Roger Ebert's Film Criticism

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When film critic Roger Ebert passed away in 2013 at the age of seventy-one, he was lauded by his colleagues for bringing "the appreciation of film, and film criticism, to the widest possible audience and into the twenty-first century" (Van Horn and Nelson) and for his distinctive ability "to connect the creators of movies with their consumers" (Corliss). At the time of his death, Ebert was, indeed, widely known to movie goers. His reviews for the *Chicago Sun-Times*, where he had worked for forty-six years, were syndicated to over two hundred newspapers, and he had cohosted the weekly, nationally syndicated television program of film reviews, *At the Movies*, for decades. As well-known as he was by the public, Ebert also achieved over the course of his career a remarkably high level of recognition from his peers. He was the first film critic to receive journalism's Pulitzer Prize for Criticism in Film, was inducted into the selective New York Film Critics Circle and the National Society of Film Critics, named an honorary member of the Directors' Guild of America, presented with the Lifetime Achievement Award of the Screenwriters' Guild, and became the first film critic to be granted a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. Upon his death, he was praised as "the best known film critic in America" by fellow film critic Kenneth Turan of the *Los Angeles Times*, while others, each in a different way, attempted to characterize Ebert's ability to reach such a wide-ranging audience. Some described his writing style as humble and accessible (McMahon); others regarded it as discursive and immediate (Clark); while still others celebrated Ebert's passion for the movies as populist, intimate, and Midwestern (Zak).

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This study examines Ebert's rhetorical practices to understand how his writing achieved the multivocality that reached two seemingly divergent constituencies of popular culture: the average moviegoer and his professional peers. Ebert's career coincided with significant transformations in the field of film criticism—the legitimation of film as art, debate about intellectualized critical practice, and the destabilizing entrée of online amateur critics and reductive effect of aggregated reviews upon the status of professional critics. Despite these shifts in professional terrain, Ebert sustained a uniquely pluralistic movie reviewing style that was both popular and populist. Using textual analysis to uncover the discursive and substantive attributes of Ebert's writing—discursive for insight into his rhetorical strategies and substantive for the ways in which his work spoke to film's social context—this study does not seek to retrospectively construct a comparative landscape of Ebert's criticism relative to his contemporaries, or what readers actually thought of his reviews, although those would be logical next stages of inquiry. Instead, its aim is to explore how a singular professional critic communicated with audiences of popular culture, with its ultimate goal being to increase insight into how the often-contentious relationship between professional critics of popular culture and their audiences can be productively navigated.

Reviewers, Critics, Criticism

Film critics played a central role in elevating the medium of film to a publicly accepted art form, but little is known about how working critics' interpretative practices contribute to *their* cultural standing, and how that standing is maintained. Scholars of film criticism classify its professional practitioners into two status-differentiating categories, reviewers or critics, although the two are not necessarily mutually exclusive (Bywater and Sobchack). On the one hand are film *reviewers* who are working journalists that write on deadline for daily newspapers, may not have a background in film studies, and abide by an approach that emphasizes a movie's factual information—its release, what it is about, pertinent production details, and whether the film seems worth seeing. On the other hand, film *critics* write for weekly or monthly publications that cater to an informed readership and that grant sufficient space for the critic to develop a review into

commentary and analysis that goes beyond the essentials of a newspaper review. That said, some newspaper reviewers who regard themselves as merely practicing journalists have also attained reputations as notable film critics who are recognized for their penetrating insight into the meaning and significance of a film while still providing the basics of a movie review. Roger Ebert was one of them, and he did it while self-identifying as a practicing journalist his entire life despite his elevation to the status of critic by organizations that defined and legitimated that standing in the field.

What makes the novelty of Ebert's transition from journalist-reviewer to journalist-critic particularly worthwhile for close analysis is that when he entered the field of movie reviewing, working for a newspaper limited most reviewers' ability to practice film criticism. In 1974, seven years into his career, he described the state of the field this way:

> As recently as the very early' 60s there were only a handful of serious movie critics in this country and they mostly worked for magazines. The newspapers that had serious movie critics were rare . . . . In most cities, movie criticism was seen as sort of an exalted form of fan magazine writing or gossip column; movie critics indeed were not even allowed to have their real names . . . . now most major cities have good competent critics on their newspapers, and there are a lot of good magazine critics around. But still, there's this basic prejudice against looking at a movie in the same way that you would look at another art form and so the movie critic who knows all these things, who knows [for example] how the camera works . . . the more of that you know the more you're able to see not only that it's a good movie, but why it's a good movie. *But now you come up against the frustrating problem of putting that into your review and that's a problem that we haven't really tackled yet in newspaper criticism.*
>
> (Ebert, "Critical Audience," emphasis added)

Critics like Ebert who work for newspapers write for a readership delineated by the business interests, editorial policies, and subscriber base of the companies that employ them. Word limit on the length of the review, types of films reviewed, and syntactical complexity are just some of a critic's operational constraints. Within these institutional limitations, critics function as the interpretive bridge between the artistic elements a film's producer has deployed to make a movie

and the visual and aural cues those elements are intended to signify. However, even with critics' expertise at decoding the complexities of a film's aesthetic elements and explaining the significance of a film as an artistic whole, the cultural meanings of those aesthetic elements are neither a given nor are they inherent. Because those elements remain polysemic if not altogether uncertain, a critic's interpretation is left open to varying degrees of acceptance or rejection by audiences.

Critics have varying strategies for dealing with the uncertainties of interpretation, depending on the cultural field in which they work. Literary critics work in a field in which measures of quality are uncertain and thus rely upon institutional anchors, such as the reputation of a book's publishing house and the assessments of fellow critics, to signal credibility of their connoisseurship and counterbalance subjective responses to a work (van Rees; Janssen; Chong), or they draw upon cultural factors shaping a readership's social milieu to tailor their reviews (Griswold). In contrast is the field of music, a mathematically based form of artistic expression, where the measurability of melodic structure is foundational to interpretation of the medium's cultural meaning and significance (Simonton; Cerulo). Film criticism lies in between these two fields because its culturally laden artistic elements are empirically observable if not altogether strictly measurable. While film critics do not have the luxury of quantifiable aesthetic elements to draw upon as do their peers in music, they have, instead, film cues to identify relations of meaning among observable elements (Bordwell). Cues—filmic-relevant categories, such as genre, character, filmmaker, concentric circles of characters, surroundings, camerawork, editing, and music—are the observable features of a film that are the symbols or representations or indicators of social, sociopolitical, or cultural issues, matters, dilemmas, or conundrums that resonate with or are of relevance to the everyday lives of the film-going audience. Bordwell regards the identifiably and accessibility of these cues as relatively straightforward, as "a matter of *procedural* knowledge, of know-how . . . a skill, like throwing a pot" (250). Once identified, a mapping of semantic fields—topics or categories of social relevance or meaning—are applied "as pertinent onto cues identified in the film" (249), and when one or more terrains of social meaning are assembled together, they form the basis for asserting a film's interpretation or relevance or significance. In short, criticism is a

means of addressing what is empirically observable in a film in part and then together as a whole and proffering an interpretation from that.

Because films are stories a culture tells itself about itself, it is to be expected that observations of their content and assemblage of their semantic fields that aggregate into a map of critical assessment are themselves influenced by the social, political, historical, and cultural era, location, and context in which films are created and produced. About this, Bordwell's systemization of critical practice is appropriately agnostic on what constitutes a correct substantive interpretation, and instead just acknowledges the potential impact of a cultural era upon reviewing practice and outcomes.

The analysis that follows examines how Ebert accomplished the multivocality of being both a reviewer and a critic, one who spoke to the average moviegoer as well as professional peers. What were the essential components that routinely went into his work as a reviewer? Were there particular film cues on which he focused? What semantic fields did he formulate with those cues? How did the discursive style of his reviews elevate his semantic fields to maps offering, if not cultural critique, an assessment of a film's contribution to its zeitgeist? As is revealed, Ebert primarily focused on a film's observable elements, its cues, to create semantic fields, and through their interplay, a map for assessment. By also at times focusing on the *social* pertinence of a film's cues within their respective fields to the zeitgeist, he elevated a review's map(ing) to provide social commentary and critique.

Who Was Roger Ebert?

In his autobiography, *Life Itself: A Memoir*, Ebert (1942–2013) describes how he was born, raised, and educated in Urbana, Illinois—a Midwestern city that is half of a metropolitan area located in the central, rural part of the state—and how he began his career in journalism in high school covering local team sports for the *Champaign-Urbana News-Gazette*. In 1960, he enrolled at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign to major in journalism. While there, he worked at the university's student newspaper, the *Daily Illini*, wrote a weekly column on the arts, won regional and national awards for his work, and in his senior year became the paper's editor and

served as president of the United States Student Press Association. An important source of intellectual mentoring throughout his adult life began at the university, when as a freshman he took an introductory English course taught by the award-winning literature professor, Daniel Curley. Curley remained an important fixture in Ebert's life, ultimately co-authoring a travel book with him.

By his own account, Ebert did not aspire to be a practicing journalist. Instead, upon receiving a Bachelor of Science degree in journalism and communications in June, 1964, Ebert re-enrolled that September for a MA in English, and after one semester, in early 1965, spent twelve months in South Africa on a Rotary International Fellowship to study literature at the University of Cape Town. There, he read the writings of that country and the works of Shakespeare and witnessed the experience of Apartheid firsthand. At the end of his year abroad, he returned to the University of Illinois, and in Fall, 1966 moved to Chicago to pursue a PhD in English at The University of Chicago with the goal of becoming an academic. Needing income to support his graduate training, he sought employment at and was hired by the *Chicago Sun-Times* as a reporter and feature writer. In March, 1967, the newspaper's resident film critic elected an early retirement, and Ebert, with some familiarity but no formal training in film analysis, was named as her replacement. He compensated for that lack of experience by studiously absorbing the writings of acclaimed film critics and by teaching from 1969 to 2005 a weekly extension course on film appreciation at The University of Chicago. Ultimately, he set aside his intended goal of a PhD and remained at the *Sun-Times*, becoming the newspaper's only designated film critic until his death in 2013 and "writing full-length reviews of virtually every movie of any note that went into national release" (Ebert, *Yearbook 1999* vii). Within a decade of the start of his career as a reviewer at the *Sun-Times*, his reach expanded greatly when, in 1975, as a sideline to his work there, Ebert and his local reviewing competitor, *Chicago Tribune* critic Gene Siskel, became co-hosts of the city's half-hour PBS-affiliate film review program, *Opening Soon at a Theater Near You*. The program soon evolved into the nationally-broadcasted PBS weekly *At the Movies* and various syndicated commercial incarnations, all of which helped popularize nationally televised movie reviewing. It was through this venue that Ebert and Siskel became widely

known for their trademarked phrase "Two Thumbs Up," which they used when both gave a film a positive review.

Ebert's Critical Practices

Multiple sources of Ebert's vast oeuvre of work—his reviews, his autobiography, various interviews, and his edited collections—served as the basis for the findings reported here.[1] The initial stage of analysis revealed three consistent, identifying characteristics of Ebert's reviews. The first is their structure: an introductory paragraph or two that offer his overall reaction to the film, followed by several that discuss plot and production elements, and a concluding paragraph that provides his appraisal. His appraisal of a film built upon the perceived credibility of the plot and production elements discussed in the review's midsection. This overall structure and approach to subject matter adhered to the components Ebert enunciated in a 1974 interview he gave about the practice of film criticism to a federally funded project on the teaching of aesthetics in schools. To Ebert, the critic's function was to address an everyday readership's needs and interests in the following ways: (1) identify the *genre* and tell the viewer what they can expect for their money; (2) give some idea of the film's *content* and its *efficacy*; (3) offer consideration of film as an *art form* so the viewer can perhaps enjoy the movie a little more deeply than they would have otherwise; and, (4) place the film in terms of its *director* but also in terms of what's happening currently or in the last five years in film, how it *reflects a certain preoccupation in society or changing social attitudes, or invites looking at things in different ways* ("Critical Audience" 4, emphasis added). The extent to which Ebert could actually achieve all this in a review was challenged by space limitations—"20 inches of newspaper space, that's a column wide by 20" long"—so he focused on "primarily talking about the story, about the acting, about some of the director's techniques and *just hoping to suggest a lot more*" (4, emphasis added).

The second consistently identifying characteristic of Ebert's reviews was his personal approach to reviewing—the importance of capturing the felt effect of a film as the lens through which to make sense of it:

> Faithful readers will know that I am tiresome in how often I quote Robert Warshow, who in his book *The Immediate Experience* wrote: "A man goes to the movies. The critic must be honest enough to admit he is that man."
>
> ("Knocked Up at the Movies")

> I translated that [Warshow quote] to mean that the critic must place experience above theory, must monitor what he actually thinks and feels during the film, and trust that above all . . . . In the mind of the critic, each film must earn its own living.
>
> (*Roger Ebert's Four-Star Reviews* ix)

To best capture a film's felt effect, Ebert preferred to screen movies for review with an audience, and he respected their reaction:

> The critic can learn from the audience, which is rarely wrong . . . . If you listen, you can hear audiences discussing *The Matrix* months or years later, and you can ask yourself why absolutely no one ever brings up *Pearl Harbor*.
>
> (*Yearbook 2004* ix)

The third identifying characteristic of Ebert's reviews was his inclusion of the ways in which change or difference in social attitudes or perspective matter to understanding how a film's representations are worthy or significant. Mainstream Hollywood films underwent an enormous transformation in content and style during Ebert's career, from ironic dramas about societal disorientation (1967's *The Graduate*) to action-adventure blockbusters (1975's *Jaws*) to "high concept" films with striking and easily communicable action (1986's *Top Gun*) to big-budget films (1997's *Titanic*) to a reliance upon franchises based upon comic book characters (2002's launch of the *Spider-Man* universe). Yet, what remained unchanged in his reviews was his attention to the relevance of a film's observable and measurable elements to the zeitgeist. Even so, he often went beyond enunciating a film's immediate felt effect and became forthright when he thought a film revealed truths about social or political issues or attitudes, or when it invited looking at social reality in different ways. This approach has been characterized posthumously as his humanity (Hornaday) and will be addressed in the final section of the findings.

Film Cues to Semantic Fields

In time, Ebert came to rely upon particular cues as the formal elements for his reviews, including an actor's performance; the film director's vision, skill, and oeuvre; the film's contribution to its genre; and the construction of the plot. Lacking formal training but with ready access because of his job to production sound stages, Ebert "learned to see movies in terms of individual shots, instead of being swept along by the narrative" (*Life Itself* 154). In order to anchor expectations for the film's narrative, stylistic, and performative conventions as particular elements to focus on, he aimed "to write with an eye to the generic intentions of a movie" (Linehan). An abbreviation of his review of the 1997 action-adventure *Anaconda*, a film about "the most dreaded predator of the Amazon," illustrates how he would deploy genre to set the metric for his appraisal:

> "Alone among snakes, anacondas are unique. After eating their prey, they regurgitate in order to eat again."
>
> This information is included in the opening title of *Anaconda,* and as the words rolled across the screen I heard a chuckle in the theater. It came from me. I sensed with a deep certainty that before the movie was over, I would see an anaconda regurgitate its prey. Human prey, preferably.
>
> *Anaconda* did not disappoint me. It's a slick, scary, funny Creature Feature, beautifully photographed and splendidly acted in a high adventure style . . . .
>
> A movie like *Anaconda* can easily be dumb and goofy (see *Piranha*). Much depends on the skill of the filmmakers. Here one of the key players is the cinematographer, Bill Butler, who creates a seductive yet somehow sinister jungle atmosphere. The movie looks great, and the visuals and the convincing sound track and the ominous music make the Amazon into a place with presence and personality: It's not a backdrop; it's an enveloping presence.
>
> The acting is also crucial. Director Luis Llosa, whose *Sniper* (1993) was another good thriller set in the jungle, finds the right notes. . . .
>
> And now for the snakes. Several kinds of snakes are used in the movie: animated, animatronic and, for all I know, real. They are mostly convincing. . . .
>
> The screenplay has nice authentic touches. . . .

> *Anaconda* is an example of one of the hardest kinds of films to make well: a superior mass-audience entertainment. It has the effects and the thrills, but it also has big laughs, quirky dialogue, and a gruesome imagination. You've got to like a film where a lustful couple sneaks out into the dangerous jungle at night and suddenly the guy whispers, "Wait—did you hear that? Silence!"
> (Ebert, *Yearbook 1999* 13–15)

Ebert's review of 2005's *Hustle and Flow*, here excerpted to its opening and closing paragraphs, demonstrates use of the lead actor Terrence Howard's performance and filmography to elevate the movie as a noteworthy contribution to heretofore lackluster depictions of the then-nascent genre of urban street life:

> Sometimes you never really see an actor until the right roles bring him into focus. Terrence Howard has made twenty-two movies and a lot of TV (starting with the *Cosby Show*), but now, in *Crash* and *Hustle and Flow*, he creates such clearly seen characters in such different worlds that his range and depth become unmistakable. . . .
>
> *Hustle and Flow* shows, among other things what a shallow music-video approach many films take to the inner city, and then what complexities and gifts bloom there. Every good actor has a season when he comes into his own, and this is Howard's time.
> (*Yearbook 2009* 302–03)

Regardless of genre, Ebert recognized and understood that the value of a film resided in its ability to take the audience on an authentic emotional journey. Using a genre's conventions as his system of measurement not only allowed for a film's evaluation to be set relative to its intentions, it also enabled a flexible comprehensiveness with Hollywood's wide range of content and styles.

Ebert's approach to conjoining a film's cues into semantic fields was subtle and complicated, and to accomplish this he deployed a combination of personal reflection and astute observation to weave them together. Ebert also understood this early in his career, stating,

> Essentially the critic of film, like the critic of anything, is just a very perceptive observer . . . he's just a member of the audience and attempts to both have the experience and then also appreciate

> it and understand it and write about it so that others can understand it and appreciate it, too.
>
> ("Critical Audience")

Excerpts from Ebert's review of 2008's *Iron Man*, a film with the unlikely casting of Robert Downey, Jr., as the lead, a Marvel Comics superhero from source material Ebert acknowledged he found tiresome, illustrate how he brought together his reflections upon the film's constituent parts—its performances and art direction—emphasized here in italics, to form a wholistic appraisal that is in the end very positive:

> When I caught up with *Iron Man*, a broken hip had delayed me and the movie had already been playing for three weeks. What I heard during that time was that a lot of people loved it, that they were surprised to love it so much, and that ***Robert Downey Jr.'s performance was special.*** Apart from that, all I knew was that the movie was about a big iron man...
>
> Yes, I knew I was looking at ***sets and special effects—but I'm referring to the reality of the illusion***, if that makes any sense. With many superhero movies, all you get is the surface of the illusion. With *Iron Man*, you get a glimpse into the depths. . . .
>
> Much of that feeling is created by ***the chemistry involving Downey, Paltrow, and Bridges. They have relationships that seem fully formed and resilient*** enough to last through the whole movie, even if the plot mechanics were not about to take them to another level. . . .
>
> ***Downey's performance is intriguing and unexpected***. He doesn't behave like most superheroes: He lacks the psychic weight and gravitas. . . .
>
> It's prudent, I think that [director] ***Favreau positions the rest of the characters*** in a more serious vein. The ***supporting cast wisely does not try to one-up him*** [Downey]. . . .
>
> The art direction is inspired by the original Marvel artists. ***The movie doesn't reproduce the drawing of Jack Kirby and others, but it reproduces their feeling,*** a vision of out-scaled enormity, seamless sleekness, secret laboratories made not of nuts and bolts but of...vistas. ***A lot of big budget f/x epics seem to abandon their stories*** with half an hour to go and just throw effects at the

> audience. This one has a plot so ingenious it continues to function no matter how loud the impacts, how enormous the explosions. . . .
>
> That leaves us, however, with a fundamental question at the bottom of the story: Why must the ultimate weapon be humanoid in appearance? . . .
>
> ***At the end of the day it's Robert Downey Jr who powers the lift-off separating this from most other superhero movies.*** You hire an actor for his strengths, and Downey would not be strong as a one-dimensional mighty-man. He is strong because he is smart, quick, and funny, and ***because we sense his public persona masks deep private wounds. By building on that, Favreau found his movie, and it's a good one.***
>
> (*Yearbook 2009* 333–35, emphasis added)

In sum, Ebert's ability to make an argument about a film's worth to a viewer in cost and time relative to its entertainment value relied upon the ways in which he regularly and predictably formatted his reviews: introduction, plot description, and assessment, as discussed earlier. Within each of those text segments he crafted the details of their content, and as he presented them, he did so in ways that measured the quality of their success against his acquired knowledge, registered in the form of a reaction to its effectiveness or delivery, of what a well-executed or quality element or cue would be relative to their genre. With cues then calibrated, he had a foundation that he was able to draw upon to reach a logical or reasonable conclusion.

Semantic Fields to Maps

How did Ebert arrive at an appraisal of a film's value as a whole that inducts from semantic fields to become a map of opinion and social commentary? To array semantic fields accessibly so they resonated with the everyday moviegoer and convey interpretation, assessment, and personal judgment, Ebert communicated discursively through a combination of style and substance guided by his personal mandate to present the felt effect of the film, as discussed earlier. Practicing Warshow's admonition that "the critic has to set aside theory and

ideology, theology and politics," (*Life Itself* 154), Ebert began his reviews as if he were in mid-conversation with the reader:

> I came to believe that the lead paragraphs should not be the beginning of a formal top-down approach, but should read as if we had jumped into the middle of a conversation together. All my reviews began with the invisible words, "so, anyway..." . . . I tried to write clearly, to use real words and not jargon . . . I believe you can discuss anything about the movies in words that are understandable.
>
> (*Roger Ebert's Four-Star Reviews* x)

Ebert's openings were enhanced by his pithiness and use of evocative adjectives and irony expressed as humor, sarcasm, or incredulity, especially with films he found lacking, as seen in the opening and closing paragraphs of his review of the 2008 James Bond feature, *Quantum of Solace*:

> Ok. I'll say it. Never again. Don't ever let this happen again to James Bond. . . . Please understand: James Bond is not an action hero! He is too good for that. He is an attitude. Violence for him is an annoyance. He exists for the foreplay and the cigarette. He rarely encounters a truly evil villain. More often a comic opera buffoon with hired goons in matching jumpsuits. . . .
>
> I repeat: James Bond is not an action hero! Leave the action to your Jason Bournes. This is a swampy old world. The deeper we sink in, the more we need James Bond to stand above it.
>
> (*Yearbook 2010* 346–47)

The introduction and conclusion of 2001's *Pootie Tang* reveal his dismay at its failed attempt at satire about racial stereotypes of popular black film characters:

> *Pootie Tang* is not bad so much as inexplicable. You watch in puzzlement: How did this train wreck happen? How was this movie assembled out of such ill-fitting pieces? Who thought it was funny? Who thought it was finished? For that matter, was it finished? . . .
>
> Anyway, I'm not so much indignant as confused. Audiences will come out scratching their heads. The movie is half-baked, a shabby

> job of work. . . . This movie is not in a releasable condition.
> (*Yearbook 2004* 509)

Language in use matters because it has the power to achieve social effect, to change or shape opinion (Fairclough), which film critics have the potential to do when rendering judgment on a filmmaker's choices as symbolic depictions of culture. Because Ebert was so accessible to the everyday filmgoer, he occupied a position of potential social influence, and perhaps more so because he was restrained in imposing value judgments about film content based on a personal moral code. It is not that he did not find some material socially or culturally questionable, as exemplified above, but rather how figuratively or literally a film's semantic fields presented that content. What mattered to him was to what extent the film was self-aware of what it was doing.

Although Ebert eschewed theory, ideology, theology, and politics as the requisite interpretive map for a review, opting instead for a film's felt effect as his lens into a movie, he did have the semblance of substantive map, guided by his regard for movies as a *social art* that not only provided entertainment but that also created "windows into other people's lives [that] can make our ideas less narrow" (Ebert, *Yearbook 2011* vii). What was that map if he did not rely on theory and related abstractions?

Ebert preferred to be agnostic about most film content, allowing it to speak for itself and taking it at face value, a stance he credited to *Esquire* magazine's film critic Dwight MacDonald as helping him find his own personal taste register. "Dwight MacDonald had three categories: high cult, mid cult, and low cult. His point was that excellence could reside in all three" (*Yearbook 2004* ix). To Ebert, MacDonald was particularly useful for evaluating films

> [in] genres residing at the intersection of mid and low. What is essential above all is taste—the taste, for example, to know the difference between Vulgar Sublime and Vulgar Contemptuous. A movie that loves its audience will be loved by its audience, and about that the audience always seems to be right.
> (*Yearbook 2004* ix)

While Ebert here is stating acceptance of the commonplace in all but the most disrespectful form, it did not deter Ebert from writing

strongly negative reviews and enunciating his distaste by ultimately reprinting four hundred and eleven of them in two edited collections, *I Hated, Hated, Hated This Movie* (2000) and *Your Movie Sucks* (2007). The aforementioned film, *Pootie Tang*, was included.

The opening and penultimate paragraphs of his review of Australia's 2010 adaptation of *Bran Nue Dae* is but one hint of Ebert's sociocultural register that constituted his substantive map. The review begins by signaling his surprise at the film's unexpected cultural mashup, and while it concludes with muted regard for the film and praise for its cinematographer, his disapproval at its residual carelessness at reproducing outdated and culturally insensitive content twenty years later is very clear:

> Here's something I wasn't expecting: An Aboriginal musical from Australia, set in a late hippie era and featuring production numbers with a dash of Bollywood. It isn't a masterpiece, but it is a good-hearted, sweet comedy, featuring an overland chase that isn't original but sure is energetic. . . .
>
> I learn *Bran Nue Dae* was a hit on the Australian stage in 1990. Many of the songs, some with serious undertones, reflect the treatment of Aborigines, ***who were treated as cruelly as Native Americans, and in such recent decades you'd think a more enlightenment vision might have seeped into Australia, not that we have anything to feel smug about.***
>
> (Ebert, *Movie Yearbook 2013* 66, emphasis added)

Ebert's autobiography recounts how "[his] liberalism took a clearer form" as an undergraduate when faced with the political crises and racial tragedies of the 1960s (*Life Itself* 97). These events, among others of his own that occurred much later in his life, sensitized him to the experiential veracities of public and private life and enhanced his receptivity to societal dynamics as matters for inclusion in critical analysis and interpretation. Ebert was affected by content when it presented realities about social difference, disadvantage, or inequality among social groups. Taken as a whole, Ebert's humanizing personal journey through life became his conceptual lens that he used to make sense of social difference and marginalization, militarism and war, human empathy, interpersonal relationships, and the emotional depths of childhood and challenges of old age. The substance of

Ebert's reviews was not about a film's politics, political systems, or race, per se, but, rather, when a film contained social or political content, his reviews were shaped by insights informed by the zeitgeist of his generation's formative era, one that prioritized the universal human values of social pluralism, global peace, and racial equality. In that way, his reviews placed the meaning and significance of the *social* art of films as *cultural* products within larger recognizable national or international geopolitical frames of reference. A few final examples illustrate this.

His conclusion about John Sayles's 1996 *Lone Star*, "a film about the discovery of a skeleton in the desert of a Texas town near the Mexican border," captures his candor about the effects of segregation:

> *Lone Star* is a great American movie, one of the few to seriously try to regard with open eyes the way we live now. Set in a town that until very recently was rigidly segregated, it shows how Chicanos, blacks, whites, and Indians shared a common history, and how they knew each other and dealt with each other in ways that were off the official map. This film is a wonder—the best work yet by one of our most original and independent filmmakers—and after it is over and you think about it, its meanings begin to flower.
> (Ebert, *Yearbook 1999* 341)

Ebert's review of Oliver Stone's *Born on the Fourth of July*, starring Tom Cruise, about Vietnam veteran Ron Kovic's turn from gung-ho patriot to paralyzed activist after being wounded in combat and, upon returning home, having to confront the antiwar movement, concludes about the disastrous foreign policy mistake that war was:

> This is a film about ideology played out in the personal experiences of a young man who paid dearly for what he learned. Maybe instead of anybody getting up in Congress and apologizing for the Vietnam war, they could simply hold a screening of this movie on Capitol Hill and call it a day.
> (*Roger Ebert's Four-Star Reviews* 99–101)

Perhaps most indicative was his comment for a 2005 re-reviewing of the famous movie, *Woodstock*, the 1970 documentary of the infamous rock concert festival of the same name:

> Somebody told me the other day that the 1960s had "failed." Failed at what? They certainly didn't fail at being the 1960s.
> (Ebert, "Woodstock" 36)

Conclusion

This analysis sought to understand how the film reviews of Roger Ebert achieved the multivocality that reached two seemingly divergent constituencies of popular culture: the average moviegoer and his professional peers. To that end, textual analysis was deployed to uncover how Ebert's discursive strategies engaged the substance of films in ways that enabled him to speak as a film critic that aligned interests of the everyday filmgoer with film analysis and social commentary and, at times, cultural critique. As a study of a singular professional critic communicating about film in a particular historical era, its aim was not to recreate the professional landscape in which he resided but, instead, to begin with an accounting of the generalizable features of his labor as a working critic who straddled the elite field of film as art with the popular cultural world of movies as a medium of mass appeal.

The analysis found that Ebert drew upon selected art world criteria of film analysis, most notably genre, to deconstruct a film's impact, but then relied upon its elements of technical production to account for its effect. His format for a review was consistent across time, providing a guarantee of regularity and accessibility for a quick read in a newspaper. That shorthand, however, did not delimit his engagement of the artier elements of a film that a more erudite moviegoer might seek. To accomplish this level of analysis, Ebert drew upon his deep encyclopedic knowledge of film to contextualize a movie's elements —an actor's performance within their oeuvre, a director's reorganization of a novel's plot, and so forth. But he did not stop there. He used various rhetorical devices, such as pithy sarcasm or irony, to express or emphasize reaction to these elements. Through his use of first person, he spoke to the audience as one of them. At times his synthesis of the fields of these elements into a wholistic map focused on summary, concluding with just a reaction. At other times the critical map he made of them raised the review to the level of not just

cultural observation but to social and cultural commentary if not outright critique.

The analysis also found that the substance of his cultural commentary was consistent with the liberalizing sociopolitical era in which he came of age, the 1960s, but that it was also influenced by some of his life encounters with race and cultural difference that he was afforded through his educational experiences and his career. All provided a personal lens through which he filtered the meaningfulness and significance of a film's elements. His apparent success was because of the way in which he coupled his engagement of *observation* of the cultural form of film with the *experience* of it as a cultural medium. Reflecting later in his career about why he continued to love movies as he did despite Hollywood's shift to popular content he was less than enthusiastic about, he said:

> A movie is not good because it arrives at conclusions you share, or bad because it does not. A movie is not about what it is about. It is about how it is about it: about the way it considers its subject matter, and about how its real subject may be quite different from the one it seems to provide . . .. These observations accepted, we can now consider movies that affect us with the same power as experiences in our real lives.
>
> (Ebert, *Awake in the Dark* xxviii)

How does this research contribute to understanding the gap between the interests of audiences of popular culture and the work of professional critics? There is a divide between critics whose primary focus is the cultural legitimacy of an art form, and of maintaining their professional standing, and audiences of popular culture who by virtue of their deep engagement with a cultural product understand, assess, and value the emotional impact of a product on its own terms as legitimate (Bielby and Bielby). When a critic does not comprehend the value of that affective register as an aspect of engagement with a popular cultural product, they are unable to speak about it to an audience in ways that resonate with their understanding of and experience with it. The findings from the analysis of Ebert's work reveal that professional critics can successfully straddle those boundaries and achieve distinction for doing so if they are open to it. Further, as the findings reveal, style of discourse is crucial.

Professional critics may lament the presence of the aesthetics and practices of popular culture in elite cultural fields (Ross; Scott), but accommodation is crucial if they are to retain their relevance with audiences in an ever more culturally globalized and omnivorous world. Audiences, especially elite audiences, have been omnivorous in taste for quite some time (Peterson and Kern), but the complicated terrain has pitfalls for critics, even for skillful practicing ones. Ebert, as expansive as he was, encountered pushback from gamers when he questioned whether digital games were art (Parker) and was considered "too highbrow" by some for praising the 2008 Academy Award winner for best film, *The Hurt Locker* and "too lowbrow" by others for praising the 2009 science-fiction thriller, *Knowing* (Ebert, *Yearbook 2012*). Finally, it is worth considering whether the challenges critics face are the same in all fields: music, television, games, as well as film. Ebert's admonition that film is a *social* art provides a suggestion for where to look further—with the discourse, the language, of criticism that captures the ways in which analysis of popular culture is an inherently *social* experience.

Note

1. The primary source was a randomly generated sample of 549 reviews that was drawn from the oeuvre of reviews Ebert produced for the *Chicago Sun Times*. The website RogerEbert.com and *Roger Ebert's Movie Yearbook*, the series of annual collections in which Ebert reprinted the reviews he published from 1999 through 2013, provided the basis for the random sample. His autobiography, various interviews, and his edited collections of his reviews, cited throughout the text, supplemented that.

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