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Siskel and Ebert:
A Cultural Transformation of Film Criticism

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ABSTRACT

The following thesis will examine how Chicago film critics Roger Ebert and Gene Siskel impacted the craft of film criticism with their TV show "Siskel & Ebert & the Movies," which ran from 1986 to 1999 and aired as "Sneak Previews" in the 1970s and as "At The Movies" in the early 1980s. The thesis will also examine what film criticism looked like before Siskel and Ebert left their mark and the state of post-*Siskel and Ebert* film criticism.

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Introduction

“I hated this movie. Hated hated hated hated hated this movie. Hated it” (Ebert). Strange as it may seem, these were the words that first sparked love inside me for the craft of film criticism. The source of this candid vitriol was a review of the Razzie-nominated 1994 movie *North* featured on what I would later discover to be one of the most influential forces in American criticism: *Siskel & Ebert & the Movies* (or *Siskel and Ebert*, for short), featuring famed Chicago film critics Roger Ebert and Gene Siskel.

At that time, I had just committed to studying journalism at Penn State and it was a personal revelation for me to have discovered these two Chicago newsmen in their archived prime on YouTube. Because I had just discovered a wealth of new and exciting movies that cultivated within me a career interest in film, the thought of combining the two practices was very appealing. And with their articulate analysis, oft-unexpected humor and their at times fiercely confrontational rapport, who better to have as a set of pseudo-role models than this late, great duo?

As television personalities, Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert served a crucial function in transforming film criticism from an elite cultural practice based on a popular medium to a popular cultural practice based on a popular medium. While their television show, *Siskel and Ebert*, borrowed from various traditions of their predecessors' print criticism, the show's mass appeal and utilization of a mass medium provided an example for the widespread accessibility and democratization of film criticism via the Internet.

Chapter 1

Siskel and Ebert's Predecessors and the Emergence of Film Criticism

To understand the importance of two of film criticism's greatest practitioners, one must first understand the practice and history of film criticism itself. Film criticism was born in May of 1908, when *The New York Dramatic Mirror*—which normally functioned as a trade paper for theatre—began printing a page devoted solely to an emerging art form known as “moving pictures.” Chiefly responsible for this page was Frank E. Woods, a screenwriter who co-wrote *Birth of a Nation* with renowned silent era director D.W. Griffith and would go on to become one of the 36 founding members of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Woods wrote the copy and found advertising to support the page, which would eventually become an eight-page section. Later on, Woods began writing a commentary column under the pseudonym “The Spectator” that focused on film aesthetics. He would continue his column until leaving the newspaper in August 1912.

According to Jerry Roberts' *The Complete History of Film Criticism*, “[Woods] is invariably referred to by historians as ‘probably’ the first American film critic” (Roberts 17). Roberts also notes what D.W. Griffith biographer Richard Schickel wrote of Woods: “He was a sensible and perceptive critic, perhaps the first more or less responsible journalist to comment more or less responsibly (and regularly) on the developing art of film” (Roberts 18). On the topic of his approach to film criticism, Woods wrote, “Reviewing is not merely finding fault and picking its flaws: it is more properly the

bestowal of praise where it is deserved—the recognition of merit where it exists” (Roberts 20).

According to film writer Anthony Slide, “Film reviewing, like the industry it represented, was in its infancy in these years. What passed for a ‘review’ then might not be considered a review by the standards of the teens or the twenties. Criticism of films was chiefly limited to film trade papers, such as *The Moving Picture World*, and theatrical trade papers, such as *The New York Dramatic Mirror*. Non-trade periodicals paid scant attention to the cinema” (Slide). While other developments were being made in film criticism such as Vachel Lindsay’s 1915 book *The Art of the Moving Picture* (which is considered by film writer Stanley Kauffmann to be the first book about film criticism), these trade papers are widely credited with helping improve both the art of film and the criticism thereof. Its writers, such as *World’s* Louis Reeves Harrison, started looking at movies in different ways and wrote their reviews accordingly.

Take this excerpt from an article by Harrison entitled “Too Deep,” in which he challenges filmmakers to advance the idea of what a movie could be. In this case, Harrison urges movies to speak the truth as often as possible:

Let us go deep into the social problems that are deeply affecting us at the moment! Let us probe the ignominy of our political system! Let us search for the truth, even if it is as deep as a well! For ‘truth is truth to the end of reckoning’ (Harrison 24).

Trade papers would continue to have a substantial influence as the silent era progressed into the 1920s, at which point coverage of film became attractive to more mainstream periodicals such as the *New York Tribune*, the *Chicago Daily News* and the

Cleveland Plain Dealer, among others. However, the style of film criticism in these papers differed from that of the reviews in trade papers. In traditional journalistic fashion, newspaper criticism was about just the facts. For example, the work of Carl Sandburg, who wrote about movies for the *Chicago Daily News* for seven years, typically revolved around conversations with the involved actors and filmmakers as well as the experience of watching the movie and the theatre where it was screened (Roberts 27).

Fortunately, though, other reviewers were not constrained to a ‘just the facts’ approach in their critiques and preferred to broaden their horizons. According to film scholar Myron O. Lounsbury, “the American critic, dissatisfied with the assembly-line production in Hollywood, examined the nature of the foreign photoplay and re-evaluated the contributions of the native movie pioneers. The encounter with commercialism gave film literature its first international and historical perspective” (Roberts 34). Among these reviewers were Robert E. Sherwood, Gilbert Seldes and Alfred B. Kuttner, whose approaches centric on writing, directing, acting and production mirror those of Siskel, Ebert and many other prominent critics of the future.

Film criticism continued to grow with the 1915 inception of the National Board of Review of Motion Pictures (NBR), noted by Roberts as the first mutual group of movie reviewers. As written in Raymond Haberski Jr.’s *It’s Only a Movie*,

The NBR...made a serious attempt to understand and criticize movies without necessarily hoping they would perform some moral or aesthetic magic on the public...In a world in which aesthetic judgment seemed progressively less important, the NBR had decided to consider popular taste within its cultural criticism. Such an approach would enable the board to deal with the movie

industry and the public on their own terms (Haberski 49).

The creation of the NBR serves to show that, at this time, film critics and their craft had arrived in the same sense that motion pictures had begun to arrive. Because movies were gradually becoming more accepted as a legitimate art form, the criticism of movies had become more relevant to filmgoers and essential to ensuring that the importance of movies be understood and appreciated. As Roger Ebert once said in a 2005 Archives of American Television interview,

Film criticism is important because films are important... Films are important because they are the art form of the 20th century. They are the most serious of the mass arts... they affect the way people think and feel and behave and they can be both a good influence on society and a negative influence on society. To the degree that they glorify mindlessness and short attention spans, I think they are bad. To the degree that they encourage empathy with people not like ourselves, and encourage us to think about life and issues, they can be good. They can also, of course, be purely entertaining, and there's nothing wrong with that (Rutkowski).

Various film critics would go on argue for the importance of films and film criticism and even push their craft into a new place where there was room for humor in reviews and advocacy for lesser known films by critics through a mainstream forum. According to film critic Philip Lopate, "The first working film critic who put everything together was Otis Ferguson of *The New Republic*. What Ferguson 'got,' while so many other critics of his day were busy lamenting the low level of American movies, was the genius of the Hollywood system, the almost invisible craft and creativity of the average

studio movie” (Lopate XV). Ferguson, who worked as a critic throughout the 1930s and early 1940s, “was...predisposed to look into the nature of films and try to understand methods and tricks, the parts of the process that created mood and effects. He was the first long-tenured critic of the sound era about which one could say that when the cinema fascinated him, he was doubly fascinated as to why” (Roberts 58).

Take Ferguson’s review of Alfred Hitchcock’s 1940 film *Foreign Correspondent*:
If you have any interest in the true motion and sweep of pictures, watching that man [Hitchcock] work is like listening to music...If you would like a seminar in how to make a movie travel the lightest and fastest way, in a kind of beauty that is peculiar to movies alone, you can see this once, and then again to see what you missed, and then study it twice (Roberts 60).

But Ferguson also packed the necessary punch to call films out on their failures, as he did with his humorous, albeit negative review of a film widely regarded as an American classic, 1939’s *The Wizard of Oz*:

It has dwarfs, music, Technicolor, freak characters and Judy Garland. It can’t be expected to have a sense of humor as well—and as for the light touch of fantasy, it weighs like a pound of fruitcake soaking wet...I’d much rather talk about *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (Roberts 63).

As stated by Roberts, “Ferguson’s conversational tones, his populist sentiments, and his succinct, punchy writing style established him as a thinking man’s proletariat with his cerebral gears usually engaged on the how and the why certain movies worked. He fit his forum, *The New Republic*, as his tone seemed to court cinetastes and

intellectuals as well as the politically aware and literarily minded casual readers. His opinions were provocatively and amusingly presented” (Roberts 59).

Though Ferguson’s impact was tragically cut short by a torpedo during his World War II naval service, his legacy lived on through critics like James Agee. Though Agee, who worked as a critic for *The Nation* and *Time* in the 1940s, was not quite as in love with the Hollywood process as Ferguson occasionally was, he found an equal amount of enthusiasm in the idea of a more realistic film. According to Lopate, “[Agee] tried to will a more realistic film into being by articulating his enthusiasms for Italian neo-realism, documentaries, and location shooting. His rich, metaphorical prose nudged film reviewing in a more classical-essay direction.”

Agee, a Renaissance man who also practiced poetry, playwriting and screenwriting (he wrote the scripts for *The African Queen* and *The Night of the Hunter*), was largely appreciated by his burgeoning readership for his precision, his honesty and his overall love of movies. In his coverage of *Agee on Film* for *The New York Times Book Review* in 1958, journalist Richard Griffith noted Agee’s love of film was “so fierce as to make him want to remold it nearer to his heart’s desire with his own hands...It was that love that gave him a deeper insight into the nature of the movie medium” (Roberts 122). According to Donald Phelps’ *Film Culture*, “The fact that James Agee was such a *personal* critic—and artist—when kept in mind, is a key to what is important and worthy in his writing” (Roberts 122).

Such affection is evident in many of Agee’s reviews of Shakespearean films involving Laurence Olivier, such as 1944’s *Henry V*:

Henry V is one of the great experiences in the history of motion pictures...A major achievement—the perfect marriage of great dramatic poetry with the great contemporary medium for expressing it...Olivier's films set up an equilateral triangle between the screen, the stage, and literature. And between the screen, the stage, and literature they establish interplay, a shimmering splendor or the disciplined vitality which is art (Roberts 124).

Agee marked a new beginning of critics who saw themselves less with as an academic scholar and more as a common man or woman who loves movies. For instance, in 1942, Agee referred to himself in his first column for *The Nation* as an “‘amateur critic’ who hoped to be ‘stimulating or illuminating’” (Roberts 123). With Siskel and Ebert, the labels of commoner and scholar were fused. Neither Siskel nor Ebert ever purported to be giants of anything, though Siskel graduated from Yale and Ebert was working on his doctorate before working for the *Chicago Sun-Times*. In his introduction to Todd Rendleman's 209-page book on his canon of work, Ebert claimed that he was merely “a newspaperman” and not an academic critic of any sort (Rendleman XIII). Similarly, Gene Siskel thought his job as a film critic was very similar to being “a beat reporter covering a fire and the fire is my reaction to the picture. What's the most important thing I could tell you? If we met on the street, I should tell you the same thing that I'm going to tell you in that review and get you into it right away” (“Siskel and Ebert on Film Criticism”).

After Agee died of a heart attack in 1955, several other names began gaining prominence in the field of film criticism, including Andrew Sarris, whose career was sparked upon meeting Jean-Luc Godard and François Truffaut in Paris, where a

filmmaking revolution commonly referred to as the French New Wave was erupting. Godard and Truffaut were among the first class of writers for the groundbreaking French criticism magazine *Cahiers du Cinema* and had a tremendous influence on Sarris during his time in Paris. Sarris, at one point, even edited an English language section of *Cahiers* (Shoard). When he returned to America in 1960, Sarris was hired by *The Village Voice* to fill in for regular critic Jonas Mekas (whom Sarris had previously worked with on the magazine *Film Culture*) while he was on vacation. His first review? Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*. Sarris relished the opportunity with his review:

Hitchcock is the most daring avant garde filmmaker in America today...Besides making previous horror films look like variations on *Pollyanna*, *Psycho* is overlaid with a richly symbolic commentary on the modern world as a public swamp in which human feelings and emotion are flushed down the drain (Roberts 234).

Sarris was kept on staff, splitting the beat with Mekas as he continued to hone his craft. He garnered a reputation for his levelheaded reviews and, through his writing, solidified the reputation of *The Village Voice* as well. As noted by Nick Pinkerton in Sarris' *Village Voice* obituary, "Sarris had the patience and discrimination to pan the gold from the muck—and his estimations hold up" (Pinkerton). One example of such discernment was Sarris' review of the Best Picture Oscar-winning 1968 musical *Oliver!*:

I don't like any of Lionel Bart's songs or any of the singers, and I don't appreciate the rather disquieting spectacle of a horde of pint-sized chorus-boys doing Jerome Robbins imitations in the midst of fustian melodramatics. As for Ron Moody's fey Fagin, his school-of-hard-knocks song spiels remind of nothing so much as a

Zorba the Fiddler from La Mancha, that all-purpose monster of middle-class, middle-aged, middle-brow metaphysics” (Roberts 234-235).

But perhaps Sarris’ greatest contribution to his craft was his invention of the auteur theory, which states that “since a film is a work of art, it carries the imprint of a creator, as that creator is the director...Despite all the people involved in the making of a movie, including the writer who conceived it and the stars whose personalities can reshape the original writer’s vision, the director is the one who can claim its authorship” (Roberts 161).

As stated by Phillip Lopate, “In attempting to bring order to American film history, he ranked directors in categories of achievement, positing a new canon that provoked considerable disagreement: “Film critics, an obstinately intuitive lot who mistrust systems to begin with, were especially dubious about a list that found any merit in commercial potboilers and seemed susceptible to glossing over weaknesses of performance or script in the interests of confirming some signature, personal style” (Lopate XVII).

One such critic who vehemently disagreed with Sarris’ theory was Pauline Kael, the long-time film critic for *The New Yorker* and a notorious provocateur in the industry. In an essay entitled “Circles and Squares: Joys and Sarris,” Kael attacked the logic of the auteur theory and the dangers of its use:

If Sarris’ aesthetic is based on expediency, then it may be expedient to point out that it takes extraordinary intelligence and discrimination and taste to use any theory in the arts, and that without those qualities, a theory becomes a rigid formula (which is indeed what is happening among auteur critics). The greatness

of critics like Bazin in France and Agee in America may have something to do with their using their full range of intelligence and intuition, rather than relying on formulas. Criticism is an art, not a science, and a critic who follows rules will fail in one of his most important functions: perceiving what is original and important in new work and helping others to see (Roberts 161-162).

This disagreement led to a substantial feud between Kael and Sarris that, as *TIME* film critic Richard Corliss put it, “raised the musty level of film criticism to volcanic, love-hate art.

Their wrangles over the auteur theory had excitement and politics and sport. The intensity of their debate lured people to see new films, and to see old (especially old Hollywood) movies in a new way. They opened eyes, awakened curiosity, aroused intelligence. They made film criticism sexy. Pictures were things that mattered; ideas were worth fighting over. Sarris and Kael were...like Ali-Frazier. Film criticism was the main event and these two were the champs (Roberts 164).

Though this contentiousness galvanized a large following for film criticism and the careers of its best and brightest, Kael was regarded as much more than just an articulate bully. Like all the aforementioned great critics, Kael’s reviews contained at their core a passion for movies, and an eagerness to share said passion with anyone willing to listen.

According to Roger Ebert, an ardent enjoyer of Kael’s work:

Writing and speaking, Pauline Kael commanded the American idiom. Her paragraphs announced their author. Like George Bernard Shaw, she wrote reviews that will be read for their style, humor and energy long after some of their

subjects have been forgotten. Her work pointed up the disconnect between the immediate sensual experience of moviegoing and the abstract theory-mongering of many film critics. She was there, she sat in the theater, it was happening to her, and here was what she felt about it. Critics aren't supposed to talk during screenings, but I can still hear her *Oh! Oh! Oh!* during scenes she thought were dreadful. She loved the movies so much that bad ones were a personal affront. And when she loved one, her ecstasy came racing through her prose (Ebert).

One such example of her ecstatic prose is her review of *The Fury*, a 1978 movie directed by one of her favorite filmmakers, Brian De Palma: "De Palma is one of the few directors in the sound era to make a horror film that is so visually compelling that a viewer seems to have entered a mythic night world. Inside that world, transfixed, we can hear the faint, distant sound of De Palma cackling with pleasure" (Kael 564).

According to journalist Neal Gabler, "[Kael] anointed herself the liberator of American film criticism, freeing it from snooty academics who treated movies as weightless *divertissements*. Pauline Kael taught us to stop worrying and love movies" (Roberts 165). "Pauline was more than a great critic," said Entertainment Weekly critic Owen Gleiberman in an interview with rockcritics.com. "She re-invented the form, and pioneered an entire aesthetic of writing. She was like the Elvis or the Beatles of film criticism" (Aradillas).

Chapter 2

Finding the Balcony: Siskel and Ebert's Emergence

According to Lopate, “The 1960s and 1970s, 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” (Lopate). It was during this golden age that Roger Ebert and Gene Siskel first began their careers as film critics.

Siskel, who studied philosophy at Yale University with the intention of starting a career as a trial lawyer, began working as a reporter for the *Chicago Tribune* in 1969 thanks to a letter of recommendation from John Hersey, his writing teacher and mentor at Yale (Thomas). Seven months later, he talked his way into the open film critic position by writing a letter to the editor (“Remembering Gene Siskel”). According to Roberts, he would later begin working for WBBM-TV, the CBS affiliate in Chicago, in 1974 as a film critic (Roberts 279).

Ebert's entry into journalism was much more purposeful, as he started cultivating his interest in news writing and movies in his high school years. In addition to contributing to science fiction fanzines (Zeldes), he was co-editor of his high school newspaper, a sportswriter for *The News-Gazette* in Champaign, Illinois (Roberts 278), and also won the 1958 Illinois High School Association state speech championship in the category of Radio Speaking (Martin). From there, he went on to study at University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, join the Campus Film Society and serve as the editor of the school newspaper in addition to winning an Associated Press sports writing contest in 1960 (Roberts 278). It wasn't until 1967 that Ebert discontinued his postgraduate studies

at the University of Cape Town in South Africa to take on a job as the film critic for the *Chicago Sun-Times*, work he would maintain for many years to come and even win a Pulitzer Prize for in 1975, becoming the first film critic in history to receive such an award (Roberts 278). According to Todd Rendleman's *Rule of Thumb: Ebert at the Movies*, "Ebert's take on American movies left an immediate impression. Readers were captivated by his direct approach, his thoughtful point of view, and—depending on the film—his sense of humor, ranging from the subtle to gregarious" (Rendleman 5).

Take Ebert's four-star review of the 1968 film *Funny Girl*, which combines his insightfulness with a great sense of humor:

The trouble with *Funny Girl* is almost everything except Barbra Streisand. She is magnificent. But the film itself is perhaps the ultimate example of the roadshow musical gone overboard. It is over-produced, over-photographed and over-long. The second half drags badly. The supporting characters are generally wooden. And in this movie, believe me; everyone who ain't Barbra Streisand is a supporting character (Ebert).

It was the same year of Ebert's Pulitzer victory that Chicago's PBS station (WTTW) decided "there ought to be more talk on TV about the movies" ("Remembering Gene Siskel"). The result of this decision was the premiere of a new TV show called *Opening Soon at a Theatre Near You*, featuring hosts Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert. Initially, according to Roberts, the two critics were apprehensive about working with rivals from competing newspapers. Adding to the concern was the duo's physical dynamic. The combination of Siskel's towering stature and the stout Ebert's tendency to slouch made for what the show's producers referred to as "a cameraman's dismay"

(Roberts 273). Thea Flaum, the PBS producer responsible for the initial union of Siskel and Ebert, also noted that the two would not stop bickering off-screen. “They would argue about everything because each of them was afraid that the other was going to get ahead of them,” said Flaum. “So they would argue about where they were going to have lunch, they would flip a coin to see who would get to do the main review on each movie, they would flip a coin to see who would get to go first at the beginning of the show” (“Remembering Gene Siskel). However, according to Roberts, “because they fought so much behind the scenes, they learned to harness that onscreen” (Roberts 273).

The show was wildly popular among its Chicagoan audience, so much so that PBS officials decided to give Siskel and Ebert a national audience and repackage the show as *Sneak Previews*. “The public face of film criticism received its biggest lift when the Chicago-based team of Roger Ebert and Gene Siskel went national on PBS in 1978 with their half-hour film-review program,” Roberts wrote. “The waiting audience caught PBS and the country off guard; *Sneak Previews* became the highest rated show in PBS history...it didn’t take long for ‘Gene and Roger’ to become living room favorites” (Roberts 270-271). Their success continued into the 1980s, at which time they began airing on commercial television when they signed a deal with Tribune Entertainment in 1982 to host *At the Movies*, which turned into *Siskel & Ebert & the Movies* (which was abbreviated to just *Siskel and Ebert* shortly thereafter) when they signed a deal with Buena Vista Television in 1986, at which point their takes on cinema had reached a weekly viewership of eight to eleven million people (Roberts 274).

In the spirit of Pauline Kael and Andrew Sarris’ widely publicized auteurist feud, Siskel and Ebert’s explosive contentiousness was a key element to their show’s success.

It became a more mainstream version of Kael and Sarris' criticism, boiled down to fit a more widely accessible medium. "Aside from the general consumer and film buffs, some Americans who cared nothing for film criticism tuned in weekly to see if Gene and Roger were going to argue. They were national celebrities, doling out opinions and trading barbs on *The Tonight Show* to the delight of Johnny Carson," Roberts wrote. It got to the point where their personalities made the show equivalent to a great TV comedy series with two great lead characters. "Their antagonistic banter became shtick, not exactly Laurel and Hardy or Hope and Crosby, but entertainment all the same" (Roberts 275). Their chemistry became such that Ebert said that he and Siskel "became whole. Complete. As if the other is superfluous. Our idea is to blow the other sonofabitch out of the water" (Grobel 332). On the other hand, though, the two admitted that they were actually good friends. Ebert once wrote that "We were linked beyond all disputing. 'You may be an asshole,' Gene would say, 'But you're **my** asshole'" (Ebert).

This kind of humor was one of three main facets that made the show as influential as it was, the others being Siskel and Ebert's popular confrontations and their advocacy for independent films that viewers might not have heard about otherwise.

Chapter 3

A View From the Balcony: Analyzing the Style of *Siskel and Ebert*

CONFRONTATION

According to film critic Bob Strauss, Siskel and Ebert's points of reference were widely dissimilar in that "Ebert's enthusiasm is piqued by the technical aspects of film and analytical criticism, while Siskel seems to look at things in more philosophical,

emotionally informed terms” (Strauss). Such differentiation was on full display during one of the pair’s highlighted disputes hailed by many viewers as a classic segment on the show: their argument about Stanley Kubrick’s 1987 Vietnam War movie *Full Metal Jacket*. Ebert thought it paled in comparison to *Platoon*, while, Siskel, who once served in the U.S. Army Reserve, called it “very original and very close to being a masterpiece” and found it a completely different experience from watching *Platoon*.

SISKEL: The fighting here [in *Full Metal Jacket*] is a different kind of fighting than in *Platoon*. It’s city fighting and it looks different and it’s a whole different war and I think he’s playing this film at a whole other level. *Platoon* was about embracing the soldier and giving the soldier credit for this crazy world that he was in. **This** fighting, to me, is about the mixture of joy in fighting and the absolute fear of being killed in the sense of when there’s this guy called Animal charges, I was so excited for him and this is a guy I’m supposed to hate. And then when I see a sniper go on an American and Kubrick has his camera push in, I feel for the first time people getting attacked. Visually, this is the strongest movie I’ve seen in a long time.”

EBERT: First of all, I didn’t think it was **that** visually exciting except for a few specific shots that were really great. But second, let’s talk about that very sequence you’re talking about. One of the guy’s friends is wounded and under fire and the other one says ‘I’m gonna go get him’ and he runs out blasting with his machine gun to try to rescue him and then later... (*Siskel tries to intervene*)

LATER! LATER! LATER! ...the others come up behind and we can clearly see where the sniper is. Then when you get to that reverse shot and he pushes in,

THAT IS A CLICHÉ, Gene! When I saw that push, I was so disappointed in Kubrick. (*Siskel begins to shake his head in disappointment*) This whole sequence is taken right out of absolutely routine, grade B, Republic World War II war movies...

SISKEL: (*as Ebert continues to slam the movie*) I HAVE NEVER... I have never felt a kill in a movie quite like that ever in any Vietnam film.

EBERT: Not in *Apocalypse Now*? Not in *The Deer Hunter*?

SISKEL: No. Not like that.

EBERT: Well, in that case, you're gonna **love** "The Late Show" because they have kills like that every night in black and white starring John Wayne.

SISKEL: But they don't have movies like this film, *Full Metal Jacket*.

EBERT: Well, I disagree. And I disagree **particularly** about the part that you liked.

SISKEL: Well, that's just one scene. I liked the **whole film**. It's **full** of great scenes.

Siskel would later advise Ebert at the end of the show to "look at [his] thumb over the weekend." This kind of review represents the consideration of cinema as well as the engaging and conversational banter incorporated into much of the episodes of *Siskel and Ebert* that so many people responded to throughout the show's 13-year run.

HUMOR

Another review considered a classic in the *Siskel and Ebert* canon is their attempt at discussing the 1987 film *The Squeeze*. This, though, is a classic of theirs in regards to the sense of humor they regularly incorporated into the show:

EBERT: I almost have to stop and think to remember the name of our next movie, which is *The Squeeze*, a horrible title. Who could remember a title like *The Squeeze*?

SISKEL: You couldn't remember...

EBERT: (*begins laughing*) Certainly not me!

SISKEL: You couldn't remember **a lot** about *The Squeeze*. Go ahead.

EBERT: When we had a conference call to decide—I'm gonna tell this story—when we had a conference call to decide what movies to put on this show and *The Squeeze* was mentioned, I couldn't even remember the name of the movie, I couldn't remember having seen it. They said, "You saw it Friday!" I said, "Who was in it?" They said, "Michael Keaton! Rae Dawn Chong!"

SISKEL: (*laughing*) You said, "What's it about?"

EBERT: Oh yeah! **That** movie! Right! This movie... I have to be honest and tell you this. It doesn't make me a bad movie critic that I forgot this movie. I think I could give anyone a test six days after they saw this movie and they'd flunk every question! This movie is vapor! It just goes into your head and evaporates! (*Siskel continues laughing*) This is chewing gum for the mind, and **that** is an insult to chewing gum! This is one of most insignificant, instantly forgettable formula comedies I've ever seen and a complete waste of the talents of Michael Keaton and Rae Dawn Chong, who are buried alive in it.

Ebert, in admitting that he has completely forgotten *The Squeeze*, has already given his review. This kind of bitingly brief review was also what made James Agee stand out for his humor, as he'd occasionally write one-sentence reviews of movies that

he didn't care for like the 1947 film *Tycoon*: "Several tons of dynamite were set off in this movie, none of it under the right people" (Olson and Roberts 288). It is also indicative of the honesty and candor that Siskel and Ebert often used in their TV reviews.

ADVOCACY

According to Roberts, Siskel and Ebert have often been credited with "saving small films that were lagging at the box office" (Roberts 273). One example of *Siskel and Ebert* bringing art to the forefront in their filmic discussions is *My Dinner with Andre*, an art-house film that saw almost no box office success until the glowing review from *Siskel and Ebert* came on the air. "Business increased dramatically," said Wallace Shawn, one of the actors in the movie, in an interview with *Los Angeles Times* journalist Donald Liebenson. "The people came and it moved on to other cities and it became a tremendous hit for a low-budget art film. In my mind, if they hadn't spoken so passionately and eloquently about it and made it seem so interesting, I think it would have been consigned to the scrap heap of history and would have been considered a failed film."

Siskel and Ebert was also impactful in the sense that they gave more attention to independent films. "If you're a small distributor or an independent filmmaker, you can't buy that air time," said independent filmmaker John Sayles. "Here is a national show that gives an independent film the same amount of attention as a major studio release. It is really important for independent films to be taken that seriously and not treated condescendingly" (Liebenson).

"We need more like them in the independent arena," said producer Harvey Weinstein. "They are a shot of adrenaline in a world that has gotten anesthetized... They call them as they see them," he said. "They've hated plenty of my movies. You can't

influence them. Lord knows, I've tried. But they use their power exceedingly well. They've built trust with their audience, so their audience has become more adventurous" (Liebenson).

According to film executive Rob Friedman, "The level of influence they...achieved nationally is quite extraordinary. They are very good about motivating an audience to see films they feel have merit. If they support a film, they will come back to it when it is released on video. They are enthusiastic about movies and enthusiastic about having people watch them, and that's very healthy for our business" (Liebenson).

In a 2013 *Huffington Post* article entitled "Roger Ebert Changed My Life," Darryl Roberts told the story of how Ebert's review of his documentary *America the Beautiful* made all the difference for his independent film: "The film opened the night of his review at the Landmark Theater and ended up being the top grossing film that weekend at the theater complex. People were coming to the theater in droves to see the film based on [Ebert's] review... It was a most awesome ride and I'm forever grateful to Roger for deciding to do a story on me when most of the major press at the time was writing off *America the Beautiful* as a small documentary" (Darryl Roberts).

In addition to the regular reviews of movies in theaters, Siskel and Ebert branched out to review movies out on video and had special episodes on various topics such as the Academy Awards (e.g. their "Memo to the Academy," where they recommended certain films, actors and filmmakers be nominated for Oscars), a particular actor (e.g. Arnold Schwarzenegger: "The Unlikeliest Star") or filmmaker (e.g. Quentin Tarantino: "The Tarantino Generation" or Steven Spielberg: "The Magic of Spielberg") or a controversial topic surrounding a certain movie (e.g. the Anti-Defamation League's claims of anti-

Semitism in Spike Lee's *Mo Better Blues* or the issue of "Is Hollywood Selling War to Kids?").

Other critics often bemoaned the approach of their Chicagoan counterparts. According to *Orlando Sentinel* critic Jay Boyar, the most common complaint among critics was Siskel and Ebert, with their verbal fights, "had reduced our field to the level of professional wrestling. Some of this complaining, of course, is sheer envy. And some is simply irritation at having to play second or third or 67th fiddle to 'Sisk-Ebert' in the popular consciousness" (Boyar). Additionally, other critics attacked the trademark thumbs up-thumbs down approach taken on the show for its over-simplification of film criticism. I couldn't disagree with that more. If anything, this approach only made their reviews more accessible to a larger audience and served as an effective launching pad for further intellectual elaboration. Further elaboration on the part of Jerry Roberts, a former critic himself, also says otherwise:

Both sorted issues alive in individual movies and talked about them at length—a performance, the portrayal of children, the cinematography—and...weighed a picture's complexity and minor merits before making their final decisions. They took the latitude afforded for wide and complex opinions allotted by their newspapers and applied that as best they could to the TV format (Roberts 281).

Chapter 4

Beyond the Balcony: The Impact of *Siskel and Ebert*

At the time I write this, it's early April 2013. Roger Ebert passed away less than a week ago and Gene Siskel has been dead for more than 13 years, after which *Siskel and*

Ebert became *At the Movies* with fellow *Sun-Times* critic Richard Roeper filling in for Siskel. It was never the same without Siskel. Ebert and Roeper built a watchable rapport, but it paled starkly in comparison to its predecessors. After Ebert developed thyroid cancer, the show eventually went in a different direction in 2009, bringing on two new, younger hosts—Ben Mankiewicz and Ben Lyons—that would derail the show’s success entirely. Ratings for *At the Movies* plummeted to the point where not even two of the new millennium’s best critics, A.O. Scott of the *New York Times* and Michael Phillips of the *Chicago Tribune*, could salvage the show, which was cancelled on the weekend of August 14, 2010 (Hibberd).

However, the end of *Siskel and Ebert* was not the end of film criticism. Rather, *Siskel and Ebert* merely paved the way for a new generation of film criticism. In his essay entitled “The Golden Age of Movie Critics,” Roger Ebert stated his belief that the golden age for film criticism is the present:

Never before have more critics written more or better words for more readers about more films. But already you are ahead of me, and know this is because of the Internet. Film criticism is still a profession, but it's no longer an occupation. You can't make any money at it. This provides an opportunity for those who care about movies and enjoy expressing themselves. Anyone with access to a computer need only to use free blogware and set up in business (Ebert).

At the same time, though, other critics like Peter Keough believe that the rise of the Internet as well as the influence of *Siskel and Ebert* has soured the craft rather than improved it: “I think it's been reduced not only to a marketing tool, but also to a kind of passive, knee-jerk response, so that the whole idea of thumbs-up, reducing opinions to

quotable, clichéd blurbs has taken the place of any kind of in-depth, intelligent act of involvement in the criticizing process” (Feaster).

Former *At the Movies* host A.O. Scott shared a similarly pessimistic view on the state of film criticism in the digital age:

There used to be James Agee, and now there is Rotten Tomatoes... Where once reasoned debate and knowledgeable evaluation flourished, there are now social networking and marketing algorithms and a nattering gaggle of bloggers. Or—to turn the picture on its head—a remnant of over-entitled old-media graybeards are fighting a rear-guard action against the democratic forces of the Internet, clinging to threadbare cultural authority in the face of their own obsolescence (Bergan).

But, as Carole Berger wrote, “What we see depends on how we see” (Berger 145). In that same vein, these opinions seem to indicate a sense of fear and do not once acknowledge the abundance of opportunities that a substantial medium like the Internet can offer. Film criticism is no longer a craft reserved exclusively for scholarly types like Scott and Keough. It is for everyone. This is the legacy left by *Siskel and Ebert*, the legacy which is currently being continued through another Chicago-based film criticism program, a popular weekly Internet podcast and radio show called *Filmspotting* hosted by Adam Kempenaar and Josh Larsen. As Roger Ebert was influenced by critics like James Agee and Pauline Kael, Kempenaar and Larsen found the same spark through *Siskel and Ebert*. “Watching Siskel and Ebert was a weekly ritual in my house while growing up,” said Larsen. “Siskel and Ebert taught me early on...that both that week's big Hollywood release and the latest indie/foreign curiosity (which they always made time for) were deserving of the same thoughtful consideration and intelligent conversation.” Kempenaar,

too, was a regular viewer of *Siskel and Ebert* and says the show was his first exposure to film criticism. “There are probably two big things I learned from them: You could defend any position... if you could, in fact, defend it,” said Kempenaar. “Film criticism—any criticism, really—should be personal and subjective. Those guys brought all of their personal baggage and biases to their reviews, which is why the conversations were often so passionate and, at times, heated.”

Filmspotting has carried the torch lit by *Siskel and Ebert* since 2005 and has even improved on what *Siskel and Ebert* were able to do through the power of the Internet. The show regularly encourages its ever-expanding international audience to contribute their own opinions of movies discussed on the show and, like Roger Ebert, its hosts have taught several film classes at the University of Chicago. They have even inspired some of their listeners to start their own film blog or podcast to share their own love of movies with the world. They incorporate a similar dosage of humor and honesty on their show with the inclusion of “Massacre Theater,” a segment following the show’s main review where the two hosts perform (i.e. “massacre”) a scene from a famous screenplay to see if listeners can guess what movie the scene comes from. Correct entrants are then entered into a drawing for a prize each week. The hosts’ rapport is refreshingly reminiscent of that of their predecessors and contains the same amount of passion and love for movies as well.

And that, ultimately, was the lasting impact of *Siskel and Ebert*. Though it was all the bickering and thumb-thrusting that made them household names, their show’s impact can most accurately be seen through Siskel and Ebert’s immense love of movie and the degree by which their passion touched the lives of its viewers.

According to Pulitzer Prize-winning critic Wesley Morris, “For a quarter of a century, [Roger Ebert] sat across from Gene Siskel and changed the act of moviegoing and popularized the art of movie criticism. He and Siskel started talking on television in 1975, the same year *Jaws* changed the art of popular moviemaking. How's that for parallelism? Siskel and Ebert: both the great white shark and the Steven Spielberg of tastemaking” (Morris).

“The thing I've always liked about them is they are just two guys who really like movies,” said director John Dahl. “They review movies from that passion for the art of filmmaking. They have no other agenda. They walk into a theater and say, 'Go ahead, entertain me.' That's why they're so popular” (Liebenson).

“When *Sneak Previews* began, the idea of two guys sitting in a fake theater arguing with each other was not just a novel set-up, it was a real way to get a peek at the latest films and help decide what we wanted to see,” stated Gael Fashingbauer Cooper of *TODAY*. “We needed Siskel and Ebert. We still do, but we don't know it” (Cooper).

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