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Film Criticism and New Media: A Paper by Siraj Syed

(Though I use the term ‘he’ all through this paper, it is a neutral, generic pronoun, and not gender-based. Therefore, ‘he’ here, represents and includes ‘she’ as well. I acknowledge that a large number of my esteemed critic colleagues and film personalities are women).

Critics enjoy a privileged status in most art-loving societies of the modern world, be it painting, publishing, sculpture, music or cinema. Criticism fulfills several needs, like evaluating merit, recommending viewing/listening/reading, chronicling, encouraging the maintenance of high standards, and encouraging the emergence of newer content and newer forms. As cinema and cinematic forms have been evolving, so have the platforms of film criticism been changing. But undeniably, the published review still commands the greatest respect.

Of course, a critic might not get it right. Some films that he pans may win accolades and awards, and others that he eulogises may land in the dustbin. What is important is intellectual honesty and being reasonable in your judgement. Here are some examples where some well-respected foreign critics got it wrong. If we treat these itchy-bitsy excerpts as reviews, are we really doing justice to the film? Decide for yourself. Do these one-line and two-line reviews convey the essence of the films?

Casablanca (1942)

“The love story that takes us from time to time into the past is horribly wooden, and clichés everywhere lower the tension.”—New Statesman

The Godfather, Part II (1974)

“It’s a Frankenstein monster stitched together from leftover parts. It talks. It moves in fits and starts but it has no mind of its own... Looking very expensive but spiritually desperate, Part II has the air of a very long, very elaborate revue sketch.”—Vincent Canby, The New York Times

Titanic (1997)

“What does \$200 million buy? The 3-hour-and-14-minute ‘Titanic’ unhesitatingly answers: not enough.”—Kenneth Turan, Los Angeles Times

Star Wars (1977)

“It’s an assemblage of spare parts—it has no emotional grip... an epic without a dream.”—Pauline Kael, *The New Yorker*

Forrest Gump (1994)

“It is... glib, shallow, and monotonous, a movie that spends so much time sanctifying its hero that, despite his ‘innocence,’ he ends up seeming about as vulnerable as Superman.”—Owen Gleiberman, *Entertainment Weekly*

Vertigo (1958)

“The old master has turned out another Hitchcock-and-bull story in which the mystery is not so much who done it as who cares.”—*Time*

Lawrence of Arabia (1962)

“The fault is also in the lengthy but surprisingly lusterless dialogue of Robert Bolt’s over-written screenplay. Seldom has so little been said in so many words.”—Bosley Crowther, *The New York Times*

Bonnie and Clyde (1967)

“Conceptually, the film leaves much to be desired, because killings and the backdrop of the Depression are scarcely material for a bundle of laughs.”—Dave Kaufman, *Variety*

A Star is Born (1976)

“A bore is starred.”—*Village Voice*

Gladiator (2000)

“By the end of this long film, I would have traded any given gladiatorial victory for just one shot of blue skies.”—Roger Ebert, *Chicago Sun-Times*

Now, how about the flip-side? Some reviews that showered praises on films that ended-up being dubbed misadventures. Of course, these are excerpts, but do they do justice to the films being reviewed? Have they really summed-up the content and form of the films in just two or three lines?

Star Wars: Episode 1 - The Phantom Menace (1999)

"Though I've been bored senseless by the Star Wars phenomenon for over two decades, I found *The Phantom Menace* something of a pleasant surprise."-- Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Chicago Reader*

Pearl Harbor (2001)

"For my money a much better heartbreaker, thrill-maker and tear-tweaker than Titanic.--Stephen Hunter, Washington Post

Sucker Punch (2011)

"The story's true "sucker punch" is the way it lures its audience in with the promise of simple eye candy but then hits you in the guts with something deeper and more complex."--Tim Martain, The Mercury

Spider-Man 3 (2007)

"To place a sensitive story in a male-epic genre -- to dramatize feelings of angst and personal betrayal worthy of an Ingmar Bergman film, and then to dress them up in gaudy comic-book colors -- is to pull off a smartly subversive drag show."--Richard Corliss, TIME Magazine

Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen (2009)

"It's bigger. Badder. Boobier. And many other words beginning with B, including bone-headedly brilliant."--Robbie Collin, News of the World

(Foreign, and not Indian, reviews have been deliberately chosen, so as to distance ourselves from local references, lest some egos are hurt and motives attributed. Moreover, the above excerpts are from websites that have compiled them after culling them from thousands of reviews over the years).

This brings me to the major constraint that a 21st century reviewer has to work in: length. In present day and time, we have SMS reviews, byte reviews, tweet reviews, facebook reviews, What'sApp reviews, TV reviews, web reviews and printed reviews. Till the late 20th century, it was the printed word, and, to a certain extent, the television review, that was the standard, since no other media existed. Video came to India in the late 80s, but not being live, it was unsuitable for film reviews. Till the end of the last century, you could not even conceive the idea of giving a video link of the trailer in your review. Nowadays, it is quite common.

While running two film societies in Bombay (now Mumbai), I came across writings that were not usually accessible to the common public. From these, I discovered that a film review could be much longer than the 500-1,000 words that it got in the newspapers and magazines. Such reviews were called 'critiques'. In the mid-seventies, at the film appreciation course conducted by the Film and Television Institute of India, I got to read entire publications devoted to just one

film, or a few films, of one director, giving invaluable insights into the films emanating out of his visualisation. At a follow-up course in the 90s, my instructor stressed that it was not possible to really review a film in 400 words or in two-and-a-half minutes. Being a result of the labour invested over a couple of years, on an average, it needed some 1,500 words to do justice to the pooled talent that got released as a film.

I can only look in amazement when some misguided souls send out SMS and WhatsApp reviews, even as they are watching a film. On many an occasion, I have been accosted by a TV channel/website crew as I emerge from a screening, and they all want a 'byte review'. "Sir...how was it? Good or bad? How many stars will you give it?" they gush. Not to be tempted, I side-step and avoid them totally. No problem for them. There are six or seven others emerging from the same screening who are ready, and even eager, to oblige, for their 30 seconds of fame. Prompted by the demand to find out the star-rating rather than going through a full review, some reviewers have even started putting the stars on top. Shouldn't a rating come at the end of a review?

Five years ago, I was approached by a cinema page editor of a prestigious national daily newspaper, who wanted me to write film reviews. Reasonable payment was promised. Then came the catch: only 400 words, please. I decided to give it a shot, and worked hard to convey a lot in the 400 words allotted. To my utter horror, the review appeared in a mere 250 words! And when I protested, my payment was refused. Such is often the plight of the reviewer.

These days, my reviews range from 1,000 to 1,500 words, and I have made it clear that no editing will be allowed. That settles the length issue for me, for now. Yet, how many of us have had how many of our reviews edited, chopped and mutilated? There is nothing wrong with an excerpt or a headline being carried as a byte/SMS/What'sApp message, but only if the full or proper review is accessible on the same or other platforms. A standalone review of 30 seconds or 250 words does immeasurable harm to any film.

1,307 words

The author is a member of FIPRESCI and this is his 50th year as a film-critic. Lecturing on cinema and other media since 1984, he is also the India Correspondent of filmfestivals.com, a Paris-based website.