

## The Value of Critics

Why do we have critics? What do they do and why do their opinions count?

Media is changing, and with it, so is the role of the critic. Just as film democratised art, the Internet has fast become a playing field for the amateur critic. Social networking sites, forums and blogs provide space for everyone to have a good rant about what they like and don't like about a film.

Before the Internet and the rise of the blogger, film fans relied on newsprint as a reliable source of information about the films that are available. From this starting point, professional reviewers have historically provided an insightful source of quality film criticism that can inform and educate, as well as helping us to decide what films we want to see.

It is argued that in the digital age, the role of the 'professional critic' has become less valued. This is because film fans are discovering a wealth of information about films online, that they can both read and contribute to.

### Discussion

Describe the places you go to for information about new films and talk about why you choose these sources.

Is it important where this information comes from?

### Activity

Some advantages of online film blogging:

- A democratic approach – the Internet is inclusive and encourages contribution and a sharing of ideas
- A diversity of views, with the option of choosing known and reliable sites
- Enables independent, critical thought and debate

Some advantages of professional film criticism:

- A reliable and informed source of information – the reviewer will have an extensive knowledge of cinema and will be able to provide substance and context as opposed to just subjective thought
- A written style and execution that is well presented, accessible and can be stimulating and entertaining
- An objective source of information that is not flawed by marketing devices

Try and add to these lists and then come up with some disadvantages for each. You can think about disadvantages in terms of what may be problematic about some of the advantages!

Considering the purpose of a film review, as listed above, whose side are you on and why? How much do you value a critic's opinion?

Compare and contrast a print review and a film blog using the advantages and disadvantages that you have identified.

## Discussion

### What is the future for film critics in the internet age?

Here are eight extracts discussing the value or otherwise of professional critics in the internet age. These extracts form a part of the ongoing debate surrounding changes in media and journalism.

You may wish to choose an extract to discuss in groups and then advance to the rest of the class in your own words.

1. 'At a time when so much in our culture is driven by PR and hype, we need those voices that say 'this is useless', this is 'crap', and here's the reason why – someone who can argue against these very important forces in the media – he or she is a dissenting voice.'

*(Cosmo Landesman – film critic for the Sunday Times – speaking on the Culture Show – October 2009)*

2. 'A critic is a cultural commentator – they are the people to lead the public debate, but we live in an age when the idea of someone being an authority is deeply unfashionable – people don't want to be told what to think they want to be told what someone clever thinks and then work out their own opinion.'

*(Writer Ceia Brayfield speaking on the Culture Show – October 2009)*

3. 'Of course, while it's clear the internet has created a channel-surfing culture where consumers can search for information in digestible bitesize chunks (see the explosion of Twitter), the critics that always flourish are the ones who deliver quality, provoking and entertaining copy – regardless of the media platform. Peter Bradshaw argues that professionals can keep their jobs safe by offering themselves as a 'prose performer, someone who will entertain them and offer stimulus' – but this is just as relevant and possibly even more true for the blogging sphere where hits are just as crucial, statistics are instant and the competition is just a click and a bookmark away.'

*('Kai' who blogs at iLostiFound – <http://ilostifound.wordpress.com/about/>)*

4. 'A huge amount of the Internet criticism – not all – but a lot of it, that I've read is 'fan-boy' criticism and stuff that has been very, very obviously influenced by PR freebees. If you are getting paid as an independent critic then you have some measure of independence – so that's what you lose (in a world without independent critics) – you'd lose independent thought.'

*(Peter Bradshaw – film critic for the Guardian - speaking on the Culture Show – October 2009)*

5. 'Apparently, (the author) Joseph Conrad's wife saw her husband sitting despondently in his library after reading the reviews of his latest novel. 'But Joseph, they all appreciate your work,' she said. 'I don't want to be appreciated,' he replied, 'I want to be praised.' And this is the view of the film companies. For them, film reviews are not seen as contributions to an on-going cultural debate but as prose fodder to be mined for useful quotations, and some critics write quotable advertising copy.'

*(Phillip French – the Observer – Are the Critics Able to Stop a Turkey in its Tracks – 21st May, 2006)*

6. 'What you can offer is yourself as a writer, as a kind of 'prose performer' – someone that is both entertaining and stimulating – that's how you've got to make your bread, your living – you can't make a living as someone who is the 'sole custodian of knowledge' – that's how the web has invigorated things – because now everyone has access to information they would never had had access to before.'

*(Peter Bradshaw – film critic for the Guardian – speaking on the Culture Show – October 2009)*

7. 'For the past 100 years the professional critic has, by and large, been one of two kinds: a journalist or an academic. There is a longstanding war between Mr Hack and Mr Don. Now a third front opens up. A new style of film and TV criticism is crawling out of the cyberslime. It's shamelessly crass and grabs the reader by the eyeballs. It's aimed at the young. And with 40% of the American population predicted to be teenage, rich and bored by 2010, it's here to stay...'

*(John Sutherland – Film and TV Critics Beware: The Want It Now Generation Prefer Internet Spoilers – Who Will Do You Out Of A Job – the Guardian 29 April, 2002*

[www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2002/apr/29/internetnews.g2](http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2002/apr/29/internetnews.g2))

8. 'It's boring writing about good films: same old adjectives, again and again - some more often than others. I'll resort to lists, pictures, graphs, anything that allows me to avoid being overly sincere and boring.'

*(On-line film critic Charlie Lyne – Ultra Culture film blog [www.ultraculture.co.uk](http://www.ultraculture.co.uk) writing about An Education)*