

AN ANALYSIS OF THE EDUCATIONAL
AND PROFESSIONAL BACKGROUND
OF NEWSPAPER FILM CRITICS
AND THE INFLUENCE THESE CRITICS
WIELD ON READERS

Thesis for the Degree of M. A.
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PATRICIA A. DENTON
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ABSTRACT

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By

Patricia A. Denton

This study was designed to determine the newspaper movie critic's role and influence on readers. Its purpose was to evaluate from responses to a questionnaire three points deemed integral to the understanding of film criticism: (1) the film critic/reviewer's description of his job and its purpose, (2) the education, training, and newspaper experience of the newspaper critic/reviewer and (3) the influence critic/reviewers feel they have on their readers.

The survey instrument was a mail questionnaire containing seventy-one items divided into five categories. A sample of journalists representing 150 daily newspapers was drawn. The list from which the sample was taken included all 496 motion picture, entertainment, and amusement editors listed in The 1974 Editor and Publisher Yearbook. Fifty-six critic/reviewers completed the questionnaire.


Analysis of responses indicated that a significant number of newspaper motion picture critics, many who work only part-time in that capacity, have been trained in film. Still further, there is a small but noticeable difference in the amount of influence those trained in film and those not trained in film feel they wield on their readers.

Among critics with film training, the largest percentage said they felt they had a moderate to strong influence on their readers. The highest percentage of the respondents who had not been trained in film said they had little or no influence.

The difference between a critic and a reviewer, a continuing point of controversy among some motion picture critics, was found to have been given little emphasis by the largest percentage of those surveyed. This study found that many, being only part-time writers on film, show little preference for either term.

The survey also provided an educational profile that aspiring film critics might use as a guideline. The majority of the fifty-six respondents suggested a journalism major and film minor as preparation for work as a film critic.

Accepted by the faculty of the School of Journalism,
College of Communication Arts and Sciences, Michigan State
University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the Master of Arts degree.


George A. Hough
Director of Thesis

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A THESIS

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Also, a special thanks is extended to those seventy-six newspaper film critics who took time to respond to the questionnaire.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | Page |
|---------------------------|------|
| ACKNOWLEDGMENTS | ii |
| LIST OF TABLES | v |
| INTRODUCTION | 1 |

PART I. A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW
OF FILM CRITICISM

CHAPTER

| | |
|---|----|
| I. THE CRITIC/REVIEWER CONTROVERSY AND THE FUNCTIONS AND INFLUENCE OF FILM CRITICISM . | 4 |
| Criticism Defined | |
| Critic vs. Reviewer Controversy | |
| Function and Goal of Film Criticism | |
| The Power of the Film Critic | |
| Harris Poll | |
| Critic as Superstar? | |
| II. THE DEVELOPMENT OF FILM CRITICISM AS COMPARED TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF FILM | 26 |
| The Eight-Minute Beginnings: 1900-1910 | |
| The Silent Era: 1910-1928 | |
| Movies Become Vocal: 1928-1939 | |
| Under Citizen Kane's Shadow: The Forties | |
| Television Invades Hollywood: The Fifties | |
| The Influx of Independents and Youth: The Sixties | |
| Hollywood's Decline?: The Seventies | |

PART II. A STUDY OF PRESENT DAY
NEWSPAPER FILM CRITICS

| | |
|---------------------------------------|----|
| III. METHODOLOGY | 53 |
| IV. TABULATION OF RESPONSES | 59 |

| CHAPTER | Page |
|--|------|
| V. COMPARISON OF ATTITUDES | 91 |
| VI. COMPARISON OF RESPONSES WITH THE STUDY'S HYPOTHESES | 103 |
| APPENDIX | 110 |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY | 120 |

LIST OF TABLES

| Table | Page |
|--|------|
| 1. Years newspaper film critics had held present position | 61 |
| 2. Film critics' previous experience on present newspaper | 63 |
| 3. Number of critics having had specific film training | 65 |
| 4. Critics' majors in college | 66 |
| 5. Film critics' performance, directing and/or production experience | 68 |
| 6. Comparison of percentages of critics' responses to terms describing their actual position and the label under their by-line . | 70 |
| 7. Number of films critics reviewed a week . . . | 71 |
| 8. Number of reviews critics wrote a week | 71 |
| 9. How soon critics wrote a review after seeing a film | 73 |
| 10. Newspaper film critics' experiences with deadline pressure and review length restrictions | 74 |
| 11. Those who edited newspaper film critics' work | 75 |
| 12. Kinds of articles critics had written besides reviews | 76 |
| 13. Percentage of newspaper film critics that read reviews in five national publications . | 77 |
| 14. Percentage of critics that ranked reasons persons attended movies in the following order | 78 |

| Table | Page |
|--|------|
| 15. Percentage of critics who designated a specific group as the one who most often read their reviews | 80 |
| 16. Amount of influence newspaper critics felt they had on their readers | 80 |
| 17. Frequency that readers communicated with newspaper film critics | 81 |
| 18. Amount of agreement with critics' views as was communicated to them by their readers . | 82 |
| 19. Percentage of critics who felt pressure to refrain from using certain terms | 83 |
| 20. Percentage of critics choosing each statement as the best definition of a critic | 85 |
| 21. Percentage of critics choosing each statement as the best definition of a reviewer | 85 |
| 22. Percentage of critics choosing each statement as the best definition of criticism | 85 |
| 23. Newspaper critics' suggested schooling for aspiring critics | 86 |
| 24. Critics' choice-top 12 motion pictures | 88 |
| 25. Percentage of respondents in each age grouping | 89 |
| 26. Percentage of respondents completing varied levels of education | 89 |
| 27. Percentage of respondents in varied salary levels | 89 |
| 28. Definitions chosen by the respondents as the best for describing a critic and a reviewer. | 94 |
| 29. Education recommended by critics with and without training | 96 |
| 30. Reason papers listing a motion picture or entertainment editor no longer used movie reviews; comparison in circulation | 98 |

INTRODUCTION

As motion pictures have become an increasingly popular medium in the United States, a few of the more visible critics who write for New York publications and large circulation magazines, have been widely interviewed and reviewed themselves.

Yet very little information has been gathered about those journalists who critique or review motion pictures in the daily newspapers throughout the country. The purpose of this study was to determine the role newspaper movie critic/reviewers, as a whole, have played in the growing interest in the cinema.

The study, based on a mail questionnaire, was also designed to collect data on newspaper film critics' education, training in film, and journalistic experience.

The questionnaire was sent to 150 newspaper motion picture, entertainment, and amusement editors, randomly selected from the 496 listed in The 1974 Editor and Publisher Yearbook. Seventy-six, approximately 50 per cent, of those surveyed responded to the study, with fifty-six, 37.3 per cent, completing the seventy-one item questionnaire.

What is the movie critic/reviewer's function? Do his readers respond favorably or unfavorably to his reviews? Are movie critics really necessary?

These are the questions that will be addressed in the study.

PART I

A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF FILM CRITICISM

CHAPTER I

THE CRITIC/REVIEWER CONTROVERSY AND THE FUNCTIONS AND INFLUENCE OF FILM CRITICISM

It is the era of the critic as superstar. As the arts have expanded . . . a need has been created for more and more critics to write about them. Some of these critics . . . have become as famous as the artists they praise or pan. They are courted, quoted on marquees, turn up on TV talk shows . . . And yet, critics are also scorned and resented.¹

Arthur Cooper discloses in this statement, the crux of a problem which has impeded the growth and development of the motion picture critic/reviewer into a universally acknowledged, relevant and reliable source of information. In the relatively short span of time that motion picture criticism has existed, confined within a single life span, an ever present controversy has been waged concerning the critic/reviewer's position and whether or not he should even be allowed to exist.

What impels the critic/reviewer to feel that he should criticize and label one film better than another and then believe he can influence others with his views?

¹Arthur Cooper, "Critic as Superstar," Newsweek, December 24, 1973, p. 96.

Criticism Defined

Before discussing the essence of this controversy concerning the critic/reviewer and his importance to the movie industry and the public itself, a basic, pertinent question should be asked. What is criticism? Donald Cushman in his article "An Analysis of a Movie Critic" said: "It is a discipline that seeks as its end the understanding of man through the investigation and appraisal of the activities of men."²

The word itself comes from the Greek krinein which means to separate or to discern. Criticism is believed to have begun in the Fourth Century B.C. with Aristotle's Poetics. Film criticism, however, has only very recently developed into an accepted area of criticism.

Criticism may be divided into two primary types, impressionistic and objective. In impressionistic criticism the critic's purpose is to communicate his opinion and impressions about the work he sees rather than analyze the nature of his subject. Reviewing, which is not analytical in nature, could be called impressionistic. A reviewer merely records his immediate reactions to a film.

Objective criticism, on the other hand, tries to judge the work on a basis of standards that are as free as

²Donald Cushman, "An Analysis of a Movie Critic," Critical Perspectives on Communication (Unpublished textbook, Michigan State University, 1973), sec. IV, p. 29.

possible of personal bias. In this type of criticism, a critic may compare a work with others of the same kind to determine how well it realizes the possibilities of the art it represents.³

With these objective well-defined divisions, why not eliminate entirely the use of the controversial terms critic and reviewer and instead use the terms impressionistic critic and objective critic?

Critic vs. Reviewer Controversy

The critic vs. reviewer controversy is one that has long harassed the field of artistic criticism. If it could be so easily settled it would have been years ago. But, today many critics, both impressionistic and objective, are still fanning the fires which keep the controversy alive.

Leo Bobker's definition says the critic must not be confused with the reporter who tells readers how he liked the work and briefly retells the story. Thus, we are for a moment back to the age-old division in the ranks. The thoughtful and scholarly critic dissects and analyzes the work in both a historical and contemporary content, Bobker says. "He seeks to give his readers insights into the author's technique and purpose, and to direct the reader to those elements in the work that are meaningful and

³"Criticism," World Book Encyclopedia, 1960, III, 913.

worthy of special consideration." Bobker claims that above all the critic must have a passionate commitment to the art about which he writes.⁴

Philip Nobile in his book Favorite Movies divides motion picture writers into two camps--"highbrow" critics and "middlebrow" buffs or reviewers. Whereas the former are strictly interested in art, the latter can content themselves with trash, he notes. "So-called critics refer to buffs as pedants and supposed buffs slap critics for being too bookish."⁵

Stephen Koch also differentiates between a reviewer and a critic. The reviewer, he says, is fundamentally a newsman. His review is a piece of news where speed, topicality and fact are the strong points. The critic publishes after the reviewer has forgotten what the movie was about, Koch continues. His virtues are "long meditation, a firm historical sense, profound insight and truth."⁶

The reviewer's mass audience, Koch says, does not particularly want new critical ideas or deep commitment;

⁴Leo R. Bobker, Elements of Film (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1969), p. 234.

⁵Philip Nobile, ed., Favorite Movies: Critics' Choice (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1973), p. 1.

⁶Stephen Koch, "The Cruel, Cruel Critics," Saturday Review, December 26, 1970, p. 12.

it wants news and a prediction--"Will we like it or not?" Judith Crist of New York Magazine and TV Guide and Vincent Canby of The New York Times are writers whose essential function is to give advice and give it in a hurry.

Further distinction between the critic and the reviewer arises with "cosmopolitan" criticism. Cosmopolitan critics write for publications such as The New York Times, The Village Voice, Newsweek, Time and The New Yorker. What sets these cosmopolitan critics apart from other motion picture writers is their popular influence.

The movie reviewer, who most often appears on the amusement pages of local newspapers, differs from the cosmopolitan critic in many ways, Thelma Altshuler and Richard Janars said. Although the reviewer may be influential, he does not have the same reputation. Unlike the cosmopolitan critic, this reviewer tends to like everything he sees.

His lack of discrimination may be caused by his mistaken belief that no one should say something nice or quiet; it is more likely, however, that he has moved to his job as critic from some other position on the paper and that because of general lack of knowledge about drama he has a heart too soon made glad.⁷

In a lecture at the Fourth New York Film Festival, Parker Taylor said there can be no responsible film criticism as long as nominally serious critics imitate the

⁷Thelma Altshuler and Richard P. Janaro, Responses to Drama (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1967), p. 153.

habits of journalistic reviewers. A journalistic reviewer's job is such that he must, even at his best, assume that Hollywood has a standard of the best and that this is authoritative at any given time, by any given measure. But the rule of the best, according to Taylor, is invalidated by having been industrially determined. Thus, he says, nothing could be more foolish than recognizing it.

To hold their jobs on dailies and weeklies, reviewers have to approve a minimum number of the local products and imported products, Taylor says.

A few junior reviewers pretend not to accept Hollywood standards and interests--these are ones who lambast one day and laud the next--and perhaps they don't accept them, consciously, but unconsciously they are occupational victims of the same standards and interests.⁸

Judith Crist, on the other hand, does not recognize that such a dichotomy exists. She holds that newspaper movie criticism as a whole was and still largely is in an abysmally low state, as the few first-rate critics who tried it discovered to their sorrow. There is not one paper, she says, that has a clean slate as far as the integrity of its film critic has been concerned. The reason is simple, Mrs. Crist claims.

⁸Parker Taylor, "Is Film Criticism only Propaganda?" in The New American Cinema, ed. by Gregory Battcock (New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, 1967), p. 67.

Movie advertising is a seven-day-a-week-every-day-of-the-year source of revenue and movie moguls are in the high places where publishers find friends. During my reporting days at the Herald Tribune one good movie critic bit the dust and another simply had to bow out.⁹

Renata Adler, for a while a New York Times critic, agrees that advertising causes many problems for the newspaper critic/reviewer. Movie advertising, she says, with its distortions, cuts, misrepresentations and downright camp reversals, seems to make the assumption that the public would rather be misled by a few superlatives lifted from a critical context than read what the writer actually said.

Therefore motion picture writers continue to fight within their ranks. Each hopes to find the title that will give them the credibility they are looking for.

This is a difficult task in a country where film is regarded simultaneously as high art and something pleasant and frivolous.

Function and Goal of Film Criticism

But, preceding this controversy in importance is the need for defining the function and goal of film criticism itself. Within the last decade, people have again begun to stand in long lines to view the latest motion

⁹ Judith Crist, The Private Eye, the Cowboy and The Very Naked Girl (Chicago: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967), p. xiv.

picture. Whether it is the present decline in the economy in the United States or interest in the advances in film technique, motion pictures have regained some of the audience lost to television in the Forties. What part does the movie critic play in this increased interest in motion pictures?

Judith Crist subscribes to the James Agee premise that film criticism is a conversation between moviegoers.

I relish agreement but I think quite frankly that my immediate goal is to keep the conversation going, to stimulate my listener into a response whether it involves a reappraisal of his own opinions or an affirmation of his disagreement. If I can just prod a person or two into just thinking for himself, let alone organizing his thought into opinion form--critical mission practically accomplished.¹⁰

The most common attacks on criticism are either that it is unconstructive or that it is unnecessary, John Simon said in Private Screenings. "Unnecessary apparently, because the public can think for itself: if a film is good it will be accepted; if it is bad, it will fail. What need then for critics?" he asks. Simon feels the art world is full of works whose true worth took far too long to be accepted. "To the extent that criticism can accelerate the verdict, it can speed the coming of pleasure and enlightenment, and spare us the waste of what we have the least of--time."¹¹

¹⁰Ibid., p. xvii.

¹¹John Simon, Private Screenings (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1967), p. 1.

Free and complete film criticism, endorsed by Stanley Kauffmann, film critic for The New Republic, has three functions: (1) the historical, determining the nature of art in a historical context; (2) the recreative, apprehending what the artist has succeeded in expressing in a specific work; and (3) the judicial, estimating the value of the work in relation to others.¹²

To be effective, this film criticism should contain interpretation and evaluation of: (1) theme of film; (2) quality of technical execution; (3) the quality and nature of the ideas in the film; (4) individual contributions in regards to acting; and (5) the relationship of the film to other works by the same filmmaker, Bobker said.¹³

According to Renata Adler, the only job of a critic/reviewer that really matters much is to recognize a distinguished work when it comes along and to keep it alive. This is the essence of the job. On a daily basis, in preparation for just such a work, the critic should try to keep audiences from being vulgarized, insulted, or made uncertain, she says.

Ideally and especially if he is to function in a mass journal, the film critic should be, according to Richard Schickel, a well-informed leader of the

¹²Cushman, "Analysis of a Movie Critic," p. 34.

¹³Leo R. Bobker, Elements of Film (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1969), p. 239.

theoretically endless discussion between artists, commercial interests, and the audience. The first obligation of the critic is to make his own position clear, in a reasonable tone of voice and with a sense of his own limits, prejudices and blind spots. "Sainte Beuve said the art of all criticism lay in 'just characterization' and that is impossible to do if your prime concern is showing off," Schickel says. He also claims that many readers and critics believe the critic to be a final arbiter of excellence.¹⁴

Kauffmann, also at one time a drama critic for The New York Times, says "the primary duty of the critic is to evaluate the aim of a work of art and the quality of its execution." His secondary task is "to help create an educated audience for good art, an audience that will encourage the creation of still better works of art."

"The film critic who has developed taste," which Kauffmann defines as the accumulation of instances from past experience, "brings his taste to bear on a film in the form of expectations." These expectations are the standards critics use to evaluate the aim of the work and the quality of its execution.¹⁵

¹⁴Richard Schickel, "Movie Critic on Movie Critics," Harper's, January, 1970, pp. 98-99.

¹⁵Cushman, "Analysis of a Movie Critic," p. 31.

Most contemporary reviewers and critics come out of a literary or journalistic tradition, Amos Vogel says in an article in The New American Cinema. Their commitment is to clear narratives, realism or naturalism, identifiable sentiments with the visual serving as illustrations of an underlying literary thesis. "This is criticism oriented toward sociology, literature and psychology, not toward the visual essence of cinema."¹⁶

A critic's role is not to guide the public to or away from films, according to Bobker in Elements of Film. Through good criticism, he says, the audience is better equipped to view a film. The actor and the director are stimulated to agree or disagree and thus to fortify or change their approach.

Bobker said the film critic must bring to his work a special combination of elements: richness of content and style, dedication to film as an art form and an ability to communicate ideas of substance and value. He set up three tools or qualifications he deems necessary to a film critic: (1) a thorough knowledge of the art form, (2) a belief in film as an art and (3) an understanding and appreciation of the other arts.¹⁷

¹⁶Amos Vogel, "Thirteen Confusions," in The New American Cinema, ed. by Gregory Battcock (New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, 1967), p. 135.

¹⁷Bobker, Elements of Film, p. 239.

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¹⁶Amos Vogel, "Thirteen Confusions," in The New American Cinema, ed. by Gregory Battcock (New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, 1967), p. 135.

¹⁷Bobker, Elements of Film, p. 239.

John Simon in his book Private Screenings, says a critic is three things. He is first and foremost a teacher and secondly an artist. Third, Simon says, a critic is or should be a thinker and must have a world view which is a moral position.

In support for his views, Simon recalls the words of Oscar Wilde in an essay "The Critic as Artist." Wilde said that criticism is "a creation within a creation" and "the critic is he who exhibits to us a work of art in a form different from that of the work itself, and the employment of a new material is a critical as well as a creative element."¹⁸

Simon also lays down what he considers a critic's responsibilities. He says a critic must recognize that there is a superficial difference between comedy and tragedy, a profound one between good and bad. But to view and review all films as anything but an art is at best trivial and at worst stupid, he says.

The ideal film critic, Simon says, must be "conversant with cinematography, literature, acting techniques, painting and sculpture (form and composition), music, dance (film musicals), and as many foreign languages as possible."

He concludes that the critic is responsible for raising the standard of motion pictures.

¹⁸Simon, Private Screenings, p. 5.

The critic should do his utmost to listen to what the artist has to say. First ask the question, Is this film filmic? By this he means, Does it use the language of the motion picture? Does it build up its total effect by a composition of visual details, skillfully selected and welded together by means of editing?¹⁹

Though film cannot be divided clearly into filmic and non-filmic, Jean Benoit-Levy says in The Literature of Cinema, he thinks the extent to which a film is filmic is a measure of its quality and seriousness as a work of film art.

No other critic is so much beset by the division of those who see art as a source of delight and those who see it as an instrument of moral good as the film critic, Benoit-Levy claims. The critics themselves are divided. Some are willing to accept the role as a reporter of public entertainment whose chief aim is to make his reports easily readable, entertaining in their own right. Others argue that films are so important in propagating ideas and influencing thought and conduct, whether their makers intend them to do so or not, that no critic can afford to be neutral and detached in reviewing them.

Though professional film critics seldom make a public declaration of their principles, Alistair Cooke, when appointed film critic of the British Broadcasting Corporation, wrote "A Critic's Testament."

¹⁹Jean Benoit-Levy, The Literature of the Cinema (New York: Coward-McCann, Inc., 1946), p. 166.

I declare that I am a critic trying to interest a lot of people into seeing, a few ambitious people into making, interesting films. My malice extends only to those who have a dull talent and continue to exploit it . . .²⁰

America is fortunate, Benoit-Levy says, to possess independent film critics, some of whom occasionally take the trouble to chart a course.

The critic's role is a beneficial one, to the artist as well as to the businessman, he, too should be entrusted with the task of reeducating the public so that the latter may exert an influence and a favorable one this time, on the individuals without whose help the artists cannot express themselves in this art industry.²¹

The Power of the Film Critic

It is perfectly true that movie people and journalists have long speculated about the exact degree of power critics exert on a film's reception by the national audience. There is general agreement that New York--the biggest and most influential movie market--is a review town, Benoit-Levy says. It is the port of entry for the majority of the foreign films.

This increases the need for simple information and is a source of such direct power as the important New York critics wield. Foreign films are booked elsewhere on their box office performance in New York which means that bad reviews there effectively kill their chances of being shown across the nation.²²

²⁰Ibid., p. 75.

²¹Ibid., pp. 197-198.

²²Schickel, "Movie Critic," p. 97.

David Slavitt in his article "Critics and Criticism" says the critic is impotent. "The critic has no influence either with the filmmakers or with the film audiences, has no suitable or adequate vocabulary with which to stand, from which to formulate a general theory of what he is trying to do or wants to say."²³

Like Benoit-Levy, Slavitt says that the influential critics are only those of The New York Times, Time and Newsweek. This influence is partly a function of circulation. He also says that reviewers on smaller papers find out what they think by reading the Sunday New York Times.

Power? No! Movie reviews don't make any difference anyway, except on art films from Europe brought in by small distributors who don't have the money for big ad campaigns or the leverage to get the mass bookings.²⁴

He concludes that movie critics are widely read but ignored.

According to Pauline Kael, the movie industry and many established actors on talk shows love the idea that the public doesn't need the critics. The young filmmaker knows different, she says. Most new pictures that try to break the molds risk confusing audiences and just about all the pictures that express new social impulses or that are critical or rebellious are small-budget pictures. If

²³David Slavitt, "Critics and Criticism," in Man and The Movies, ed. by W. R. Robinson (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967), p. 335.

²⁴Ibid.

a few critics don't go all the way for them, Kael says, the public doesn't hear about them in time to keep the directors working and to keep the art of film alive.

The movie industry cannot be kept alive by pictures like 'The Odd Couple' or 'Airport'; those are the ones that don't require the help of the press (though they often get it). The audience finds its way to them with the help of the advertising.²⁵

Dudley Nichols said that "the artist himself desperately needs the critic because he cannot contain him. And the people need him just as urgently because neither can they contain him. They are blind to values without him." Nichols feels the public can in fact more easily contain an artist because the poetic faculty is instinctive in mankind. The critical mind, in contrast, is based on knowledge and must be consciously trained and developed.²⁶

Most people seem to agree that, at the very best, critics call attention to what the public may happen to like. But what really determines cinematic success is still word of mouth. "At best, the critics are merely advance publicists for something that will or will not take off on its own," Koch said.²⁷

²⁵Pauline Kael, "Current Cinema," New Yorker, January 23, 1971, p. 76.

²⁶Nichols, "Death of a Critic," pp. 266-273.

²⁷Koch, "Cruel Critics," p. 13.

On the contrary, Schickel says, people who don't know the first thing about the principles or functions of criticism are suddenly reading the stuff with new interest. He says this is because it is now more widely available than ever and because it is being written about a subject everyone knows something about and which is wildly fashionable--the movies.

Reviewers are thus thought to be a very powerful crowd, people whose casual smiles or sneers can make or break. Are they? Opinion is mixed and nobody seems to really know. Koch answers the question this way:

Unlike the audience of the Broadway theater, where what the critic says is indeed the name of the game, the movie public is fortunately still large and diverse enough to follow its own tastes. These tastes may often be lamentable, but it is still true that a movie like 'Airport' can do business in tens of millions of dollars despite unanimously patronizing reviews.²⁸

Whatever conclusion is drawn, there is at least a small detectable gap between the critics and the casual, general reader at times. One movie is dismissed as sickeningly wholesome. A reader decides to take his family and loves the picture. The next day he may write the critic/reviewer an indignant letter. It is perhaps unfortunate that such a gap exists, for the cosmopolitan critic in particular is in an ideal spot to provide leadership. He

²⁸Ibid.

has seen more movies than most of us ever can, Koch says, and his opinions are respected by theater people and the publication for which he writes reaches many people.

The critic's words are his tools, or weapons, and he would be foolish and incompetent if he did not use them to the utmost of his ability. If a critic is wrong, Simon says, time eventually proves him very wrong, more quickly than the artist. Here it can rely on the enthusiastic help of the critic's colleagues, he says.

Harris Poll

Dr. Everett C. Parker, director of the Office of Communication of the United Church of Christ, in the summer of 1969 commissioned the national public opinion-survey firm, Louis Harris and Associates, Inc., to make a determination as to critics' attitudes about their jobs and to attempt to calculate what their real influence is on the public.

This Harris survey is probably the most comprehensive examination yet made of criticism in this country, despite the relatively small size of its national sample. The survey included interviews with a small group of thirty-six "visible" critics in four major cities, New York, Chicago, Los Angeles and Philadelphia. A national sampling was also taken by mail of critics and editors in metropolitan areas and smaller cities, only some of whom were film

critics. About 269 critics and 122 editors completed and returned the questionnaire.

Though only some of those surveyed were movie critics, the Harris report, titled "Critics and Criticism in the Mass Media," can be applied to a segment of artistic criticism. The survey found that a majority of editors and critics of the arts believed that criticism published in newspapers today has the most influence. Magazine and television criticism ranked considerably lower.

"A significant minority of the critics surveyed feel pressures upon them to censor, restrict and slant," Harris reported. They imply that they are keenly aware of the danger and are successful in resisting such pressures--at least the most blatant and crude variety.²⁹

Editors, when asked where they look for persons to fill reviewing positions, said they first look at people within their own medium or on their own staffs (journalists). Less often they look for people with formal training or expertise in the arts. Half of the "visible critics" felt they had been hired for their competence as journalists. The other half said they were hired for their competence plus a special background in the field they were to criticize. Only two of the thirty-six felt they were hired solely due to their expertise in the field.

²⁹Robert Shayon, "Critics on the Critics," Saturday Review, March 21, 1970, p. 52.

Critic as Superstar?

Another recent Louis Harris poll revealed that of all occupations, critics are the least respected. They rank lower than sanitation workers.³⁰

Yet, oddly enough, the Seventies has been labeled "the era of the critic as superstar." This paradox raises many questions and points up the ambiguity of today's critic's function.

Claudia Cassidy, former Chicago Tribune music critic, now movie critic for the new monthly magazine Chicagoan, said, "I have always considered myself as guide to what was going on."

"It sounds pretentious to say it, but there is no other reason for being in film criticism than to help raise tastes," Los Angeles Times movie critic Charles Champlin says.³¹

Arthur Cooper, in his article "Critic as Superstar," says the most visible critic in the movie criticism field is Pauline Kael, whose reviews run on and on in the pages of The New Yorker. What makes Miss Kael such a marvelous critic is "her ability to convey the seeing of a movie as experience; she reacts to a film with all human energies--like a lover loving, a thinker thinking, a virago viraging," Cooper says.³²

³⁰Cooper, "Critic as Superstar," p. 96.

³¹Ibid.

³²Ibid., p. 97.

Movie reviewers, Cooper adds, are easily the bitchiest of all critics.

Like contestants in the Roller Derby, they are constantly trying to lurch past one another in the circular race for celebrity and doctrinal primacy. Parallel columns in the Sunday Times pit John Simon against Andrew Sarris; the pages of Esquire match Peter Bogdanovich against Pauline Kael; the air-waves ripple exquisitely to devilish dust-up between Rex Reed and Judith Crist. What are the movie mavens beefing about? Big stuff, Sarris plumps for the auteur theory that a director is responsible almost entirely for a movie, Simon's response to this can barely be printed in a family newspaper. Bogdanovich and Kael see different credits lurking behind "Citizen Kane." Rex and Judith--well, their friends put them up to it.³³

Mrs. Crist, Cooper says, is probably the most widely read movie reviewer. Formerly on NBC's "Today" show, she now reaches millions in TV Guide and New York Magazine.

Simon, on the other hand, has become the "critic you love to hate." Cooper says that in the face of pronouncements such as Mrs. Crist's that "I never arrived at a film with the notion that, wow, it's an art form," Simon sees himself as the guardian of the highest standards of Western culture. He is more of a police dog than a seeing-eye dog and his savaging of performers have made some of his victims weep. But, Cooper says, at his best he is that rare critic who can make ideas work instead of just lying there looking like ideas.

³³Ibid.

"But film is both a much newer art than any of the others and one which, as a true Gesamtkunstwerk, subsumes all the others," Simon said in his book Movies into Film: Film Criticism. He realizes that this newness means there is an insufficient body of film criticism, scholarship and theory available to the aspiring critic. Because film is relatively unexplored it has the same fascination for critics that a barely discovered resort has for tourists; it becomes a fad and invites fanatical partisanship. So out of ignorance and overenthusiasm it is easy for the film critic to be or become one-sided or overzealous. To prevent this, Simon says, a critic must have experience in other arts and critical disciplines.

I consider film inferior to no art but neither do I make the dangerous assumption widely held by illiterate film critics that film is superior to all the other arts. A critic may be a lover; he must not become an idolater.³⁴

³⁴Simon, "Movies into Film," pp. 23-24.

CHAPTER II

THE DEVELOPMENT OF FILM CRITICISM AS COMPARED TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF FILM

Movie critics deal with a distressingly familiar form, the history of which can still be encompassed by a single life span, a new and extremely accessible expressive form that fits few of the traditional definitions of art and which has, as yet, no great tradition to comfort and guide them.³⁵

Thus, Richard Schickel expressed in 1965 what he felt was the obstacle the film critic had for decades striven to overcome and must continue to overcome even today.

In addition, he said, many who write regularly about the movies had their professionalism foisted upon them.

Few of us consciously and consistently sought to become what we are. The hope was there flickering, but since there was no clearly marked path toward attaining the goal and no formal method of preparing oneself, no sensible man allowed much hope to take up room in his thoughts. I suspect the desire simply to write, to express ourselves on some topic or another, preceded the desire to express ourselves specifically on movies.³⁶

³⁵Richard Schickel, Second Sight: Notes on Some Movies 1965-1970 (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1965), p. 13.

³⁶Ibid., p. 14.

Thorold Dickinson, in his book A Discovery of Cinema, claims that film criticism has been rarely achieved. "Just as knowledge of the long established arts is an element in education," Dickinson said, "so should the advantage of knowing something about and understanding cinema be included in our upbringing." He said such a potent medium deserves trained critics.

When we do not keep pace with our artists, the best in cinema goes into cold storage, waiting as La Regle du Jeu which was shelved from 1939 till 1960.³⁷

How tentative and labored the growth of film criticism has been alongside the rapid expansion of the film industry itself.

The Eight-Minute Beginnings: 1900-1910

In 1894, Edison's Kinetoscope peepshow machine provided the first means of commercially exploiting the new invention of motion picture photography. Edison's success led to the setting up of other film companies. One of the first was Vitagraph Company, founded in 1896.

The American film industry itself was officially born in 1900 when Thomas Edison put Edwin S. Porter in charge of production at the Edison studios. The first motion picture theater opened in Los Angeles two years

³⁷Thorold Dickinson, A Discovery of Cinema (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 137.

later. Porter was responsible for the first important complete American film production, The Life of an American Fireman, released in 1903.

A real-estate dealer named Harry Davis of McKeesport, Pennsylvania, installed a movie projector in a vacant storeroom and in 1905, showed one of the screen's first efforts to tell a real story in pictures, The Great Train Robbery. He charged five cents for admission, thus creating the first "nickelodeon," a theater which became famous overnight. By 1907 about 5,000 nickelodeons had appeared throughout the United States.

During the earliest days of film, just prior to 1900, movies were mere fragments--brief comic bits. They were not much more than demonstrations of the invention. Then in 1903 came The Life of an American Fireman. It ran eight minutes. Porter next made Uncle Tom's Cabin which lasted twelve minutes and then The Great Train Robbery which lasted ten minutes.

But while film activity bubbled and boiled, there was little of what could be called film criticism. Almost all writing about motion pictures merely described them, or discussed them in social, economic, or scientific terms.

Film trade journals, such as Views and Film Index, began popping up around 1906. In about 1907, a paradox occurred. Criticism of specific pictures remained in a long-synopsis and brief-comment form. But, at the same

time, especially in film trade journals, articles were being written which addressed large critical-esthetic problems. Evidently this was because of the difficulty in criticizing the brief items, called movies, that flitted by rapidly in theaters. It was much easier to discuss the phenomenon as a whole.

There was in the United States also a continuing comparison of American films with foreign films; a theme that began with the beginning of American criticism and constantly recurs.

To exemplify this early type of criticism, one editor's final order as he detailed an anonymous critic to criticize contemporary film theater and program was "to write just what you think of them in your own words." The critic told his readers of this policy in his first review in The Moving Picture World on January 9, 1909.³⁸

Lewis Jacobs, in his book The Rise of the American Film, said that by May of 1909, Frank E. Woods of the New York Dramatic Mirror was known as "film's movie critic" and that "from the outset Woods impressed movie makers: they read his column steadily, respected his opinions and often acted upon his advice."³⁹

³⁸ Stanley Kauffmann, ed. with Bruce Henstell, American Film Criticism: From the Beginnings to Citizen Kane (New York: Liveright, 1972), p. 19.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 25.

But, according to Stanley Kauffmann, when film criticism, in any meaningful sense, was only two years old, it was already a subject of criticism. A comment appearing in the New York Dramatic Mirror on November 27, 1909 read:

A gentleman interested in the moving picture business recently advanced the argument to the writer that criticism by the press in the free manner that plays are reviewed is not entirely justified in the case of films, because they are articles of manufacture. This view, while not generally held by film manufacturers, may have occurred to some of them and it may be as well to dispose of it.⁴⁰

Early American film reviewing left a good deal to be desired. American criticism, like American cinema, in its beginnings was pragmatic and anti-theoretical. Almost from the start the cinema was saddled with transcendent moral obligations that converted critiques into sermons. Stylistic analysis was often neglected for the sake of presumed realism and social significance.

The Silent Era: 1910-1928

After suffering a temporary setback at the end of World War I, the film industry grew rapidly and became the fifth largest industry in the United States. The star system, which later provided the American film with its most potent medium of publicity, effectively began in 1910.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 37.

Particularly between 1914 and 1919, the industry went through a period of rapid development and transformation. The pattern created by the rise of the feature film still survives today, as do many of the companies formed at that time. The nickelodeon era came to an end and more luxurious theaters took their place.

Together with director D. W. Griffith's innovations, the influence exerted by Soviet and German Expressionist schools led to a growing interest in film technique. The use of a written scenario became standard practice in place of improvisation on the set as longer shooting schedules and larger budgets were used. The foremost genres during this period were the domestic dramas, costume dramas and spectacles. The Western developed significantly.

A landmark in the development of film criticism occurred in March, 1922. Will Hays, President Harding's postmaster general, opened the offices of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America, Inc., and thus created the organ of film censorship known as "The Hays Office." Now film would be criticized, from inside the industry itself, before it ever reached the public.

The move to longer feature films in 1911 and 1912 was absolutely crucial to criticism. Not only was there more substantial work to write about, it had to be written about. The reportorial function of criticism was needed

since longer films played longer engagements. The evaluative functions had greater play.

At the opening of D. W. Griffith's The Birth of a Nation at Liberty Theater in New York City on March 3, 1915, a story in The Moving Picture World said, "the dramatic critics of all the New York daily papers attended the premiere and in almost every instance the picture was reported at length and in glowing terms." This is significant in that it demonstrates that even though films were longer and more developed, there were still as yet no specialized film critics. The dramatic critics attended films and only those deemed important.⁴¹

Now that films were longer and more substantial and the audience increasing, newspapers and magazines had to consider regular reviewing of the medium. The Nation and The New Republic began to comment on film.

At the end of World War I, motion pictures had arrived as commercialized popular art. Movie making was the fifth largest industry in the country. Several critics as well as directors and actors considered the cinema an art form, but few others had such illusions. It was, though, a highly lucrative form of popular entertainment and aimed at a mass market.

⁴¹Ibid., p. 86.

It was recognized that to keep stride with the rapidly growing film industry, critics singularly devoted to film were essential. Several critics quickly established themselves as such on the larger newspapers and magazines. Robert E. Sherwood became film critic of Life in 1920. Richard Watts, Jr. joined The New York Herald Tribune staff in 1924. Also during the Twenties, Quinn Martin began reviewing for the New York World and Eveyn Gerstein's reviews appeared in the Boston Herald, Theatre Guild Magazine, Nation and The New Republic.

Welford Beaton founded The Film Spectator in Hollywood in March, 1926. He felt that criticism was too concentrated in the East and that the film capital should have a critical journal of its own. His goals, he said, were "basely commercial," to help the industry make more money. But this criticism and that of other contributors was reminiscent of the trade journals of twenty years before, in the New York Dramatic Mirror and The Moving Picture World, where American film criticism had begun. There was a great consciousness that the trade critic's best way to help the industry was to write the most rigorous, informed criticism that he could. He should emphasize expertness about films and studios and picture people, without slavishness to business criteria.⁴²

⁴²Ibid., p. 188.

In 1927, Harry Alan Potamkin introduced a new note in film criticism. He was one of the first serious critics born in the twentieth century; after the motion picture had become an important part of the social environment.

Movies Become Vocal: 1928-1939

The two events that most influenced film in the Thirties occurred at the very end of the previous decade; the advent of sound, and the Wall Street Crash in 1929 and resulting Depression. The unbelievable success of The Jazz Singer (1927) compelled other studios to experiment with talking pictures. The problems of the static camera imprisoned in its padded booth and the rudimentary inadequacy of sound recording devices were quickly overcome. By 1931, 85 per cent of the theaters in America were wired for sound. The majority of the great stars such as Greta Garbo were able to make the transition and at the end of the decade, films such as Gone With the Wind, The Wizard of Oz and the first feature-length cartoon Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs proved Hollywood to be at the height of its powers.

About midsummer of 1933, motion pictures began to feel the pinch of the Depression. Some 5,000 of the 16,000 movie theaters had closed. It was not until the end of the decade, apart from a temporary improvement in 1937, that

the industry as a whole could be said to have attained a sound financial footing.

As a result of the arrival of sound with its high cost and the country's economic slump, the independent companies disappeared or merged into eight major studios: M-G-M, Paramount, Twentieth-Century Fox, Warner Brothers, RKO, Universal, Columbia, and United Artists. The Thirties also saw the development of a new Technicolor process that could be used for production on a large scale.

When the British, who were making disturbingly good films during this time (which American critics gleefully seized on for comparative criticisms), confronted Hollywood by putting a quota on foreign films, which demanded that one of every five distributed in Britain be made there, M-G-M answered by establishing British studios in 1937. On this occurrence, Variety, a trade magazine, commented with "a nice nationalism appreciated by the film colony" that the best British pictures were being made in Hollywood (Cavalcade, Mrs. Miniver).⁴³

But in 1929, after little more than a year of talkies, Variety also wryly reported, "Sound didn't do any more to the industry than turn it upside down, shake the entire bag of tricks from its pocket and advance Warner

⁴³ Beth Day, This Was Hollywood: An Affectionate History of Filmland's Golden Years (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1960), p. 227.

Brothers from the last place (among the film companies) to first in the league."⁴⁴

William Troy said on February 8, 1933, in Nation that movie criticism, though too new to have set up any really solid standards or to have found for itself an adequate vocabulary, had already managed to establish in a certain section of the public mind "a body of priori judgments which can only be described as cant."

Cant nowadays means the adoption of some opinion or point of view whose implications of superiority depend largely on its being at variance with the popular (or should we say vulgar?) point of view. Now the essence of current movie cant is fortunately summed up in a single definitive and invariable dictum: that nothing worth while ever has or will come out of Hollywood.⁴⁵

But, while some criticized the move to sound, others realized the great possibilities and promise that its advent carried. For example, the Marx Brothers arrived with large theater reputations and with the intense interest of a sophisticated group of critics such as Gilbert Seldes (The Seven Lively Arts, The Public Arts).

Several other critics became popular during the Thirties. Otis Ferguson of The New Republic (1934-1941), Howard Barnes of The New York Herald Tribune (1936-1951),

⁴⁴Arthur Knight, The Liveliest Art; A Panoramic History of the Movies (New York: New American Library, 1957), p. 147.

⁴⁵William Troy, "Movie Cant and Criticism," Nation, February 8, 1933, p. 157.

Andre Sennwald of The New York Times (1934-1936) and Frank S. Nugent of The New York Times (1936-1940) became known as film critics.

Leda V. Bauer said right after the advent of the talkies that it was a curious commentary on films that at that point in the development of film criticism, the lower the newspaper in the literary scale, the greater the importance attached by picture producers to its opinions.

Rhymed reviews are considered very elegant in these circles and the cheapest of wise-cracks pass for wit. Save for pictures unendurable even to the lowest intelligence, praise is spread in superlatives. The worst are passed over noncommittally, the critics filling their space largely with the plot of the story, for the most part in unconscious colloquialisms, though several have created an entirely new vocabulary for the subject, unintelligible save to addicts of this special literature.⁴⁶

The better type of newspaper usually contented itself with a picture reviewer who could be inoffensive and meaningless in words of two or more syllables, she added.

What exceptions there are seem to be mainly in the weekly, humorous field. An occasional Robert Sherwood or Charles Brackett here relieves himself of certain keen, if facetious, observations on the current screen fare. But save in the instance of two well-known sheets, the trade and fan magazines, naturally enough, expend themselves in indiscriminate admiration of their advertisers, or print verbatim the material sent them by the publicity men of the picture companies. And the journals of opinion, only now beginning to exhibit

⁴⁶Leda V. Bauer, "Movie Critics," American Mercury, January, 1929, p. 73.

an interest in the vulgarest of the arts, have as yet no departments committed to screen criticism.⁴⁷

One of Sennwald's columns on September 29, 1935 demonstrated public thoughts on movie critics during the Thirties and one critic's reaction. Sennwald related that he had suffered a good deal of "epistolary abuse" because of certain comments he had made of Fredric March's work. He included what two correspondents had written in the course of their assaults.

One of them declared that "when a critic finds that he has become nothing but a critic in the true sense of the word, he had better hunt himself another job, because he might do a great deal of damage unknowingly." The other wrote: "It is only fair to say that you are entitled to your opinion and I to mine. You, however, have both Mr. March and his firm adherents at a disadvantage since our opinion can't be flaunted in the widely read New York Times."⁴⁸

Sennwald said these were reasonable points of view and he himself had wondered at the temperance which most readers adopt when they expressed dissatisfaction with his opinions. Actors, of course, he said had always been bitter at the injustice which permits them no opportunity

⁴⁷Ibid., pp. 73-74.

⁴⁸New York Times, September 29, 1935, sec. X, p. 5.

to defend themselves against newspaper reviewers. "The difficulty is that when a reviewer sweetens his opinion with mercy and corrupts his point of view with an abstract yearning for justice, he quickly ceases to be helpful as a cinema guide," he said.

"The producer and the actor have no claim on the reviewer," Sennwald added, "as he addresses himself to the film-going public and he presents, in theory, a body of opinion that enables the film-goer to get the maximum of entertainment value for his money."⁴⁹

On January 22, 1938, in an article in The New York Times, it was reported that in a speech before the National Board of Review of Motion Pictures, Mortimer J. Adler, University of Chicago professor of philosophy of law, said that "in general criticisms are on as low a level as the public taste itself." He particularly objected to the "sneering type" of critics.⁵⁰

Dr. Russell Porter, associate director of Columbia University Extension, agreed "that there are too many critics who actually hate movies."

Alistair Cooke, British radio film critic, said "the irony of popular criticism today is that only high-brow critics, whose papers carry no advertising, can say

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ New York Times, January 22, 1938, p. 17.

what they like." He added that if radio was ever free of commercial shackles it would provide an unfettered outlet for movie criticism.

That same year on August 28, another New York Times article labeled the movie critic "the Cinderella in the kitchen, the muses' illegitimate godchild."

The motion picture reviewer (critic is really too good for him) is looked down upon by the literati, is distrusted by the proletariat as a tool of the capitalist press and is tolerated with the immense skepticism by the admission-paying public, at whose ungrateful shrine even the least conscientious picture reviewer has often been tempted to commit professional hara-kiri. . . . But what ever you may say of the film critic, his function is not that of another barker to confuse and entice the wavering public into every passing side-show; let this one shred of dignity at least cling to his diffident form.⁵¹

In the article aptly named "The Case of the Critics," Otis Ferguson said the truth of the matter was that when he became a critic in 1933, it wasn't a very good time for movies. "On the level of the lofty brow you weren't allowed to notice anything unless it came from abroad or had been made in the nostalgic days of the silent film . . ." he said.

It was a pretty tough time, with that perennial Junior, Richard Watts, trying to be Mr. Watts of the Dramah Patch and William Troy trying to be William Troy, and the whole thing boiling down to who had read the most books in a foreign language, could refer thereto and quote therefrom. There was

⁵¹Ibid., August 28, 1938, sec. IV, p. 3.

a great rush for words like regisseur montage and almost no appreciation of the movies that people after all see . . .⁵²

Ferguson said that some of the stuffier attitudes disappeared from movie reviewing and there was a tendency to take films for what they were and with respect. But, there was still no atmosphere for breeding critics. "I wonder if it isn't the movies themselves who are responsible . . . But the movies themselves are not interested in having able criticism. They are suspicious of it and shy violently when its presence is suspected," Ferguson said.

Hollywood has been able to insist that the whole of its public is feeble enough in the head to admire practically anything on celluloid so long as nobody meanly spoils the show by suggesting that as an actor Errol Flynn is about as expressive as the leg of a chair, or that even a million dollars can be wrong and not art. Consequently film criticism is obediently dull and uninformative, and surely unworthy of so lively and imminent a subject. We started out by paying the movies no respect, and now we lag behind them and are taken into camp. The respect is now there but it is a poor thing and it is paid rather to the wishes of the men who merely sell them for profit rather than to the movies themselves.⁵³

Under Citizen Kane's Shadow: The Forties

The Forties were under the shadow of Orson Welles' film Citizen Kane (1941). Welles made Kane, a press

⁵²Otis Ferguson, "The Case of the Critics," New Republic, February 2, 1942, p. 148.

⁵³Ibid.

magnate, a man who was all things to all men. The film itself inspired many directors that followed. Camera work with deep-focus compositions, flashbacks and sombre lighting became the rule rather than the exceptions they had previously been.

In the late Forties, there was an attempt to bring back dwindling audiences by moving "from the more predictable escapist plots toward stories which reflected attitudes and problems of the postwar society." This social realist trend was further developed in the Fifties and later came to encompass a wider spectrum of controversial subject matter, such as drugs.

Along with this push for audience development came hard-hitting attacks on film critics.

The average cinemogul regards critics as either free press agents or costly saboteurs. Even when a bad picture is a box-office hit, the moviemaker resents critics who called it bad. M-G-M is particularly touchy about critics who refuse to love its products. (In Manhattan, M-G-M likes to avoid projection-room screenings and show films to reviewers at "sneak previews" in regular theaters. The tactic seems designed to drown out critical judgment with loud sounds of audience approval).⁵⁴

In 1946, Eileen Arnot Robertson was dropped as BBC's film critic after M-G-M charged that her reviews were "unnecessarily harmful." Time magazine reported in its December 13, 1948 issue that she sued for libel after

⁵⁴"Criticism Hurts," Time, December 13, 1948, p. 102.

M-G-M sent its letter of complaint to BBC. She collected \$6,000 for damages but in 1948 a higher court said the letter was "fair comment innocent of malice" and reversed the decision. London's Critics Circle began raising funds for a last appeal to the House of Lords.

Near the end of World War II, Wolcott Gibbs, a New Yorker drama critic, was forced to write movie reviews for ten months but he vowed he would never do so again:

It is my indignant opinion that 90 per cent of the moving pictures exhibited in America are so vulgar, witless and dull that it is preposterous to write about them in any publication not intended to be read while chewing gum. There are so few exceptions that obviously no one could hope to find regular employment writing about them, and consequently they can be ignored here.⁵⁵

Television Invades Hollywood: The Fifties

In the 1950's, the American film industry saw its first consistent drop in cinema attendance since the Depression as a result of the impact of television. After nearly fifty years of popularity, cinema sank to second place in the mass audience's scheme of things. Admissions dropped from a high of close to 90,000,000 a week to a low of 15,000,000.

The industry felt that if the "talkies" had saved movies during the Depression, the new Cinerama and 3-D

⁵⁵Hollis Alpert, "Film: The Bright Kingdom," Saturday Review World, August 10, 1974, p. 98.

photography would work now, and though they proved too inflexible to be generally acceptable, the success of Cinerama showed a ready audience for the sort of spectacular entertainment that TV could not provide. In 1953, Twentieth Century-Fox introduced CinemaScope.

These and other developments during the decade brought about a relatively stimulating, if somewhat uncertain creative climate, Cowie says, although in retrospect "an aura of melancholy hangs over the memory of Hollywood at the beginning of the Fifties." The McCarthyism of the decade caused a number of distinguished filmmakers to be blacklisted. "In 1952," Cowie says, "Chaplin delivered his valedictory film Limelight, a sad but moving testament and shortly afterwards quit America for good."⁵⁶

Of the active established directors of the early Fifties, John Ford, William Wyler, George Stephens, Billy Wilder, and John Huston perhaps were the five held in the greatest contemporary esteem.

In the mid-1950's the auteur theory, European-based but extremely influential in America, became a kind of militant rallying cry, particularly among younger critics. Auteur criticism, which is a variant of romantic

⁵⁶Peter Cowie, ed., A Concise History of The Cinema (London: The Tantivy Press, 1971), p. 33.

theory where the artist receives greater emphasis than the work of art, offended older established critics. Movies should be judged on the basis of "how" and not "what." They were particularly hostile to message movies "boring but well intended" in desire for social reform. Film directors ignored by "serious" critics became popular, among them Hitchcock, Hawks, and Ray.⁵⁷

In 1958, when Agee on Film was published, there was a noticeable change in general attitudes toward serious film criticism. To be a serious critic in the post-agee age was to be culturally apposite. Earlier, there was something of cultural heroism in the act, in the United States at least.

In the early days of the motion picture, when film was oriented in a large part toward entertainment, critics in the daily newspapers and periodicals reviewed new films as they might review a musical comedy or an ice show at Madison Square Garden. Their key concern was whether the film was entertaining. Film critics on major newspapers--Kate Cameron, Rose Pelswick and Bosley Crowther--were by and large ex-reporters commissioned by their publications to provide the readers with a guide to good and entertaining film viewing.

⁵⁷Louis D. Giannetti, Understanding Movies (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1972), p. 198.

As film techniques became more complex and films more intellectually demanding, the need for serious and thoughtful criticism was felt. Critics who could say the latest Doris Day film was "funny and delightful" had difficulty explaining the character and quality of a complex film like Bergman's The Seventh Seal.

The Influx of Independents and Youth:
The Sixties

By the Sixties, a new pattern emerged in film production. Television's invasion of Hollywood had been overcome and though audiences were still dwindling, they did so at a greatly reduced rate. The new independent producer, many New York-based, replaced the old-style Hollywood producer. Many young directors moved into film from television, among them Arthur Penn, John Frankenheimer, and Sidney Lumet.

Anarchy of the most stimulating sort reigned in movie criticism in the Sixties, Schickel said in his book Second Sight. The basic task of the reviewer was, in effect, to make up his terms as he went along.

In 1965, the average quality of studio-made American films had fallen off. Movies lost the knack for the kind of fast-moving action, adventure and comedy film on which the prosperity of the movie industry had been based. Hollywood was still panicked by television, the loss of

theater chains, and inutility of old factory production methods. Richard Schickel said that at this point the truly memorable, influential films were coming from abroad.

"The films never regained the 'mature audience' they lost in the Fifties to television and other attractions," Russel Nye said in The Unembarrassed Muse. An American Research Bureau report in 1969 on Detroit's movie-going audience showed that the greatest potential audience for films lay in the twelve to thirty plus age group, especially in its sixteen to twenty-two segment, Nye said.⁵⁸

Similar nationwide surveys indicated that 52 per cent of the movie audience was under the age of twenty; 72 per cent under thirty. Successful theater managers, therefore, tended to pay little attention to the movie critics, who in their estimation were viewing films in terms of an older, inconsequential audience. "The true test of a big picture," remarked Martin Shafer of Detroit Suburban Theatres, Inc., "is its gross. Our job is to determine what the public wants."⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Russel Nye, The Unembarrassed Muse: The Popular Arts in America (New York: The Dial Press, 1970), p. 386.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

Since Hell's Angels outdrew by more than four times a picture unanimously acclaimed by the critics, Lion in Winter, in Shafer's theaters in 1969, his attitude is explainable.

Mike Nichol's The Graduate (1967) was in many ways a watershed in American cinematic history. The first financially successful of the "personal" films--films in which the director seeks to express a personal viewpoint of a given aspect of our society--The Graduate marked the advent of the New American film.

Hollywood's Decline?: The Seventies

If the movies of the 1970's have proved anything, it is that no single formula can guarantee success. The runaway top grosser in 1970 was Airport, an old-fashioned melodrama with old-fashioned thrills. Yet at the same time the tear-jerker Love Story and an irreverent antiwar comedy M*A*S*H proved to be big moneymakers. Recently admissions have climbed back from the 15,000,000 of the Fifties to 20,000,000 with films such as The Godfather, The Exorcist and The Sting aiding the popular resurgence.

One omnipresent problem in the Seventies has been the fact that several of the major studios are in financial trouble. M-G-M sold its entire collection of props, miniatures, furnishings, and costumes at auction. It also sold its fabled Lot Three with Tarzan's jungle. At Twentieth

Century-Fox, Richard D. Zanuck, studio head, was ousted partly because of his studio's elaborate productions which were losing money. Warner Brothers as well as M-G-M gave up their costly headquarters in New York City.

Most film criticism has seen little definable positive change, especially since the Sixties. It is still almost exclusively devoted to discussions of "content." Very few critics come to grips with the basic elements of film--images and movement.

One reason why the bulk of movie criticism is considered bad or misleading is that most critics never go beyond the "content" of a film, said Louis D. Giannetti in Understanding Movies. Shallow commentaries of this sort do not tell the reader specifically why and how a movie succeeds (or fails). They merely provide a general notion of what a film is about.⁶⁰ Giannetti says that superficial judgments are being made all the time by otherwise cultivated and intelligent people. A film by Alfred Hitchcock is dismissed as a "mere thriller," despite the fact that Hamlet on this level of criticism could be similarly discussed. On the other hand, Giannetti says, critics often praise a didactic potboiler like Stanley Kramer's Ship of Fools because of its "important" theme, although it is a dull and uninspired film.

⁶⁰Giannetti, Understanding Movies, p. 45.

The New York Times plays it safe these days. Should a new film be ill-treated by its daily reviewer, another critical analysis will appear in its Sunday drama section, this time raising the same film to the level of a classic, Hollis Alpert claimed in a Saturday Review World article, "Film: The Bright Kingdom."⁶¹

Though the earliest movie reviews come down to us as simple descriptions of an event, they are as such invaluable to film historians. The writing is usually sparse and phlegmatic without being unduly perceptive or analytical. The subsequent evolution of capsule journalism into "a branch of belles lettres" has been an arduous process. Always the artist has been far ahead of the critic. The inventors and innovators of the medium as Lumiere, Edison, Porter, Griffith, and Eisenstein made their contributions before a critical vocabulary even existed to describe them. Why did criticism lag behind? Andrew Sarris lists three reasons he sees as probable answers to this question: (1) Cinema, as a visual art, is difficult to describe in words (only partly visual, partly exists in time--requires renaissance man to encompass all its aspects); (2) the oversupply of movies has strained the eyesight of conscientious film scholars for

⁶¹Alpert, Bright Kingdom, p. 100.

more than sixty years; (3) and there has been little time to recollect screen experience in tranquility.⁶²

Pauline Kael in Movies, the Desperate Art, said that the film critic in the United States now is in a curious position: the greater his interest in the film medium, the more enraged and negative he is likely to sound.

He can assert his disgust, and he can find ample material to document it, but then what? He can haunt film societies and reexperience and reassess the classics, but the result is an increased burden of disgust; the directions indicated in those classics are not the directions Hollywood took.⁶³

⁶²Andrew Sarris, "Film Criticism from Blurbs to Belles Lettres" in The New American Cinema, ed. by Gregory Battcock (New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, 1967), p. 5.

⁶³Pauline Kael, "Movies, The Desperate Art," in Film: Readings in the Mass Media, ed. by Allen and Linda Kirschner (New York: The Odyssey Press, 1971), p. 213.

PART II

A STUDY OF PRESENT DAY NEWSPAPER

FILM CRITICS

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

From information collected in Part I of this thesis, it is evident that little reliable, representative study and observation has been spent in determining the newspaper movie critic's role and influence on readers. (Throughout the remainder of this thesis when the term newspaper movie critic is used, it will refer to both critic and reviewer.)

Much of what is said about these professionals has been conjecture and what others have candidly observed by watching, reading, and conversing with only a small number of them. It is true that a newspaper movie critic is a newsman. His review is most often considered a piece of news where speed, topicality and fact are the strong points. But it is untrue that this leads him to make snap judgments and that his reviews merely designate what films are available to readers, "as the 'Where to Dine' listings do for food."⁶⁴

⁶⁴Judith Crist, "Ask me no questions and I'll tell you. . ." in Favorite Movies: Critic's Choice, ed. by Philip Nobile (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1973), p. 196.

This study was intended to either disprove this conjecture or to give it a substantial basis for further consideration. It was begun with the establishment of several hypotheses as a basis from which (1) questions could be derived for a survey of newspaper critics and (2) information from published literature could be gathered for support or contradiction. These are:

- (1) Most newspaper film critics feel they have some influence on their readers.
- (2) Most newspaper movie critics, particularly those working full-time, have some training or education in film.
- (3) Most newspaper movie critics have a journalistic background.
- (4) Most newspaper film critics have held another position on the paper prior to assuming their present reviewing position.
- (5) Most newspaper film critics hold another position on the paper in addition to reviewing.
- (6) Most newspaper movie critics are not mere reporters of their likes and dislikes, as many magazine critics have charged, but they also try to show a film in its historical perspective and give readers an insight into their views.
- (7) Most newspaper film critics consider themselves as critics. Those who don't either feel there is

little difference between the terms critic and reviewer or that neither term provides a satisfactory description of their jobs.

- (8) Most newspaper film critics work for papers in cities of 50,000 and over.

The instrument used in the study was a mail questionnaire with seventy-one items divided into five segments. In Section A, the questions were designed to determine some basic facts about the individual respondent, such as his college major, other newspaper positions he had held or now holds, years working as a newspaper critic on his present publication, and film training.

Section B was designed to solicit information about a newspaper movie critic's job such as the number of films viewed weekly, preparation for viewing a movie, deadline pressures, and problems caused by others editing a review.

Section C concerned itself with the critic's knowledge of his readers and the responses he received from them, through letters, phone calls, or in person.

Section D was made up of general questions for the field, such as the goal of film as a medium, the definition of the terms, critic, reviewer, and criticism, and the respondents' top ten all-time favorite films.

Section E was concerned with demographic variables such as age, education, and income. A copy of the questionnaire is in the Appendix.

The questionnaire was sent to a randomly selected sample of newspaper movie critics. To compile a list of current newspaper critics, The 1974 Editor and Publisher Yearbook was scanned state by state and all those persons listed as motion picture, amusement and entertainment editors and managers were recorded. There were 322 labeled as motion picture editors or managers and 174 listed as entertainment or amusement editors and managers. Many of the motion picture editors were also listed as amusement or entertainment editors. It was supposed that some newspapers include the movie critic under this latter title. Responses to the questionnaire showed this to be so.

Random sampling was selected as the appropriate probability sampling procedure to use in the study. This gives each combination of persons an equal chance to be included. A random sample of 100 critics from around the United States was drawn from index cards containing the list of names taken from The 1974 Editor and Publisher Yearbook.

The number ten was chosen from a table of random numbers. The index cards with the names were shuffled three times. Then, starting with the tenth critic listed, every fourth name was drawn from the first sampling wave of 100.

For a preliminary test of the questionnaire's first draft, several journalism students and professors at Michigan State University were given the questionnaire and asked to evaluate it as if they themselves were critics. After consulting with this group, the questionnaire was revised to correct hard-to-answer questions or those not easily understood and any other evident mistakes that might hamper the critic in answering the questionnaire.

The revised questionnaire was sent on January 19, 1975, to the first wave of 100 critics. This first wave would either serve as a pretest (if those returned first showed untold problems) or as a substantial part of the survey. It was opted to first determine if this wave yielded reliable and complete enough information that would be suitable for tabulation. If so, these returned questionnaires would be slotted in the survey rather than cast aside as merely pretest material. This procedure was used to facilitate a quicker completion of the survey and one that would be less costly.

In addition to the questionnaire, a letter of transmittal soliciting the critics' cooperation and giving the purpose of the survey was sent. Also as an inducement for those surveyed to reply, a self-addressed stamped envelope was enclosed.

No untold problems were evident among the first questionnaires returned, so the first wave was used as substantial, valid survey material.

Two weeks later the researcher shuffled the index cards again, and started with the tenth name, every fourth critic was chosen for a second wave of fifty, skipping those sent a questionnaire in the first wave.

When daily returns dwindled, a second questionnaire was sent to the 100 of the 150 critics that had not responded. Again a letter was drafted, this time as a "reminder" that their response was essential. This letter accompanied the copy of the original questionnaire.

The sample of 150 was chosen as large enough to avoid intolerable sampling error. It was also selected to yield statistically representative and significant results in all the proposed tabulations, but not to prove to be so large as to retard the project or incur unnecessary expense.

CHAPTER IV

TABULATION OF RESPONSES

In the previous chapter, the methodology of the study and the hypotheses on which it was based were disclosed. Here the tabulated survey results will be given. Then concrete findings, in relation to the hypotheses, can be determined.

Seventy-six critics or slightly over 50 per cent of those surveyed responded to the questionnaire. They did so in one of two ways; either by returning the completed questionnaire or by replying that there was no longer a critic on their respective newspapers. Several papers had decided to dispense with movie reviews since The 1974 Editor and Publisher Yearbook had been printed. Many movie houses had closed during 1974, and some newspapers no longer had a need for a film critic.

Two graphs in the Appendix compare the percentage of the questionnaire respondents to the non-respondents, in relation to their city's population. Seventy-four critics did not reply to the questionnaire.

Section A

The remainder of this chapter will be devoted to examining each question in the order and section it appeared in the survey.

Of the fifty-six respondents who completed the questionnaire, only 12.5 per cent said they were full-time critics.

The forty-nine respondents who reported that they are not full-time critics were asked two additional questions:

How much of your normal work week is spent on film criticism?

What other newspaper jobs do you have in addition to that of film critic?

To the first question, 65.3 per cent responded that they spend less than ten hours a week on film criticism. About 20 per cent said they spend between ten to twenty hours a week. One responded that he spends over thirty hours a week in this part-time capacity.

Concerning the second question, 73.4 per cent of the part-time critics said they hold a combination of jobs. For many, this additional position is something other than a second facet of criticism. It is a news, a women's department and/or a sports reporting job. Some 6.1 per cent said they were reporters in addition to their job as

a part-time movie critic. About 10.2 per cent said they were critics of a second art form as well as a part-time reporter. Only 8.1 per cent hold an additional job in just the field of artistic criticism.

Part- and full-time film critics were asked how many years they had held their present position as a newspaper motion picture critic. The table below shows their response.

Table 1. Years newspaper film critics had held present position.

| Range of Time | Frequency |
|----------------------------|-----------|
| Less than 1 year | 8.1% |
| 1 to 3 years | 39.2 |
| 4 to 6 years | 21.4 |
| 7 to 10 years | 10.7 |
| Over 10 years | 16.0 |

Are you the only movie critic published in your paper?

The response was fairly close, with those answering that there were other film critics on their paper having the advantage. About 58.9 per cent said they were not the only film critic published in their newspaper. Surprisingly, this includes four of the seven full-time movie critics. Forty-one per cent of the respondents said they were the only motion picture critic writing for their respective papers.

Those thirty-three who replied that they were not the only critic published in their newspaper were asked to designate the position held by other part-time critics published there. The majority, 48.4 per cent, of these thirty-three answered the category, other staff members. About 15 per cent said syndicated and wire service columnists complete the space given to movie reviews. Only 6 per cent said their newspapers used both additional reviews by staff members and by wire service columnists and 3 per cent replied in the category other. Some 27.2 per cent did not designate the additional reviewers' position.

Next, film critics were asked whether they had held another position on the newspaper prior to their present one as a movie critic. If so, what was this position? Twenty-five per cent of the responding critics said they had not held a previous position on the newspaper. But the vast majority, 75 per cent, said they had held another newspaper job before movie reviewing. No particular position, though, showed itself an extremely large breeding ground for critics. (See table 2.)

Have you written any other kinds of artistic reviews?

Eighty-nine per cent said they had written other types of reviews. Only 10.7 per cent had not. This some 89 per cent also said they had written reviews in several rather than just one other category. In the questionnaire,

Table 2. Film critics' previous experience on present newspaper.

| Newspaper Positions | Frequency |
|----------------------------|-----------|
| News | 28.5% |
| Sports | 7.1 |
| Editing | 16.6 |
| Advertising | 2.3 |
| News and editing | 21.4 |
| Other | 23.8 |

they were given eight artistic categories and were asked to check those in which they had reviewed. One critic checked as many as seven of the eight categories and two checked all eight categories. Five said they had written six different kinds of reviews and six respondents said they had written reviews in five areas of the arts. There were nine critics in each division of those who had experienced writing reviews in four, three, two and one other artistic category.

A vast majority of the motion picture critics listed in The 1974 Editor and Publisher Yearbook, the reference for the survey sample, were concurrently listed as a theater editor. This double listing was given credibility by the respondents' lists of other artistic areas in which they had written reviews. The largest number, 82 per cent of the respondents, said they had written theater reviews. Forty-six per cent checked the rock

category and the same number designated that they had done reviews of television and radio programs. The category with the lowest number was ballet, in which only 20 per cent of the critics had reviewing experience. Classical music, jazz and folk had 26 per cent, 34 per cent and 42 per cent, respectively. Thirty-six per cent said they had done reviewing in a few other unmentioned categories such as art, books and night club acts.

The critics were asked if they had had any courses, seminars or other kinds of training in film. This question will later be significantly related to other answers by the respondents, to help establish the most recommended course of action for someone interested in working professionally as a film critic. The percentages were very close in relation to whether the responding critics had been trained in film. Those replying yes, 53.5 per cent, slightly outweighed the no's with 46.4 per cent.

What type of training had this 53.5 per cent had?

Table 3 shows seven categories of training and the percentage of the respondents who had been involved in each.

The largest percentage of the respondents with prior training said they had taken a variety of film study classes and had done a good deal of independent study. Those who checked the third, fourth, fifth or sixth categories were asked to be more specific about their work in the category. Respondents who said they had taken classes

Table 3. Number of critics having had specific film training.

| | Frequency |
|--|-----------|
| Classes in Film History | 10.0% |
| Classes in Film Production | 6.6 |
| Classes on Specific Directors | 0.0 |
| Independent Study | 16.6 |
| Film Festivals | 0.0 |
| Other | 13.3 |
| Any Combination of the First Four Categories . . | 53.3 |

on specific directors, mentioned having studied Ingmar Bergman, Luis Bunuel, Howard Hawks, John Ford, George Cukor, Frank Capra, and Yasujiro Ozu. In the independent study category, critics said that they had done a variety of work including reading, film making, collecting of films, studying at the National Critics Institute and working in movie theaters. Film festivals visited by the respondents included ones in San Francisco, New York and Los Angeles. Film making was the main entry under the other category.

The 46.4 per cent who said no to having had any film training were asked if they felt such training would be beneficial to their job. Some 38.5 per cent chose the answer, of some value, which covers a large area of possibilities. One critic wrote in the words very little. About 23 per cent answered that such training was very valuable, 19.2 per cent said it was valuable, and

11.5 per cent claimed that it had no value at all. Two critics did not answer. A couple of additional comments were made by those in the of some value group. One said that training sometimes leads to reviews written for a film technician and not the general public; a legitimate complaint which all critics must be aware or beware of.

The seventh question in Section A was concerned with whether those who attended college had majored in film. Only 3.5 per cent of the fifty-four critics who had attended college had majored in film, while 94.6 per cent had not. This 94.6 per cent were asked what their major had been in an effort to see if their major could be related at all to their present job.

Table 4. Critics' majors in college.

| College Majors | Frequency |
|-----------------------------|-----------|
| Journalism | 31.5% |
| Drama | 5.6 |
| Music | 1.9 |
| Political Science | 3.7 |
| English | 14.8 |
| Other | 42.6 |

Those in the other category, primarily, had had double majors. Several had both English and journalism and a couple, English and drama. Other combinations included journalism and fine arts, music education and humanities,

anthropology and journalism, psychology and theater, and political science and journalism. The majority of these were connected with the arts, literature and journalism, which signifies that these critics had some background that might aid them or qualify them for their job as a motion picture critic. Any of these majors might lead to an understanding of some of the many facets of film.

Only those with a political science background might be at a slight disadvantage in a reviewing position, especially without some kind of film training. Of the two political science majors, one had not had any training in film and said he did not feel it would be beneficial to him at all. He also said he felt he had little influence on his readers and recommended a liberal arts education to prospective film critics. Both points seem significant. The other political science major, unlike the first, was a full-time critic and said he had done independent study by working in many capacities in theater business. He said he felt he had moderate influence on his readers. He recommended a liberal arts education and wide reading as preparation for film critics.

Have you ever been associated with the production of a play, musical or film?

About 37.5 per cent of the critics had never been associated with such a production, while 62.5 per cent had.

The table below shows the type of work this 62.5 per cent had done.

Table 5. Film critics' performance, directing, and/or production experience.

| Areas of Experience | Frequency |
|--------------------------------|-----------|
| Acting | 40.0% |
| Production Staff | 8.6 |
| Directing | 5.7 |
| Other | 20.0 |
| Combination of Areas | 22.9 |

Those critics who had been associated with a production were also asked if they were currently associated with a play, musical and/or movie and, if so, what they were doing. Twenty-six said they were not currently associated with any production. Nine were associated with a musical, play and/or film at the time of the survey; three were acting, one was working in production, one in directing, and four were working in other capacities such as script writing.

Did you ever consider pursuing a career in drama and/or film"

About 54 per cent of the total respondents said they had not considered a career in drama or films, but a rather large number, 46.4 per cent, said they had considered such a career. It can be assumed by examining

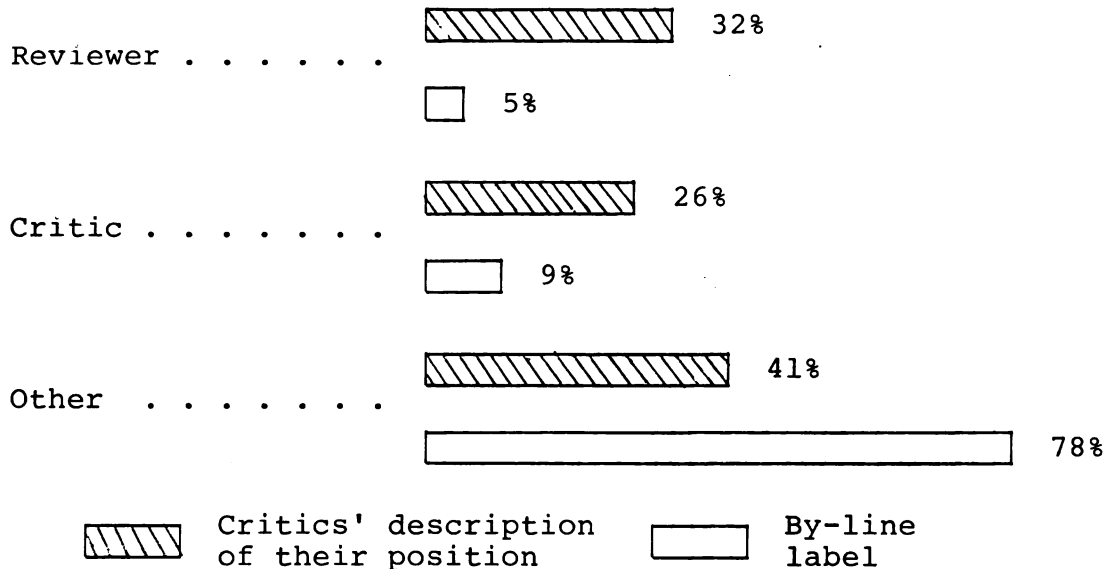
these percentages that a few of those who had previously worked on a production had decided against pursuing drama and film as a career.

Those who said they had considered such a career were asked what had changed their mind, if anything. Nine said their reason was monetary, one said it concerned talent, ten had other reasons such as deciding too late in life. In one case a hearing loss was the cause. But, seven or 12.5 per cent of the fifty-six respondents said that nothing had changed their mind and they were still pursuing this career while continuing their reviewing position.

The last two questions in the survey's first section asked what term the respondents felt best described their job and what title their newspaper used in their by-line, primarily to see if there was any correlation between the two. Table 6 shows the results of both questions.

About 18 per cent of the responses included in the other category for by-line labels was none or no label. Most newspapers seem to avoid using either the title critic or reviewer in labeling their motion picture writers or of using any title at all. One respondent said that his newspaper as a whole does not use titles under by-lines. Also, since only 12.5 per cent of the respondents are full-time motion picture writers, it is possible that newspapers view

Table 6. Comparison of percentages of critics' responses to terms describing their actual position and the label under their by-line.



the title critic or reviewer inadequate to describe the complete functions of the other 87.5 per cent of the respondents.

About 5.3 per cent more of the respondents called themselves reviewers than critics, but only little more than half, 58.9 per cent, think of themselves as either one or the other, in their present position. This also correlates with the fact that 87.5 per cent are not full-time writers on film. Some of the other terms they used to describe their position, such as editor or general reporter, reflected this.

Section B

The second section of the questionnaire was designed to find out more about a critic's job--what he actually does.

How many films do you review a week, on the average?

Table 7. Number of films critics reviewed a week.

| No. of Films Viewed | Frequency |
|------------------------------|-----------|
| 1 a week | 39.3% |
| 2 a week | 8.9 |
| 3 a week | 16.1 |
| 4 a week | 19.6 |
| More than 5 a week | 5.4 |

How often do you write film reviews for your newspaper?

Table 8. Number of reviews critics wrote a week.

| No. of Reviews | Frequency |
|------------------------------|-----------|
| Less than 1 a week | 41.1% |
| 1 a week | 21.4 |
| 2 a week | 14.3 |
| 3 or more a week | 21.4 |

The third and fourth questions in this section deal with preparation for viewing a movie. The critics were asked how they prepared and how much time they spent doing so. The largest percentage, 51.8 per cent, replied that

they had done a combination of things in preparation for viewing a movie, including reading about the director, reading publicity sheets on the film and reading other reviews of the movie. About 32 per cent said they relied on other things for preparation, such as checking a brief synopsis of the movie, visiting the production sets and reading the book or play on which the movie is based. Some 1.8 per cent said that in preparation they had read about the director, 3.6 per cent had read publicity sheets, and 5.4 per cent had read other reviews. About 5 per cent of the respondents omitted the question, probably meaning they do not prepare for viewing a movie. The next question concerning the time critics spent preparing revealed that a definite number of current newspaper film critics do not prepare for viewing a film. Some 18 per cent said they did not spend time preparing. Forty-one per cent had spent less than an hour and about 20 per cent had spent an hour. This means that an extremely large percentage of the respondents, 79 per cent, had spent an hour or less on preparation. Of the remaining 21 per cent, 10.7 per cent omitted the question, 7.1 per cent and 3.1 per cent had spent two to three hours or more than three hours, respectively.

The fifty-six respondents were also asked if they took notes while viewing a film. About 63 per cent said they had taken notes during the film and 36 per cent said

they did not. Two critics omitted the question. The 36 per cent who had not taken notes were asked what, if anything, they did to recall details of the film when they wrote a review. Thirty per cent said they relied on their memory, and 25 per cent relied on a combination of things including memory and plot summaries given to critics at screenings. Forty per cent said they relied on other things such as additional screenings, their files and advance material.

After viewing a movie, how soon do you generally write your review?

Table 9. How soon critics wrote a review after seeing a film.

| Length of Time | Frequency |
|---------------------------|-----------|
| Immediately | 10.7% |
| Within 5 hours | 14.3 |
| Within 12 hours | 14.3 |
| The next day | 33.9 |
| Other | 10.7 |

Two additional questions were then asked concerning the review, itself.

Do you feel pressured by deadlines?

Are you usually told of an approximate number of inches being set aside in the paper for your review?

Table 10. Newspaper film critics' experiences with deadline pressure and review length restrictions.

| Response | Deadline Pressure Felt | Given Column Inches |
|-----------|------------------------|---------------------|
| Yes | 28.6% | 28.6% |
| No | 67.9 | 67.9 |
| No answer | 3.5 | 3.5 |

The 28.6 per cent that said they had been notified of the space set aside were asked when they were generally given the information. Fifty per cent of these said they were told before they went to the film; 25 per cent, immediately after the film; and the remaining 25 per cent answered they were told three hours after viewing the film or even later.

Is your copy edited by someone other than yourself?

This question was designed to define the freedom critics have. About 71 per cent said their copy was edited by someone else. But 29 per cent said no one edited their copy, which is a rather large percentage when only one of the fifty-six respondents answered that he did not have a superior. The others said they were primarily supervised by an editor, but were obviously given a considerable amount of freedom by not having their copy edited. Those 40 respondents, or 71 per cent, whose copy was edited were asked who edited their work.

Table 11. Those who edited newspaper film critics' work.

| Positions | Frequency |
|--------------------------------|-----------|
| Entertainment editor | 22.5% |
| City editor. | 7.5 |
| Managing editor | 15.0 |
| Copy desk | 27.5 |
| Other | 25.0 |
| No response | 2.5 |

About 70 per cent of these edited writers said they have had no problems resulting from someone else editing their articles. A few admitted to having run into some difficulties; one had space problems; seven found their editors used poor judgment in cutting copy or were unable to understand what the critic had written well enough to trim the articles without changing the interpretation. Two attributed their problems to other reasons, such as the changing of certain words thought obscene or improper.

Who is your immediate superior?

About 20 per cent said the entertainment editor was their immediate superior; 7 per cent were supervised by the Sunday department editor; 16 per cent, the city editor; 34 per cent, the managing editor; and 23 per cent answered others, such as the feature editor or the modern living editor.

Since the question of "freebies" has come up often in recent discussions of newspaper policy, newspaper film

critics were asked whether they were given complimentary tickets by local theater owners. If so, they were asked if they use them. Some 82 per cent said they did get such tickets and of these, some 78 per cent said they used them. The 17 per cent who said they did not use their free tickets were divided in their reasons for not doing so. Two said it was newspaper policy, four said it was their own policy and two said it was a combination of the first two reasons.

Newspaper movie critics were asked if they write any other articles on the motion picture industry for their paper. Forty-one (73.2 per cent) of the fifty-six respondents said they did. Table 12 illustrates their response as to the kinds of articles they write.

Table 12. Kinds of articles critics had written besides reviews.

| Kinds of Articles | Frequency |
|--------------------------------------|-----------|
| Feature stories | 14.6% |
| Columns | 0.0 |
| Interviews | 7.3 |
| Combination of first three | 70.7 |
| Other | 7.3 |

There is very little question whether critics read other critics' reviews. Only one respondent said he did not read other reviews. In most cases, critics read a

number of publications. Out of the fifty-five who said they had read other reviews, forty-seven, or 85.5 per cent, had read them in newspapers, some being the New York Times, The Village Voice, Christian Science Monitor and Women's Wear Daily with Rex Reed's column. The other eight critics had read only magazine reviews. The table below shows the frequency that certain magazines were read by the fifty-five who responded to the question.

Table 13. Percentage of newspaper film critics that read reviews in five national publications.

| Publications | Frequency |
|---------------------------------|-----------|
| <u>The New Yorker</u> | 43.6% |
| <u>Newsweek</u> | 50.9 |
| <u>Time</u> | 56.4 |
| <u>Esquire</u> | 32.7 |
| <u>Variety</u> | 12.7 |

About 35 per cent of the fifty-five listened to radio and television reviews. Half, or 50 per cent, listed some specific publications where they had read reviews, including Playboy, Sight and Sound, Boxoffice, Saturday Review, New York Magazine and The New Republic.

Section C

The third section of the questionnaire was designed to determine what critics knew about the readers they

served and what these critics felt their influence was on the readers.

Why do you think your readers go to movies?

The critics were asked to rank four categories numerically. These were (1) entertainment, (2) education, (3) artistic experience, (4) other. Some 92.9 per cent ranked entertainment first and the remainder ranked the category other first. Of the fifty-six critics who used a ranking system, the majority ranked education third, artistic experience second, and the category other fourth as to why their readers go to movies. The following chart shows a comprehensive list as they were most often ranked from first to fourth by the fifty-six respondents.

Table 14. Percentage of critics that ranked reasons persons attended movies in the following order.

| Rank | Category | Frequency |
|------|---|-----------|
| 1 | Entertainment | 92.9% |
| 2 | Artistic experience | 46.4 |
| 3 | Education | 41.1 |
| 4 | Other: such as sex, cheap thrills, etc. | 42.9 |

As is evident, the critics almost totally agreed that entertainment was the main reason their readers go to movies. For the other three categories, though, there was less than 50 per cent agreement in their ranking importance.

Part of this may be due to the fact that several critics did not rank the categories but merely picked one.

Secondly, newspaper film critics were asked to rank kinds of films in the order they felt their readers like each kind best. Thirty-two per cent did not rank the choices, so merely the number, if any, who chose each category as their readers' favorite, will be designated. Some 5.4 per cent said they believed their readers liked musicals best, while 19.6 per cent said suspense was their readers' first choice. Only 3.6 per cent chose drama first and likewise two chose erotic films first. The largest percentage, 35.7 per cent, said they believed comedy to be their readers' favorite. The categories westerns, art films, horror and rock music films listed on the questionnaire were never selected as the films their readers liked best.

In the next question, a similar number refused to rank the categories. Fifteen, or 28.6 per cent, omitted the question Who do you think most often reads your reviews? Table 15 shows the number of critics who designated each group as the one who most often reads their reviews.

The next question asked critics whether they felt they had any influence on what movies their readers viewed. Few committed themselves at the two ends of the scale, no influence and strong influence, as Table 16 shows.

Table 15. Percentage of critics who designated a specific group as the one who most often read their reviews.

| Category of Persons | Frequency |
|---------------------------|-----------|
| Housewives | 19.6% |
| Businessmen | 3.6 |
| Students | 19.6 |
| Professionals | 23.2 |
| Unemployed | 1.8 |
| Laborers | 3.6 |
| Craftsmen | 1.8 |
| Senior Citizens | 0.0 |

Table 16. Amount of influence newspaper critics felt they had on their readers.

| Amount of Influence | Frequency |
|------------------------------|-----------|
| No influence | 5.4% |
| Strong influence | 3.6 |
| Little influence | 39.3 |
| Moderate influence | 51.8 |

The following was one of two open-ended questions given those surveyed: How do you determine what influence you have on your readers?

After reading a number of responses, meaningful answer categories were set up for coding purposes. Forty-one per cent fell in the category of determining influence by readers' comments; by word of mouth. Some nine per cent said they determined influence by theater operators' feedback, and 25 per cent said they used a combination of the

first two categories. About 14 per cent had other responses, including that they did not try to determine their influence and that it was impossible to tell whether they influence their readers.

How often do readers generally communicate with you?

In Table 17, it is shown that critics were divided evenly among the six possible categories as to frequency.

Table 17. Frequency that readers communicated with newspaper film critics.

| Communications | Frequency |
|--------------------------------|-----------|
| 2-3 times a month | 21.4% |
| Once a week | 16.1 |
| 2-3 times a week | 25.0 |
| Once a day | 5.4 |
| More than once a day | 16.1 |
| Other | 14.3 |
| No response | 1.8 |

Corresponding to the above question, critics were asked how their readers communicated with them most often. Some 12.5 per cent said by letters to the editor, 19.6 per cent said by telephone, 21.4 per cent answered in person, 10.7 per cent said personal letters, and 8.9 per cent received communications in all categories equally. Twenty-six and eight-tenths per cent said there were other ways, including the combination of a couple of the above categories.

What percentage of these communications expressed agreement with your views?

The chart below shows that the bulk of newspaper film critics felt that some 40 to 74 per cent of their communications from readers expressed agreement with the critic's views. Some 73.2 per cent of the respondents said that readers' agreement with their views was somewhere above 40 per cent in their communications.

Table 18. Amount of agreement with critics' views as was communicated to them by their readers.

| Amount of Agreement | Frequency |
|----------------------------|-----------|
| Over 90 per cent | 12.5% |
| 90-75 per cent | 21.4 |
| 74-40 per cent | 39.3 |
| 39-10 per cent | 8.9 |
| 9-1 per cent | 3.6 |
| None | 1.8 |

Seven of the respondents omitted the question

The final question in the third section asked critics whether they felt pressured to refrain from using certain terms or ideas in their reviews. The majority or 66.1 per cent said they did not feel pressured in this manner. The 33.9 per cent who did feel pressured were asked what kind of terms they refrained from using and where the pressure to do so came from. Table 19 lists

those categories of words these pressured critics refrained from using in reviews.

Table 19. Percentage of critics who felt pressure to refrain from using certain terms.

| Categories of Terms | Frequency |
|--|-----------|
| Extremely negative words on long run films . . . | 5.3% |
| Foreign or technical terms | 10.5 |
| Specific sex verbs or nouns | 21.1 |
| Obscenities or four-letter words | 36.8 |
| Combination of sex terms and obscenities | 10.5 |
| Other reasons | 5.3 |
| No response | 10.5 |

The majority of the pressure to refrain from using certain terms seemed to lie with editorial policy. Over half, or 57.9 per cent, said their pressure came from this area. Some 5.3 per cent said it came from the advertising department policy, 10.5 per cent said community attitude accounted for most of the pressure they felt, and 26.3 per cent said it came from other areas including their own personal policy or a combination of the other categories they were given to choose from.

Section D

In the fourth section of the questionnaire, it was endeavored to find newspaper film critics' responses to several general questions. They will later be compared

with the critics' responses to questions in the previous sections.

What do you think should be the goal of film as a medium?

The respondents' answers to this first question showed some difference of opinion. Finding the answer difficult to pinpoint to one area, twenty-three of the critics selected the category other. Some 12.5 per cent said the goal should be true art. About 28.6 per cent said it should be entertainment. In an earlier question, respondents found entertainment unequivocally the primary reason readers go to the movies. Not one of the fifty-six selected the category education, but 8.9 per cent said it should be a combination of true art, entertainment and education. Two omitted the question.

The next three questions were an attempt to determine what newspaper film critics thought was an adequate definition of critic, reviewer and film criticism. The three following tables show the results.

The critics were asked which term they used most often, film or movie, an effort to settle an unending argument as to which term showed the most serious view of the medium. It has been said that movie is a frivolous term and should not be used by those serious about film. The movie critics surveyed appeared through their response to see very little distinction between the two terms.

Table 20. Percentage of critics choosing each statement as the best definition of a critic.

| Definitions of a Critic | Frequency |
|---|-----------|
| He is an artist himself | 8.9% |
| He is a writer whose responsibility it is to raise the standards of motion pictures | 14.3 |
| He dissects and analyzes films in both a historical and contemporary context | 55.4 |
| He is strictly interested in art, not trash . . | 1.8 |

(Eleven or 19.6 per cent omitted the question or marked more than one and so had to be eliminated from the survey.)

Table 21. Percentage of critics choosing each statement as the best definition of a reviewer.

| Definitions of a Reviewer | Frequency |
|--|-----------|
| He tells readers how he "liked the work" and briefly retells the story of the film | 39.3% |
| He writes from the vantage point of film as entertainment | 30.4 |
| He is a shield between bad movies and the public | 8.9 |

Table 22. Percentage of critics choosing each statement as the best definition of criticism.

| Definitions of Criticism | Frequency |
|---|-----------|
| It informs, interprets and stimulates readers . | 64.3% |
| It is "a creation within a creation" | 1.8 |
| It views and reviews all films as art | 5.4 |
| It guides the public to and away from films . . | 12.5 |
| It functions for movies as the "where to dine" listings do for food | 5.4 |
| It recognizes a distinguished work and keeps it alive | 5.4 |

Three (5.4 per cent) said they used motion picture most often in their reviews. Twenty (35.7 per cent) responded that they used movie, while the same number used the term film. Nine (16.1 per cent) used both terms movie and film interchangeably. Two said the decision to use one or the other term depended on their mood or other reasons. As for cinematic production, it elicited such reactions as "what about flickers" and "never cinematic production, for God's sake."

What course of schooling would you recommend to an aspiring motion picture critic?

This question was designed to help determine whether newspaper film critics' choices coincided with their own education and to give aspiring critics a recommended path to follow, educationally.

Table 23. Newspaper critics' suggested schooling for aspiring critics.

| Schooling | Frequency |
|--|-----------|
| Journalism major with a film minor | 35.7% |
| Film major | 10.7 |
| Journalism major | 5.4 |
| Liberal arts major | 19.6 |
| Other | 28.6 |

Surprisingly, only a few recommended a journalism major, while 31.5 per cent of the respondents had received a journalism background themselves.

The difference probably concerns the question which asked what major they would recommend for an aspiring critic. Many of them probably did not go to school with the resolve to become a critic.

The second open-ended question in the survey was one which critics claim they are constantly asked--List your ten all-time favorite films. Judith Crist once said the search for an answer to this inevitable question "is in part for an open-sesame to the soul (let alone standards, stupidity and small mindedness of the critic) and in part for confirmation of the questioner's secret selection." She said it is as scary "as the 'who-do-you-love-best-in-the-whole-world?' inquisitions of childhood."⁶⁵

Maybe this is the reason that eleven (19.6 per cent) of the fifty-six respondents left the question blank. The reviewers who responded to it mentioned some 230 movies in their lists. All the films that were mentioned were listed and tabulated. The top twelve ranking motion pictures are shown in Table 24.

⁶⁵Judith Crist, Favorite Movies: Critic's Choice, p. 196.

Table 24. Critics' choice-top 12 motion pictures.

| Motion Pictures | Frequency |
|---|-----------|
| <u>Gone With the Wind</u> (1939) | 32.1% |
| <u>Citizen Kane</u> (1941) | 30.4 |
| <u>Casablanca</u> (1942) | 14.3 |
| <u>The Godfather</u> (1973) | 12.5 |
| <u>2001: A Space Odyssey</u> (1968) | 12.5 |
| <u>8½</u> (1963) | 12.5 |
| <u>Cabaret</u> (1971) | 10.7 |
| <u>Midnight Cowboy</u> (1969) | 10.7 |
| <u>Cries and Whispers</u> (1972) | 10.7 |
| <u>La Grande Illusion</u> (1937) | 10.7 |
| <u>Dr. Strangelove</u> (1963) | 10.7 |
| <u>The Sting</u> (1974) | 10.7 |

Seven motion pictures, each chosen by five respondents, made up a list of "also mentioned" favorites. They were King of Hearts, Jules and Jim (1961), Chinatown (1974), La Strada (1954), Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? (1967), and Butch Cassidy and The Sundance Kid (1969).

Section E

The final section of the survey dealt with demographics variables, i.e., age, education, etc. of the fifty-six respondents. Three of these variables have been tabulated in Tables 25, 26 and 27.

The critics surveyed offered a big difference between the number of females and the number of males. The females were outnumbered more than four to one, as

Table 25. Percentage of respondents in each age grouping.

| Age Categories | Frequency |
|--------------------|-----------|
| 20 to 30 | 48.2% |
| 31-37 | 16.1 |
| 38-45 | 14.3 |
| 46-55 | 10.7 |
| 56-65 | 8.9 |
| Over 65 | 1.8 |

Table 26. Percentage of respondents completing varied levels of education.

| Levels of Education | Frequency |
|------------------------------------|-----------|
| 3 to 4 years of college | 3.6% |
| 1 to 2 years of college | 8.9 |
| College graduate | 51.8 |
| Master's degree | 25.0 |
| Other kinds of schooling | 8.9 |

Table 27. Percentage of respondents in varied salary levels.

| Annual Income | Frequency |
|--------------------------------|-----------|
| Below \$10,000 | 30.4% |
| \$10,000 to \$14,999 | 35.7 |
| \$15,000 to \$19,999 | 16.1 |
| Over \$20,000 | 16.1 |

82.1 per cent of the respondents were male. Some 17.9 per cent were female.

Only eleven of the fifty-six respondents had professional affiliations with organizations concerned with music, drama, motion pictures or criticism. These eleven (19.6 per cent) were asked to list the organization or organizations they belonged to. They included the New York Film Critics Circle, Boxoffice, professional/semi-professional theater groups, Actor's Equity Association, Broadway Theatre League and the National Society of Film Critics.

CHAPTER V

COMPARISON OF ATTITUDES

After Chapter IV's detailed account of newspaper critics' responses to each item in the questionnaire, it is now necessary to sit back and take a broader look at the results and to draw some conclusions from them. Additional comments made by respondents can also give further insight on the field of newspaper film criticism.

First, this study will try to make what could be referred to as a "comparison of attitudes;" a matching and evaluation of the respondents' answers to one question with those on another question in hopes of a better understanding of today's newspaper movie writer; particularly, an understanding of aspects of his job not easily drawn out by the general questionnaire.

A significant number of newspaper motion picture writers questioned said they had been trained in film. Of course, it can be assumed that this training could aid them in making more intelligent, well-founded statements about movies appearing at their local theaters. The real question, though, is how does it affect the opinion of these critics and their readers in regards to the worth of motion

picture critical comment? Do film-trained critics find that their reviews elicit more confidence and influence than those of non-trained critics?

In comparing the survey's some 53.5 per cent with film training to that 46.4 per cent without film training, there is a small but noticeable difference in their opinions of their influence on readers.

Among critics with film training, 63.3 per cent said they felt they had moderate to strong influence on their readers. The lesser percentage, 36.7 per cent, felt their views had little or no influence on readers.

On the other hand, among those 46 per cent without film training, the highest percentage felt they had little or no influence on their readers. Over half, 53.8 per cent, of those not trained in film said they had little or no influence. Some 46.2 per cent of the surveyed critics without film training said they had moderate to strong influence.

Though the percentage was closer among those untrained in film, there is an obvious difference in the amount of influence they feel they have in comparison with film-trained newspaper movie critics.

Another point of confusion this questionnaire attempted to resolve is what a newspaper writer on film should and would like to be called--critic or reviewer or something else entirely.

What is the fine line that separates these two words or do they in fact carry, for all essential purposes, the same meaning? As it was previously said, newspaper writers seldom distinguish between the words critic and reviewer. What should be given notice is the fact that only 58.9 per cent use either term to describe their position. Of the remaining percentage, 8.9 per cent, said they use critic and reviewer interchangeably. The others said terms such as general reporter, newspaperman, journalist, conduit of information and editor provided a better description of their job.

Whether film training has any bearing on this name calling has been little discussed. This study might shed some light on this facet. Newspaper writers with film training divided almost evenly between calling themselves a critic or reviewer. But, among those with no training, 34.6 per cent chose reviewer and 23 per cent said they call themselves critics.

It could be concluded then that among themselves, newspaper movie writers differentiate between the terms critic and reviewer primarily in the sense of training. But as there is very little evidence concerning the use of either one term or the other, the issue will probably remain for the most part unsolvable.

One other idea can be examined in trying to develop a better understanding of the two terms. As was

discussed in the preceding chapter, critics were asked to mark the one statement of several given which best described a critic. The same procedure was used to determine the statement that best describes a reviewer. These statements were chosen from definitions given by a number of well-known individuals concerned with the field of criticism.

Table 28. Definitions chosen by the respondents as the best for describing a critic and a reviewer.

| Term | Definition | Frequency |
|----------|---|-----------|
| Critic | He dissects and analyzes films in both a historical and contemporary context. | 55.4% |
| Reviewer | He tells readers how he "liked the work" and briefly retells the story of the film. | 39.3 |
| | or | |
| | He writes from the vantage point of film as entertainment. | 30.4 |

It is evident that newspaper film writers feel scholarly analysis separates the term critic from reviewer. But, it must be remembered that only forty-five of the fifty-six respondents found a statement among those given which they felt best described either term. There is still room left for doubt.



One of the most encouraging facets of the questionnaire results is that 64 per cent of the respondents chose the statement, "It informs, interprets and stimulates readers," as the one definition that best described criticism. Newspaper critics should remember that they must continue to try to reach readers. It is their primary goal as media and whether they are scholarly or look more toward the entertainment side of film, they must remember the audience for which they are writing.

This questionnaire was developed, in part, to provide an education profile prospective film critics might use as a guideline or reference. Very little has been written about the movie critic's background. Such information should prove helpful to others considering the field.

The fifty-six who returned the questionnaire showed, as a whole, a preference for a journalism major and film minor as the most direct and best course for an aspiring motion picture writer to follow. On the other hand, aside from those choosing assorted combinations, such as a communication arts major with a drama and film minor, and a film major with a journalism minor; a rather large percentage chose the liberal arts route.

This could be due to the fact that many respondents themselves had received an education that could be placed under a liberal arts heading. Forty-two per cent marked

the category other in the questionnaire, and when asked to specify in most cases they listed two or three subjects, such as history, journalism and English, or psychology and theater in which they had done concentrated study.

One respondent who checked liberal arts as the area toward which he would direct a young motion picture critic said that an emphasis on film or a film minor could be useful, but he felt that it was not essential "if a person knows how to read, and can thus do independent study in the field."

Table 29 shows the type education the fifty-six respondents recommended. Responses are divided according to whether the respondent had any film training.

Table 29. Education recommended by critics with and without training.

| College Major | Respondents With Training | Respondents Without Training | | |
|---------------|---------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------|------------|
| | | Training Not Valuable | Training of Some Value | No Comment |
| Jrn. and film | 33.3% | 3.8% | 30.8% | 2.7% |
| Film major | 10.0 | 0.0 | 7.7 | 0.0 |
| Jrn. major | 3.3 | 0.0 | 7.7 | 0.0 |
| Liberal arts | 23.3 | 7.7 | 7.7 | 0.0 |
| Other | 30.0 | 0.0 | 26.9 | 0.0 |

It is interesting that more writers trained in film would recommend a liberal arts education than those that had not been trained in it. It is possible that some of the respondents feel a motion picture writer can be "too knowledgeable," a concern that is often voiced by news persons today. These respondents may have chosen the liberal arts route as a caution against this.

Also of interest is the fact that of the three non-trained respondents who said they felt film training of no value, one recommended a journalism major and a film minor. The two respondents without film training who did not comment on film training's value, also picked the journalism major with a film minor. It can be assumed, perhaps, for this reason that they actually do think film training of some value.

As previously stated, twenty newspaper persons responded, but did not answer all questions. They gave four main reasons for not filling out the questionnaire. The main reason was that the newspaper did not review films. Table 30 shows the reasons.

Among these twenty responses, one paper's view on movie criticism stands out. An assistant managing editor of a daily with a circulation over 100,000 wrote the following:

We use Joe Gelmis of Newsday in the p.m. paper, Bernard Drew of Gannett News Service in the a.m. They file reviews when the film is shown in New

York and hold them until it opens in Rochester.
This has improved the quality of reviews, we think.

Table 30. Reason papers listing a motion picture or entertainment editor no longer used movie reviews; comparison in circulation.

| Circulation | Reasons for Not Having Movie Reviews | | | |
|-----------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------|-----------|--------------------|
| | Fewer Theaters | Use Syndicated Reviewers | No Critic | Just Do Not Review |
| Over 50,000 | 0.0% | 5.0% | 10.0% | 15.0% |
| 20,000 - 49,999 | 0.0 | 5.0 | 10.0 | 15.0 |
| 10,000 - 19,999 | 5.0 | 0.0 | 5.0 | 15.0 |
| Less than 9,999 | 0.0 | 5.0 | 10.0 | 5.0 |

An entertainment editor of a daily with a circulation over 150,000 said that in the past he had reviewed films. But, since 1973 his paper had adopted a policy of not advertising, reviewing or covering in news space any R or X-rated film. He said he had decided not to review at all rather than be stuck with Walt Disney and adventure films.

A third respondent, writing for an approximately 13,000 circulation paper, voiced a complaint in which lies the reason numerous smaller community papers do not review movies.

"Sad to say our community has but one theater which is in deplorable condition, showing primarily X-rated shows. There is very small attendance and we do no reviews."

At the conclusion of the questionnaire, respondents were asked for further comments. A number of them did comment both about the questionnaire itself and about their personal feelings as a movie critic.

A part-time university teacher of film courses voiced concern that a survey of this sort tries to compartmentalize film critics or to identify trends that might not really be trends. This is a common danger of any questionnaire or survey, and the researcher must realize that there are often exceptions to the rule.

A writer for a newspaper with a circulation of 350,000 said he does not seek or want make-or-break power over a film. "I seek to persuade, to give reasons and with many films I'm not crazy about, I hope people go to them anyway," he wrote.

"The biggest problem I face as a writer/reviewer is the eternal question of why review in the first place?" said a critic who works for an over-30,000 circulation paper. "Reviews are predominantly expressions of opinions and are worth no more or no less," he said. He said he felt that opinions can stir debate and discussion, but felt there should be more to a review than just opinion.

"If the reviewer doesn't take the role of the audience and attempt to show meaning and explain characterizations, much of the reason for his very existence is nullified."

A California critic wrote that the critics of his acquaintance by and large were a sorry lot, "visible donkeys for the Business, image conscious and bitchy." If they were sometimes useful as watchers to a film maker, he said, they were seldom credited except in the commerce of product. "More often, errant judgments, and such occur in process, bring the critic scorn from the very people whom he need engage in dialogue," he said.

A brief comment on the difference between a reviewer and a critic came from a writer for a 37,107-circulation newspaper:

I think the difference between a reviewer and a critic is a matter of experience and insight as well as a matter of avowed purpose. Much as I would like to consider myself a critic (I feel I have the necessary insight into films), I haven't the background to give the work its proper perspective. This can only come with time.

A comment by a critic on a 622,236-circulation newspaper might be of particular interest to prospective film critics:

I think too many college students become wrapped up in films (some probably literally as well as figuratively) and think that the world exists on celluloid. So they learn about movies and then think that they are qualified to write for a daily newspaper. If I were hiring someone to write about motion pictures, my first objective would be to find a good writer. Second, he should be a good reporter. Third, he should have an interest in movies, and should basically like the medium. I would not care if he had never seen a splicer or if he knew the difference between a dissolve and a sprocket-hole.

This critic, who himself had no film training, said he enjoyed writing about movies. "If people read and react favorably to what I write, so much the better. If they react unfavorably, so be it," he wrote. He said he wrote on a highly subjective level, but tried to be consistent so readers could take this into account in making up their minds as to whether a given picture was worth seeing.

A lengthy yet extremely interesting response on his personal feelings about reviewing movies came from a critic on a newspaper with a circulation of 127,955. His comments:

I think a lot of newspaper movie reviewers are tending to hold themselves up as talking about some Holy Grail; when as many people as do say, "Well if that newspaper critic likes it, I'm certainly not going" or "If so-and-so rapped it, it must be pretty good," we lose all credibility, and our self-assigned "high standards" are just pie in the sky for all anybody believes us.

I think a good case in point is a recent movie "The Longest Yard!" It's on my 10-best list for the year; I'll bet not another critic in the country will make that statement, or at least not without hanging his head.

The movie took almost unanimous raps, yet it is still playing here after 24 weeks. Dammit, people like it, and not for the same reason they liked "Walking Tall." It is perfectly innocuous entertainment, and it is a damn well-made, fast-moving film and PEOPLE LIKE IT, and in my initial review I said it was "terrific movie entertainment," for which my critical colleagues wagged quite a finger at me.

Now during the course of the review I mentioned that morally, this movie didn't have a leg to stand on, particularly with Attica only five years and 40 miles distant. Anybody that read that far, they really got a bone to chew on--but if I tell them it's garbage and then 77,000 people go out and enjoy, who the hell is going to believe me when I recommend "A

Tall Blond Man With One Black Shoe" or "Day for Night"?

"Walking Tall" and "Death Wish," now there's something else again, two brutal, vicious, blood-rankling polemics, neither based on the slightest shred of fact, yet seemingly somewhat documentary. They, too, had enormous audiences. I think in the face of a wave such as this, the newspaper reviewer best serves his public by coming back around after such a movie has made a smash, and defining for the audience why the movie roused them to such an extent. Now there's a service . . .

. . . I think maybe I got audiences out for "Rabbi Jacob" and "Harry and Tonto" and "Tall Blond Man," and if I was able to do this because I "lower my standards" and call entertainment entertainment, then it's all worth it.

CHAPTER VI

COMPARISON OF RESPONSES WITH THE STUDY'S HYPOTHESES

"A ribbon of dreams."

This was what writer, producer Orson Wells called the cinema and to a large extent dreams are what much of the cinema was built on from the early films of Edison to Welles' Citizen Kane.

But, history says that for those who took it upon themselves to criticize and applaud this "ribbon" in print, there have been few dreams and a long struggle to gain acceptance from the cinema and its artists.

Today moviegoers may pay some attention to the professional critic, if only to check his review before buying a ticket. Altshuler and Janaro said in Responses to Drama that "those who don't (check critics' reviews) are forced to rely on advertising or a friend's opinion. Neither of these is as reliable as that of a good, responsible critic whose evaluations have proven trustworthy in the past."⁶⁶

The assumption that newspaper motion picture critics do have some influence on readers is one of eight

⁶⁶Altshuler and Janaro, Responses, p. 141.

hypotheses on which this study was founded. As a final note, these hypotheses will be briefly reviewed to test their validity in the face of the questionnaire findings.

- (1) Most newspaper film critics feel they have some influence on their readers.

Though only 3.6 per cent said they felt they have a strong influence on their readers, about 91 per cent claimed to feel some influence on readers, though of a lesser degree. Thus the assumption could be said to be true for about 95 per cent of today's newspaper motion picture writers.

- (2) Most newspaper movie critics, particularly those working full-time, have some training or education in film.

Over half of the fifty-four respondents had film training, much of it being in college and university courses, though only two critics had majored in film in college. Since about 46 per cent of the respondents in this study had not had any film training, the use of the word most in the above hypothesis is unsubstantiated.

- (3) Most newspaper movie critics have a journalism background.

When asked what they had majored in while in college, the fifty-four respondents' replies ranged over twenty-two different areas of study. Only about 32 per cent said they had majored in journalism. About 13 per

cent had double majors which included journalism. Thus altogether about 45 per cent could be said to have a journalism background. Again the word most seems too strong.

The result is surprising in regards to other studies and statements concerning critics' backgrounds. For example, the 1969 Harris Poll found that when editors are looking for critics, they most often look within their own medium and hire a journalist.

But, there is also another way to look at the journalism background question. The respondents were asked whether they had held another position on their respective newspaper before being selected as a critic. Here the results showed that 75 per cent of the newspaper film critics had held another position on their newspaper before becoming a critic. This experience in news, editing, sports, and other areas could certainly be considered journalism background, and serve as substantial proof of the researcher's hypothesis.

- (4) Most newspaper film critics have held another position on the paper prior to assuming their present position as a reviewer.

Since about 75 per cent of the respondents said they had held another position on their newspaper before being assigned as movie critic, there is support of this hypothesis. It also, unfortunately, gives further

evidence to the 1969 Harris Poll conclusion that most editors choose critics from their staff members rather than hiring someone from outside the paper who might have more expertise in the arts.

- (5) Most newspaper film critics hold another position on the paper in addition to reviewing.

Criticism is most often a part-time assignment as this study shows. About 88 per cent of the respondents are part-time critics, and over 60 per cent of these critics said they spend less than ten hours of their work-week on film criticism. The majority also said they held a combination of jobs on their newspaper, usually including something outside the arts field such as news, copy editing or sports reporting.

- (6) Most newspaper movie critics are not mere reporters of their likes and dislikes, as many magazine critics have charged, but they also try to show a film in its historical perspective and give readers an insight into their views.

Though this hypothesis cannot be easily measured, some conjecture can be made concerning its validity. This can be done by examining the statement the largest percentage of respondents chose as the best definition of criticism. Over 60 per cent picked the statement made that criticism "informs, interprets and stimulates readers."

Only 5 per cent chose the statement "It functions for movies as the 'where to dine' listings do for food."

- (7) Most newspaper film critics consider themselves as critics. Those who don't either feel there is little difference between the terms critic and reviewer or that neither term provides a satisfactory description of their job.

The study disproves the first portion of the hypotheses since more respondents called themselves reviewers than critics. The second half of the hypothesis, however, is valid. Only a little more than half of the respondents thought that either term best described their present position. This could largely be due to the fact that about 88 per cent of the respondents were part-time motion picture writers and hold other jobs on the newspaper that are not explained by the words critic and reviewer.

- (8) Most newspaper film critics work for papers in cities of 50,000 and over.

Of the 150 newspaper motion picture, entertainment and amusement editors surveyed in this study, some 62 per cent work for papers in cities with a population of 50,000 and over. The hypothesis is valid, though not as strong as previously supposed by the researcher. When looking at circulation figures, though, it is obvious that a number of the newspapers from these larger cities have a much

smaller circulation count. Only 43 per cent of those critics surveyed work on a paper of a circulation of 50,000 and over.

The paradox of newspaper film critics being called superstars on one hand and thought of as something lower than garbage men on the other is just one of the many that have been used to show the ambiguity of their function. Is the newspaper film critic an educator, a pursuer of excellence or merely a consumer's guide to what's playing at the local theater? Is he, as some magazine critics have charged, "a sweaty-palmed deadline typist hacking out a 5,000 word substanceless review in some 3,600 seconds"?⁶⁷

According to newspaper motion picture writers themselves, though they are sometimes pressured by deadlines and are necessarily limited to a certain amount of print space, they are not and do not pretend to be merely consumer guides.

They feel like Arthur Cooper who said "Criticism is not the function of an enlightened or unholy few but a human faculty that plays an important part in everyone's reading of and relation to the world."⁶⁸

⁶⁷Cooper, "Critic as Superstar," p. 98.

⁶⁸Ibid.

The critic's job is to criticize art but, as Matthew Arnold said, art itself is a criticism of life. The critic shows us how life works or is not working by showing us how art works.

Cooper quotes an artist and critic, Harold Clurman, in words that probably define the majority of newspaper film critics' views of their position as well as or better than anything in this study:

"I don't hold up the torch of art. I hold up the torch of living."⁶⁹

⁶⁹Ibid.

APPENDIX

SURVEY OF NEWSPAPER FILM CRITICS/REVIEWERS

This questionnaire is divided into five sections, each designed to gather information about a particular facet of newspaper movie criticism/reviewing. Place a check mark in the space provided by the answer that seems best to you. In some cases a response leads to one or more additional questions. Please answer these before completing the rest of the questionnaire.

A. IN THIS SECTION WE WOULD LIKE TO KNOW SOME BASIC FACTS ABOUT YOU AS A NEWSPAPER CRITIC/REVIEWER.

A1. Are you a full time film critic/reviewer?

yes



no



If no: a. How much of your normal work week is spent on film criticism?

over 30 hours a week
 20-30 hours a week
 10-20 hours a week
 less than 10 hours a week

b. What other newspaper jobs do you have in addition to that of film critic/reviewer?

music, art or drama critic
 news reporter
 home or women's department reporter
 sports reporter
 other (Please specify) _____

A2. How many years have you held your present position as a motion picture critic/reviewer?

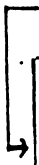
- less than 1 year
 1-3 years
 4-6 years
 7-10 years
 over 10 years

A3. Are you the only movie critic/reviewer published in your newspaper?

yes



no



If no: What other reviewers/critics are printed in the newspaper? (Please list)

A4. Did you hold another position on the newspaper you work for before becoming a film critic/reviewer?

yes no

If yes: What type of position did you hold?

| | |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> news | <input type="checkbox"/> production |
| <input type="checkbox"/> sports | <input type="checkbox"/> advertising |
| <input type="checkbox"/> women's news | <input type="checkbox"/> other (Please specify) _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> editing | _____ |

A5. Have you written any other kinds of artistic reviews?

yes no

If yes: Check all those about which you have written reviews.

| | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> rock or soul music | <input type="checkbox"/> ballet |
| <input type="checkbox"/> folk music | <input type="checkbox"/> television/radio |
| <input type="checkbox"/> jazz or blues music | <input type="checkbox"/> theatre |
| <input type="checkbox"/> classical music | <input type="checkbox"/> other (Please specify) _____ |

A6. Have you had any courses, seminars or other kinds of training in film?

yes no

| | |
|---|---|
| <p>If yes: Which of the following have you had?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> classes in film history <input type="checkbox"/> classes in film production <input type="checkbox"/> classes on specific directors, i.e. Hitchcock (specify) _____ _____ <input type="checkbox"/> independent study (specify) _____ _____ <input type="checkbox"/> film festivals (specify) _____ _____ <input type="checkbox"/> other (specify) _____ | <p>If no: Do you feel such training would be beneficial to your job?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> not at all <input type="checkbox"/> of some value <input type="checkbox"/> valuable <input type="checkbox"/> very valuable |
|---|---|

A7. If you attended college, did you major in film?

yes no

If no: What was your major?

B3. How do you prepare for viewing a movie? (Which of the following do you do?)

- read about the director
- read publicity sheets
- read other reviews of the movie
- any combination of these three
- other (Please specify) _____

B4. How much time do you generally spend in preparation for viewing a film?

- none
- less than 1 hour
- 1 hour
- 2-3 hours
- more than 3 hours

B5. Do you take notes during the viewing of a film?

yes

no

If no: What do you rely on for recall of details in the film?

- strictly memory
- plot summaries given at screenings
- combination of the first two
- other (Please specify) _____

B6. After viewing a movie, how soon do you generally write your review?

- immediately within 5 hours within 12 hours the next day
- other (Please specify) _____

B7. Do you feel pressured by deadlines?

- yes
- no

B8. Are you usually told of an approximate number of inches being set aside in the paper for your review?

yes

no

If yes: When are you generally told about the length of review needed?

- before the movie
- immediately after the movie
- over 3 hours after the movie

B13. Do you read other critics' reviews?

yes no

If yes: Where do you read or listen to other movie reviews? (Check all those you use.)

| | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> other newspapers | <input type="checkbox"/> television/radio |
| <input type="checkbox"/> The New Yorker | <input type="checkbox"/> other (Please specify) _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Newsweek | _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Time | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Esquire | |

C. IN THIS SECTION WE WOULD LIKE TO KNOW WHAT YOU THINK OF YOUR READERS AND THE KIND OF PERSONAL RESPONSE YOU RECEIVE FROM THEM.

C1. Why do you think your readers go to movies? (Please rank numerically)

- entertainment
 education
 artistic experience
 other (Please specify) _____

C2. What kind of films do you think your readers like best? (Please rank)

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> musicals | <input type="checkbox"/> drama |
| <input type="checkbox"/> westerns | <input type="checkbox"/> horror |
| <input type="checkbox"/> art films | <input type="checkbox"/> rock music films |
| <input type="checkbox"/> foreign films | <input type="checkbox"/> comedy |
| <input type="checkbox"/> suspense | <input type="checkbox"/> erotic |

C3. Who do you think most often reads your reviews? (Please rank)

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> housewives | <input type="checkbox"/> professionals |
| <input type="checkbox"/> businessmen | <input type="checkbox"/> unemployed |
| <input type="checkbox"/> students | <input type="checkbox"/> laborers |
| <input type="checkbox"/> senior citizens | <input type="checkbox"/> craftsmen |

C4. Do you feel you have any influence on what movies your readers view?

- no influence little influence moderate influence
 strong influence

C5. How do you determine what influence you have on your readers?

D2. Which statement best describes a critic?

- He is an artist himself.
- He is a writer who's responsibility it is to raise the standards of motion pictures.
- He dissects and analyzes films in both a historical and contemporary context.
- He is strictly interested in art, not trash.

D3. Which of the following statements best describes a reviewer?

- He tells readers how he "liked the work" and briefly retells the story of the film.
- He writes from the vantage point of film as entertainment.
- He is a shield between bad movies and the public.

D4. Which of the following definitions of film criticism/reviewing do you agree with most?

- It informs, interprets and stimulates readers
- It is "a creation within a creation"
- It views and reviews all films as art
- It guides the public to or away from films
- It functions for movies as the "where to dine" listings do for food
- It recognizes a distinguished work and keeps it alive

D5. In referring to the medium discussed in this questionnaire which term do you use most often?

- motion picture
- cinematic production
- movie
- film
- other (Please specify) _____

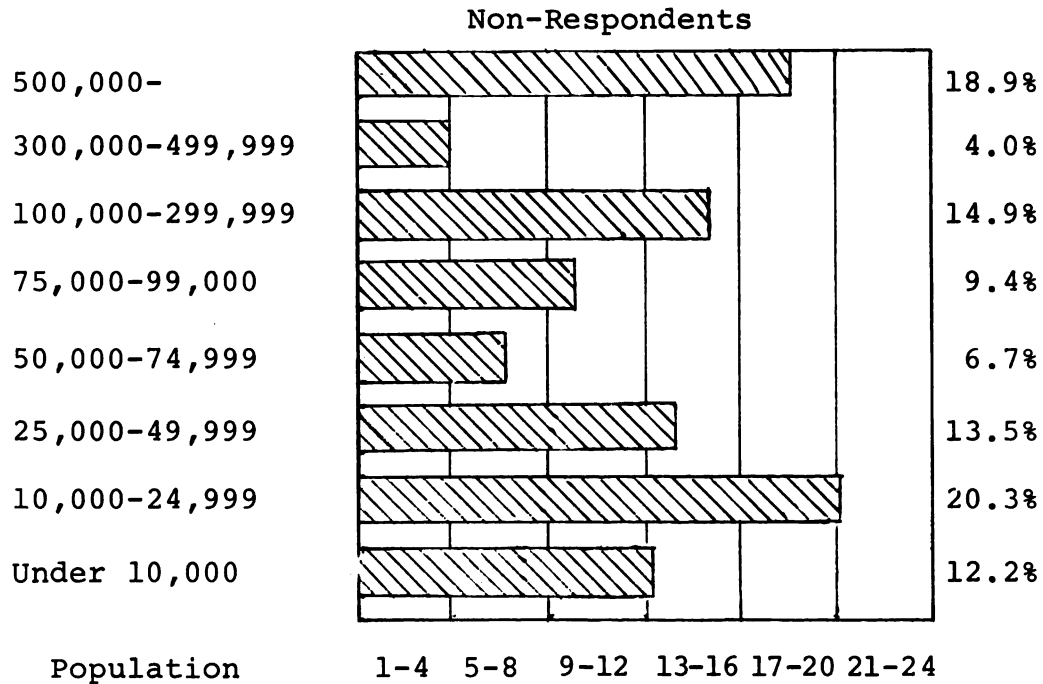
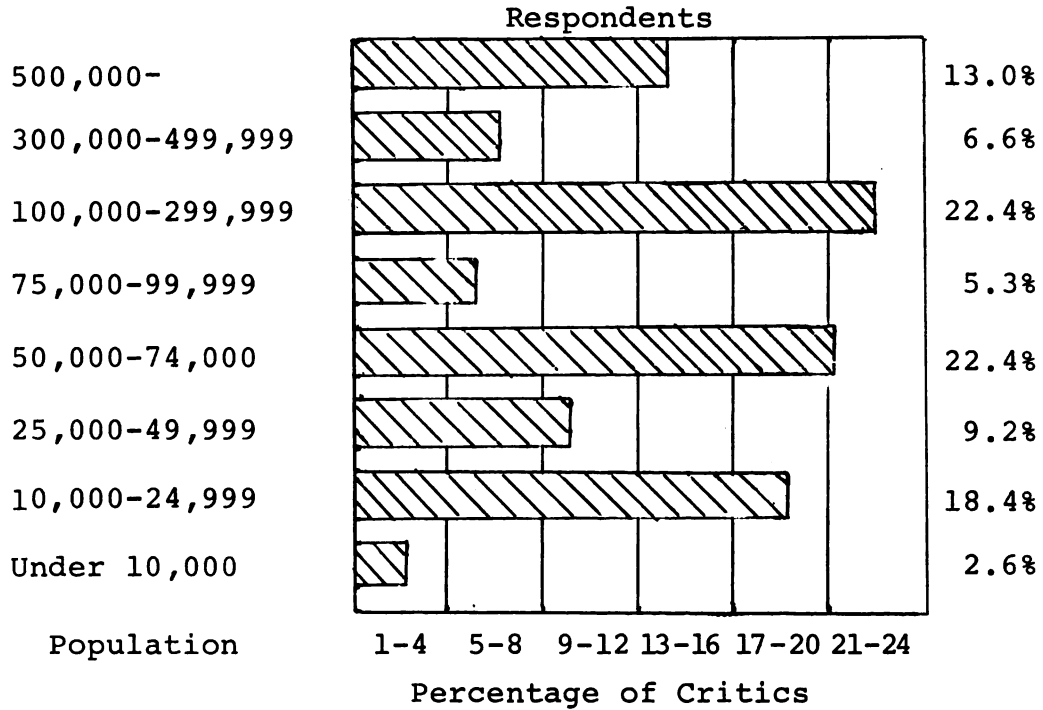
D6. What course of schooling would you recommend to an aspiring motion picture critic/reviewer?

- journalism major with film minor
- film major
- journalism major
- liberal arts major
- other (Please specify) _____

D7. List your ten all-time favorite films.

- | | |
|----------|-----------|
| 1. _____ | 5. _____ |
| 2. _____ | 6. _____ |
| 3. _____ | 7. _____ |
| 4. _____ | 8. _____ |
| _____ | 9. _____ |
| | 10. _____ |

COMPARISON OF RESPONDENTS TO NON-RESPONDENTS
BY POPULATION SIZE



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