geek-Colin-Needham-house-Bristol.html](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-1342663/IMDb-run-self-confessed-geek-Colin-Needham-house-Bristol.html).
- Reynolds, Matt. "You Should Ignore Film Ratings on IMDb and Rotten Tomatoes." *WIRED*, WIRED UK, 10 Nov. 2017, [www.wired.co.uk/article/which-film-ranking-site-should-i-trust-rotten-tomatoes-imdb-metacritic](http://www.wired.co.uk/article/which-film-ranking-site-should-i-trust-rotten-tomatoes-imdb-metacritic).
- Robehmed, Natalie. "For Movies, Twitter Users Are A Key Audience." *Forbes*, Forbes Magazine, 27 Apr. 2015, [www.forbes.com/sites/natalierobehmed/2015/04/27/for-movies-twitter-users-are-a-key-audience/#4d6414395300](http://www.forbes.com/sites/natalierobehmed/2015/04/27/for-movies-twitter-users-are-a-key-audience/#4d6414395300).
- Rodriguez, Ashley. "How Hollywood Created Its Own Worst Enemy in Rotten Tomatoes." *Quartz*, Quartz, 26 Sept. 2017, [qz.com/1073208/how-hollywood-created-its-own-worst-enemy-in-rotten-tomatoes/](http://qz.com/1073208/how-hollywood-created-its-own-worst-enemy-in-rotten-tomatoes/).
- Rogers, Adam. "Rotten Tomatoes and the Unbearable Heaviness of Data." *Wired*, Conde Nast, 6 July 2017, [www.wired.com/story/is-rotten-tomatoes-ruining-movies/](http://www.wired.com/story/is-rotten-tomatoes-ruining-movies/).
- Rothman, Lily. "IMDb Is Turning 25. How Is It Older Than Web Browsers?" *Time*, Time, 16 Oct. 2015, [time.com/4068036/imdb-history-25th-anniversary/](http://time.com/4068036/imdb-history-25th-anniversary/).

Schreier, Jason. "The Case Of The Flawed Metacritic Study." *Kotaku*, Kotaku.com, 29 Mar. 2013, [kotaku.com/the-case-of-the-flawed-metacritic-study-463147686](http://kotaku.com/the-case-of-the-flawed-metacritic-study-463147686).

Scorsese, Martin. "Martin Scorsese on Rotten Tomatoes, Box Office Obsession and Why 'Mother!' Was Misjudged (Guest Column)." *The Hollywood Reporter*, 10 Oct. 2017, [www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/martin-scorsese-rotten-tomatoes-box-office-obsession-why-mother-was-misjudged-guest-column-1047286](http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/martin-scorsese-rotten-tomatoes-box-office-obsession-why-mother-was-misjudged-guest-column-1047286).

Tran, Kevin. "The New York Times Soars Past 3 Million Subscribers." *Business Insider*, Business Insider, 8 Dec. 2017, [www.businessinsider.com/the-new-york-times-soars-past-3-million-subscribers-2017-12](http://www.businessinsider.com/the-new-york-times-soars-past-3-million-subscribers-2017-12).

Urbanora. "The Optical Lantern and Cinematograph Journal." *The Bioscope*, 23 Dec. 2011, [thebioscope.net/2011/08/21/the-optical-lantern-and-cinematograph-journal/](http://thebioscope.net/2011/08/21/the-optical-lantern-and-cinematograph-journal/).

Wallenstein, Andrew. "Rotten Tomatoes Scores Don't Impact Box Office, Study Finds." *Variety*, 11 Sept. 2017, [variety.com/2017/film/news/rotten-tomatoes-scores-dont-impact-box-office-study-finds-1202554546/](http://variety.com/2017/film/news/rotten-tomatoes-scores-dont-impact-box-office-study-finds-1202554546/).

Wilkinson, Alissa. "Rotten Tomatoes, Explained." *Vox*, Vox, 31 Aug. 2017, [www.vox.com/culture/2017/8/31/16107948/rotten-tomatoes-explainer-critics-movies-aggregation](http://www.vox.com/culture/2017/8/31/16107948/rotten-tomatoes-explainer-critics-movies-aggregation).

Williams, Lara. "Why IMDb Should Rethink the Decision to Close Its Message Boards." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 17 Feb. 2017, [www.theguardian.com/film/2017/feb/17/why-imdb-should-rethink-the-decision-to-close-its-message-boards](http://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/feb/17/why-imdb-should-rethink-the-decision-to-close-its-message-boards).