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## Women, Convergent Film Criticism, and the Cinephilia of Feminist Interruptions

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**WOMEN, CONVERGENT FILM CRITICISM, AND THE CINEPHILIA OF  
FEMINIST INTERRUPTIONS**

A Dissertation Presented

by

RACHEL LEA THIBAUT

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfilment  
of the requirements of the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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COMMUNICATION

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Women, Convergent Film Criticism, and the Cinephilia of Feminist Interruptions

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## ABSTRACT

### WOMEN, CONVERGENT FILM CRITICISM, AND THE CINEPHILIA OF FEMINIST INTERRUPTIONS

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This dissertation examines the ways in which female film critics practice film criticism in the convergent age. In original research drawn from ethnographic interviews with eight female film critics and bloggers as well as textual, historical, and reception analyses of criticism, this dissertation argues that women who write film criticism in the convergent era are not only writing from a space of marginalization based on the patriarchal dominance of the film industry, but also face a series of obstacles and conflicts that are unique to writing online and which do not exert the same impact on male film critics. The findings reveal that women often draw on a feminist impulse to *disrupt* critical film discourse. I deem this disruption the “cinephilia of feminist interruptions”—a space where women who are knowledgeable about cinema must address issues of representation, identity, misogyny or sexism that interrupt the pleasure of moviegoing and their own writing practice. Women writing film criticism today not only must fight for cultural authority but must defend their knowledge of film, their feminist approach to film and media, and be constantly aware of how the simple fact of their gender shapes how male critics and audiences will receive their criticism.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	iv
ABSTRACT.....	vi
LIST OF FIGURES .....	ix
CHAPTER	
1. WOMEN, CONVERGENT FILM CRITICISM, AND THE CINEPHILIA OF FEMINIST INTERRUPTIONS.....	1
Introduction.....	1
Where Are the Women?.....	7
Chapter Outlines .....	20
Film Criticism as Historical Document: The Significance of this Study.....	22
2. THE SPACE OF FILM CRITICISM: NEW MEDIA, CONVERGENCE AND FILM BLOGGERS .....	24
Cinephilia.....	24
Feminist Film and Media Theories.....	33
Convergence, Publics, and New Media Users .....	36
Gender and Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC).....	40
Conclusion .....	48
3. HISTORICAL OVERVIEW: A CULTURAL HISTORY OF FEMALE FILM CRITICS .....	49
The Nickelodeon Years: The Cinema is for Women.....	50
Film Curator and Champion: Iris Barry.....	52
Deming: Curating the '40s.....	56
Molly Haskell, Marjorie Rosen, and the “Images of Women” debates.....	58
Pauline Kael, Penelope Gilliatt, and Cultural Authority at the <i>New Yorker</i> .....	63
Historicizing Women Film Critics.....	77
4. METHODOLOGY: BLOGGING AND THE GENDERED CONFLICTS OF FILM CRITICISM .....	81
Methodology.....	84
Cinephilia and the “Cinephile” .....	91
Gender and Discursive Conflict.....	95
The Feminist Impulse .....	99
Social Media and Networked Film Criticism .....	104



The Writing Process.....	111
Conclusion .....	112
5. BLOGGING AS CRITICAL WOMEN’S CINEPHILIA.....	114
Reardon and the Feminist Space of <i>cléo</i> .....	116
The Actor’s Critic .....	118
Marilyn Ferdinand and the Female Director.....	122
Blogathons as Cinephilic Activism.....	125
Lindbergs, the B-film Fan.....	127
Carrie Rickey and Local Color .....	132
Smith Nehme and Classic Film Fandom .....	134
Amy Monaghan “Enjoys Being a Girl” .....	136
Online Identity and the Female Blogger.....	140
Conclusion .....	143
6. WOMEN, FILM BLOGGERS, AND THE CINEPHILIA OF (FEMINIST) INTERRUPTIONS .....	145
The Flaws of a “Masterpiece”.....	154
Criticizing the Critic: A Selected Reception Analysis of <i>Hannah Takes     the Stairs</i> .....	161
Conclusion: Responsibilities of the Critic .....	164
7. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION .....	167
Future Considerations and Research.....	173
Conclusion: The Future of Online Film Criticism.....	175
APPENDICES	
A. INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR FEMALE FILM CRITICS AND BLOGGERS.....	177
B. LIST OF INTERVIEW SUBJECTS.....	178
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	179

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
1. Interview Transcripts .....	see supplemental content

## CHAPTER 1

### WOMEN, CONVERGENT FILM CRITICISM, AND THE CINEPHILIA OF FEMINIST INTERRUPTIONS

#### Introduction

Since the early aughts, one of media's most talked about casualties is film criticism. Though this particular panic is attributed to many economic and cultural factors, the discourse of “crisis” and “death” comes in part from the economic downturn in newspaper publishing, and as a result, the loss of print film critics. Although no one is still keeping count, Sean P. Means in *The Salt Lake City Tribune* reported that since 2006, 55 film critics have been fired or otherwise removed from their positions. (2008) As many newspapers moved their operations and content online, the models of publication shifted, and as some newspapers downsized or ceased operations, layoffs became the norm. In this past decade, the layoff of high profile critics such as Nathan Lee and J. Hoberman of the *Village Voice*, David Ansen of *Newsweek*, and Anne Thompson of *Variety* became news itself.

It is difficult to pinpoint the exact moment in which this crisis in print film criticism occurs, but it is clear that it holds wide-ranging implications arising from economic, cultural, and technological changes. According to the U.S. National Bureau of Economic Research, the U.S. fell into a recession that began at the end of 2007 and ended in June of 2009, which had a ripple effect on global markets and required bailouts of global banks (such as Lehman Brothers) and fueled panic and layoffs in many industries. During this time, many newspapers and magazines folded, incurred massive layoffs, or moved their

content entirely to the Web. *The Christian Science Monitor* announced that it would no longer publish their print edition; Gannett News, the largest newspaper company in the U.S., announced it would reduce its workforce by 10% (resulting in the loss of nearly 3,000 jobs); and the Tribune company incurred layoffs of nearly 150 employees that same year. (Carr, 2008) These business shifts resulted in the loss of jobs and careers for hundreds of workers and presents a bigger news story which impacted the entire state of print journalism.

Doug McLennan at the National Arts Journalism Program has estimated that in 2005, there were approximately 5,000 staff positions at American newspapers involving arts journalism—a figure that, by 2009, reflected only half that amount with jobs closer to 2,500 (Jacobs, 2009). Alternative weeklies, which are often at the forefront of extensive arts coverage and criticism, have also been part of this dramatic decline. In 2005, the companies that owned *The New Times* and *Village Voice* newspaper chains merged, affecting more than a dozen alt-weeklies. In 2013, *The Boston Phoenix* ceased publication after 47 years; Connecticut's *New Haven Advocate* also shut down operations that year, and in 2014 the *San Francisco Bay Guardian* stopped the presses after its 48-year run. Jack Shafer (2013) argues that the alt-weekly collapse happened over the last decade due to the convergent era, as the Internet stole the highly profitable (with profit margins between 20-50%) classified business away from alt-weeklies, with Craigslist becoming the biggest threat to classified sections (2013). It is worth noting here that some of today's prominent voices in film criticism (Manohla Dargis, David Denby, and Stephanie Zacharek) all worked at alt-weeklies prior to moving to mainstream publications. In this same time period, many newspapers dropped their full time critics to

rely on critics from larger publications through wire services (including the work of Roger Ebert).

Yet “crisis” refers not only to print journalism’s economic downturn but also to the loss of quality arts journalism and in turn, cultural authority. “Is film criticism dead?” was the headline that appeared as far back as October 2001 in the Atlanta arts weekly *Creative Loafing* (Feaster, October 26, 2001). In September 2008, Roger Ebert wrote a blog post titled “Critic is a Four-Letter Word,” broadly defining what the goals of criticism can and should be; in November 2008, he wrote “Death to the Critics! Hail to the CelebCult!” (Sept. 18, 2008; Nov. 26, 2008). In this latter post, Ebert used the news about the Associated Press’ limitations regarding word counts on all reviews and entertainment stories (500 words) to discuss the degradation of film criticism and the rise of celebrity gossip. Ebert observed that film criticism has been pushed aside in favor of celebrity news, catering to an audience that does not bother to read the paper anymore. He also argued that we should not worry about a supposed disappearance of film critics, but instead the reasons for diminished attention to quality writing in the first place (Nov. 26, 2008). Critic Patrick Goldstein in the *L.A. Times* echoes these concerns, noting, “many newspapers simply have decided they can’t afford a full range of critics any more—it seems clear we’re in an age with a very different approach to the role of criticism” (April 8, 2008). The role of the critic has shifted, and in some cases writing about film is literally being ‘dumbed down’ for an audience who care more about stars’ exploits off-screen, rather than on.

These crises are connected to the rise of the convergent era, in which the Internet has re-shaped the economic, social, and cultural landscape of arts journalism and with it,

film criticism.<sup>1</sup> While Ebert and Goldstein explore the impact of commercial, cost-cutting measures for traditional print journalism, film scholar Thomas Doherty (2010) in his article, “The Death of Film Criticism,” blames the loss of quality film journalism on another condition—the quantity of “amateurs” (which includes bloggers) positioning themselves as film experts and connoisseurs *online*, diluting the cultural authority of those who hold paid positions as film critics. Without taking the diversity of film bloggers into consideration, Doherty suggests these film bloggers are merely “fanboys” without proper film knowledge, suggesting that they tend to be “visceral and emotional,” spitting out criticism “with no internal censor or mute button” (Feb. 28, 2010). In his view, the internet has drawn out the amateurs in hordes, all while empowering the wrong people to write criticism. Similarly, film critic Armond White (2008), writing at the now-defunct *New York Press*, finds many problems with internet critics:

Internetters who stepped in to fill print publications’ void seize a technological opportunity and then confuse it with “democratization”—almost fascistically turning discourse into babble. They don’t necessarily bother to learn or think—that’s the privilege of graffiti-critique. Their proud unprofessionalism presumes that other moviegoers want to—or need to—match opinions with other amateurs. (April 30, 2008)

For White and many others, amateurs are the source of the problem, as if all those who take to the web to write and create have no valid experience. This is echoed by Andrew Keen, who notes that “today’s internet is killing our culture and assaulting our economy” (2007). These writers believe that with such easy access to the tools of criticism and without journalism’s standard gatekeeping function, internet critics cannot add to the collective wisdom of critics but instead seem to be purveyors of drivel.

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<sup>1</sup> Scholar Jay Rosen follows the impacts of convergence on journalism at his blog [pressthink.org](http://pressthink.org).

All this attention to the changes to the landscape of film criticism, as shaped by the shifts in economic structures, the do-it-yourself nature of blogging, and the prevailing discourse of a “democratic web” draw attention to film criticism as an object of study for academics and journalists. In 2008, the New York Film Festival (NYFF) hosted the panel “Film Criticism in Crisis,” and international critics such as Jonathan Rosenbaum, David Hudson and Emmanuel Bourdeau (from *Cahiers du Cinema*) discussed not the debate between print and online film criticism but what the changes amidst this “crisis” meant. On the NYFF panel, Kent Jones notes that, “Those most worried about it [the state of film criticism] are not the hobbyists...There is no crisis as long as there are still people who take film seriously” (2008). Jones, like many of the panel’s critics, is centrally concerned not with the economic ramifications of such a shift, but the possible decline of cultural value that might take place as it becomes harder to find the serious voices among those participating in this new form of film criticism.

In the last decade there has been continued attention to the online criticism debates by film publications and festivals. This is often articulated by many seasoned print critics, and illustrates the need to see a new trajectory for film criticism, focusing on how film bloggers play a key role in carrying on the critical traditions and responsibilities formerly consigned primarily to print critics. In 2008, *Cineaste* magazine solicited commentary from more than a dozen film critics from both online and print sources, who weighed in on this same topic on “Film Criticism in the Age of the Internet: A Critical Symposium.” *Sight and Sound*, a cinephilic British film publication, took hold of the debate in the UK, and its editor Nick James introduced a special issue titled “Who Needs Critics?” (October, 2008). Writing at the *L.A. Times*, Patrick Goldstein notes, “The Web

isn't the enemy of critical thinking. The land of a million blogs is a medium brimming with opinion. What's different is the reader gets to decide whose opinion matters the most" (April 8, 2008). Relatedly, *Christian Science Monitor* film critic Peter Rainer notes at a 2010 panel on filmmakers and film criticism at UCLA:

What's sad now about criticism is not so much that it's dead, but that there are probably more good critics potentially in a position to be critics right now—critics who have written, who are writing, should be writing, who have stopped writing—than there has ever been in the history of American journalism. There are just fewer and fewer places where these people can be published. (as cited in Emerson, 2010)

Perhaps more precisely, Rainer suggests that there are fewer places where critics can be published and valued. Despite how much the internet is embraced as a space of progress, often what is posted there still does not command the authority achieved through the institutional affiliations granted by publication in a traditional, print-based format; this is a crucial implication of Rainer's observation. As Mattias Frey (2015) suggests, "today's critics feel undermined by bloggers and other 'citizen journalists' because of the way in which the practice of criticism by 'anyone' degrades the professional distinction of working critics...The anxiety about the status and cultural authority of the critic is as old as the profession itself" (p. 83). In many ways, it could be argued that traditional critics are simply averse to change and feel challenged by a younger generation who might react with the same passion to their canon of films. But others argue that there should be no anxiety over the loss of quality or even a lack of knowledge; while some may envision all internet critics as illiterate basement dwellers unable to complete a sentence, Paul Brunick (2010) argues just the opposite in *Film Comment*:



Internet criticism is at once more comprehensive (as online critics collectively fill in the gaps in mainstream review coverage) and more specific (as one-line descriptions tossed off in a newspaper review are expanded into a whole series of topically driven blog posts). Professional critics like to complain that the quintessential internet critic is a hack, but no: the quintessential internet critic is a *wonk*. (“Online Criticism, Part Two,” September/October 2010)

The breadth and depth of the work of hundreds of internet critics cannot be so easily stereotyped. Much of this disgruntled rhetoric does not acknowledge that many of these critics are previously-employed print film critics, film students and scholars, and cinephiles who are equally devoted to watching film and the craft of writing about it, and also fails to note the dozens of web-based publications devoted specifically to the thoughtful analysis of film. The ubiquity and diversity of internet critics provides us with the very reason to study and explore the implications of the rapid expansion of public film discourse.

### **Where Are the Women?**

While film criticism in the age of the internet is seemingly ubiquitous, the assumptions regarding democratic access, inclusion, and visibility can be problematic. Jennifer Merin, President of the Association for Women Film Journalists (AWFJ), surveyed the landscape of these symposia in order to ask, “Why So Few Women’s Voices?” (Sept. 14, 2008). She discovers that of the 44 writers featured in the 2008 *Cineaste* and *Sight and Sound* symposia, only four were women. These four women included in the *Cineaste* symposium are Karina Longworth, Farran Smith Nehme, Amy Taubin and Stephanie Zacharek. Merin concludes: “Women’s voices are seriously underrepresented in the public discussion of cinema, one of the world’s strongest cultural formatives” (Sept. 14, 2008). Despite the fact that the public discussion of cinema and film criticism and the discourse of “crisis” has exploded in the convergent era, the

women's participation is often marginalized, overlooked or disregarded, clearly a form of symbolic annihilation.

In this dissertation, I look beyond this marginalization to focus on what happens when women film critics have the opportunity to enter critical film discourse. In convergent film criticism, women assert their authority, share their expertise, and often challenge the status quo in their attention to issues of sexism, misogyny and gender representation in film. This dissertation explores the many ways in which women writing film criticism often draw on a feminist impulse to *disrupt* critical film discourse. To understand what this impulse looks like and why it arises, it is important to see how women critics understand this phenomenon, and the ways in which women have been perceived as missing.

Recently, journalists have attempted to explore the reasons for this serious underrepresentation. Kate Everson, in her 2014 article for *Lydia* magazine, "Gone Girls," surveys female critics to elicit insights as to why there are so few women in the industry. It is not for a lack of interest—Everson notes that a relatively new group, The Women's Film Critic Circle, founded in 2004, has 80 members. One of those members, Chiara Spagnoli Gabardi, admits, "I don't think it's an intellectual discrimination. It's rather a sociological legacy that we are trying to change day by day" (as cited in Everson, July 8, 2014). Everson also talks to Dorothy Rabinowitz, film critic for the *Wall Street Journal*, one the highest circulating publications in the United States:

It's not easy to prove that there's a prejudice against women reviewers... The question is why do you find so few women? An accident? Possibly. Women's preference? Possibly. Maybe a lot of women don't feel like they want authority to tell people what to do. (as cited in Everson, July 8, 2014)

Similarly, Katie Kilkenny (2015) asks in an *Atlantic Monthly* article “Why Are So Few Film Critics Women?” and reiterates Everson’s point about the marginalized space in public forums for female critics, pointing out that only 20% of the top critics excerpted on popular film review site RottenTomatoes.com are female. She also notes that in four of the top film critics’ associations, women are never more than 25% of membership (Dec. 27, 2015).<sup>2</sup> As explanation, Kilkenny draws on various cultural notions, such as how women have been discouraged to speak out or expound on their knowledge in an opinionated fashion, citing recent informal studies which reveal that men tend to pitch stories and coverage more than women, “which puts women at a disadvantage at any publication that welcomes film commentary from freelancers” (Dec. 27, 2015).

The conversation about women’s role and participation in film criticism has spiked in the past decade, often as part of a reaction to research conducted by Dr. Martha Lauzen at the Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film at San Diego State University. In 2007, Lauzen’s report, “Thumbs Down,” Lauren found that “Men write 70% and women 30% of all film reviews published in the nation’s top newspapers.” (2008; p. 4) To arrive at this conclusion, Lauzen examined film reviews for theatrical releases written in the Top 100 U.S. daily newspapers (by circulation numbers) from October to December, 2007. (“Thumbs Down,” p. 2) Lauzen updated and replicated the “Thumbs Down” study in 2016, using the representation of women and men designated “top critics” at Rotten Tomatoes. She finds that male reviewers comprised 80% and

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<sup>2</sup> The film critic associations examined by Kilkenny are the National Society of Film Critics, the Los Angeles Film Critics Association, the New York Film Critics Circle, and the Broadcast Film Critics Association.

females 20% of those writing about film for the trades, with a similar breakdown by gender for large U. S. newspapers (71% men, 29% women). (“Thumbs Down 2016,” p. 2). While this could also apply to the 2016 study, Lauzen concludes with the stark reality that, “men dominate the reviewing process of films primarily made by men featuring mostly males intended for a largely male audience” (“Thumbs Down,” p. 10). This reinforces the fact that the film industry actively seeks to marginalize women by not envisioning them as audiences, consumers, or even as producers, thus eliminating women (as subjects with agency) from the entire circuit of culture. (duGay, 1997)

Female film critics suggest that their insights on gender as well as their feminist impulse provide a unique intrinsic value to film criticism. In March 2014, NYU’s Fusion Film Festival hosted a panel entitled “Can Women Save Film Criticism?” The panel included many New York-based female film critics, including Miriam Bale, Dana Stevens, Inkoo Kang and Farran Smith Nehme (who I interviewed for this study). One of the things that female critics can do, according to the panel, is to challenge pre-conceived norms of female representation. As Kang points out, “having more women talk about what’s in the film is very important in terms of countering the naturalization of male hegemony within the film culture” (as cited in Laffly, 2014). Miriam Bale, who freelances for the *New York Times* as well as other outlets, noted that, “The niche perspective is important on sexism and even race...But it’s challenging. People don’t know those perspectives are needed, and push them away. After a while I think, I am a woman, I am an African-American. You need to trust my gut reaction and not your authority” (as cited in Laffly, 2014). Thus, female critics can see the value in their

personal experiences and viewpoints to the work of film criticism, but see that their task is to convince others of this value.

These responses and insights from female film critics attest to film culture's need for diverse perspectives. Film criticism, in their view, tends to become monolithic, celebrating male-driven films and accentuating masculine discourses. Bale suggests that having more female critics challenges the problem of having few female directors, further noting that more female voices could "counter many male critics' tendency to heroicize certain male directors" (Laffly). This also reveals that auteurism is a masculine-inflected approach to criticism, an argument I will pursue in more detail in a later chapter of this dissertation.

While the language of "crisis" is rarely used in terms of the problematic absence of women writing for mainstream news outlets as well as alternative ones, this dissertation looks beyond the question of "Where are the Women?" to find out why. Why are there so few women holding prominent positions as tastemakers with cultural authority? And are women who do hold such positions more likely to be questioned or challenged in this regard? In this past decade as non-traditional film criticism has grown, we have seen the loss of two women who can be called arbiters of a critical taste: Pauline Kael and Susan Sontag. Although they represent another era, their passing leaves questions about who could take up their mantle. Pauline Kael died in 2001 at 80, and is regarded as one of the most prominent critics of the '60s through the early '90s. Although she had a late start to film criticism, Kael spent nearly 40 years in the profession, working for several magazines but primarily for the *New Yorker*, and published several collections of her movie reviews. Kael was an outspoken critic who did not follow particular auteurs

or genres but wrote compellingly about films she adored or hated. Kael often held opinions that ran contrary to many other critics (for example, she famously panned *The Sound of Music* for *McCall's*, an act that according to movie lore caused her to be fired.) She championed Bertolucci's *Last Tango in Paris* when others saw it as a failure, and is famous for her attack on auteur theory through her criticism of Andrew Sarris in a biting commentary published as "Circles and Squares," in which she accused Sarris of abdicating his key role as a critic in favor of following a formula (Kael, 1963; p.14). Kael was a critic who acquired cultural authority not only through her expert, no holds-barred analysis of film but also through her ability to defend her *own* writings to other critics and their readers.

Although her work was not solely focused on film, Susan Sontag (1933-2004) was another public intellectual and cultural critic whose works on illness, photography, film, war, and terror are considered classic and canonical. Her key works included *Illness as Metaphor* and her controversial and widely cited "Notes on Camp," but for film critics and cinephiles, perhaps her most contentious and controversial piece was 1996's "The Decay of Cinema" (Sontag). This essay ignited many debates about the growing commercialization of film, and a renewed hyper-aware sense of nostalgia for cinephilia in a time before VCRs, blockbusters, and the general decline in moviegoing.

After Kael and Sontag, few other women have come forward to take their place. Molly Haskell, known for her famous book on women's representation in '40s cinema, *From Reverence to Rape* (1974) still writes occasional reviews but is less active in film discussions as they have migrated to the internet. Manohla Dargis, co-chief film critic for *The New York Times*, has risen to prominence not only from her years of experience but

also from being an outspoken critic of the continued marginalization of women in Hollywood—decrying the lack of women’s representation (and recognition as) directors, writers, actresses, and film critics, as well as the lack of recognition of the female moviegoer as an integral participant in American film culture. Like Kael, she has commanded attention when she has defended her positions and sparked controversy by critiquing the (often) unquestioned views of men in the industry. In 2015, she was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize, journalism’s most coveted award, for her “command of film history that stretches from the silent era to the avant-garde and leads readers on a clear-eyed exploration of a film as a social document—a document that bears the imprint of the culture in which it was made” (2015, Pulitzer.org). Patrick Goldstein, writing for the *L.A. Times’ The Big Picture* blog, describes how independent filmmakers do not want Dargis to review their film since she might tear it apart, yet this provides insight on how much influence she holds as a critic. Goldstein goes on to say that her “intellectual heft will actually persuade high-brow moviegoers to drop the film from their must-see list” (Dec. 10, 2008). Dargis has written for the *L.A. Times*, the *Village Voice*, and now as a co-chief critic along with A.O. Scott at *The New York Times*, she possesses one of the most solid reputations of any critic (female or otherwise) still working in print journalism today.

Yet other questions remain, not only about the presence of female film critics but all those who dare to demand cultural authority in a convergent era. Is there any room left for critics, whether print-based or online, to be valued for their expertise and insights? How might it be articulated? Whose voices will be heard, and whose voices will matter? The cultural practice of film criticism is caught between the commercial imperatives of

journalism and grassroots (i.e. individualistic) media convergence, and it is crucial to chart how it shifts in a space that is a confluence of industrial, technological and social changes. While commercial forces alter the ways film critics write (via word counts, push for gossip-related content) and if they will be employed at all, fans, cinephiles, scholars and former critics can, at the push of a blog-publishing button, create criticism and related content as part of what Henry Jenkins (2006) calls “grassroots convergence”—which also includes such practices as YouTube mashups and the creation of fan fiction. Jenkins, who also calls these activities central to a “participatory fan culture,” also sees blogging as a central activity of grassroots convergence, and this do-it-yourself practice of creating user-generated content is part of the logic of convergence as part of a “bottom-up” and often “consumer-driven” process (Jenkins, 2006; p. 8). This way of looking at blogging reminds us of the possibilities of individual power, autonomy and potential for *authority* by bloggers, even without institutional affiliations. My focus on film bloggers operates on the idea that cinephilic film bloggers are the successors to traditional print film critics, holding much of the same responsibility and authority.

My project is located in a specific but fluid space of convergence: the study of women who practice film criticism via film blogging. While there are no current figures on the total number of film blogs written in the English language, research conducted by Pew Research indicates that eight million American adults say they have created blogs (formally called weblogs) (Pew Research, 2005). A film blog can be broadly defined as any site, personal or commercial, that focuses on film or the film industry and allows for any reader to comment via posts. Blogging itself has grown exponentially in the past decade, and one magazine even sponsors annual awards for the best film-related blog



(Totalfilm.com). Indiewire.com, which started as a site to report industry news and festival reports and coverage of American independent films, now serves as a blog aggregator, hosting established film review blogs as well as those written by former print critics such as Anne Thompson and Leonard Maltin, and notably, one devoted to Women and Hollywood by Melissa Silverstein. (indiewire.com) The prominent film site imdb.com provides links to external film reviews posted on film blogs as well as publication reviews, further blurring the lines of critical film culture. However, many film bloggers who specifically write film reviews and criticism (as opposed to celebrity news or simple film synopses) try to distinguish their work from these more entertainment (and even “amateur”) oriented blogs by aligning themselves with sites or organizations that utilize a review process or provide another kind of gatekeeping function. The Online Film Critics Society, established in 1997, as of April 2016 boasts 246 members from 22 countries around the world. (OFCS.com) This includes bloggers who write personal blogs as well as those working for professional sites. However, only those who meet strict minimum requirements can apply and be granted membership. According to the organization’s bylaws, film bloggers must have at least two years of writing experience and a minimum of 100 completed reviews, a minimum of 400 words long, and written solely for the Internet and not for print, radio, or television. (ofcs.org). Given these new areas of growth, how can film criticism be “dead,” if the numbers of those who practice it continue to expand?

This dissertation research draw attention not only to questions of who participates in online film criticism, but also to understand the forces that shape who has a voice among those who are amplified. Although I start with the obvious absence of women in

this critical film space, my research will focus on further implications of this absence:

- In what ways are women writers marginalized in this space?
- Why do women film critics encounter so much hostility in convergent criticism, and how do they respond?
- How are feminist perspectives marginalized or discounted in online spaces?
- Do readers respond differently to critics when they perceive that they identify as women?
- Does the hostility of the convergent film space interrupt and challenge women's cinephilia?

While “Where are the Women?” is asked countless times in regards to women both onscreen and off, my research looks at the women who have found a voice on the internet for their film criticism. Specifically, my research examines online film criticism and cinephilia through a feminist lens to reveal how women participate in and contribute to critical film culture. Women and their cinephilia, or love of movies, are interrupted by a feminist impulse, which may be enacted in a variety of ways. My research illuminates the ways in which women present themselves online as subjects and as critics and deal with discursive and communicative conflict—a dimension that did not exist for the print film critic with the frequency and immediacy now presented by internet culture. Film bloggers not only write criticism but (like most other bloggers) act as moderators for discussions or arguments that might develop, placing the blogger in a defensive position in regards to their ideas and their overall knowledge of a subject. I argue, as some other scholars do, that gender-related communication problems that arise from social interaction also appear in online spaces, and complicate the discourse of film criticism and cinephilia in a way

that has the potential for a greater impact on women than it does on men.<sup>3</sup> Patriarchal structures are reproduced in online spaces, in which women are more often the targets of trolling than men, which further undermines their work, knowledge and authority and drives some women, and especially feminists, away from participating in online spaces altogether (Goldberg, Feb. 20, 2015). How women present themselves as critics and cinephiles, as well as how they understand and respond to discursive conflict, is a key area explored through my ethnographic interviews with eight female film bloggers.

Secondarily, this dissertation examines *how* women practice cinephilia through critical film writing and discussion online. In what ways might women's film criticism be different from men's? I argue that such differences are not essential but lie in how women respond to the film industry, a space that often works to exclude women as workers and spectators. In order to understand how women develop such subjectivities, it is crucial to acknowledge the context in which they write, since they occupy a space on the margins due to a different relationship to both the film industry and by extension, convergence culture. Women in all parts of the entertainment industry still inhabit a space that is not equal to that of men, and this occurs in all sectors despite the growth of the Internet as a space for "everyone."

For feminist scholars of popular culture, it is common knowledge that the American film industry (Hollywood) employs a mere fraction of women as directors, producers, editors, writers, actors, cinematographers, and this can also be seen among the ranks of mainstream film critics. In the United States, women's participation in Hollywood (or mainstream cinema) both onscreen and off is represented by a much

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<sup>3</sup> See Danet, B., & Herring, S., eds. (2007). *The Multilingual Internet: Language, culture, and communication online*. New York: Oxford University Press.

smaller ratio as compared to the contributions of men at almost every level. In 2014, women comprised 17% of all directors, writers, producers, executive producers, editors, and cinematographers working on the top 250 (domestic) grossing films. Of these, only 9% were directors, 11% writers, and 5% cinematographers. Yet no films failed to employ a man in at least one of these roles. (Lauzen, “2014 Celluloid Ceiling Report,” p. 1)

Given these statistics, it is not surprising that Kathryn Bigelow’s Oscar win for best director in 2010 was considered a landmark victory for women, marking the first time in the Academy’s 82-year history that a woman has won the award. In a similar vein, *New York Times* film critic Manohla Dargis noted that “Of the almost 600 new movies that will be reviewed in *The New York Times* by the end of 2009, about 60 were directed by women, or 10 percent” (Dargis, 2009). Dargis also reveals that many of the films in that 10 percent were made outside of the U.S. (by European directors such as Claire Denis and Lucrecia Martel). In addition, women do not have a prominent space onscreen, either. For example, research conducted by Martha Lauzen at the Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film shows that in 2014, females comprised 12% of protagonists featured in the top 100 grossing films, representing a decline of 3 percentage points from 2013. (Lauzen, “It’s a Man’s (Celluloid) World,” p.1)

While these statistics are not surprising, they are relevant for how they influence and shape *how* many women writers approach film criticism. Dargis and Lauzen voice frustration with an industry that, despite making dramatic changes over the past several decades in everything from business models to new technologies, has changed little in its attitudes toward women, both in front of and behind the screen. The female film critic, presented daily with the obvious fact of women’s marginalization, is often compelled to

direct attention to analysis of women's representations on screen or their lack of representation. While this is not to say that male critics are unaware of cultural conditions and positions that shape their viewing experience, I argue that female critics often feel obligated to address, in writing, the burden of representation (or the problems of misrepresentation), which I explore in detail as a "cinophilia of interruptions"—the space in which women watching movies that they love are "interrupted" by the spectacle of gendered or sexist misrepresentations. Erin Donovan (who maintained a film review blog, *Steady Diet of Film*, through 2013), recalls such a problem with the film *Observe and Report*, (Hill, 2009) a mainstream Hollywood film starring Seth Rogen as an incompetent mall cop named Ronnie. The film includes a scene of Ronnie having sex with a drunk, unconscious Anna Faris (Brandi), which was clearly received as a representation of rape by many audience members. Donovan notes that initial reviews never mentioned the scene, and it was not a point of contention "until the lady blogs saw it in wide release...Critics are free to focus on whatever aspects of films they choose, but that the film received so much coverage and no one thought that was an important thing to mention is just shocking" (Email w/author, March 6, 2009). Donovan also suggests that such a film really needed a "trigger warning" for sexual assault survivors. In general, however, Donovan's comments suggest that women exhibit a different set of responsibilities in their writing, which perhaps interrupt a cinephilic impulse. Instead of devoting time to writing a defense for aesthetic choices and cinematic craft, the female film blogger (and critic) will point out what might be a glaring problem in a film's representation of gender or sexuality. Although this is only one example, my dissertation explores what I call an "interruption" to the cinephilic impulse in selected case studies in

a chapter devoted to this phenomenon. This impulse is also addressed in detail by the bloggers I have interviewed for this dissertation, many who reveal impulses that echo Donovan's.

Manohla Dargis writes about these conflicting impulses, and while she often calls attention to representations of women in the industry and on the screen through features and essays, she insists that this is not necessarily her primary goal. In an interview with *Jezebel.com*, Dargis reveals:

I don't want to be the woman critic. I don't want to be the feminist critic. What I want to do is talk about the art that I love and point out, every so often, inequities. It's a weird balancing act, and I'm not saying that there aren't contradictions. (as cited in Carmon, 2009)

Reflecting on this marginalized industrial space that women occupy in Hollywood and beyond, how might film criticism (in its amateur and professional forms) be a unique critical practice for women? Is it also possible that, if women are more likely to discuss, critique, and find meaning in films made by women or films that prominently represent women, then their absence from a role of cultural authority might be considered a double absence? This is one of the many ideas I explore in this dissertation.

### **Chapter Outlines**

In Chapter 2, "The Space of Film Criticism: New Media, Convergence and Film Bloggers," I further develop and articulate the ideas about how convergence works and its connection to film blogging. This chapter serves as a literature review of theoretical concepts that inform my ideas about networks, publics, and online communities, as well as film theory frameworks to examine cinephilia and feminist film theories. I draw on the work of P. David Marshall and Nancy Baym among others to make these connections. In addition, I discuss the idea of the "networked film public," a term coined by Chuck Tryon

in reference to how he sees bloggers, posters, and others who participate in online film culture connect. (Tryon, 2008) Thirdly, I focus on the work on Susan Herring, Deborah Tannen, as well as others to explore the ways that gender is articulated in online spaces and how interactivity produces and generates discursive conflict.

Chapter 3, “Historical Overview: Women, Cultural Authority, and Film Criticism” explores the role and prominence of women as film critics throughout history, focusing on key critics such as Iris Barry, Pauline Kael, and Molly Haskell. This history is included as a way to examine how women in the past have expressed cinephilia and why their writings commanded attention, controversy, and cultural authority. It also investigates how these critics dealt with criticism which in turn shaped or influenced their writings. This background allows me to see the similarities and differences between the two eras of film criticism and how each group of women navigate this public critical space.

In Chapter 4, “Methodology: Blogging and the Gendered Conflicts of Criticism,” I summarize my findings based on the interviews I conducted with female film bloggers. It covers areas such as cinephilia, writing practices and processes, gender and conflict, and attitudes toward and uses of social media. It details the ways in which women present and perform their critical film identities online, and to what effect. (Please see appendix for preliminary interview questions.)

Chapter 5, “Blogging as Critical Women’s Cinephilia,” summarizes my findings based on my textual analysis of several cinephilic blogs written by women. It explores patterns in the ways that women write and react to film and what these expressions might mean for writers and readers.

Chapter 6 explores “The Cinephilia of Feminist Interruptions,” in which I present three case studies of women whose traditional cinephilic experiences and tendencies toward film spectatorship and criticism are interrupted by a feminist impulse to address misogyny and gender representation in their criticism, and the subsequent backlash these critics receive for following such an impulse. I also examine the frequent use of auteurist excess as a form of cinephilic criticism, which often romanticizes a film or filmmaker, and appears to work against the feminist interruption.

### **Film Criticism as Historical Document: The Significance of this Study**

One of the primary reasons for doing this study is to consider the ways in which the narratives of new media are told, and to examine spaces that might be overlooked, as history repeatedly neglects certain groups and relies heavily on well-worn tropes in order to tell a specific type of story. Lynn Spigel (1992) observes this problem in writing media history, noting, “it’s not to argue that history repeats itself, but rather that the discursive conventions for thinking about communication are very much the same...Our culture still speaks about new communication technologies in remarkably familiar ways” (p. 186). I would argue that two considerations must be made in order to avoid the problem Spigel highlights. First, one of these familiar ways is the assumption that when it comes to technology, the “early adopters” or most active users of a new technology are often assumed to be men. While technology companies often market to men, recent research conducted by Genevieve Bell (2012), an anthropologist at Intel, reveals that women in Western countries use the internet 17% more every month than men, and that the biggest users of many forms of technology are women in their 40s, 50s, and 60s (June 8, 2012). This is not to argue for a rescue operation for female “adopters,” but for attention to ways



discourse is created and how convergence culture in the last fifteen years has been narrated through industrial, commercial and academic frameworks, which often neglect to illuminate the gendered differences in the adoption patterns of new media practices.

Secondly, and perhaps more complex to illustrate is how to document media that is still shifting and affecting *other forms of media*. In what is often called the “post-cinematic age,” we can no longer envision something like “film” as a static, material object, and much has been written about this as the form is more often accessed and produced in digital form rather than in historical celluloid counterpart. So too, we must consider that film criticism, a journalistic practice that creates a record of reception of media, is no longer static thanks to convergence culture. It is crucial to envision criticism not only as a practice that engages with cinema, but also as a process that further engages with film via audiences, fans, writers, and cinephiles discursively. Although this is not new, what is new in convergence culture is how this social interaction and discursive framework is now inscribed alongside film criticism via blog posts and comments, framing and becoming part of the *social history* of film criticism. As stories about today’s film criticism are written, it will not be enough to collect a film critic’s (individual) pieces of criticism for anthologies and histories; it will be necessary to also document the ways in which such writing is dialogic and contributes to broader cultural discussions. The internet has made the inscriptions of film criticism and criticism’s *reception* interdependent; they cannot be neglected or separated.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE SPACE OF FILM CRITICISM: NEW MEDIA, CONVERGENCE AND FILM BLOGGERS

Film criticism today is a moving target. No longer confined to the printed page or to a daily broadcast, it changes form as it migrates across platforms and is practiced not only by seasoned professionals and academics, but also by amateurs, fans, film buffs, and cinephiles. This change is broadly attributed to convergence culture, which Mark Deuze (2009) sees as “blurring the lines between production and consumption, between making and using media, and between active or passive spectatorship of media culture” (p. 148). While the internet has been integral to people’s social, cultural, and working lives since the late ‘90s, only in the last decade has it been used so prolifically for various means of cultural production and distribution. As Meikle and Young (2012) argue, “the convergent media environment is making possible an enormous redistribution of a certain kind of power—the power to speak, to write, to define, to persuade—symbolic power” (p. 10).

It is for this reason that my research looks at film criticism not only in its connections to film theory, spectatorship, and more substantially cinephilia, but also in its connection to convergence culture and the growing body of research on new media users, communities, and networks. The interactive and fluid nature of this environment dramatically impacts film critics, film audiences, and even the film industry itself. To understand film criticism, the complex space in which it is produced must be explored.

#### Cinephilia

While many new media scholars study fan cultures and their practices to illustrate the effects and meanings for media convergence, far less studied (and often situated in different theoretical frames) are film criticism and blogging as both *convergent* and

*cinephilic* practices. Betz (2007) argues that cinephilia can be constructed as “*phenomenon* (cultural, historical, geopolitical), as *experience* (collective, individual), and as *knowledge* (fascination, recollection, interpretation)” (p.132). The latter constructions, those of the experience of film and its subsequent expression and acquisition of knowledge, will be closely examined in this dissertation. While the related construction of *fandom* often describes the enthusiast of mainstream film objects or franchises (*Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, and *Harry Potter* films are key examples), cinephilia is a term that is more connected and associated with the love and experience of moviegoing, and more likely to favor a sophisticated, or “sacred” film object (one less likely to be a highly “commercialized” work of art), and an approach to its appreciation via writing. (Hudson & Zimmerman, p. 136) Cinephilia is not necessarily connected to one media text, and not to commercial consumption, but to the practices of moviegoing and the affective responses and exhilaration in the discovery, appreciation, and analysis of films—in some cases only certain types of films (such as the aforementioned “sacred object”) or genres.

The earliest intellectuals who dubbed themselves cinephiles were the French scholars and artists of the 1920s, and this includes Jean Epstein (1897-1953), Louis Delluc (1890-1924), Germain Dulac (1882–1942), and Ève Francis (1886–1980). For these filmmaker-critics, their mode of cinephilia was *photogénie*, which referred to a very specific experience produced by cinema. This term, introduced by Epstein, was not connected to any one particular film but the experience of aesthetic aspects of film.

Robert Farmer (2010) notes that:

Depending on our perspective, *photogénie* is either an approach to filmmaking, or it is a way of thinking about film. It is perceptible in the filmmaker’s attitude

towards the medium, and our understanding of the medium. *Photogénie* does not literally exist in the film, except in a metaphorical way designed to encourage us to take a more active part in the cinematic experience and to gaze more deeply at the screen. (2010)

Relatedly, Paul Willemen (1994) suggests that for Epstein, *photogénie* was about specific moments of recognition, and not all viewers would be sensitive to these aspects, but some would possess a “viewer’s aesthetic” (p. 126). This stance suggested that viewers are aware of the formal structure of film, but perhaps recognize something more. Sylvia Harvey remarks (1978):

A living film culture could not grow simply out of the watching of movies, rather it would grow out of the relationship between the act of watching and a critical awareness of the techniques of the cinema, (which will) make possible a more active role for the spectator: the role of challenging, analyzing and criticising the spectacle, not simply consuming it. (p. 24)

For Harvey, it is necessary to have an awareness of the value, gravity, and pleasure of the experience of movies.

Cinephilia is also most frequently associated with Francois Truffaut, André Bazin, and the *Cahiers du Cinema* critics, who were affiliated with the French New Wave and wrote articles that championed Hollywood filmmakers such as Alfred Hitchcock and Howard Hawks, romanticizing the cinematic contributions of filmmakers and thus connecting the auteur theory to cinephilia. As Willemen (1994) argues, *Cahiers’* theory of authorship was a “form of secondary elaboration, a rationalization and social justification for the obsessive pleasures of the cinephile,” in an attempt to “make the pleasure of cinephilia productive instead of repressing it” (p. 14). Thus the process of canonizing films and directors were central for the written explorations of cinephilia as it was articulated in the ‘50s and ‘60s.

Beyond these definitions of cinephilia, those most relevant to my project are those tied to the compulsion and need for written expression.<sup>4</sup> Thomas Elsaesser (2005) notes that cinephilia is a way of watching films and speaking about them, which includes “the need to write about it and proselytize, alongside the pleasure derived from viewing films on the big screen” (p. 28). Willemen (1994) also sees this connection, noting, “Cinephilia has more to do with writing in magazines than with reading them. It is as if cinephilia demands a gestural outlet in writing: if not in magazines then on index cards or in list making” (p. 239). Willemen also suggests that “perhaps it has something to do with bearing witness: the need to proclaim what has been experienced, to draw attention to what has been by the elect but which may not have been noticed by “routine” viewers” (p. 239). Willemen also points out a hierarchy between cinephiles and “routine” viewers, suggesting the cinephile has distinctive viewing patterns and behaviors.

Antoine de Baecque and Thierry Fremaux define cinephilia very simply as a “life organized around films” (1995, p. 133). Indeed, cinephilia is all-consuming, based on experience and a specific kind of consumption of the film object, according to Willemen:

[People] “have a ‘love of cinema’ in the same way that you can love any kind of collecting activity. And perhaps that notion of collecting objects is not a bad analogy in the sense that you are there talking about discrete objects, moments, which are being serialized in your mind into collections” (1994, p. 233).

In this sense, cinephilia is an activity akin to curation, but of the individual’s own unique relationship and subjective experiences arranged in a way to suit and please the cinephile.

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<sup>4</sup> See “In Focus: Cinephilia,” ed. Mark Betz, *Cinema Journal*; “Cinephilia Dossier: What is Being Fought for by Today’s Cinephilias?” ed. by Elena Garfinkel and Jonathan Buchsbaum in *Framework*; *Goodbye Cinema, Hello Cinephilia*, by Jonathan Rosenbaum, and *The New Cinephilia* by Girish Shambu.

Much of the contemporary scholarship on cinephilia connects it to film studies but with a nod to convergence, specifically the change in film consumption and appreciation thanks to digital technologies and effects. Balcerzak and Sperb's (2009; 2012) two volumes on *Cinephilia in the Age of Digital Reproduction* map out several ontologies of cinephilia and productively, attribute cinephilia's growth in part to blogging and online film communities. They argue that "blogs can and will shift how cinephilia is defined—more so than the reverse—every bit as much as digital effects and home viewing have" (2009, p. 23). The rhetoric of the sacred object is also crucial in the introduction of the first volume, and the authors position digital cinema as their object:

Scholars, critics, bloggers, and so forth seek intellectual and emotional self-gratification through the act of writing about the intense pleasures and ideas (importantly, the pleasure of ideas) that film affords us... The cinephile's own love—the awareness of that love and the anxiety it produces—takes precedence in writing. (Sperb & Balcerzak, p. 8)

However, the foci of these volumes, as seen through the essays by various contributors who discuss specific films and their technologies, are filtered not always through the idea of pleasure but through the academic discipline of film studies, which extrapolates the concept of cinephilia through sacred objects instead of looking at the experiences of cinephiles themselves. This approach makes sense from a film studies perspective; methodology shapes our understanding of a subject or discipline. Cinephilia has also been found within the realm of film studies' theoretical models, and not those central to media/cultural studies, which has more of an investment in studying and understanding the audience. Exceptions to this include an epistolary exchange between five bloggers in volume one, as well as the more personalized responses to films by Girish Shambu (*Code Unknown*) and Jason Sperb's A-Z evaluation of *Be Kind, Rewind* as a cinephilic text in volume two.

While these collections promise to explore cinephilia in the era of ‘digital reproduction,’ feminist or female-centered narratives or experiences are nowhere to be found. There are several women who contribute to these volumes (including film scholars such as Catherine Russell and Kristi McKim, for example) but they focus on international filmmakers or attitudes toward technologies, which certainly makes sense given the volume’s title. This is not to say that as women they must do feminist work, just that they might be more likely to hold an interest in this approach. However, at times the volume’s entries conflate cinephilia with technophilia. While this is not to dismiss the expansive work of Balcerzak and Sperb’s project, it is crucial to note that none of the films noted as ‘sacred objects’ are directed by women, or even feature women as protagonists or otherwise central to a narrative. This underscores a related point that even with specific attention to contemporary films and filmmakers, watching women’s’ stories or narratives is often not part of ‘cinephilic pleasure.’ Given that historical accounts suggest that cinephilia was interrupted and castigated by *Screen* theory in the 1970s, which took away the pleasures of cinema because of its strong critique of the objectifying cinematic apparatus and Mulvey’s ideas about scopophilia, the male gaze, their voices in the discourses of cinema would have been welcomed here.

Less theoretical and more practice-based entries on cinephilia exist in the volumes, including the aforementioned epistolary exchange between five bloggers (Girish Shambu, Andy Horbal, Dan Sallitt, Zach Campbell, and Brian Tarr). They initially acknowledge a lack of diversity and the insular nature of cinephilic practices, but do not explore this further. Shambu ends his opening letter stating that, “it’s crucial to note that the five cinephile bloggers...are notable in many ways for their lack of

diversity...we cannot claim to be a representative demographic sampling of film blogging on the web” (2009, p. 57). Andy Horbal notes that “internet cinephile communities are often more insular than they look; the illusion of diversity prevents us from actively seeking new voices from other countries or cultures” (p. 59). While not addressing diversity, Zach Campbell’s closing letter discusses the freedoms of the independent blogger, using feminine pronouns, “who answers to no one but herself” (p. 64.). Diversification of viewpoints and actual participation in online film spaces and networks is referenced in only the most abstract ways. These areas are specifically highlighted to emphasize the missing or failed attention to women as cinephiles or in the key representations of cinephiles, a gap in the critical research I intend to address.

A comprehensive section in the 2009 edition of the journal *Framework* is devoted to cinephilia, and its editors, Jonathan Buchsbaum and Elena Garfinkel, pose the question that shapes the dossier: “What is Being Fought for by Today’s Cinephilia?” (2009, p.176). Contributors are not exclusively academics but writers who are “cinephiles who speak to a public of general film watchers,” and thus include film critics, bloggers, and programmers such as James Quandt, Jonathan Rosenbaum, and Chris Fujiwara, among others (p. 176). The question invites a series of personal and sometimes polemic views on cinephilia, highlighting definitions of what works and what does not in an era of changing technologies and unlimited and unbridled access to the tools of criticism. Girish Shambu (2009) whose work also appears in the Sperb and Balcerzak collection, argues that today’s “internet cinephilia is fighting to build bridges between zones previously kept apart” and argues that “the serious “amateur” cinephile, making her home on the internet, can form an important bridge—a sort of glue—between the professional critic



and the academic.” Shambu admits his view is a bit utopian in arguing for the possibility of “a large democratized, globally dispersed cinephile community” (p. 220).

Two articles in the *Framework* dossier that coalesce with my own arguments come from critics Adrian Martin and Laurent Jullier, and each has different goals. Martin (2009) argues that cinephilia is not solely the passive task of loving movies and making lists of them, but the active role of defending them, and arguing for their place and value. This also amounts to a passion for film that correlates to ideas of film activism, although Martin prefers the metaphor of “War Machine:”

Desiring engagement leads to acts—particularly of writing, speaking, programming, or curating...Acts that happen in public. Cinephilia is a *motivating*, and mobilising, passion. Cinephilia is always about *thought*, always about theory, always about criticism. If it’s not about those things, it’s just a load of nonsense about devising best-film lists and seeing six thousand movies...There is no essential form or content to cinephilia, but maybe there is something like an essential cinephile process or gesture. Cinephilia is a war machine, a tactical, cultural war machine. Always a different war, always a different machine, depending ...what you’re fighting against. (2009, p. 222)

Thus, a cinephile is always in a position of defense for the movies he or she loves (or does not love, for that matter), because this defines the essence of cinephilia. This definition complicates the love of cinema, accepting that it requires more than just passive adoration, but one that is educating and mobilizing.

It is French scholar Laurent Jullier (2009) who argues that we must acknowledge that cinephilia and its histories are essentially masculine, and that many of the ways of practicing and thinking about cinephilia have not changed: “there is still a cult of Great Men” (the ‘Auteurs’) esotericism, aestheticism, sexism, and a disgust for the taste of others” (p. 202). The practice of cinephilia may be more ‘democratic’ thanks to the internet, but cinephilia’s discourses remain somewhat narrow-minded. Jullier appears to be writing specifically about its current condition in France, however, and also laments

that “gender and cultural studies also offer excellent tools to study cinephilia (at least if one retains the ethnographic approach of the Birmingham School from which they derive), but France rejects them,” as Genevieve Sellier and Noel Burch lament (2009; p. 204).

Robert Koehler (2009) discusses the problematic nature of cinephilia and film festivals, suggesting that most (U.S.) film festivals don’t cater to cinephiles but instead are primarily markets. Koehler argues that Sundance is a horror show for cinema... which “rejects cinephilia with cool disinterest” since it is more enamored with celebrity than film culture, yet he likes Vancouver for its wide-ranging roster of entries from around the world (particularly those from Asia), and Telluride as their “efforts to present a wide range of archival discoveries must be regarded as an essential contribution to world cinema” (p. 84; 89). For Koehler, cinephilia should not be confused with the domain of commerce, which is problematic with many festivals as there exists a large contingent of industry executives as well as moviegoers more interested in celebrity sightings than the newest film by a favorite director.

Cinephilia has rarely been studied in relation to gender, as it has often been theorized in its relationship to the film object. Classic formalist, structuralist, and semiotic film theorists such as Roland Barthes, André Bazin, and Christian Metz have analyzed film’s unique form and linguistic qualities through phenomenology and a relationship to a universal viewer, but tend to avoid constructions of a gendered viewer. This absence is obviously first and foremost a theoretical and methodological one: film studies stakes its claim in the world inside of a film text, not outside of it. Women’s relationship to cinema and film culture has often been positioned and explored through

theories of spectatorship and the gaze (often informed by Freudian concepts), which focus primarily as women as voyeuristic victims and objects in cinematic representation, as well as the problems women encounter when viewing films that assume a male spectator and more generally the assumption of the audience's identification with dominant, patriarchal cinema.<sup>5</sup> While theories that relied heavily on psychoanalytic approaches dominated the pages of many film journals (such as *Screen*) in the 1970s, in the 1980s and beyond other theoretical frameworks, most notably those informed by cultural studies, have examined the audience and their responses— from discursive reception of films in reviews and star interviews and entertainment trade documents to ethnography. Many feminist film theories are useful for consideration of looking relations within a text, but they do not move beyond it to examine social, cultural, and practical concerns for the female viewer. Thus, for purposes here I focus primarily on perspectives derived from feminist cultural studies that acknowledge the ways women are marginalized in industrial and representation modes, and the overall struggle for power.

### **Feminist Film and Media Theories**

Psychoanalytic theory considered the unconscious ways in which the spectator is positioned in and through the film text. It was Mulvey's essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," first published in *Screen* in 1975, that brought forth a feminist view of the subject, and more than 40 years later, remains a touchstone for understanding the ideas of woman as "object," of a "male gaze"—not only in film studies but with wide applications for analysis in other areas of media culture such as television, advertising, video games and publishing. The pleasures of looking, deemed scopophilia, are built into

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<sup>5</sup> See Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975); E. Ann Kaplan, *Looking for the Other: Feminism, Film and the Imperial Gaze* (1997); Judith Mayne, *The Woman at the Keyhole: Feminism and Women's Cinema*, (1990).

and codified by dominant cinema, Mulvey argued, and those pleasures are gendered, since “pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female” (1975, p. 11). Women are relegated to sexual fantasy, trapped and subordinated by the gaze and the apparatus. The male hero actively advances a film narrative but the ‘woman-as-image’ disrupts narrative movements, “to freeze the flow of actions in moments of erotic contemplation” (1975, p. 11).

At the time, Mulvey’s essay represented a move forward for feminist film theory. As Maggie Humm (1997) argues, it was “a jump from the ungendered and formalistic analyses of semiotics to the understanding that film viewing always involves gendered identities” (p.17). Janet McCabe (2004) offers, “Her work helps us understand how dominant cinema constitutes the spectator as male and the phallocentrism of desire, in which male subjectivity is the only subject position made available” (p. 32). However, in the attention to these looking relations and patriarchal structure, I would argue, as McCabe does, that “in the process of structuring a language, the woman—as subject on screen, reader of film texts, consumer of cinema—appeared in danger of vanishing from view” (McCabe, p. 36). The problem with this theoretical position is that it only allows “woman” to be a victim or an object, but never to be a subject, with agency.

Feminist theorizing focuses on the ways “power in conjunction with gender organizes both the material and symbolic worlds” (2014; Harp & Loke, p. 291). According to feminist media scholars, media provide ideological support for hegemonic power structures, including patriarchal power structures. Feminist theorizing is usually considered a political project, as “feminism is committed to intervening and transforming these systems of power in terms of both media practices and content” (Harp & Loke, p.

292). Maggie Humm (1997) emphasizes the overall goals of feminist theory, without allegiance to any singular methodology:

Feminist theory has no party line but brings together many ways of looking, which in turn draw on different disciplines and debates. What brings feminist theorists together is a common belief that gender is constructed through the visual and that representations must thus articulate, consciously or unconsciously, gender constructions. (p. 197)

Gender is socially constructed, a notion introduced by Simone deBeauvoir that now has wide support in cultural and feminist studies.<sup>6</sup> Further, Humm argues that feminist (media) theorists are united in their examination of visual forms, “to open up visual culture to issues of power and sexual divisions” (p. 197).

Jackie Stacey (1994) makes a landmark contribution to the field of feminist reception studies in her book *Star Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship*, featuring an historical reception analysis of how female spectators understood Hollywood stars in the ‘40s and ‘50s. Her study challenges the aforementioned psychoanalytic theories of spectatorship, and calls for an inclusion of audience research by exploring ways in which women responded to seeing images of other women on screen. Stacey looks at how female spectators consumed identities and explore various discourses of spectatorship, escapism, and consumption. Stacey argues that discourses of consumption offered women the possibility of “the production of the self and of agency in the public sphere” (1994; p. 223). Annette Kuhn’s (2002) ethno-historical study of cinemagoers in ‘30s Britain, *Dreaming of Fred and Ginger*, also provides a useful look at the audience through interviews and reception analysis of key publications. Kuhn defends her methodological framework as compared to film studies, noting that, “To the extent that film studies privileges the film text, for example, it will downplay not only the reception

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<sup>6</sup> See deBeauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 1949; Lorber, *Paradoxes of Gender*, 1994.

of films by social audiences but also the social-historical milieu and industrial and institutional settings in which films are produced and consumed” (p. 4). Kuhn’s study emphasizes the need to examine the social and cultural conditions of reception, which is also key for my study of female film critics, not only for how women receive films but how women’s criticism is received by both audiences and the film industry.

Another key perspective that informs my work in this study is the guiding principles of Feminist Standpoint Theory, which argues that “The different social locations that women and men occupy cultivate distinct kinds of knowledge...To develop a feminist standpoint, individuals must engage in an intellectual struggle to recognize, analyze, and contest broad power relations that account for the subordinate status of girls and women and the activities they are expected to pursue” (Wood, 2012). Essentialism is not a determining factor for this feminist perspective; instead, it focuses on the social ideologies that shape the value of activities assigned to men and those assigned to women (Wood, 2012).

### **Convergence, Publics, and New Media Users**

A discussion of convergence, the activities of users and media publics must include the research and work Henry Jenkins. Convergence culture includes what Jenkins deems “participatory culture” (related to the DIY-notion of grassroots convergence) and in his book *Convergence Culture*, he offers a specific, detailed definition of “participatory culture and digital democracy,” but one that is constructed and *contingent* on several factors:

A participatory culture is a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one's creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices. A participatory culture is also one in

which members believe their contributions matter, and feel some degree of social connection with one another. (2006, p. 12)

Jenkins' definition seems idealistic rather than functional. It is quite elastic and leaves open variable conditions, which are hard to measure. How do we identify "low barriers"? If we consider a participatory culture most likely operating in an online space, how do we know that "support" and "mentorship" exist? Online spaces and communities often provide, but do not guarantee, "some degree of social connection." While Jenkins' book offers many case studies that support his view, I argue here that online spaces created both by institutions as well as fans and new media users, may also (intentionally) and unintentionally marginalize individuals who participate in unexpected ways. Feminist technology scholar Judy Wajcman (2004) writes, "Networks create not merely insiders, but also outsiders, the partially enrolled, and those who refuse to be enrolled" (p. 42). Nancy Baym (2010), a new media scholar who has conducted qualitative studies of soap opera fans in online communities, notes, "the mere existence of an interactive online forum is not community, and those who participate using one platform may comprise very different groups" (p. 74).

I note the ways online spaces and collective interaction might *not* promote community effectively, not only because I believe it is an understudied area of convergence, but because it serves as a useful backdrop to the work and writings of women film bloggers as they navigate internet film culture. Further, convergence plays a large role in understanding how internet cinephilia works; it allows us to see that while there is a discourse of democratic access, in which lies the possibility that everyone can be a critic, it not mean that everyone has an equal opportunity to be heard online. Although there now seems to be fewer barriers for women to engage in the critical

conversations that constitute cinephilia, convergence culture allows us to witness the disparities and differences in how women participate in film culture.

Henry Jenkins' *Convergence Culture* is primarily a study of male new media users. He explains in his introduction why this is relevant:

Most of the people depicted in this book are early adopters. In this country they are disproportionately white, male, middle class, and college educated...Our best window into convergence culture comes from looking at the experience of these early settlers and first inhabitants. These elite consumers exert a disproportionate influence on media culture in part because advertisers and media producers are so eager to attract and hold their attention. (2006, p. 23)

Jenkins admits the narrow parameters of his work, but sees it not as a limitation but as a strength—equating the white, middle class male as media's essential “target market” and therefore, worthy of his analysis. While subsequent chapters are interesting as examples and case studies of convergent fan practices and behaviors, Jenkins' focus on upper class white men limits the applicability of his study, providing little interest or focus on marginalized groups and cannot address the practices of at least 50% of the population.

Melissa Gregg and Catherine Driscoll (2011) write an article that specifically engages with Jenkins' book and its relationship (or lack thereof) to feminist cultural studies. They are disappointed in Jenkins book, noting, “The relative absence of gender in *Convergence Culture*— it seems almost incidental that the fanfic writers' names in his chapter on Harry Potter fanatics are all women—is additionally important because Jenkins' earlier work was actually integral in bringing fan fiction to wide attention” (p. 572). While Jenkins earlier books, including *Fans, Bloggers and Gamers* interrogated gendered aspects of fandom, *Convergence Culture* neglects gender:

By ignoring the structuring imperatives of labour and gender in the use of new media, *Convergence Culture* risks relegating ideological analysis to a distant past. But such work is solely needed when cultural, media and especially internet studies appear ready to serve as the prophets for new industries. (2006, p. 567)



In his efforts to celebrate the activated powers of the audience in participatory convergence culture, Jenkins in many ways neglects a more nuanced and critical approach to new media users and fans. Gregg and Driscoll argue “feminist interrogation of convergence culture must begin by asking which stories are told on which media platforms, and why” (p. 578). This perspective is crucial in the discourses and frameworks of new media, which often rely on utopian ideas of participatory culture to explain emerging technologies and their uses.

Media industries scholar P. David Marshall (2009) emphasizes that the internet is “not connected to a public but defines itself more centrally through a private experience” (p. 84). Further, Marshall argues that the internet produces a “user-subjectivity” that, “hails the individual to see themselves producing their cultural activity” (Marshall, p. 84). Marshall’s emphasis on the individual as user-subject connects to the very success of many new media entities from cell phone usage to blogging and online video games. These call for the importance of analyzing personal exploration and discovery, a dimension often lost in much of the convergence scholarship’s emphasis on collective intelligence, online community, and collaboration.<sup>7</sup> Thus, individual contributions have value whether they belong to a community, public, or network, but they might not necessarily be recognized. This framework allows us to envision the individual and personal contributions of bloggers and the value of their expressions, separate from and not contingent on their relationship to a network, public or community, which is often problematic for women. I would argue that this framework makes space for the reintegration of democratic ideals to discourses of participatory culture and DIY media

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<sup>7</sup> See Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture* (2006) and *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers* (2006).

frameworks, as it suggests that value exists even without membership in an online community or public.

Secondly, Marshall's view of convergence allows for the re-introduction of the ideas of discourse as they are intertwined with the concept of communication:

Perhaps the best way to express this new complexity is to understand the media industry as a convergence of media and communication, where the communicative dimensions of the media industry have invaded, informed and mutated the media elements...Media-communication convergence implies that the "product" or cultural artifact is less fixed and stable and is subject to its transformation through communication channels and discussions and through forms of expression by its users. (p. 88)

Marshall's way of viewing both communication and media can be applied to film criticism, which is no longer "fixed and stable," as it was often regarded when primarily existing in print media—it is now subject to transformation through *communication* via the interactive nature of blogging and social networking. Film criticism that appears in online forms such as blogs and any space that allows for commenting transforms criticism into discussion and debate. As with any discourse, this can result in harmonious dialogue (which would lead to an idea of community) or in argument and conflict.

### **Gender and Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC)**

Conflict as a result of gender difference is the object of study for Deborah Tannen and other scholars who have documented the differences in how men and women communicate in conversation, each with a different set of expectations and emphasis (Tannen, 1991; Herring 1996). Susan Herring (1996) has established that many of these same differences are replicated in online, computer-mediated-communication (CMC), based on her research of interaction in MUDs (multi-use discussions) and other forms of discussion boards. Herring finds, "women and men appeal to different—and partially incompatible—systems of values both as the rational foundation of their posting behavior

and in interpreting and evaluating the behavior of others online” (p. 116). Herring elaborates:

Not only do women and men use recognizably gendered posting styles, but they also appeal to different systems of values in rationalizing their posting behavior and in interpreting and judging the behavior of others. Women preferentially evoke an ethic of politeness and consideration for the wants of others, while men evoke an ethic of agonist debate and freedom from rules of imposition. (p.117)

While Herring’s research focuses primarily on interaction on discussion boards and chat rooms, it is clear that there are a series of assumptions and expectations that arise from communication patterns and how both men and women understand norms and “netiquette.” Melissa Gregg (2006) notes a similar problem occurring on her own blog, *Home Cooked Theory*. Bewildered by the predominance of responses from men instead of women to her blog posts, she asked her readers why this might be the case. One unidentified reader posted:

The “thrust and parry” approach that many bloggers adopt is, for me, exhausting and unproductive—unless you are training to be a professional debater. This will undoubtedly prove to be a controversial observation, but there seems to be a fair bit of bravado informing these textual responses. (as cited in Gregg, p. 157)

Thus women’s discursive experiences online are frequently characterized by conflict or marginalization. Herring and Stoerger’s (2013) overview of the research on gender and anonymity in Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) synthesizes these issues and highlights multiple studies, which reveal that women are less likely to participate in online discussion forums and “are more likely to be alienated, and “gender-based harassment and the contentious tone of many online forums have tended to discourage participation” (p.13). Herring also argues that “public CMC is often contentious, favoring assertive male over supportive female discourse styles” (p.13). They conclude that while the internet is no longer predominantly the space of the male elite, differences remain and

that “computer networks do not guarantee gender-free, equal opportunity interaction, any more than any previous communication technology has had that affect” (p.13). Despite the technological utopians who believe that “digital democracy” exists, discourse on the web will remain a space that women will have to carefully navigate to avoid conflict.

Gendered dimensions of communication conflict come into play, and further change how we understand and read film criticism in a now convergent space. Film criticism overall, no longer commands the same status, when anyone can challenge the authority of bloggers despite the experience and knowledge they exhibit on their sites. Women, often holding a marginalized position in relation to the public sphere, are more likely to have their authority, status, and knowledge questioned.

It is important to understand that weblogs, or blogs, play a central role in the dramatic shift in film culture and criticism. Therefore, it is essential to construct an overview of the social and cultural possibilities that blogs have opened up as they were introduced while understanding what this new mode of DIY discourse can sustain. Two early platforms for blogging were [livejournal.com](http://livejournal.com) and [blogger.com](http://blogger.com). These spaces attracted different groups and shaped what people understood as key primary interests of bloggers: keeping diaries and posting personal politics. Subsequently, these also shaped the gender politics of blogging. LiveJournal began in 1999 and by 2003 hosted one million accounts. ([livejournal.com](http://livejournal.com)) Blogs posted on LiveJournal were highly personal “journals” or diaries, and the site has privacy settings to limit who could see such posts. Most of the posters of the site at the time were teen girls and women, and thus LiveJournal was considered a feminized space, one in which private thoughts took center stage for public consumption (Gates-Markel, 2015).

In a content analysis of a random sampling of blogs, Herring, Kouper, Scheidt, and Wright (2004) note a number of striking differences between blogs written by men and those by women, especially in regards to circulation and discursive construction. Notably, filter blogs and “k-logs” (labeled by early blogger and software developer Dave Winer as knowledge or information based blogs) were more likely to receive media attention, as journalists find these more newsworthy, since their content is “information in the external world (events, technology developments, etc., i.e. hard news) rather than internal to the blogger (cf. human interest stories and ‘soft news’” (Herring, et al.). They also argue that,

an unintended effect of this practice, however, is to define blogging in terms of the behavior of the minority elite (educated, adult males) while overlooking the reality of the majority of blogs, and in the process, marginalizing the contributions of women and young people—and many men—to the weblog phenomenon.  
(2004)

Further, by privileging filter blogs and excluding personal journals, defining them as less important or simply “not weblogs—not only minimizes women’s and teens’ contributions to the evolution of blogging, but overlooks broader human motivations underlying the weblog phenomenon” (Herring, et al. 2004). While LiveJournal was mostly feminized and thus devalued, Blogger.com remained somewhat gender neutral, and thus more authoritative.

The 2000s marked the phenomenal rise of the lifestyle blog, always associated with women bloggers and with it the space for conference devoted to their practices. BlogHer was started in 2005 as a network specifically for women blogger and since 2009, it has paid out (through advertising revenues) \$36 million to more than 5,700 bloggers who agree to their guidelines. The bloggers who are part of this network

primarily write about the home, fashion, food, or family, and are not generally writing about politics, art and science, often associated with blogs penned by men.

In her research on self-identified women's blogs, scholar Lori Lopez (2009) contends that "mommy blogging is a radical act" because it offers women the potential to "build communities and challenge dominant representations of motherhood" (p. 30). While blogging plays a crucial role in allowing women to form and express identities and in turn, shape discourse, most of the output of said bloggers does not challenge such notions and is not radical. Mommy bloggers and the high profile conferences for women such as *blogher.com* often simply reinforce traditional gender norms, and relegate women to the "pink ghetto" of topics to write about such as food, family, and fashion. (Fry, 2012) Rosenberg (2009) notes that "references to women, whether as 'knitters' or 'mommy bloggers,' "typically show a condescending tone indicating that women's blogs do not have the gravitas of men's' blogs" (p. 263). In her study of lifestyle bloggers, Daniels (2009) concludes that blogging conferences reinforce hierarchies of gender and race, and the "commodification of women's blogging is also the commodification of feminism, as it takes women's emotional labor and the crypto-feminist impulse toward diary keeping, and uses it to sell back to women their own experience" (p. 53). Not surprisingly, even in professional fields where blogging has become popular, such as philosophy, law, and science, women are notoriously underrepresented; by one count only around 20 percent of science bloggers identify as women. (Taylor, 2014) These observations highlight how the assumptions about who and *how* people should belong to and participate in the public and private spheres are reproduced in online culture. Clearly hierarchies exist, which

value the work and public contributions of men, with their interests in the “external” while devaluing what is considered the private, inner contexts for women who blog.

But there are other constructions of blogs that suggest that women can and do have agency in the blogosphere. Gurak and Antonijevic (2008) discuss the ways in which blogs bridge the public and private, allowing not only for a written expression of personal identity but also as a mode of communication and a way to interact with an audience. Blogging thus is a twofold communicative event. On one hand, it is the event of “writing oneself” through continuous recording of past and present experiences, just as in the case of traditional diaries. On the other hand, blogging is the event of rewriting oneself through interaction with the audience. Unlike writing a traditional diary, blogging is a process of linking two or more individuals. (p. 65)

While personal narratives as diaries are devalued, they take on more meaning once they are considered sites for interaction and networking. As Coleman (2005) notes, blogs become “an ongoing experiment in the social production of reflection and knowledge” (p. 274). Blogs are not just for information but also for debate and deliberation and the performance and expression of personal identity in relation to the rest of the blogging world. (Bruns, 2006, p. 5)

Matthew Hindman, in his aptly titled book *The Myth of Digital Democracy* (2009), discusses much of the utopian discourse that exists, debunking the “myth” of the web as a democratic space, illustrating his points through case studies of political blogs. Hindman notes that equality does not exist in this space for a variety of reasons, and “because of the infrastructure of the internet, then, not all choices are equal. Some sites consistently rise to the top of Yahoo’s and Google’s search results; some sites never get

indexed at all” (p.13). Further, “Internet politics seem to nurture some democratic values at the expense of others...pluralism fails whenever vast swaths of the public are systematically unheard in civic debates. The mechanisms of exclusion may be different online...but they are no less effective” (Hindman, p.12; p. 19). Hindman makes a key distinction about users on the internet, noting, “who speaks and who gets heard are two separate questions” (p. 19). Filmmaker and media scholar Astra Taylor (2014) also argues that the internet is not the great equalizer, noting, “the internet does not close the distance between hits and flops, stars and the rest of us, but rather magnifies the gap, eroding the middle space between the very popular and the virtually unknown” (p.7). Anyone can build and blog and write posts daily, but if your posts do not attract a wide audience, it is no longer about the production of information, but how it is filtered (Hindman, p.13). This inequality shows up in Hindman’s case study and analysis of political blogs, which find that while a handful of them are widely popular, a close look at their networked capacities reveals that blogs written by women and people of color are few and far between, and none of them rank in the top ten in terms of traffic, according to a Hitwise survey. (Hindman, p. 105)

It has been argued that blogs (and social media) operate as part of a “networked public” (boyd 2011; Tryon 2009). boyd’s (2011) expansive definition is useful here:

Networked publics are publics that are restructured by networked technologies. As such, they are simultaneously 1) the space constructed through networked technologies and 2) the imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice. (p. 39)

This concept is integral to understanding film criticism in the convergent age, since it is in this space that film critics meet and interact with their audiences and further blur the lines of professional and amateur, journalist vs. academic, forever altering the definition



of what film criticism is. Convergence culture facilitates these distinctions which have are often problematic.

boyd (2010) is also interested in the social dimensions of identity formation, and the specifics of dealing with writing for “an invisible audience.” She documents how some people in certain professions (actors, journalists) have always had to contend with the invisible audience:

Some journalists perform for those who provide explicit feedback, intentionally avoiding thinking about those who are there but invisible. Performing for imagined or partial audience can help people handle the invisible nature of their audiences. These practices became a part of life in networked publics, as those who contributed tried to find a way to locate their acts. (p. 50)

Bloggers write for themselves but always for others, and continually shift and re-assess their audience. While some bloggers may adapt to learning about who reads their work through comments or web tracking demographics, others might disregard this information and continue to write exactly what they please.

Commenting—the interactive feature of blogs that transforms once static, fixed and stable media into something more volatile—is also not a neutral feature of the mythic democratic web. While some would argue that this dimension changes journalism “from a lecture to a conversation” (Rosen, 2009), others elaborate on the problems that commenting has created not only for blog writers but also for blog readers. Writing for the feminist pop culture publication *Bitch*, Laura Nathan (2008) examines the various pitfalls of commenting on blogs, noting the problematic aspects when control over the conversation is relinquished in the blogosphere. Nathan catalogs a series of issues, noting that commenters often want to provoke others, commenting gives hate speech free rein, and that it also often keeps interested parties from participating (p. 47-48). These categories point out how commenters can completely distract readers from the primary

conversations for which the blogger initially engages, spinning out of control for the blogger. Nathan considers that “the sheer aggressiveness of just a handful of statements, arguments, or flames posted by a small number of people makes many of us fret daily, if not hourly, about the state of feminism, the state of democracy, and the rise of technology” (p. 49).

### **Conclusion**

This overview of my secondary research examines the unique physical, industrial, and discursive spaces that shape the study of online film criticism. While technologies of the convergent era influence how cinephilia and film criticism is practiced and experienced, organizing how we watch, write, and discuss film, it also circulates new ideas and assumptions about audiences and critics and their role in that space, one often informed by hegemonic patriarchal ideals and gendered assumptions that have shaped previous modes of communication. Women writing film criticism in the convergent era are impacted by these realities as they write criticism and assert their voices in critical film culture.

## CHAPTER 3

### HISTORICAL OVERVIEW: A CULTURAL HISTORY OF FEMALE FILM CRITICS

A history of women as film critics and reviewers not only charts the changing value of women's writing and their place in journalism, but also provides a barometer that measures the shifting climate for women as moviegoers and their prominence on the screen. The purpose of my history of women's film criticism is not to create an exhaustive catalog of every woman who wrote about films in U.S. culture, but to understand the role these women played in public discourse and their relationship to the motion picture film industry and film audiences.

This history will document the observations and arguments these women made about films and film culture, while also looking at selected reception of these critics to understand how their ideas circulated and their impact. I have placed emphasis on writers and critics who were immersed in film culture, or wrote of their personal connection to cinema: women who might be considered cinephiles. For these women, writing about film was always more than a vocation—they were advocating for cinema, encouraging moviegoing, and placing emphasis on a more critical spectatorship. Despite a tendency for women to be considered averse to intellectualism, many of these women grappled with the now age-old debate of film as art and film as entertainment, examined high and lowbrow film tastes, and for some, stood up for particular genres previously greeted with derision. Some of these critics found their way into film criticism through their feminist impulses to point out problems in representation or to comment on film's relationship to the changing social climate around them. These women wrote books, screenplays, created film programs at museums, and found new ways to promote or engage with the medium.

The criticism and reception of Pauline Kael serves as a central case study for understanding how female critics have often been attacked based solely on their gender and how this shapes their writing style and engagement with the public sphere.

While I am concerned with how these critics respond to women both on and behind the screen, I am not seeking to categorize a history of solely “feminist” film critics, or those who only addressed gender politics or identity issues. Instead, this history looks closely at how these women crafted and maintained a distinctive voice in film culture and defended their positions as writers, as women, while defending cinema itself. In addition to locating their historical contexts and currencies, I argue for their position as the predecessors to today’s film bloggers, who also often retain a defensive position to their vocation, cultural authority, and cinephilia.

### **The Nickelodeon Years: The Cinema is for Women**

Female film critics in the early years of the motion picture in the United States were not writing in obscurity, as one might think. The early years of moving pictures, during the height of the nickelodeon’s popularity (roughly 1905-1915), marked filmgoing as a feminized activity, with audiences primarily comprised of women, and in turn, reviewing and criticism were professions open to and often occupied by women. Film reviews often appeared on the women’s page of a daily newspaper. The nickelodeon appealed to families, who were a large part of the audience. Abel (1999) provides an analysis of the reception of moviegoing in cities such as Chicago, Birmingham, and Indianapolis that identifies audiences as “school girls and young women” (p. 67).

Hansen (1991) argues that during the nickelodeon years, cinema was a safe space for women, and “a particularly female heterotopia.”<sup>8</sup>

The cinema was a place [that] women could frequent on their own, as independent customers, where they could experience forms of collectivity different from those centering on the family...the cinema catered to women as an audience, as the subject of collective reception and public interaction. It thus functioned as a particularly female heterotopia, because...it simultaneously represented, contested and inverted the gendered demarcations of the private and public spheres. The cinema provided for women, as it did for immigrants and recently urbanized working class of all sexes and ages, a space apart and a space in between. (p. 118)

Thus it can be argued that cinema was an exclusive, feminized space, and thus the presence of women film critics was naturalized. Movies were often made with a female audience in mind, in stark contrast to how movies are made in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The gender of a critic was rarely a subject of debate, although this could be argued that the cinema did not hold the cultural value and place in public consciousness as it would in later decades.

The role of the female film critic and writer has been well documented as crucial and making a vital contribution to how we understand the early years of film culture.<sup>9</sup> Central to this argument is the extensive research of Antonia Lant’s (2006) collection of 50 years of film writing by women, *The Red Velvet Seat*, which examines how women understood audiences, film as art, and reflected on the ways women and actresses were portrayed on screen. The volume anthologizes more than 160 pieces of critical writing from 1895-1950, all previously published material that can materially “make the case for the existence and substantial scale of public and professional reaction by women, even among women, to film” (Lant, p. 29). Additionally, Lant argues that while she does not

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<sup>8</sup> “Heterotopia” is a term popularized by theorist Michel Foucault to describe a space that functions outside of hegemonic conditions; in this context, parallel to public life.

<sup>9</sup> Lant’s comprehensive, landmark study noted here is central, but work by Haidee Wasson and Melanie Bell also argue for women’s role in early film culture.

hold an essentialist position on women's writing (unlike scholars such as Susan Gubar, Sandra Gilbert, and Helene Cixous)<sup>10</sup> her volume might provide a space in which to look for ways that the feminine experience of film might be different, stemming from a structurally different experience of work, public life, and an often "narrower means of access to culture, knowledge" (Lant, p. 12).

Lant and Haidee Wasson (2006) both argue that reading about cinema and consuming film magazines, newspapers articles, and reviews were *constitutive* of the moviegoing experience. Wasson notes,

If reading about movies became a basic condition for watching movies, then newspapers (and other textual forms like them) played a key role in forming expectations, framing debates, defining interests and augmenting experience before and after people attended movie theatres...popular film criticism constituted an important site for generating particular sensibilities about cinema. (2006; p. 156-157)

Thus film criticism was one of the integral parts of understanding film in these early years of cinema, fueling interest in films and the people who wrote about them.

### **Film Curator and Champion: Iris Barry**

Iris Barry (1895-1969) was a pioneer not only as a film critic but also as film curator, and overall champion of film as an art form. Her advocacy for film was illustrated through her work as founder of the London Film Society, as critic for *The Spectator* and *The Daily Mail* (both in the UK) and curator and founding member with John Abbott of the Film Department at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. (Sitton, 2014)

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<sup>10</sup> Gubar, Gilbert, and Cixous connect women's writing to the feminine and to the physical body; see *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (Gubar, Gilbert, 1979) and *The Laugh of the Medusa*, (Cixous, 1979).

In addition to writing for *The Spectator* and other outlets in the London popular press, Barry also wrote for intellectual, sophisticated journals, and made the argument that film should be taken seriously. (Sitton, 2014, p. 3) Robert Sitton (2014), in his biography of Barry, elaborates, “it became her responsibility to make the case that films—especially British films—were not to be taken as a mere amusement but instead bore marks of a new and influential art form” (p. 4).

Wasson (2006) argues that Barry’s persona might be best described as “opinionated, argumentative, sometimes populist, sometimes highbrow. Above all, she was firmly convinced that she was always right” (p. 159). Sitton (2014) argues that her book *Let’s Go to the Pictures* [the book’s British title] “succeeds most thoroughly as a report on the nature and rewards of filmgoing” (p. 131). In the early part of her book, Barry (1926) writes, “even in the crudest films something is provided for the imagination, and emotion is stirred by the simplest things—moonlight playing in a bare room, the flicker of a hand against a window” (p. vii-ix). Such highlights foretell a certain cinephilia and even the cinephiliac moment, long before such ideas had any currency. Paul Willemen (1993) describes the cinephiliac moment as, “always the fetish of a particular moment...isolating an expressive detail” (p. 227). He emphasizes the cinephiliac, not the cinephilic moment, and explains that the term includes “overtones of necrophilia—something that is dead, but alive in memory” (p. 227). While this conceptual framework projects a nostalgic response on the viewer, the ways in which he describes the moment itself correspond to what Barry seems to highlight and experience: “One way of accounting for the cinephiliac description would be to say that it has to be an aspect of cinema that is not strictly programmable in terms of aesthetic strategies...it

is something that is not choreographed for you to see” (p. 237). Barry observes and notes her key response to aspects of the film that may or may not have been crafted with the intention for a specific sentimental or aesthetic response.

Barry also wanted to encourage moviegoing and hoped audiences would derive pleasure from this practice. As she wrote, she often envisioned women filmgoers and projected their experience. Barry thought that for women, the experience of ordinary life was limited and boring. The cinema, on the other hand, “is something, whereas making the beds and shopping or taking shorthand, or covering jam-pots is, by repetition, less than nothing. So there the girl sits in the cinema and feels that life after all is not so dreary: even if nothing happens to her, it happens to other people” (p. 8-9). Thus the cinema attracted women as both a means of escape but also as an aspirational vision of what life could be.

*Let's Go the Movies* is a collection of longer, critical reflections of the audience, film as art, stars, and genres. It expands on many of the ideas and theoretical points she addressed, in shorter form, in her criticism in *The Spectator*. (Sitton, p. 131) Although Vachel Lindsay's book *The Art of the Moving Picture* (1915) is considered one of the first books to make the case for cinema as art, Barry's 1926 book was not far behind. While Lindsay analyzed genres and ultimately argued that film was an art form derivative of other arts, Barry considered it a new art of the twentieth century (Sitton, 2014). In her chapter “The Public's Pleasure,” Barry presents a detailed argument against the “marriage plot” in so many American films, arguing that it is a distinctly American concept, while detailing all the films from France and Germany that manage to successfully avoid it as a central theme. Barry argues that,



Really, it is not the whole function of woman to get herself married, nor her sole possible interest, but no doubt because it is the only thing most women do bring off successfully, the only thing they realize they want, this business of love (leading to marriage, of course) is the one preponderating subject of the movies. (1926; p. 61)

Barry cannot fathom why there was so much attention paid to marriage in the American cinema. In an attempt to decipher it, she rhetorically asks, but isn't that what the public wants? Barry's answer to this question is twofold:

Well to begin with, I am not at all convinced that the public as a whole do want love stuff and love stuff only. I think the love stuff is overdone. It's at such a pass now that you can't have a woman nestle in any man's arms without the collective audience reaching for its hat under the impression that the finale is due...If one out of ten of all the women who go to the movies here and in America would write a nice little letter to the manager of their pet cinema and tell him they're tired of just nothing but unreal love-stuff, they'd get something else. They certainly would. (p. 64; 66)

At this point in her career, Barry had been watching and reviewing films for more than a decade. Her exhaustion with this particular narrative device (which she argued was not limited to one particular drama) is clearly articulated. Further, she suggests that this tiring trope is not just something she has observed, but something that the audience also experiences, and just begs for something new. Barry's prescription for an alternative to the unending use of the marriage plot suggests:

Also the cinema must develop or die, and it is remarkable that all the best films are the ones with little or no conventional sentiment in them. The best that the enlightened public can do is to boost the non-sentimental, the experimental films, the ones that cause new blood to come into the unwieldy carcass [sic] of cinematography. The cinema runs after the public: it does not spring from the public. (1926, p.68-69)

Barry was a critic who did not adhere to one particular school of film criticism; indeed, during her years as a critic there was no school to emulate. She did take a sociological standpoint on film, noting it as a reflection of the era in which it was produced. Her contribution to criticism and film study is how she promoted its value as

an art not only through her writing but also through her curatorial work. Barry encouraged audiences, especially addressing women, to take a more critical look at the cinema that seemed to be meant to please them, but often did not.

### **Deming: Curating the '40s**

Moving forward to the '40s, we find Barbara Deming, who had a less traditional career as a film critic. Deming was known as a poet, author, and activist. In the late 1930s, she wrote essays about plays and the theater, and wrote poetry throughout her life. Deming's interest in theater was augmented by an interest in film after she took employment at the Museum of Modern Art in 1942, doing work in conjunction with the New York City Library of Congress film project (1942-1945). In 1945, Deming started a freelance writing career, submitting poetry and film reviews for publications such as *Chimera*, *Wake*, *Vogue*, *Partisan Review*, *The New Yorker*, *City Lights*, and the *Paris Review*. (Meyerding, 1984; p. 3)

Deming's notable contribution to film criticism is the collection *Running Away from Myself: A Dream Portrait of America Drawn from the Films of the Forties*, inspired by her screenings while she worked for the Library of Congress. The book was complete in 1950, but did not find its way to publication until 1969. The focus of Deming's book is sociological study, avoiding auteurism and staying away from nostalgic commentary about stars and their glamour in favor of analyses that reveal how films of the '40s reflected anxieties of the time, for both men and women. Lant (2006) argues that in the second half of the 1940s, many female film critics, (including Deming), "were increasingly discontented with Hollywood's treatment of women, both on screen and in terms of how it made film appealing to women, some argued that the event of the war had

thrown into intolerably stark relief discrepancies between the lives of actual women, and what the screen offered them” (p. 31).

Deming’s film criticism is informed by two different impulses. First, she was motivated by the archival impulse as influenced by her position as film analyst, not simply a job for her but a way to make meaning and practice the art of curation. This work was done through the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) and beginning in 1942, Deming, along with Norbert Lusk, Philip Hartung, Liane Richter, and Barbara Symmes, screened 1400 motion pictures to be selected for inclusion in a national collection. (Jones, p. 45) Deming explained the group’s methodology in an article published in 1944, and Jones cites that “the general principle guiding the selection process was to “serve the student of history rather than the film scholar” (Jones, p. 45). Deming’s efforts to create an archive not only of films but to document American social and cultural anxieties come at a time long before the development of advanced, archival media storage technologies and thus she could not see how the physical results of her work, in part, operated as a form of institutional or public memory of the films of the war-time era, as she explains in *Running Away from Myself*:

In writing this book, I felt that I should provide the reader with some sort of substitute for the text to which he cannot return—should try my best to evoke it for him, so that he could judge for himself whether or not the pattern I trace is there in fact. (Deming, 1969, p. 6)

Secondly, Deming’s goal in her criticism was to speak of films not based on stars, or an oeuvre of films by particular auteurs, but collectively, of an era. In Deming’s piece for a 1946 issue of *Vogue*, “Love Through a Film,” she explains:

Because Hollywood films are so innocuous on the face of them, the deeper story they tell is carefully veiled (and it may be veiled even from those who make them) [and thus] the study of isolated films is unrewarding. But if many films, the good and the bad, are studied together, an underlying pattern begins to clear,

exposing the prevailing deep-felt but unanalyzed sense of the nature of love in these times. (as cited in Lant, p. 467)

Deming's criticism highlights how a series of films construct heroines who actively pursue men instead of passively waiting around for them, while the men find a variety of excuses and reasons why marriage is not for them. Deming (1946) is critical of the marriage pursuit itself, and the ways that film narratives suggest men seek to avoid it:

In some of the films the hero offers a very literal reason why he cannot "wish himself off on" the heroine. He is an alcoholic (*Lost Weekend*); he is an amnesiac, and fears he is a murderer (*Spellbound*); he has been blinded in the war (*Pride of the Marines*); he is afraid if he marries the heroine he will shatter the "serenity" of her amnesiac state (*Love Letters*). Looking at them collectively (and I have not exhausted the examples), the wonder is what makes Hollywood so unfailingly, at the moment, document just those situations in which the hero will feel incapable of marriage. (as cited in Lant, p. 468)

Deming's writing can be seen as a cultural and sociological approach to Hollywood films that critiqued the representation of institutions (marriage, war) while offering that these representations must be preserved as well, not only through actual preservation, but through the act of criticism. Deming's contributions allow us to see patterns in these films of the '40s in terms of gender representations and overall anxieties that were projected through them. Her work sets the stage for the more comprehensive analysis of '40s films that is central to Molly Haskell's work in the '70s. Deming's writing and attitudes toward film and history echo my own suggestions that film criticism and its social context must be construed as part of film history itself.

### **Molly Haskell, Marjorie Rosen, and the "Images of Women" debates**

Deming's attention to gender roles and what she saw as an unnecessary fixation on marriage instead of other concerns would be continued in many ways through the work of Molly Haskell. Haskell's work defined popular feminist film criticism alongside

the work of Marjorie Rosen, and both focuses on the role of “images of women” in films of various eras. Known for her critically acclaimed 1974 book *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in Movies*, Haskell began her writing career as a theater critic at the *Village Voice* where she later became a film critic alongside future husband and fellow film critic Andrew Sarris, who is widely known for popularizing and promoting the auteur theory in the United States. Haskell enjoyed the freedom she had to write about the art form with minimal editing and structure. As she became more interested in feminism and the women’s movement, Haskell wondered why women, who were making strides in so many other areas socially and professionally, had disappeared from the movies. (as cited in Crowds & Wallace, 1981, p. 3.) Haskell went on to write for a series of other publications, such as *New York*, *Vogue*, *Film Comment*, and another book that explores women’s representation in film, titled  *Holding My Own in No Man's Land: Women and Men and Films and Feminists* in 1997.

For Haskell, feminism is a key part of her identity, and in her writing she admits a responsibility to illuminate the many injustices that she saw in film. Haskell (1997) writes of her connection:

The feminist perspective, is something I can’t deny; it’s something that’s part of me and that I feel very deeply...I’m disappointed that more women have not taken up the cudgel, because I do think it’s something that women have to do. If women don’t perceive these injustices, or fight for their independence, no one is going to do it for them. (p. 4)

Haskell admitted to the consequences of film feminism in her time, suggesting that, “engaging with film on a feminist basis left me in a friendless place...I couldn’t help responding in an unusually intense way to the man-woman relationship and its meaning for both sexes” (1997, p. 6).

Yet Haskell understood that criticism needed to be holistic, and points out the possible problems with a viewpoint that might be considered ideological. In the Preface to the second edition of her book, *From Reverence to Rape*, she discusses the problems of being a film critic, and a feminist: “The danger in any kind of movement or ideology is that it ceases to consider formal and aesthetic questions and concentrates on political ones. I’ve never wanted to over-politicize the situation” (p. ix). Yet at the same time, Haskell also argues that any art form that neglects the female point of view is fair game for *criticism* of such a deficiency. Thus for Haskell, responsible criticism needs to convey the value of aesthetic choices but also cultural ones.

In her work, Haskell was not interested in academic feminist theory and she was turned off by the feminist structuralists (her reference to those critics that emerged from *Screen* theory, among others), who she argued were so removed from the film viewing experience as to be both elitist and irrelevant. Haskell (1981) noted, “I don’t think most of those articles really lead anywhere...you wonder what the filmic fruits of all those theoretical pieces are going to be” (as cited in Crowdus, 1981, p. 4). This commentary is somewhat ironic, as Haskell has been criticized for perpetuating the textual analysis approach in her work and not paying attention to the women in the audience. (Stacey, 1994; p.10)

Still, Haskell’s approach was highly influential and her work has wide circulation, often cited by other mainstream film critics and making its way into film studies and women’s’ studies classrooms. Haskell argues that “film is a rich field for the mining of stereotypes...if we see stereotypes in film, it is because stereotypes existed in society” (p. 30). She also argues that women are “the vehicle of men’s fantasies” and “the scapegoat

of men's fears" (1987, p. 39-40). However, *From Reverence to Rape's* key premise was that as the decades rolled by, the image of women on screen had deteriorated. In retrospect, Haskell noted that she wanted to show that women were better served by the studio system than they were in Hollywood of today (writing in the '90s). She suggests the "female stars of the thirties and the forties radiated an enormous sense of authority and had the salaries to back it up" (Haskell, 1997, p. 5). Her defense of the "woman's film" is a central part of the book, and remains a genre that many other film critics even today continue to praise, defend, redefine and for many, introduce for a new generation of audiences.<sup>11</sup>

Haskell's book appeared at the same time as Marjorie Rosen's *Popcorn Venus* (1973), and together these two books became the center of the aforementioned "Images of Women" debate, which borrowed much from Betty Friedan and second-wave feminism. (Hollows, 2000) While Haskell focused on woman as text and her exploration of how these representations reflected society, Rosen had similar arguments, noting, "The cinema woman in a *Popcorn Venus*, a delectable but insubstantial hybrid of cultural distortions" (1973, p. 13). Rosen's history focuses on female stars and argues that they embodied stereotypes, mythical patriarchal fantasies of how men think women should be, and thus as Janet McCabe (2012) argues, they "afford female audiences little chance for authentic recognition" (p. 8). Rosen's book is also presented chronologically, starting with the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and reviewing each decade through the sixties and part of the seventies. Rosen tackles her subject with a broad historical and sociological perspective,

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<sup>11</sup>Farran Smith Nehme is one of these critics, and there are many female bloggers at TCM's companion blog, *Movie Morlocks*, such as Susan Doll and Moira Finnie.

often going back and forth from the screen to the social culture of the time, reinforcing her reflectionist approach. Rosen (1973) notes,

Does art reflect life? In movies, yes. Because more than any other art form, films have been a mirror held up to society's porous face. They therefore reflect the changing societal image of women—which until recently, has not been taken seriously enough. (p.13)

While this allows Rosen to chart changes historically, it also limits the usefulness of her critique. Janet Sternburg (1974) argues that Rosen “falls into the trap of all sociological criticism; concerned with the audience, she slights the movies” (p. 54). Rosen cites many films but does not consider the connections between narrative and aesthetics and is often quick to point out plots and the stereotypes in certain films, and these are attributed not to the director or creative personnel who put together a film but often connected to being a product of Hollywood's limited arsenal.

Both Rosen and Haskell were later criticized for their heterosexism. Patrice Petro (1994) finds that Rosen romanticized the on-screen relationship of Katherine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy, while Haskell problematically reduced “the history of women and film to the (failed) history of heterosexual romance in contemporary American cinema and culture” (Petro, 1994, p. 70). Second-wave feminism advocated for more “real and positive” images of women, yet for feminist film scholars, it was not always clear exactly what those might be. Hollows (2000) notes, “The argument for images that are more ‘positive or real’ always depends on value judgments about what is more ‘positive and real.’ Their argument also rests on a problematic notion of media effects: Haskell and Rosen assumed that a film's ‘message’ would be unproblematically transmitted to a passive audience” (p. 42). Despite the reception by feminists and feminist film scholars who pointed out the weaknesses in the ways that both Haskell and Rosen wrote about



women's representation in film, these books were important for starting the critical conversation about women onscreen, and contributed, if not solely constituted, the first "stage of feminist film criticism" (Mayne, p. 84).

### **Pauline Kael, Penelope Gilliatt, and Cultural Authority at the *New Yorker***

In 1968, the *New Yorker* was home to many women's voices in its pages that figured prominently as critics or staff writers. Their ranks included not only Pauline Kael and Penelope Gilliatt, but by 1973, the women on the roster included dance critic Arlene Croce (whose "acerbic wit" has been compared to Kael's) prolific book critic Naomi Bliven, and the Washington political reporter Elizabeth Drew. Pauline Kael and Penelope Gilliatt wrote film criticism at the *New Yorker* in an era that defined film history but also defined the direction of film criticism. Beginning in 1968 and for the next 11 years, Kael worked from September to March, while Gilliatt wrote for the rest of the year at the *New Yorker*. While Kael is probably one of the most famous of all American film critics, Gilliatt is less well-known but deserves recognition for her work, which complemented Kael's in many ways.

The *New Yorker* allowed and encouraged both women to write at length and which supported each of them despite controversy sparked by their writings. Kael and Gilliatt, while very different in their approaches to both writing and asserting their positions, crafted their identity as female film critics and cultivated authority not only through their respective criticism but how they responded to those who would interrogate and challenge them. In other words, both Kael and to a lesser extent Gilliatt often used such controversy and discursive conflict in a productive way in order to assert and articulate an identity as female film critics, reacting critically to gender stereotyping as

well as sexism in an era in which intellectualism and cultural consecration were dominated by mostly male auteur critics. A reading of the reception of these written antagonisms provide the space to show how many of these attacks display gender stereotyping, and how Gilliatt and Kael defended themselves, often in a feminist manner. Kael, and to some extent Gilliatt, refused to adopt the prevailing discourse of both film criticism and literary intellectualism to which so many of their peers subscribed.

In the 1960s, American film criticism was at a crucial turning point, a time when mainstream audiences as well as academics were shifting their attitudes about the quality and value of film. During this period, film became a legitimate subject for academic study at American colleges and universities; auteurism as originally defined by the *Cahiers du Cinema* writers had found new interpretations in the United States via Andrew Sarris (in 1962) and many other critics; and Hollywood films were undergoing a “Renaissance.”

In this climate, film and film criticism were taken seriously by the editorial staff at the *New Yorker* upon Kael’s arrival in 1968, after her piece on *Bonnie and Clyde* thoroughly impressed editor William Shawn. Phillip French (1996) notes that until Gilliatt and Kael joined the *New Yorker*, the magazine had taken a flip, dismissive approach to film in its critical columns and this brand of “light, above-it-all dismissals” can be traced back to the “brittle wit” of Dorothy Parker as opposed to the critical lineage of James Agee (Kellow, 2012).

During this time, other publications such as *The New Republic*, *The Nation* and *The New York Times* paid more attention to the artistic merits of film and their connection to filmmakers. Film critics chose a variety of writing techniques and styles in order to

validate not only the seriousness of film but the seriousness of their writing devoted to the medium, but the tendency was to remain with auteurist approaches, which, according to Allen and Lincoln (2004) and their empirical study of American film and status-making, presented an opportunity to accrue cultural capital:

Much of their cultural authority derives from their ability to frame their aesthetic judgments about films and directors within the context of an established cultural schema...auteur theory, as a cultural schema, encourages film critics and scholars as reputational entrepreneurs, to frame their discourse about a film in terms of the contributions of its director. (p. 878)

Both Kael and Gilliat managed to cultivate authority without relying on any sort of 'schema.' Kael understood that auteurism sought not only to raise the status of directors, but in the process promoted those who wrote and embraced auteur criticism. In many ways, this meant that men writing criticism would praise and promote men making films—and perhaps ignore the women who were involved in either or both—a process that replicates the marginalization of women in film culture as well as in public life.

Kael has been a favorite subject for film historians as well as for biographers and other film critics, but my reception analysis calls for a review of how others understood and wrote about her writing style. Kael's writing style was bold and loud, and while this was her greatest asset as she viewed it, she also saw it as her "worst flaw as a writer... the reckless excess in both praise and damnation" (as cited in Seligman, 2004; p. 33). Craig Seligman, in his 2004 book *Opposites Attract Me*, describes Kael's direct and often explosive style, noting that if you "open a book of Kael's to any page, the verbs jump out at you. She isn't trying on arguments; she's hurling them" (p. 34). In this way, criticism was a full contact sport, and critic Manohla Dargis (2011) notes she "will not lead you to correct positions, but she is an example of the right way to do criticism, which is with

everything you have” (Dargis, p.1). Kael operated as more than merely a movie reviewer; she distinguished herself as a cultural critic who possessed the authority to shape cultural standards. (Haberski, p.137). “With her wise-cracking and ballsy tone, she even gave some readers a new idea of what a woman writer could sound like” (Schwartz 2012; p. xxi).

Kael’s resistance to theory and formula is well known through her high-profile argument with Andrew Sarris (in “Circles and Squares”) as well as others regarding auteur criticism. While many would find it problematic that her writing was deemed impressionistic, often attributed to her “occasional whimsical tastes” (Heller, 2011), its foundations were rooted in her intellectualism, comprehensive knowledge of film history, and her obvious (though she would never use the word) cinephilia. Writing in 1983, Ray Carney points out, “there is more relevant film history and scholarship in three or four of her flashy references than in a dozen film journal footnotes” (p. 100). Kael was an intellectual (albeit without the same upper-class background of contemporaries Joan Didion and Susan Sontag, for example) but did not expect her audience to be, and did not write specifically for sophisticated audiences. In a 2000 interview, she claims she never aimed (her criticism) at a particular audience, and wrote the same way for the women’s magazine *McCall’s* as she did for the prestigious *New Yorker*. She was initially skeptical of the highbrow character of the *New Yorker* with its “swank look” and “silky texture,” but eventually talked herself into the writing opportunity (cited in Quart, 2000).

Kael approached film criticism in ways that were often diametrically opposed in style to her critical peers, and her ability to break the rules became the reason *why* she commanded authority with readers while invoking the ire of her detractors. These

controversies have been well documented, but here I highlight what key written exchanges and critical reception (which often appeared in film journals or other publications) revealed about the nature and level of authority that she exerted.

Just from its title, Kael's 'Trash, Art, and the Movies' suggests an essay that will be gleefully filled with derision for every type of film Hollywood can produce. However, while Kael's essay flings criticisms at movies that take themselves too seriously as art (in particular, she points to Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), as well as Norman Jewison's *The Thomas Crown Affair* (1968), her essay is surprisingly generous as she points out dozens of instances of pleasure, joy, and delight in films considered trash as well as films considered art—and often these movies fall into the same category.

Yet Kael, while not subscribing to anyone else's definitions of high and low culture, art and trash, argues that we shouldn't take this kind of sorting system seriously, that is not where we should find value in a movie, or in the act of watching a movie. The value of a film can be determined by its enjoyment. She notes that all art is entertainment, but not all entertainment is art, and "it might be a good idea to keep in mind also that if a movie is said to be a work of art and you don't enjoy it, the fault may be in you, but it's probably in the movie" (as cited in Schwartz, p. 217). Kael argued that,

Simply to be enjoyable, movies don't need a very high level of craftsmanship; wit, imagination, fresh subject matter, skillful performers, a good idea—either alone or in any combination—can more than compensate for lack of technical knowledge or a big budget. (p. 207)

By pointing out a series of pleasures in films, noted in dialogue or gestures that may seem trivial to some but not to Kael, and this corresponds to what Willemen has called the "cinephiliac moment." Christian Keathley (2006) builds on Willemen's concept and says "ultimately, it is less the quality or nature of image that is excessive than the cinephile's

response to it” (p. 32). Thus the affective response can be construed from a variety of moments or aspects of the film, and it is the responsibility of the cinephile to construct it.

Critics, film scholars, and journalists cannot agree on what Kael stood for. Perhaps this is based on her idiosyncratic style and unpredictable reactions to movies and popular culture. Many critics see her as “anti-feminist” or at least, anti-dogma, eschewing religion, feminism, or any other set of ideologies. (see Adler, 1980). However, while she would not be described as a feminist critic in the same way that Molly Haskell and Marjorie Rosen aligned themselves with this perspective, as she had many other cultural and aesthetic priorities in her writing, she still addressed the treatment of women in film, and a woman’s perspective. In an interview after Kael retired, Ray Sawhill asked her how things might have been different in her career if she had been “Paul Kael.” She answered: “I don’t know who can say, because I very specifically took a woman’s point of view” (as cited in Seligman, p. 71).

Prior to her *New Yorker* work and amidst her controversy with Andrew Sarris, Kael wrote a piece in *Film Quarterly* in 1963 called *Criticism and Kids’ Games*. Here, Kael suggests, “I suppose that any woman who writes is in that act asserting the rights of women, and in that sense, I am happy to be called a feminist” (p. 62). This may be the only time that Kael identifies and connects to this perspective. For context, Kael was reacting to the editors of British film magazine *Movie* who seemed dismissive and misinformed when they wrote, in a response to Kael, “There are, alas, no female critics.” Kael reacted negatively, for not only did it “ignore fellow female critic contemporaries such as Dilys Powell, Penelope Gilliatt, Penelope Houston, and Arlene Croce,” precisely because they were not “auteurist critics,” she was also offended by the flippant tone of

the editors and claimed: “why the offensive, hypocritical little ‘alas’—as if the editors of *Movie* regretted that women were not intellectually strong enough to support the rigors of their kind of criticism” (Kael, 1963; p. 62). Kael fought for credibility and legitimacy in ways that were different than her male counterparts.

Craig Seligman (2004) calls Kael a “protofeminist,” arguing that she had progressive ideas about women’s roles and equality long before the feminist movement was in full force during the late ‘60s. (p. 69) Seligman also cites Kael’s dismay and gripe about “how difficult it is for a woman...in what “turns out to be a new Victorian [age] again in its attitude to women who do anything, to show any intelligence without being accused of unnatural aggressivity, hateful vindictiveness or lesbianism” (as cited in Seligman, p. 70). She was a feminist without embracing the word or any of its associated waves. Kael kept her distance from the woman’s movement, and refused to align herself with feminist dogma. She warned fellow film critic Carrie Rickey not to engage in feminist rhetoric in her reviews, because “it’s going to kill your career.” (as cited in Kellow, p. 239).<sup>12</sup> Yet feminism was something she clearly embodied. She criticized the images of women in coffee table volumes on sex in the cinema, arguing that,

This female image is a parody of woman...lascivious face, wet open mouth, gigantic drooping breasts...these images reduce women to the lowest animal level... in the modern world, where women are competent, independent, and free and equal, the men have a hostility—they want to see women degraded. (as cited in Seligman, p.71)

These comments were written in 1961—before feminism was a defined political and unified movement. Her film reviews often revealed and reflected her disdain for misogyny on the screen. In a review of the thriller *Fatal Attraction* (Lyne, 1987) Kael

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<sup>12</sup> This is advice which Rickey did not heed, as I will argue in another chapter which includes my own interview with Rickey.

understands Lyne's generic form and the conventions he uses in manifesting Glenn Close's character ("a femme fatale...from hell") or the "dreaded lunatic of horror movies" yet calls out the gender specific nature of this,

The horror subtext is the lawyer's developing dread of the crazy feminist who attacks his masculine role as protector of his property and his family. It's about men seeing feminists as witches, and, the way the facts are presented here, the woman is a witch...This shrewd film also touches on something deeper than men's fear of feminism...their fear of women, their fear of women's emotions, of women's hanging on to them. Ultimately, this is a hostile version of feminism. (1987, p.106)

While it is true that Kael championed some directors and this can be construed as her own brand of auteurist criticism, she refused to subscribe to anyone else's ideas for why she held them in high regard. Kael saw auteurism as a brand of criticism culturally skewed to favor men. She did not believe that film culture needed yet another mechanism that allows for patriarchal discourse to dominate. Kael complained that Sarris had abdicated his key role as a critic in favor of following a formula:

It takes extraordinary intelligence and discrimination and taste to use any theory in the arts, and that without those qualities, a theory becomes a rigid formula (which is indeed what is happening among auteur critics) ...Criticism is an art, not a science, and a critic who follows rules will fail in one of his most important functions: perceiving what is original and important in new work and helping others to see. (1963, p. 14)

Kael fought for critical legitimacy using a different strategy than her peers—she bent the rules instead of following them. Raymond Haberski Jr. (2001) elaborates on this problem:

By subscribing to a great man approach to filmmaking, auteur critics had not only raised trash ("trash" being one of Kael's favorite descriptive terms) to the level of art, but they did so with a strange male chauvinism. By championing directors at the expense of producers and screenwriters, and perhaps most importantly, actors, the auteur critics had shunned many women who exercised considerable influence over the movies. (p. 130)

Kael wished to distance herself from a practice that elevated men in their work in the industry.



Kael's writing defied classification and systematization, and other critics were dismissive of her writing and her refusal to be predictable. A.O. Scott notes that she never expounded "a theory, a system, or even a consistent set of principles" (Oct. 16, 2011). Edward Murray (1975) also sees no theory in her work, which he found problematic; he prescribes how she could "become" a great critic: "If she would discipline her thinking, take more care in her research, show more love for art than trash, and devote as much attention to form as to content—then she might truly become... the best film critic now practicing in America" (p. 140).

Kael's refusal to embrace theory or formula also led to accusations that Kael, as James Wolcott (2012) recounts, was "being more impressionist and free associative than being rational-analytical—an accusation laced with a sexism which she was wearily familiar, the implicit and sometimes explicit assumption that a woman critic was more at the mercy of her hormones, mood fluctuations" as compared to the "*New Republic's* Stanley Kauffman or a sprightly carnation such as Vincent Canby of the *New York Times*" (Wolcott, p. 67). She called out gender disparities not only in filmmaking but within film criticism.

Kael's approach offended some not for her strong opinions but for her use of language and choice of words that could also be deemed "masculine." Once again, Kael is compared to other critics and their expectations and here the gender stereotyping reveals animosity and conflict. One such written disturbance is Renata Adler's now famous proclamation that Kael's collection of film reviews, *When the Lights Go Down*, was "piece by piece, line by line, and without interruption, worthless" (Aug. 14, 1980). For Adler, Kael is both worthless yet important and powerful enough that she devotes

more than 7,000 words to craft a detailed attack on the critic. Interestingly, Adler (1980) specifically fires at Kael for using language that is vivid and active, language she finds aggressive, masculine, and even violent. Adler writes, “the degree of physical sadism in Ms. Kael’s work is, so far as I know, unique in expository prose” (1980). Much of Adler’s essay is devoted to cataloging all the ways that Kael fails the reader, citing words and phrases in detail, even counting the number of instances in which Kael might use a particular turn of phrase. She derides Kael’s use of rhetorical devices: “the mock rhetorical questions are rarely saying anything; they are simply doing something. Bullying, presuming, insulting, frightening, enlisting, intruding, dunning, rallying” (1980). These criticisms seem odd since Kael is using active language as opposed to a passive voice, which is often associated with women’s writing.

Despite her intellectual status as a well-regarded critic for *The New Yorker*, a National Book Award winner, and the author of multiple collections of her work, Kael was often under fire for her physical appearance, and these remarks cropped up in a multitude of reviews, interviews, and anecdotal exchanges. Perhaps because of Kael’s prominence for many years in intellectual circles, there was little of this same brand of misogyny to be found directed at the other critics in my historical study.

In a book review of the anthology assembled by Sanford Schwartz, *The Age of Movies: The Selected Writings of Pauline Kael*, Erich Kuersten (2011), in an introductory anecdote, describes her photos on previous collections as those “heavy paperback reprints with her strange hawk-like visage on them” (Nov. 24, 2011). He continues to praise her work and celebrate her eclectic style, seemingly unaware of his misogynistic and irrelevant assessment of her looks. David Thomson, (2004) a film critic based in the UK,

writes a review of Seligman's book for *The Atlantic*, and comments on the visual appeal of both Kael and Sontag: Kael was "small and never threatened beauty," and Sontag "still gives terrific head shot" (2004). And Alan Vannerman (2004) a critic for the online film journal *Bright Lights Film Journal*, begins a review of a collected volume of Kael's criticism by saying, "she was a midget...life is tough for a midget...she was the little critic that could—sort of" and spends several paragraphs finding new ways to pull her apart, calling her a "schoolgirl" whose writing was "subject to mood swings" (2004). Such misogynistic comments seem isolated and anecdotal, but they occur often enough to reveal a disturbing pattern of attacks that are much more common for women than they are for men. *Time* writer and critic Mary Pols cites a personal anecdote, in which she observes off the cuff, derogatory remarks mentioned about Kael. At a dinner party for Manny Farber, she meets a guest who bragged about knowing Kael. Without identifying the guest in question, she recounts:

'Well of course she was very ugly,' he said. 'No one wanted to sleep with her.' That was the lead in his Kael story? That she was undesirable? Kael sold 150,000 copies of her first collection of criticism, *I Lost It at the Movies*, before she'd even joined *The New Yorker*. She excited and engaged readers like no other critic...but how natural it was for him to reduce this woman to her sex. (Pols, Nov. 2, 2011)

In a blog post about James Wolcott's book, *When the Lights Go Out*, Farran Smith Nehme (2011) articulates the underlying sexism that often creeps into these critiques of Kael's work:

When I read threads of this sort, I consider dropping by to say, 'I wonder why Andrew Sarris and Manny Farber—both of whom had some blind spots and occasionally reversed themselves—don't inspire certain people to call them irrational, or psychotic, or to speculate about their sexual fixations.' But I don't comment, because I don't really wonder why. I don't wonder at all...I'm arguing that through a decades-long career, Kael earned the courtesy of having her film judgments evaluated without veiled sexism. She clearly wanted that herself. (Nov 3, 2011)

All of these examples are very public attacks on Kael that have nothing to do with her life's primary work: her film criticism. In a review of Brian Kellow's book, Amanda Schubert (2012) notes, "It is impossible to ignore the ways in which Kael's gender makes her a target for the thinly-veiled character slander that seeps into analyses of her work... this intolerance persists in the perception of her career today. Is it likely that writers mentored by a popular male critic would earn a nickname like "the Paulettes" —why that patronizing diminutive?" (April 12, 2012). Indeed, this nickname given to film critics who were originally hand-selected by Kael to be mentored was initially considered an honor but as they became independent, the "Paulettes" sought to distance themselves from the affiliation to make their own names. (Showalter, 2012)

This overview of such sexist reception of Kael serves as a reminder of how misogynistic critical film culture can be for women. Why are Kael's opinions considered irrational or emotional, while Farber and Sarris are equally outspoken but their arguments and opinions are not spoken of so negatively? This suggests that many are threatened by strong voices by women. Sexism in film criticism and its reception only becomes amplified in the convergent era, as I will argue in my subsequent chapters.

Compared to Kael, Gilliat's style was not bold and confrontational, but she was no less accomplished. A native of England, Gilliat spent six years writing film criticism for *The Observer* in London before arriving at the *New Yorker* in 1967 at age 35. She wrote short stories, novels, and was nominated for an Oscar for her screenplay *Sunday Bloody Sunday*, a film directed by John Schlesinger and released in 1971. Gilliat's time as a film critic at the *New Yorker* ended abruptly and in controversy in 1979, when editor William Shawn placed her on extended leave after she was charged with plagiarism. She

continued to write profiles and fiction on an ad-hoc basis but with supervision from the fact-checking department. She died in 1993 at the age of 61, after a struggle with alcoholism. Gilliatt's writing style and persona were always in comparison to Kael, as they shared a post as the *New Yorker's* primary film critics from 1968 to 1979 (at which time Kael went to work with Warren Beatty in Hollywood, and Gilliatt was forced out due to a plagiarism scandal) It can be argued that their styles complemented each other; one was brusque and bold and the other refined, tasteful. Phillip French (1996) has noted that Kael and Gilliatt were "a double act, once compared by a British observer to Stanley Kowalski and Blanche Dubois in Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*—a tough demotic, commonsensical Kael wading into the movies with barroom aggressiveness; the delicate whimsical ladylike Gilliatt fluttering around her subjects with quivering antennae" (French, p. 11). Gilliatt considered herself a novelist first and a critic second; her criticism gravitated toward the auteur theory and she wrote two books that articulated this view: *Jean Renoir: Essays, Conversations, and Reviews* and *Jacques Tati*. She has been described as a writer who loved those who made movies more than the movies themselves. (Shoals, 2012) Gilliatt's writing did not have the brassiness of Kael's—instead she cared less for analysis and more for the art of writing itself, and scholar Ray Carney calls her an "art-for-art's sake writer" (Carney, 2001). Her review of *The China Syndrome* (Bridges, 1979) reveals this aesthetic stance, for she takes an aggressive and perhaps polemic film and creates what Carney calls "a sort of still life" and "by extracting each of the events and scenes she notices from its political, social and dramatic background, she freezes them into a static pattern of internal tensions" (Carney, n.d.). Gilliatt (1980) notes, "evocative criticism seems a better thing than analytical

criticism. Analysis seems to be barren and overweening: it thinks itself the master of the thing criticized, not its servant. Such writing ties the English language into Granny-knots. It forbids sentences that seek and anecdotes that expand” (p. 14). Gilliatt identifies with the creative vocation of directors and screenwriters more than the critical core of her profession.

Gilliatt believed in canons and embraced an elitism that was antithetical to Kael’s approach to criticism. (Shoals, 2012) While at *The New Yorker*, Gilliatt often wrote in the shadow of Kael, unnoticed. Despite her vast output, her books are now out of print; there is very little to be found about Gilliatt in public writings and even her criticism allows for no illumination of the personal and private writer. Yet despite this strange invisibility, she was a force to contend with: Kellow reports in his biography of Kael that she always felt in competition with Gilliatt, who had excelled at creative writing while Kael had not. Kael loved movies; Gilliatt loved writing, and this marks a key difference in their approach to film criticism. Gilliatt’s film criticism did not depend on a vivid dissection of films but instead revealed a sense of wonder and awe, if not for a film in its entirety but for its cinematic intricacies and details. While the central pull and force of Kael’s writing is her bold assertions, a rich knowledge of film history, and at times polemical take on films and directors, Gilliatt’s writing was more nuanced, and her film criticism was more akin to literary criticism, rebuilding visual images with creative word play. For Kael, subjectivity and a highly emotional response to art were what enabled her to make a mark as a critic, despite the fact that her entire career was faced with criticism for these exact qualities. She claimed authority by saying what other critics, male or female, would not say. Those who criticized her writings often did so in a way that was implicit, not always

explicit, received as a gendered stereotype. For Gilliat, her strengths and authority came from her excellence in literary and creative writing, and the need to continually work and prove herself in the shadow of Kael as her *New Yorker* counterpart.

### **Historicizing Women Film Critics**

Attempts to survey American film criticism often fall short when it comes to including women writers, even those who had extensive careers. Stanley Kauffmann and Bruce Henstell (1972) edit a collection titled *American Film Criticism: From the Beginnings to Citizen Kane—Reviews of Significant Films at the Time They First Appeared*, which has a very narrow selection of representational reviews, and often includes reviews of films attributed not to a single critic, but to a publication in which the author is unknown (*The New York Dramatic Mirror*, *The Moving Picture World*, and *Exceptional Photoplays*). In the book's introduction, Kaufmann notes his goal was to "select important films and to find at least one important review about each, written at the time when the film was first shown in the United States" (p. x). Without indicating further criteria as for how he defines what is "important" in regards to both films and reviews, this collection's value is merely novelty rather than "to show how film criticism developed in this country" (p. x). The collection relies heavily on reviews by Robert E. Sherwood, Alexander Bakshy, and Otis Ferguson, and offers selections by only three women writers, which includes several from the little-known Evelyn Gerstein, as well as one selection each by Louise Bogan and Margaret Marshall (the latter two women coming from literary criticism circles).<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Evelyn Gerstein was a film critic during the silent era for *The New Republic* and *The Boston Herald*; Louise Bogan was the U.S. Poet Laureate; and Margaret Marshall served in several editorial positions as well as a film critic at *The Nation*.

Jerry Roberts book, *The Complete History of American Film Criticism* (2010), is an industrial and anecdotal overview of film critics in the U.S, not an edited collection of reviews. Written as a narrative history, it begins at the same spot as Kaufmann's volume, discussing the silent era and publications such as *The New York Dramatic Mirror*, progressing decade by decade with sections on "The Television Age" and the changes that occur as film criticism enters the convergent, internet era in "The Great Wake: The 21<sup>st</sup> Century." The volume is comprehensive and names dozens of critics, yet superficially, without detailed exploration of writing style and context. While this volume does emphasize the import of Pauline Kael, for example, many other women are neglected; there is no mention of Marjorie Rosen and film critics Molly Haskell and Penelope Gilliatt are often discussed only as "wife" or "long-time companion" of their more well-known film critic partners, Andrew Sarris and Vincent Canby, respectively.

A more notable and prominent collection appears in 2012 by essayist and film critic Phillip Lopate, in *American Movie Critics: An Anthology from the Silents until Now*. Lopate argues that "more energy, passion and analytical juice has gone into film criticism than other forms of arts criticism in the past 50 years" (p. xix). The collection includes more than 150 pieces by 79 writers, spanning 90 years of film criticism, with emphasis on the "stars" of film criticism including Otis Ferguson, James Agee, Pauline Kael, and Andrew Sarris. Lopate's curation strategy is to include only American critics, not British writers, yet admits he included pieces of criticism that he liked and agreed with. While Iris Barry is not included because of this definition, Lopate includes a fair number of women such as Cecilia Ager (the first woman to write for *Variety*), as well as Barbara Deming, Arlene Croce, Susan Sontag, Pauline Kael, Molly Haskell and in an



attempt to note contemporary critics, Carrie Rickey and Manohla Dargis. Unfortunately, like Roberts, Lopate chooses to create biographies that present two of these film critics in relation to men. Cecilia Ager is noted for her marriage to Milton Ager, a songwriter, and Molly Haskell's marriage to Andrew Sarris is also highlighted, although mention of Haskell is not reciprocally noted in Sarris' biography. Such framing of female critics suggests dependency or association with men in order to gain cultural authority, and is thus problematic, as these critics should not be shadowed by their partners.

Feminist film scholars are aware of the implications of re-writing film history to include women. Christine Gledhill (2010) argues that "posing questions of gender changes the way we do film history," since authorship models rarely bring women's work into perspective" (2010). Melanie Bell (2011), in her historical work on women film critics in the UK from the '40s through the '60s, argues that "film criticism is one of the most gendered pathways in film culture; it is an area of work where women have dominated and played a key role in the dissemination and circulation of ideas about individual films and cinema more generally" (p. 192). Lauren Rabinowitz (2006) suggests, "lost and found scholarship lies not in merely correcting a record that swept away women's contributions but in refashioning film theory and historiography" (2006).

This selective history of women as film critics serves as a small case study of what cinephilic criticism can be. These women were invested in film culture, and for many of these women it was not enough to simply write about it—they found ways to encourage moviegoing, encourage its preservation, and stressed its enormous impact on its audience. Most importantly, it reveals that women were not always marginalized in their relationship to American film industry or to the occupation or work of criticism. It

also reveals however, that as the cinema became more dominated by men, the more sexist the reception and reaction to film critics became. This has carried over into the convergent era, and in my next chapter I explore how women film critics and bloggers navigate the new landscape of online film culture.

## CHAPTER 4

### METHODOLOGY: BLOGGING AND THE GENDERED CONFLICTS OF FILM CRITICISM

Women writing film criticism in today's convergence culture are presented with a variety of obstacles that a previous generation of film critics did not have. Both film bloggers and critics whose writing appears online are no longer finished with their work once their pieces are published; the Web 2.0 era is one in which journalism is now conceived as a conversation, not a lecture.<sup>14</sup> While 'conversation' means an interactive space in which more people can express their views and participate, it also means that there are more chances for conflict and harassment to occur. Female bloggers are more frequently attacked online for their writing, and those attacks are often directed at their gender. One notable recent example involves film critic Amy Nicholson, a critic for the *L.A. Times* as well as *Box Office* magazine, who wrote a mixed review of Joss Whedon's *The Avengers* (2012). While she did have positive comments about certain scenes as well as for performances by key actors, overall she did not think it was a good film. Nicholson's critique was not an ad hominem attack on comic book movies but the standards by which films should adhere:

*The Avengers* almost works. It's funny and it's physical, but even at two and a half hours, it plays like it's on fast-forward. Forget character development—there's not even character explanation. The lesser Avengers are most slighted...The problem is that after controlling their own fiefdoms, these characters don't play well with others. If such a thing can be said about a \$220 million-dollar blockbuster, *The Avengers* needs more ambition. (2012)

Nicholson's review brought the film's "100% Fresh" rating on Rottentomatoes.com down to 96%, which made some comic book fans furious (Payne, 2012). The comments

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<sup>14</sup> Many journalists and scholars use this phrase to describe journalism and citizen journalism in general in the convergent era. See *Dan Gillmor, We the Media: Grassroots Journalism for the People, By the People*. O'Reilly Media, 2006.

directed at Nicholson were angry at her critique, but blamed her assessment of *The Avengers* on the failings of her gender—which in their view made her less capable of writing, or even understanding a comic book movie:

She asked her boyfriend what score she should give. Just stick to rom-coms, bitch.

Everyone in the civilized world thinks this is the best comic book film ever and one woman gives it a bad review. This is what happens when you send a woman with Katherine Heigl posters on her bedroom walls to review a comic book movie. (as cited in Payne, April 25, 2012)

Nicholson's response to this outpouring of contempt notes how personal these attacks were. "When I realized what I'd stumbled into, I made myself vow I'd never read the comments for my own sanity. I've only gotten one email that actually wanted to argue the substance of my review" (cited in Silverstein, 2012). Such vitriolic comments are often labeled trolling in the blogosphere, and are quite commonplace. However, sexist comments are primarily directed at women and often appear more frequently when women are writing. Online harassment is a broader problem that affects not only women in prominent positions (such as journalists) but the average woman as well, on blogs and social media sites such as Twitter. Some argue that such harassment drives women away from participating in conversations in the blogosphere altogether (Friedersdorf, 2014). Misogyny is not only coming from the audience and anonymous commenters on the internet, but in some cases more directly from the industry and the business of journalism.

While a critic's biological sex is attacked for writing about so-called "masculine" subjects (comic book films), a male critic is criticized and fired for writing about strong women. In 2012, film critic Michael Calleri of the *Niagara Falls Reporter* was fired because his publisher did not like strong women in movies, and forbid Calleri to write

about them. Calleri's story reached a national audience via RogerEbert.com, where his column about his sexist publisher, Frank Parlato, included many details about the conflict, including the email sent to Calleri. Parlato objected to running his reviews of *Snow White and the Huntsman* (Sanders, 2012) and *Headhunters* (Tyldum, 2012). Below are verbatim excerpts of this email sent to Calleri:

Snow white and the huntsman is trash. moral garbage. a lot of fuzzy feminist thinking and pandering to creepy Hollywood mores produced by metrosexual imbeciles. I don't want to publish reviews of films where women are alpha and men are beta...where women are heroes and villains and men are just lesser versions or shadows of females.

If you care to write reviews where men act like good strong men...i will be glad to publish these. i am not interested in supporting the reversing of traditional gender roles. (Calleri, 2012)

These examples of sexism and misogyny that proliferate in online film criticism are reminders that the landscape of film criticism is a highly gendered and hotly contested space in which women's voices and their representations need constant vindication and justification. Convergence culture has exacerbated this problem for the practice of film criticism and journalism, as many commenters do not treat established professional outlets any differently than upstart or unknown websites. Many of the women in this study have experienced the impact of this phenomenon which often originates and is reinforced in convergence culture, and all of them are conscious of the ways that their writing, online presence, and attention to gender shape the reception of their work. By examining the voices of female film critics and bloggers in eight ethnographic interviews, my study reveals that the women who write film criticism today face obstacles in performing the labor of writing, but are still dedicated to the practice and participation in online film culture and their work can be constructed and articulated as a form of

activism. Henry Jenkins (2006) recognizes that bloggers “have become important grassroots intermediaries—facilitators, not jammers, of the signal flow” (Jenkins, 2006; *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers*, p. 151).

### Methodology

This dissertation uses mixed methods in order to examine contemporary online film criticism written by women and the online spaces in which it is located. I conducted both ethnographic interviews as well as a textual analysis to gather my data on the writings of women film bloggers. These mixed methods were necessary in order to engage with concepts that straddle disciplines or have not traditionally circulated in a critical cultural studies framework. Cinephilia, a construct tied to film history and film studies traditions, is often examined in terms of its relationship to its object (cinema) and contexts which privilege a textual analysis of the object or viewing situation.

In this dissertation, I conducted ethnographic interviews with female film bloggers in regards to their blogging practices as well as their subjective experiences with film and cinephilia. The bloggers interviewed in this study include: Marilyn Ferdinand, **Ferdy on Films**; Catherine Grant, **Film Studies for Free**; Kimberly Lindbergs, blogging at both **Cinebeats** and TCM’s companion site, **Movie Morlocks**; Amy Monahan, blogging as “the cinetrix,” at **Pullquote**; Farran Smith Nehme, blogging as **The Self-Styled Siren**; Sheila O’Malley, blogging at **The Sheila Variations**; and two female critics who fall outside the strict parameters of blogging, Carrie Rickey and Kiva Reardon. Rickey and Reardon are included in this study as they have worked as both bloggers and professional critics at different points in their career. They also provide unique perspectives: Rickey as a seasoned critic with more than 25 years of experience,

and Reardon as the youngest member of my study, reports a decidedly different experience of the convergent film criticism environment than the other women interviewed. Overall these critics and bloggers were selected for this study as they self-identify, or often consciously discuss, the idea of the “cinophile,” write posts on a regular (at least weekly) basis, write for English-language readers, and often appear on several other cinephile blogrolls. The women in this study also teach film studies courses, edit film journals, create video essays, and write on other subjects professionally. Most of the women film critics here know each other through social media networks and through shared interests in film writing, thus indicating that these women understand and participate in the tightly networked nature of today’s film criticism. In my interviews with these subjects, most women revealed both a passion for writing about film, but also their frustration with the various processes involved in doing so. These frustrations reflect a double bind: not only must they confront an industry that marginalizes women on-screen, which often shapes how they write about film, but they must also contend with the conflicts and hostility created by an open web with little to no gatekeeping functions which are so central to print criticism. Unlike male critics, female film critics must have a constant awareness of how their gender plays a role in how and why they write, and yet this awareness and acute perception strengthens their abilities as writers.

Ethnographic approaches are rarely used in connection to the world of cinephilia, as the concept of cinephilia has been theorized through film studies frameworks that do not utilize ethnography as a research tool, with film studies often aligning with the humanities and literary studies. This ethnographic approach allows me to collect data on how each blogger: 1) chooses to present herself and her cinephile identity; 2) views her

relationship to cinema and film criticism; 3) deals with conflict on her site; and 4) understands the role gender plays in influencing both how and why she writes criticism online. I consider ethnography to be the most effective research tool in gathering this information, and agree with Elizabeth Bird's (2003) assessment that, "only ethnography can begin to answer questions about what people really do with media, rather than what we imagine they might do, or what close readings of texts assume they might do" (Bird, p.191).

Farran Smith Nehme has been blogging at *The Self-Styled Siren* since 2005. The blog started as a hobby to help Smith Nehme "flex her writing muscle" and turned into a space for writing about films, specifically classic films from the American studio system, pre-1960. Smith Nehme has also been involved in blog-a-thons to support various causes, such as a film preservation blog-a-thon (with Marilyn Ferdinand, also profiled here) and many others. Smith Nehme's writing focus is primarily on obscure classic films, often with an emphasis on women's films from the '30s and '40s. Over the years, Smith Nehme has become more popular and visible within the film blogging community, and in 2012 she was offered a reviewing position at *The New York Post*. She has written essays to accompany Criterion collection films, such as *All That Heaven Allows* (Sirk, 1955), *Autumn Sonata* (Bergman, 1978), and *The Uninvited* (Allen, 1944). In the fall of 2014, Overlook Press published Smith Nehme's film-themed novel, *Missing Reels*, which as of this writing has received positive reviews from publications both niche and national (*Kirkus Reviews*, *Entertainment Weekly*). In February 2016, Smith Nehme started writing a biweekly online column focusing on classic films at *Film Comment*.



Sheila O'Malley seems quite sincere as she notes, "Almost everything—no, everything— that has happened in my writing, about film anyway, is because of the blog." This admission from O'Malley comes early in our interview, as she reveals that her personal blog, *The Sheila Variations*, has opened doors for numerous opportunities to write about film.

In 2007, O'Malley was asked to cover the Tribeca Film Festival for online magazine *The House Next Door* (which is now officially part of *Slant* magazine). While that assignment was unpaid, it is where she met Matt Zoller Seitz, who encouraged her work. Seitz, who is now Editor-in-chief at RogerEbert.com, invited O'Malley to write for the site in 2013. At the RogerEbert.com site, O'Malley writes weekly or biweekly reviews of current films and occasional pieces to highlight a new release or re-release. O'Malley supports herself financially with freelance writing and web production as well as reviewing for RogerEbert.com. Recently, she created a video-essay for the Criterion Collection's long-awaited release of John Cassavetes' *Love Streams* (1984). Trained as an actor who worked for several years in the theater business in Chicago, this background informs O'Malley's emphasis on the work of acting and performance in films.

Carrie Rickey comes to blogging after spending more than 30 years writing for print publications full time. Rickey got her start as an art critic, writing for *Artforum* and the *Village Voice* in the 1970s. She really wanted to be a movie critic, however, and found opportunities to write about film at both the *Village Voice* and later *The Boston Herald*. She wrote reviews for *The Philadelphia Inquirer* for 26 years and still occasionally writes for their site, Philly.com, but most of her current writing is located at her personal blog and website, CarrieRickey.com. Rickey was chosen in part for this

study for her attention to women in the audience and on the screen, topics she frequently discusses in her reviews, blog posts, and feature articles that appear elsewhere, such as RogerEbert.com and the *New York Times*. Rickey is also recognized for being one of the only female critics among Pauline Kael's protégés.

Kiva Reardon is the youngest of the film critics in this study, and participated in the 2012 Young Film Critics Academy (for critics under 30) at the Locarno Film Festival in Locarno, Switzerland. Reardon received a master's degree in Cinema Studies from the University of Toronto, and shortly after started writing for [now defunct] *The Loop*, an online film publication that became a larger lifestyle-entertainment publication in 2012. In 2013, Reardon launched an online feminist journal titled *cléo*, a quarterly publication that focuses on films made by women and performances by women. For Reardon, the new journal provides an opportunity to express and practice feminism, after she "became really frustrated with seeing how few female film critics were at [press] screenings in Toronto." She recalls getting stuck in "fanboy conversations about films...and if you wanted to talk, say, 'well guys, that film was really sexist,' they'd say, 'Oh well, not really.'" In 2016, Reardon became a programming associate for the Toronto International Film Festival, but still writes for a variety of online film publications such as *Cinemascope*, *Reverse Shot*, *Fandor* and *The Dissolve*.

Catherine Grant is an accomplished film scholar, who received her PhD from the University of Leeds in 1991. She has held academic appointments at the University of Strathclyde and the University of Kent, where she served as Director of the Film Studies program from 2003-2007. In 2008, Grant left Kent to move to East Sussex to focus on research and online publishing. She was a Visiting Research Fellow in the School of

Media, Film & Music at Sussex between 2008 and February 2011, when she was appointed to her current, part-time, Senior Lectureship in Film Studies. In 2012, Grant founded *Reframe*, an open access, academic journal, focusing on the publication and curation of internationally produced research and scholarship. Grant became founding co-editor (with Christian Keathley and Drew Morton) of [in]TRANSITION, a first-of-its-kind peer-reviewed journal of videographic film and moving image studies and a collaboration between MediaCommons and the Society for Cinema and Media Studies' official publication, *Cinema Journal*. In regards to this type of film criticism, Grant says, "I think if probably more women knew how easy it was, which I do try and communicate wherever possible, they might be interested in trying it as well. It probably is a sort of technical matter. There's also a sense in which this particular form of criticism is arising out of online cinephilia, sort of contemporary new forms of cinephilia and they are very male dominated." Grant launched *Film Studies for Free* in August 2008 at about the same time she shifted her time away from being a full-time film professor to her current part-time position at the University of Sussex. The blog serves as a repository for research on film and media available via open access, scholarly, peer-reviewed online journals through other film and media weblogs, and film/video archives, among other resources. Grant was interested in finding film research on the web and created compilation posts on specific topics, essentially operating as a resource not only for film scholars but other film bloggers and cinephiles. She also encourages her readers to suggest resources for her compilation posts as well.

The films of the '60s and the '70s are key subjects for Kimberly Lindbergs, who hosts a personal blog, *Cinebeats.com*, and writes for the popular site *MovieMorlocks.com*,

a companion site to the classic film channel TCM. Lindbergs started blogging in the early days of the internet, posting at Livejournal in 2001. Lindbergs notes this early writing was primarily personal and diary-oriented, detailing what was going on in her life. In 2006, she started *Cinebeats*, and at that time, there were only a handful of blogs written by women devoted to fringe, cult, foreign and horror cinema. In 2010, *Film Comment* called *Cinebeats* one of The Top Film Criticism sites online. In 2012, she was asked to join the Alliance of Women Film Journalists, a group that promotes the work of female film critics.

Chicago-based Marilyn Ferdinand has been blogging since 2005. Ferdinand started her blog with Australian writing partner Roderick Heath, whom she met on a discussion board called The Third Eye Film Society, which grew out of *The New York Times* film forum. On that discussion board, she could post reviews, but did not like the structure, format, or the administrator, and it did not generate a lot of feedback from others. “It wasn’t really in a format that would allow you to interact with readers too much,” Ferdinand says. She wanted the opportunity to get comments and create a more robust discussion, and hence the blog *Ferdy on Films* was born. Ferdinand and partner Heath write comprehensive reviews of new films, classic Hollywood films, and film festival coverage. Ferdinand prefers writing about older films, world films and independent films, and sometimes approaches them from a feminist perspective. In addition, she often participates in film blog-a-thons (with Farran Smith Nehme) in which a group of bloggers commit to writing about a particular subject to raise awareness and money for a particular cause.

Amy Monaghan has been writing her blog, *pullquote*, under the pseudonym “the cinetrix” since 2003. The blog is a space to write about films that interest her, not full reviews but often “impressionistic takes on film on some aspect of a film-the way music is used, a certain performance. Or revelations that come to me in the classroom.” She received her master’s degree in cinema studies at NYU and teaches film and literature classes at Clemson University in South Carolina. She continues to blog sporadically and often covers film festivals such as the Full Frame Documentary Film Festival and occasionally makes the trip northeast for the Independent Film Festival of Boston.

For this study, I utilized a general interview guide to ask my participants the same set of questions. In some cases, these questions led to other related explorations based on responses and the direction of a conversation. In order to organize the interview data into logical frameworks, I have utilized six central aspects articulated by my respondents in interviews: 1) cinephilia, 2) gender and discursive conflict, 3) the feminist impulse, 4) the writing process, 5) the uses of social media, 6) networked film bloggers. Because my questions highlighted the writing process and engagement with the internet as both a tool for their work but also a space for discourse, community, and conflict, these issues tend to dominate much of this chapter, illuminating the key challenges, practices, and labor of film criticism as it is performed by women today.

### **Cinephilia and the “Cinephile”**

One of the key reasons for this study is to trace how cinephilia and related discourses fuel the need for writing about film, and how this manifests itself in the writings of film critics. While I have explored the term as it has unfolded historically and to its more recent iterations and theorizations in a previous chapter, the reactions and

identifications to the designation of ‘cinophile’ by the film bloggers and critics interviewed provides insights to how the term carries with it a series of meanings that confer status, suggest hierarchies, and delineate film “fandom” from other film experiences. These film critics can be considered cinephiles in the broadest sense—possessing a passionate, enthusiastic relationship to filmgoing and film writing—yet not all of these women embrace the term or identify with it, and thus are not hailed by cinephilic discourses. As noted in a previous chapter, historical notions of cinephilia, especially from the *Cahiers du Cinema* and champions of the Nouvelle Vague, are often masculine and never gender neutral.<sup>15</sup> Genevieve Sellier (2005) articulates that “cinephilia...seems to be founded on a split between a more or less conscious fascination with films made for a male audience or constructed for a male gaze” (n.p. 2005). As for contemporary cinephilia, Barbara Klinger (2006) argues that cinephilic discourses are often extensions of technophilic discourses, in which the construction of the cinophile as predominantly male becomes more evident. Klinger writes of the contemporary cinophile as a collector as well as a “technophile or gadgeteer,” noting also that “The collector helps to shed light on the relationship of gender and home film cultures, demonstrating a “persistent equation of men and machine,” highlighting a set of “exclusionary discursive practices that animate and define this world” (Klinger, p. 56).

For many of the bloggers, the term cinophile seemed snobbish and pretentious, and thus they distanced themselves from the term. Sheila O’Malley admits that she “doesn’t like that word,” elaborating, “I just think it’s a little...I think it’s a little snooty.

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<sup>15</sup> See Laurent Jullier, *Philistines and Cinephiles: The New Deal*; Genevieve Sellier, *Masculine Singular: French New Wave Cinema*; and Rosanna Maule, “*Female Singular: Women and French Cinephilia*.”

I call it show business...it's not in my vocabulary. I call them movies, not films. I just don't refer to myself as a cinephile." (2013)

Kimberly Lindbergs understands these negative associations but embraces the term and transforms it for her own personal use:

The subtitle of my blog is "Confessions of a Cinephile," so yes, I do consider myself one. There tends to be a scholarly snobbishness surrounding the term that I find abhorrent, so I wanted to reclaim it and used it somewhat cheekily in my blog's subtitle. But I think at its most basic the term simply means (as Annette Insdorf described in her book about Francois Truffaut) "a passionate lover of film" and that's what I am. (2013)

Carrie Rickey also finds it necessary to qualify her answer regarding cinephilia, and says,

I answer to the descriptions cinephile or movie geek. Am I a cinephile in the Annette Michelson sense? I never really think of it. In that I love movies, I suppose I'm a cinephile."<sup>16</sup> (2013)

For most of the women here, this term is an afterthought; one that can name their passion for film but not one that they have any interest in engaging with theoretically, but practically. Most have no interest in how it circulates in current scholarly works (though as both Rickey and Lindbergs illustrate, have read widely on film and thus can cite sources in which the term has been articulated). It can be argued that men are more likely to embrace the term "cinephile;" and on the other end of the spectrum, be the target of "fanboy" discourse. This suggests that there are different typologies of men as both serious or casual film enthusiasts, yet no such term or discursive formation exists for women or girls.

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<sup>16</sup>Annette Michelson embodies a serious, often political and highly theoretical take on cinema and its aesthetics and philosophical tensions as the founder (with Rosalind Krauss) of the progressive arts and culture journal *October*.

Kiva Reardon is skeptical of the term but is more willing to grapple with its various aspects:

It's a very vaunted term. I would be mortified to call myself one, because it sounds so pretentious, or something like that. Like "I'm a cinephile." If someone called me that, I'd be very flattered but I don't think that I would ever call myself that just because the people that I think who are cinephiles are [people] like Bernard Eisenschitz<sup>17</sup> or someone like that...you've written books on cinema. (2013)

Reardon's understanding of "cinephile" suggests it is a term that you earn by investing time and energy into film scholarship. She envisions it as both lofty but based on both experience and knowledge of film. Further, she notes, "if you define cinephilia as just a love of cinema, then that applies to me. And then a lot of the battle then is sort of fighting that blind love and looking at it critically as well." Reardon also responds to the ideas of love vs. criticism and was asked a similar question in a symposium of film critics that appears in *Cineaste*: "For me, the term means something like 'passionate skepticism,' where I'm deeply invested in thinking through the films I see, but hopefully never let myself be carried away by a blinding fandom" (as cited in Porton, 2013). Reardon's explication of the term reveals one of the ways this idea of the cinephile is delineated from fandom. While the term does connote a certain level of sophistication, for Reardon it also means engagement with the critical and not just romanticizing certain films or directors.

In a later portion of our interview in which topics beyond cinephilia are discussed, Reardon describes her writing process and her drive to write about film in a way that essentially explains her cinephilia. She notes that she loves music, dance, and theater, but none of those things inspire her to write the way film does:

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<sup>17</sup> Bernard Eisenschitz is a French film critic who has published extensively on the work of filmmakers such as Fritz Lang, Chris Marker, and Nicholas Ray.



It doesn't fire up my brain the same way as it does when I'm watching a film. And when I'm watching a film, I just, I get so excited to think about it and analyze it and work through what's being presented in front of me. So I think that's the most enjoyable thing, is seeing a ... really difficult film and engaging film or really good film that challenges you to think about it in a really complex way. (2013)

Reardon's writing impulse is not driven by fandom, but by the drive to critically engage and examine a film and its contexts. While this is not something she suggests in her own personal explanations of cinephilia, these connections between written expression and film make her cinephilia readily apparent. In this way, her response is similar to Farran Smith Nehme's understanding of the term cinephile, as she sees "most cinephiles may have one area where they feel a tremendous affinity for or that they feel a desire to bring more to light for other people. Seems to be true of almost all worthwhile film writers—everybody's got their pets" (2013).

### **Gender and Discursive Conflict**

These female film bloggers and critics find that the conversational, interactive aspect of online film criticism often invites conflict from male bloggers and commenters for a variety of reasons. Many commenters have gendered assumptions about which subjects women will be interested in and the impact that has on their writing capabilities. O'Malley notes how, after she reviewed a book about Mussolini, she received an email from one man who said, "I am just amazed that a woman would be interested in this material. I mean, I just thought that women were all like [interested in] *Fried Green Tomatoes*." This kind of gender stereotyping is not unusual among these critics, however. Carrie Rickey reveals some of the comments she has found on her blog in the past are "jaw dropping...like, 'How can you review a war movie when you've never fought in a

war?” (2013). Smith Nehme does not provide specific examples of such gendered conflict, but says she has had only a few experiences with people:

Talking down to me in a way that I considered sexist, or at least one instance it was quite nakedly sexist. But...people who do that, I turf them the hell out of my comments. If you feel the need to insult my intelligence or what I'm writing about then, feel free to go do so on your own blog. (2013)

One particular aspect of gendered conflict many bloggers face is mansplaining.

Mansplaining is a term coined by author Rebecca Solnit in a 2012 column called “Men Explain Things to Me” on the political blog TomDispatch.com, an essay later collected in a book of the same name published in 2014. In the essay, Solnit recounts a story of being at a cocktail party in Aspen, Colorado in 2003, in which a man tells her everything he knows about a very important new book about Edward Muybridge, which he proclaims immediately after Solnit announces that she has written a book about him. During his explanation, Solnit was unable to interrupt the man, who also ignored her (female) friend, who pointed out three or four times “that’s her book!” Later, Solnit clarifies,

People of both genders pop up at events to hold forth on irrelevant things and conspiracy theories, but the out-and-out confrontational confidence of the totally ignorant is, in my experience, gendered. Men explain things to me, and other women, whether or not they know what they’re talking about. Some men. (2012, p. 4)

While Solnit’s essay goes on to explore other aspects of this phenomenon in which women’s voices are often unheard and ignored, rendering women invisible and not credible on a global scale, the term “mansplaining” went viral and became the subject of countless columns and articles; in 2010, *The New York Times* designated it as one of its words of the year (Sifton, 2010). In her original essay posted at TomDispatch.com, Solnit noted, “This all-too-typical experience of being unthinkingly talked down to trains

[women] in self-doubt and self-limitation just as it exercises men's unsupported overconfidence" (Solnit, 2008).

However, while "mansplaining" appears to be a term most appropriate for urban dictionaries and popular feminism found on the internet, Deborah Tannen has identified this conversational phenomenon as early as 1990 in her book *You Just Don't Understand: Men and Women in Conversation*. Tannen is a linguist at Georgetown University and widely known for both academic and popular works about language and its relationship to gender and families. Tannen revealed that men and women have different conversational styles, in which men tend to lecture, or speak at length about a subject, and women tend to listen and offer support. Tannen argues that "the inequality of the treatment results not simply from the men's behavior alone but from the differences in men's and women's styles" (Tannen, p.124).

In Tannen's view, men talk to negotiate and achieve status. Women talk to establish and maintain connection:

Women and men fall into this unequal pattern so often because of the differences in their interactional habits. Since women seek to build rapport, they are inclined to play down their expertise rather than display it. Since men value the position of center stage and the feeling of knowing more, they seek opportunities to gather and disseminate factual information. (Tannen, 1990, p.125)

Tannen's argument refers to spoken conversational styles, yet this also occurs in the interactive spaces of Web 2.0 as well. In her discussion on commenters, O'Malley notes, I've had a couple of those...mansplaining. They don't so much focus on my gender, but you definitely feel, 'Would you be talking this condescendingly to a man?' (2013). One commenter followed O'Malley's review of Lars von Trier's *Melancholia* (2014) and was angry that men weren't included in the film. His comments were condescending. He wrote, "Depression is something I know about..." O'Malley reveals that she felt "it was

like a little girl he was scolding...Our exchange was heated enough that I've never heard from him again" (2013). Not only was the commenter attempting to 'lecture' O'Malley about his own knowledge about depression as a way of suggesting status in the online 'conversation,' he also took offense at the lack of male protagonists in a film in which men were not central to the narrative.

Kimberly Lindbergs has also experienced mansplaining, revealing:

I've received comments from some men who are surprised that a woman is writing about genre cinema or cult and horror films. And because I write about genre films (particularly horror and spy movies) that are generally considered 'male territory,' I've also had plenty of men try to 'school me' on a particular topic that I'm already familiar with. In my experience, mansplaining is somewhat epidemic in the film blogosphere. (2013)

While Tannen argues that differences in interactional styles are not personal or sexist attacks but based on different interactional goals, she provides evidence of how hostility toward women takes place in conversation. In a series of experiments that considered what would happen if a man or a woman would be allowed to be an "expert" in a conversation, she found that when women were the experts (and thus the word could even be spoken in conversation, 'so, you're the expert'), the "evidence of the women's superior knowledge sparked resentment, not respect" (1990, p. 128). Lindbergs' experience with mansplaining and other hostility directed toward her knowledge (as well as sexist references to her appearance) led her to shut down *Cinebeats* for several months in 2013. She started it back up again, in a slightly different format, in 2014.

Amy Monaghan finds that a confrontational mode of conversation is not exclusive to film criticism but can be found most everywhere on the internet:

I think from the social aspect, the thing that I find most trying about blogging: other bloggers. The pissing matches that tend to go down primarily, though not exclusively, among the male members of the tribe. That sort of noise,

I could do without...but that's just more endemic to, I think, the internet in general. (2013)

These female film critics not only confess to experiencing this particular phenomenon, but see it so often on their blogs and others that they perceived it as normalized in the blogosphere. Women are called on to defend their knowledge, their experience, and authority to write on film much more frequently as men, suggesting that women are not seen as naturally interested in film as fans, cinephiles, or bloggers.

### **The Feminist Impulse**

The women in this study are often compelled to write about representations that they find troubling and this is often the impetus for criticism—something that interrupts their cinephilia. While not all of these women write critically about the representations of women, all of them understand how their gender influences not only how they write about films, who their audiences might be, and how readers respond to their writing. There is an impulse to draw on a personal, often gendered perspective, one based on identity, to point to inequalities both onscreen and off in the world of the film industry.

Catherine Grant notes that her female identity as well as her feminist identity are often submerged in *Film Studies for Free*, which is a more pluralist rather than personal project, one that she hopes has “an expansive, inclusive agenda.” (2013) Still, Grant says that:

In my life, in my research, I am very much a feminist, a committed feminist, committed to lesbian feminism as well, so I'm out there in this particular niche for a lot of people, and certainly in my life been attacked for those things before...In *Film Studies for Free*, those things are visible. (2013)

Amy Monaghan admits that in the past, if something bugged her “as a female person,” she would write film reviews or essays, which always included the introductory

title, “I Enjoy Being a Girl.” Many of these reviews can be found on her blog, *pullquote*, which are examined in a later chapter. Monaghan also argues that there is no reason not to address problems with how films are discussed in online spaces:

But I feel like it’s an important thing to sort of interject with a big, Word version of an eye roll when stuff is getting a little too “bro” in the discourse...I’m definitely a feminist and I also teach young people of both genders, so I’m constantly aware of presumptions that could be noxious if you don’t nip them in the bud...life’s too short to just stew about stuff when you can just say like ‘Ahh, no, that’s terrible, that’s wrong and here’s why.’ (2013)

Monaghan is not alone in her feminist impulse to point out problems in representation, and this was a common refrain among the women interviewed for this study. Kiva Reardon notes that her own feminist reaction to films, as well as the feminist reactions she observed in other female film critics, compelled her to create her online feminist journal *cléo*:

It’s not like you’re born with some kind of feminist gene. It’s an active political choice. When I do talk to other female film critics they’ll be like ‘God yeah, I’m fed up with seeing xyz in films.’ I had been trying to figure out a way also to sort of express my own feminism for a long time...moving it more into a lived reality as opposed to just this theoretical political thing that I had always adhered to. If [film criticism] does have any social impact, it is sort of creating a place where there are more female voices who can start writing about film, and writing about film from a feminist perspective, so maybe it would slightly help the gender imbalance that does exist in film criticism. (2013)

Farran Smith Nehme does not suggest a feminist impulse in her writing explicitly, but the films she chooses to explore on her blog reveal her affinity for women’s narratives and characters on screen. She writes “about certain movies that I feel get neglected by the critical establishment because they’re...girly.” Smith Nehme argues that the most prominent critics throughout the years have been men (with “the glorious exception of Pauline Kael”) and most of those critics did not possess an affinity for films from the ‘30s and ‘40s, which were often derogatively labeled “weepies.” Smith Nehme

acknowledges that Molly Haskell's *From Reverence to Rape* (1974) was "probably my big formative critical influence because she took the kinds of movies that I liked seriously" (2013).

O'Malley echoes Smith Nehme in her admiration of '30s and '40s films, in which "women were just the powerhouses, they were the stars...movies were built around them, and there was no shame in woman's pictures." O'Malley argues that a film like *The Thin Man* (Van Dyke, 1934) "has a certain view of marriage in which there was this equality happening, even if it's before feminism's time." She points out that an actress like Jill Clayburgh would not have a career now, as Clayburgh played strong, independent women and her career was "really limited to the time when the real political women's liberation movement [was going on] ...where someone like her could be considered a leading lady, not that she's not beautiful, not that but—she's awkward—she's totally human" (2013). O'Malley is referring to the '70s films Clayburgh starred in, such as *An Unmarried Woman* (Mazursky, 1978) and *Starting Over* (Pakula, 1979). Clayburgh's career decline coincided with the conservative Reagan era and its backlash against the feminist movement. O'Malley's nostalgia for women's roles in earlier eras embodies her lament with contemporary film and film criticism:

It seems like a very narrow place where women can operate right now. The culture is so dismissive toward anything that is focused on a woman's point of view. And certainly, it doesn't mean that all women have the same point of view. Diversity of voices is what we need. (2013)

These concerns are also central for Marilyn Ferdinand, who considers herself both a feminist and a feminist film critic:

Women's point of view is underrepresented. Where we are fed the fantasies of the male majority and we know a whole lot more about them than they know about us, because they don't care to know about us. So it's important for me to filter what I see onscreen through my feminine experience so that people will get

to know what, who women really are. There's so many made up things that people think about women, women included, that are not realistic. (2013)

Thus two key problems are articulated here: the female perspective, whether onscreen in the form of a protagonist, or as a critic evaluating a film through a woman's eyes, are not valued. O'Malley notes that there are blinders in our culture—spaces in which women are overlooked, though not always intentionally.

Women are less visible in critical film culture for a variety of reasons. One of them is simply the hegemonic power of patriarchal discourses. One problem that exists for women is the idea of the “female ghetto”—a space where women's work or interest is stigmatized for its gendered—in this case, feminine—qualities. An example of a female ghetto would be women writing “chick lit,” or romance novels, and women filmmakers who only make stories involving women (which are often relegated to the gendered category of “chick flicks”). Melissa Silverstein argues in a 2012 *Washington Post* article:

That odious term now seems to describe all films about women, including those that were made before anyone was marketing movies to “chicks.” Even Academy Award winners such as *Terms of Endearment* and *Thelma and Louise* are labeled chick flicks...Chick flicks have created a kind of girl ghetto where all films about women have to fight for respect among reviewers and at the box office. (April 19, 2012)

Sheila O'Malley argues that in the book world, there is a specific process in which reviewing is segregated, further limiting the ways in which critics form their opinions. “Men review men and women are, well...if a woman has written a book, a woman is assigned to review it, and it's like this circle that keeps going...it's unbelievable that this still happens” (2013).

Another factor for understanding the limited space for women's film criticism is how the feminist viewpoint is considered a marginalized approach, even when feminist criticism aims to point out inequalities in the pursuit of parity in representation. Despite



the wealth of women in the audience and the prominence of feminist actors and spaces within popular culture, feminist film criticism does not occur in many mainstream publications and sites but does find its place in various online spaces. Melissa Silverstein's *Women in Hollywood* blog focuses on labor and industry specific issues affecting women in Hollywood, but also covers film criticism issues: BitchFlicks.com regularly reviews films from a feminist perspective; and in 2015, Marya E. Gates, who blogs at *Cinema Fanatic*, watched only films directed or written by women and documented this process. (Galo, 2015) Manohla Dargis occasionally writes from a feminist perspective, and although her reviews will often point to problematic representations, her most focused attention to women's issues appears not primarily in her reviews but in the feature essays about film culture. Dargis' essays have discussed the lack of representation of women behind the camera, and on the screen, a topic she returns to repeatedly over the years. At the end of 2014, she penned "It's a Men's, Men's, Men's World," which highlights that even though there are more female studio executives today, this in turn has not made a change in the number of women directing films in Hollywood or elsewhere in the United States. Dargis (2014) reports, "by the end of this year, the six major studios (not including their art-house divisions) will have released three movies directed by women. It's a number that should be a call to action" (December 28, 2014).

Carrie Rickey and Kiva Reardon, the two women in my study who have the most experience with writing professional film criticism, both understand the limitations of mainstream criticism and reviewing and left those positions behind for other forms of criticism which are more receptive to, and often invite, a feminist perspective. Reardon quit her position at *The Loop*, in part, since she felt limited in expressing her feminist

perspective in some of her writing. She notes that she always wanted to point of the gender politics of something, but does not think it is necessary for every film, for every audience. Reardon says, “I don’t think feminism is niche, and I don’t think gender politics are niche. I do think people perceive them to be that way.” Gender politics, however, are not usually front and center for professional critics, who must adhere to proprietary guidelines and editorial practices that limit not only space but also content, with much criticism being reduced to blurbs and star ratings. Yet, as Reardon believes, online writing can promote diversity:

For most, “online criticism” has become unjustly synonymous with—and I loathe using this sexist term—fanboy culture. This however, overlooks the vast opportunity writing has offered to other marginalized forms of criticism—feminist, Marxist, queer, genre cinema, to name a few” (as cited in Porton, 2013).

Thus, it can be argued that the ways in which film discourses circulate suggest that masculine or male constructions dominate not only the language of cinephilia and technophilia but also online film criticism.

### **Social Media and Networked Film Criticism**

It is impossible to overlook social media’s role in the entertainment industry and its reliance on film critics. Hollywood studios, celebrities, trade publications, fans, film critics and bloggers all jockey for position and prominence. Some 15% of online adults use Twitter as of February 2012, and 8% do so on a typical day. Although overall Twitter usage has nearly doubled since the Pew Research Center’s Internet & American Life Project first asked a stand-alone Twitter question in November 2010, the rise of smartphones might account for some of the uptick in usage because smartphone users are particularly likely to be using Twitter. (2012; Pew Internet) Twitter boasts 313 million monthly active users, with 82% of those users on mobile (Twitter.com, 2016).

Social media famously allowed the late Roger Ebert to continue to be a prolific critic and film commentator long after he lost his voice to throat cancer in 2006. (Seligman, 2011, n.p.) In 2011, Ebert logged 300 reviews and was one of the internet's most followed Tweeters. *New Yorker* film critics Anthony Lane and David Denby do not currently use Twitter, but Richard Brody, the movies editor for the elite magazine's "Goings On About Town" section, is a prolific Twitter user, with more than 28,000 followers and an engaged presence who often interacts with other critics on a variety of topics, from French New Wave directors and actors to the latest Dardennes film and occasionally comments on Hollywood fare from Jason Reitman. Thus Twitter is not simply used by mainstream reviewers but a variety of film critics, and cinephilic bloggers who have a vested interest not only in films but film criticism itself.

Dana Stevens, film critic for *Slate*, discussed the role of Twitter in the film criticism landscape on a Tribeca Institute panel called "Film Criticism in the Age of Twitter" (2013). She sees that Twitter can be valuable as a "space of writing freedom," and a place for "the exchange of ideas...markers for future conversations, a space where vital conversations about movies can happen." Yet she also notes the presence of "annoying upmanship," which can be tuned out by blocking or unfollowing users and taking the time to manage and massage your feed. (Stevens, 2013).

According to Susan Herring (2012), Twitter is a space where men still exhibit more authority than women, and in some cases, hostility toward them. For example, "men's tweets are retweeted more often, especially by men, even though women post more tweets overall (Mashable 2012). Blogs by men are more likely to be reported in mass media as well (Herring, 2004). Moreover, women are still disproportionately the

targets of online verbal harassment, and incidents of threatening communication when women “speak up” on social media “continue to deter women’s participations in online environments” (Marwick, 2013, n.p.).

The conflict that erupts on Twitter is not solely gendered but is often the nature of the medium. Film critic Nick James (2014) writes in an editorial that:

Some critics do seriously seem to think it’s their tech-given right to gang up and enforce opinion on any given film, to call out these who ‘get it wrong,’ as if commenting on film was an entirely Manichean business of good/bad, right/wrong name-calling. There’s a kind of arrant high-horseism to some exchanges that, for me, make commentators look weak and self-glorifying.

Most of the critics in this study use Twitter or Facebook personally, but have varying ideas about using it professionally. Amy Monaghan does not use Twitter to promote her blog, but to start or continue discussions with other like-minded bloggers and critics. She recounts how in 2006, she helped organize a commentary roundup aptly titled “The Conversation,” in which she and Dana Stevens (prior to her film critic post at *Slate*), Andrew Grant, and Aaron Hillis discussed their thoughts on the Golden Globes for five days. This usage of Twitter illustrates the ways in which film critics can build networks and community, which is especially important for women, who have often been marginalized in exclusive cinephilic spaces.

However, the film bloggers in this study often admit that social media’s usefulness has limitations. Reardon says that Twitter is really good for breaking news, and for self-promotion, and O’Malley notes that Twitter is excellent for real-time news as well. But both Reardon and O’Malley do not use Facebook extensively for cross-promotional purposes. O’Malley and Smith Nehme notice that comments on their respective blogs have diminished and most have migrated to social media platforms. Smith Nehme states, “I’ve always had a thriving comments section but even I have

noticed that the volume of comments has gone way down.” Smith Nehme notes, rather ironically, that it was during an exchange on Facebook with other bloggers that they all agreed that there was a distinct lack of comments, regardless of whether their blogs were low or high traffic blogs. Further, Smith Nehme observes that:

A lot of the conversations have moved to Facebook. There’ll be big conversations when I post a link on my Facebook page, a lot of them go there to talk, both social media (have) kind of siphoned off some of the comment activity I think for everybody lately. (2013)

O’Malley sees the shift to social media from blogs as an evolution of how people experience the web and consume information. O’Malley recalls a time when her early posts received nearly 70 comments, which she finds does not exist anymore for personal sites like hers—30 comments is sizeable for *The Sheila Variations* these days. While Twitter has helped more readers find her blogs, those who visited her site did so out of personal interest; now, that is not true:

It’s just a different environment now in terms of the conversation that happens... this is the other sort of change, a sea change in the whole culture, is that people used to just come to my site as a destination. I think they would just—and I think there are still some people who do—“Oh, let me go see what Sheila’s talking about”—but there are people on Twitter who probably would never visit me if I didn’t link to it.

This change can be partly attributed to the shift from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0—technological changes which have in turn changed the social functions of new media. Web 1.0 is primarily considered a more static and “passive” space where information is posted, while Web 2.0 is considered a more active space where users create content and other media, and these technologies of the web mean that is shared widely via social media. Terry Flew (2008) characterizes the shift as a “move from personal websites to blogs and blog site aggregation, from publishing to participation, from web content as the outcome

of large up-front investment to an ongoing and interactive process, and from content management systems to links based on tagging (folksonomy)” (p. 19).

While it is possible that the shift to social media has expanded the audience for certain critics and bloggers, it comes at a price. Reardon says she is trying to cut back on her time on Twitter, because she “finds the sort of hyper-competitiveness of it really taxing, and I would rather not partake in it all the time. So I’ve been stepping back from engaging in, what I find, are very petty, inane arguments.” Twitter is known for igniting debates or exacerbating them, from news to politics to pop culture and beyond. A CNN feature on anger in the ‘Twitterverse’ cites a variety of scholars that highlight why Twitter, more so than other social media spaces, sparks some intolerance, anger, and sometimes outrage. Anger is considered the most predominant of emotions found online, according to Chinese researchers in the article, and users’ impulsiveness paired with the site’s relative lack of accountability only serve to add fuel to the fire (Leopold, 2013). Leslie Withers, a communications professor at Central Michigan University, notes that people consciously use Twitter to provoke or get reactions from others. “It’s like a popularity contest: If you can put something out there that’s quick and inflammatory and it gets retweeted a ton, that’s your feedback—that’s how you know that it was an interesting or effective tweet” (as cited in Leopold, 2013).

Lindbergs has an even more contentious relationship with social media, which has made her completely rethink how she uses it going forward. In 2013 her blog, *Cinebeats*, went on hiatus, and returned on a different blog platform:

I’ve been re-evaluating the way I use social media because I realized that a lot of the men (often professional film journalists or film bloggers themselves) who were commenting on the photos I uploaded to sites like Facebook and Twitter

were not interested in my writing. They never commented on my blog posts but they had no problem commenting on my photos, which I find unnerving. (2013)

Catherine Grant's experience on Twitter is dramatically different, which she attributes to her presence not as a personal one but specifically as her blog, *Film Studies for Free*, and the lack of clear identity markers. Grant notes that her online presence as FSFF used an image of Faye Wong in *Chungking Express*, (Kar-wai, 1994) but she changed the image to one of Jake Gyllenhaal in *Brokeback Mountain* (Lee, 2006). Outside of friends and colleagues, Grant wonders if people really know that I'm a woman...I'm not sure how visible I am anymore to especially new audiences around gender." For Grant, Twitter has been a positive space devoid of personal conflict, and a space that offers her "the most lively feedback," in part because her readers are thankful for the content and resources she provides. Grant argues that on Twitter, there are a lot of women (who are cinephiles and scholars), and it a space where you can easily find women. Grant observes that:

Female tweeters in the film and media studies community are very prominent and great. I think when Twitter started then, in a sense, women's contributions to this became very visible. And it became really easy to be in touch with people, even easier than it had been through blogger. Microblogging has been a huge boon, I think, to women's participation in this (online film culture). It's a much more dynamic community. (2013)

For Grant, many of the obstacles faced by other film critics are stripped away, because not only is her gendered identity masked, but most of her intended audience is composed of scholars, which reduces the possibility and presence of trolls.

Many of the bloggers in this study know each other, comment on each other's blogs and social media profiles, include each other in blog rolls, and cite each other as critical influences in terms of subject and style. It can be easily argued that these bloggers constitute what Chuck Tryon (2009) calls the "networked film public"—a space where

community-building activities occur, in “which individuals engage in significant debates without needing the resources of a major media outlet” (p.144). These blogs correspond to Tryon’s definition of ‘cinophile blogs,’ in that these blogs are more likely to focus on neglected filmmakers or genres, which, “often provoke public debate about certain films and filmmakers, sometimes leading to the re-evaluation of films that were dismissed by professional critics” (p. 144). This is clearly evident in the work of Kimberly Lindbergs and Farran Smith Nehme, who both champion films from an earlier era (horror films of the ‘70s and women’s films from the ‘30s and ‘40s, respectively), although Marilyn Ferdinand and Kiva Reardon often focus on neglected filmmakers past and present in their writings as well. Catherine Grant notes that when she started blogging she was inspired by others, in particular Farran Smith Nehme and her third person approach, noting that her writing is “very funny, erudite, and moving.” Grant interacted with Smith Nehme and Ferdinand through their blog-a-thon work, and notes that she’s had lots of contact with the ‘cinetrix’ (Amy Monaghan) over the years, as she’s someone who’s “been incredibly encouraging of my work.”

The networked nature of these cinephilic blogs encourages collaboration both planned and accidental. Aside from the obvious collaboration involved with putting together an annual blog-a-thon (which will be discussed in more detail in a later chapter), Smith Nehme notes that collaboration happens accidentally, but naturally, when reading and commenting on other cinephilic blogs:

One thing I like about blogging is that often a good blog (to me) tends to talk to other blogs, right? So there are times when somebody like Sheila O’Malley or Glenn Kenny or Kim Morgan of *Sunset Gun* have just written something I thought was really interesting, and so I riff on it, take it in another direction, and link back to the original blog...that’s good blogging manners. (2013)



Smith Nehme describes a process in which a conversation about film culture can take place across blogs and, as Tryon (2009) argues, this networked film culture can build community and expand knowledge: “These conversations, facilitated by a variety of social networking tools and by activities such as film blog-a-thons, have also enabled cinephiles not only to expand their knowledge of film but to cultivate a large community of people thinking and writing about film” (p. 148).

### **The Writing Process**

Blogging may be a voluntary activity but for these women, writing is mandatory, a passionate compulsion for self-expression. It is space to keep the brain and its critical faculties limber and for self-edification, all while maintaining an active connection to an audience. Smith Nehme notes that she had the notion of having a blog first, and then decided she would write about film. She felt she had to keep her writing in shape, and a blog would be a way to stretch herself, a way to organize her thoughts in a more coherent way than she had through other online activities. Smith Nehme notes that, “I was losing my ability to express myself, I was spending a lot of time on chat boards, and I felt like I had this sort of slangy ‘LOL writing’—which had so infected my brain that it would be the only kind I could do” (2013).

For O’Malley, writing about books and movies seemed like a logical next step after blogging about more personal issues, as they were already a big part of her life. She notes that gaining an audience who commented on her posts was a “confidence builder,” and she started writing obsessively about favorite actors, especially Cary Grant, reviewing performances of all of his films. While she does not look back on these posts with any particular pride (with posts such as “The top 5 moments that I love Cary

Grant”), like Smith Nehme, this writing became a consistent practice and helped her gain recognition from other bloggers and publications in the film community, leading to many freelance film criticism assignments.

### **Conclusion**

The women in this study reveal that writing film criticism online is a complicated task, made more difficult due to the unique obstacles posed in the convergent era. The female film critic must be hyper-aware of her audience in ways that their male counterparts may not consider their readers. This is not to make an essentialist argument or to romanticize the role of women film critics. Women as bloggers must assert their positions and take advantage of the networked nature of blogs. Many online film communities and spaces often show evidence of male-dominated discourses. Karen Boyle (2014), in her study of gendered audience response to popular comedies, finds that “IMDb is a male-dominated space where male-oriented narratives appealing to male audiences are more highly valued than their female equivalents” (p. 36). In her qualitative analysis of user reviews of six films, one of her most notable findings are the higher concentration of male-identified writers overall. (Boyle, p. 38) Similarly, *Buzzfeed* film critic Alison Wilmore notes that IMDb’s Top 250 (by users) include mostly male-driven films, while more women’s focused films with just as much critical acclaim are nearly forgotten. Wilmore states in an interview with *Lydia* magazine that, “When you have a particularly uniform group of people who are dominating the discussion in terms of what is good, what is worthy, what is quality, it inevitably tends to get skewed in one direction” (cited in Everson, 2014). Kate Everson remarks that while this is not from established critics themselves, it still “acts as evidence to how male-centric criticism has

formed audience's opinions of what constitutes the best cinema" (2014). The work of female film critics and bloggers serves as an intervention for film criticism, which requires more diversity and attention to 51% of the American population.

## CHAPTER 5

### BLOGGING AS CRITICAL WOMEN'S CINEPHILIA

This chapter provides a textual analysis of the writing of my eight interview subjects, which will explore each critic's chosen subject matter and the ways in which they articulate and craft a personal voice. To collect my data, I followed all of my bloggers for a period of three weeks in November 2013. The most prolific and substantial writing came from Sheila O'Malley, who posted often on a variety of subjects beyond film such as theater and books, and often cross-posted her reviews from RogerEbert.com. Other bloggers were less frequent, however, and writers Carrie Rickey and Farran Smith Nehme published reviews and features at other sites during the collection period, which will be included in this study.<sup>18</sup>

In this analysis, I examine each critic's style and voice, and consider the space each writer occupies in public discourse. My usage of the term "discourse" is Foucauldian, in that "representation and discourses are themselves acts of power, acts of division and exclusion, which gives themselves as knowledge" (Martin, 1988; p. 9).

Criticism and discourse for women is shaped by their alternate position (one could say, Othered position) in society in general. The "Othering" of women in public discourse is connected to understanding the public sphere as partly dependent on an essentialist view of women and men, and some forms of communication that are thus privileged are a result of essentialist influences. (Griffin, 1996; p. 21) When women speak in public, not only are they not considered authoritative, but they also do not possess

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<sup>18</sup> Amy Monaghan did not write at all during this period, but I will examine some of her posts which specifically address women or gender representation in film, which she labels with the heading, "I Enjoy Being a Girl."

expertise; alternative views on subjects are discredited as ignorance (Beard, 2014). As classics scholar Mary Beard notes, “It’s not *what* you say that prompts it, it’s the fact you’re saying it” (2014, para.15). While scholarly practices of feminist criticism remain protected to some extent by the Ivory Tower and feminist scholarly practices are encouraged, as witnessed by the longevity and value placed on significant journals such as *Camera Obscura*, *Signs*, and *Feminist Cultural Studies*, the circulation of criticism (and specifically feminist criticism) is not received in the same way in popular or mainstream culture. Meaghan Morris argues that, “transforming discursive material that otherwise leaves a woman no place from which to speak, or nothing to say... actively assumes that the movement of women to a position of power in discourse is a political necessity, and a practical problem” (Morris, 1988, p. 5). If film criticism is construed as a space of activism, then it follows that women need to find ways to establish more discursive power, a process that is also both ‘political and practical.’ Bidy Martin (1988) argues in reference to feminist scholars that,

Unlike many of the male critics, feminists are quite consciously involved in systematically articulating the extent to which woman has been situated very differently with respect to the “human,” to “Man,” than has man; and feminist analyses demonstrate ever more convincingly that woman’s silence and exclusion from struggles over representation have been the condition of possibility for humanist thought. (p.13)

This exclusion, not only from discourses but also from a culture that universalizes men, shapes how women understand who they are and affects the formation of their identities, including those of writer, critic, and scholar. Feminists are constantly aware of difference, exclusion, and symbolic annihilation that both consciously and also subconsciously shape their approach to the world and to mediated culture.

This chapter examines the way in which female film critics and bloggers challenge accepted meanings through their interpretations of media texts and their contributions to the networked film public, and their understanding that their position as women is a marginalized position to film culture, public discourse, and convergence culture.

### **Reardon and the Feminist Space of *cléo***

Based in Toronto, Kiva Reardon is the only non-blogger of the group. While she does maintain a web site, it is primarily used to collectively showcase the freelance writing she does for a variety of film publications in the U.S. and in Canada. In her staff position at *The Loop*, (which ended in 2014) Reardon wrote reviews, interviews, and short pop culture pieces. Reardon's film reviews were limited in length (never topping 320 words), and followed a strict three-paragraph format. In addition, reviews on *The Loop* were always given a grade rating. Despite these limitations, Reardon made efforts to tease out the specificities of a performance or narrative. Writing about Matthew McConaughey in *Dallas Buyers Club*, Reardon contends that his character "could have been overwrought, McConaughey avoids easy sentimentality in his performance. Instead, he captures both a hardened sense of desperation, while emitting a charming and cocky posturing that masks a fragility" (Reardon, 2013, n.p.). Her reviews exhibit her thorough knowledge of a director, genre, or original source material (for adaptations) while focusing on performances and the effectiveness of a narrative.

But Reardon's freelance work allows her to engage with subjects of her own choosing and in these spaces she has the opportunity to write longer pieces that focus on some of her favorite directors or to explore gender politics. In a piece for online film site

*Fandor*, Reardon writes a preview of a TIFF Cinematheque Series, “The Cinema of Claire Denis,” highlighting key films and their connections to each other. While at times Reardon may romanticize the director for whom she has an affinity (she interviews Denis for her own film journal, *cléo*), the essay illuminates her comprehensive knowledge of Denis’ oeuvre while also discussing the criticism that Denis sometimes faces. Denis has made films in a variety of genres, which Reardon argues has led to a “near constant subversion of expectations over her career” (Oct. 10 2013). Reardon notes that “without getting into the problematic (i.e. limiting nature of the gender-qualified “female filmmaker” title), there are critical and social expectations of what (the few working) women directors should make” (Oct. 10, 2013). This echoes O’Malley’s concerns about women getting boxed into only certain kinds of books, or films—an essentialist notion of a “female ghetto,” as discussed in a previous chapter.

Reardon writes vividly about how Denis is captivated by the body in her work: These bodies are, as the title of the forthcoming retrospective succinctly put it, ‘Objects of Desire.’ Her films, however, are not marked by a purely lustful gaze or mere aesthetic beauty...they are often described for their affective qualities, being called “sensual” and “visceral,” suggesting that have the power to touch and transform our own skin...They are not merely watched, but also felt. (October 10, 2013)

Reardon finds her voice in the feminist film journal *cléo*, which she claims was partly inspired by the work of Claire Denis (November 28, 2013) *cléo* is named after Agnes Varda’s central female character in her New Wave classic *Cléo from 5 to 7* (1962). Reardon started the journal because she was “irked by the lack of feminist perspectives in film criticism, as well as female bylines in review sections” (April 2, 2013). Reardon’s goal for the journal is not simply to define what feminist film might be or even to define feminism itself, but to “treat the ever-increasingly disparaged term as a powerful and organic concept; a movement that can provide rich critical fodder” (April 2, 2013). In her

editor's note for her third issue, she laments the 'watered-down' versions of feminism that appear in today's media, citing films like Noah Baumbach's *Frances Ha* (2012) and Lena Dunham's *Girls* and critically finds:

These few examples illustrate that what was once a radical and politically inspiring movement has been reduced to pink-washing, the notion of consumption as emancipation, and the rhetoric of individual choice above all else. Feminism has been simplified to fit the status quo. (April 2, 2013)

Reardon's observation is an incisive way to describe the contours of post-feminism, not a theory or wave but a 'sensibility,' the idea that equality has been achieved, feminism as collective action is no longer needed, and that all women are free to make any choice they want. (Gill 2007; Levine, 2013)

### **The Actor's Critic**

Sheila O'Malley is a diversified writer and blogger. She writes for at least two hours each day and her posts explore films, books, plays, and television. She also writes several reviews per month for rogerebert.com, which she cross-posts to *The Sheila Variations*. O'Malley writes long reviews that are detailed, focused on actors and characters and the moments in films that bring them to life. For RogerEbert.com, O'Malley reviews contemporary films but not always big budget Hollywood films, opting instead to write about small character-driven independents or documentaries. At her blog, she writes about both old and new films but always invests her time at character development and performance. O'Malley's background as a trained actor informs her writing approach, and she often chooses to write about films that have an extensive focus on actors. This style is not about celebrity or star fandom, as many of the films she reviews feature unknown actors or offbeat roles. O'Malley does consider a performer's previous work and their persona both onscreen and off. In her review of *All is Lost*



(Chandor, 2013), starring Robert Redford, she notes his bare-bones approach: “The performance is based around doing, not feeling. There are a couple moments of sheer feeling, but that’s it. Everything else is problem-solving, surviving, and improvising his way out of one disaster after another” (Nov. 18, 2013). O’Malley highlights his minimalist performance of a mysterious character who’s given no backstory. This realistic approach perfectly suits the singular nature of the film, which focuses on Redford’s character trying to survive in a slowly sinking yacht during a horrific storm with no one else to help (a typical “man vs. nature” scenario). O’Malley explores how we respond to films with famous actors (applicable to any number of films):

Because he is played by Robert Redford, we already come to him with all kinds of associations, powerful, resonant. Half of the film is us projecting all of our stuff onto him. The great movie stars all may be talented charismatic individuals but what they all do best is act as projector screens for our associations/dreams. (Nov. 18, 2013)

Many other reviews also focus on the performances of actors. O’Malley avoids writing about Fassbinder’s *The Marriage of Maria Braun* from an auteurist perspective but instead carefully articulates the work of actress Hannah Schygulla in the title role. O’Malley applauds Schygulla’s transformation as Maria Braun, and says it is:

nothing short of incredible and brings to mind the great and in-depth “women’s pictures of the Hollywood Studio Era, film likes *The Damned Don’t Cry* or anything starring Bette Davis or Joan Crawford: where female experience was given a privileged status in the storytelling apparatus of the day. (Nov. 16, 2013)

O’Malley highlights her knowledge of film history, lamenting the lack of films with serious roles for women as protagonists. She argues that the film would not have worked without Schygulla, and might have been “seen as a sex farce and satire...The plot points in the film are “not as important as HOW it happens” (Nov. 16, 2013). O’Malley is not put off by the gender politics of Schygulla’s role: “Some see the portrayal of Maria Braun

as misogynistic, the rapacious woman. I see it more as a critique of capitalism and what it does to women in its clutches” (Nov. 16, 2013). While some have argued that Maria Braun is a femme fatale, a sexual predator of sorts, O’Malley argues that she makes the first move (toward her boss), “because she then maintains the upper hand. Maria Braun is a capable intelligent woman. She ends up dominating the business she infiltrates through her sexual allure. She does what she needs to do to survive...This is no victim” (Nov. 16, 2013).

O’Malley does not romanticize the role of the actor in film performances without providing the reader with evidence through descriptive attention to small details, scenes, or actor inflections. In her review of the independent film *The Motel Life*, (Polsky and Polsky, 2014) she writes at length on the lead actors, Stephen Dorff (Jerry Lee) and Emile Hirsch (Frank). In reference to Dorff’s performance:

Is a damn near masterpiece of pathos, bringing “The Motel Life” into “Of Mice and Men” territory, clearly one of the story’s original influences. When Frank steals a dog, and tells Jerry Lee about it, Dorff’s face cracks in a childlike smile that is almost unbearable to witness in its uninhibited joy, saying, “We always wanted a dog!” The “We” is eloquent. (Nov. 8, 2013)

O’Malley’s writing reveals her affection for the film, its characters, and for the process of writing itself. Her mode of film criticism is also prescriptive to the reader, suggesting the ways one should watch a film in order to appreciate its essence.

Overall, O’Malley’s film criticism is generous, often forgiving films for their structural weaknesses if it has been rescued in part by one or two strong performances. While she pays most attention to acting ability and character development, this does not mean she ignores other elements, such as cinematography and musical score. In her review of *King of Herrings* (2013; co-directed by Sean Richardson and Eddie Jamison) a micro-budget, independent film centered on the lives of four buddies (in their 40s) going

about their lives in New Orleans. O'Malley says it is a compliment that the film "looks and feels of a gritty art film from the late 1950s, early 1960s" (Nov. 2, 2013). In her second paragraph, she discusses how the cinematographer has an eye for lifting up the mundane: "Shots are framed with elegance and thought, adding emotional heft to a simple scene of a wife cooking eggs for her husband, or a guy washing his hands in the restroom." These scenes show us the "emotional underbelly, its deeper subtext... The camera angles and interesting framing elevates *King of Herrings* from realism into something loaded with symbolism and surrealism" (Nov. 2, 2013).

O'Malley examines the characters in regards to their class and life cycle positions: "guys who play poker until they are thrown out of dive bars"—but argues that the film does not condemn or sentimentalize these characters, but "presents them, warts and all" (Nov. 2, 2013). O'Malley's extensive and comprehensive review also points to the characters' relationship to women in film, one that is framed by their own immaturity and limited space in life:

These are guys who see women as frighteningly "Other." Women are weak, and therefore to be held in contempt, and yet also they have power over men, because men desire them. It's a double-bind, and the two women in the film, Mary and "Evie," (Ditch's sister, played by Andrea Frankle) are both trapped. It's a man's world, they're just living in it. (Nov.2, 2013)

O'Malley examines the main character Ditch (played by co-director Eddie Jemison) who she notes is a "bully and a misogynist" but more specifically, "Ditch thinks that by controlling his woman, and controlling his friends...he will stave off death" (Nov. 2, 2013). She makes the distinction between a film that could be read as misogynist to instead note that misogyny is embodied by the main character and shapes his entire perspective on the world (but not necessarily the film's.) Further, she notes how the main character is "ugly to his wife," "appallingly cruel to his friends," and yet the film "does

not try to elevate or romanticize him” (Nov. 2, 2013). The film does not reward the character for these behaviors but instead highlights their ugliness—O’Malley notes that she simply pities him. O’Malley’s strength as a critic is to tease out characters and their motivations, and how actors embody them in ways that appear to supersede the director’s intention. In her criticism, O’Malley seeks to find and explore the best performance, nuance, or characterization she can find in almost every film she writes about, and avoids making broad judgments for and against directors, genres, or filmmaking styles. While she points out a series of characterizations that might suggest misogyny, ultimately she never strives to make gender politics the central aspect of her reviews.

### **Marilyn Ferdinand and the Female Director**

Marilyn Ferdinand posted only three reviews in November 2013 at *Ferdy on Films* (her blog partner, Roderick Heath, posted four reviews in that month). However, the reviews allowed her to connect two films thematically: *Hannah Arendt* (von Trotta, 2012) and *The Headless Woman* (Martel, 2008). Each film presents a female protagonist with a moral and philosophical dilemma, leaving the burden of judgment to the audience. In her review of *Hannah Arendt*, Ferdinand opens her review by noting the film’s critical flaw: not introducing characters through adequate contextual biographical information. She points to a reference to Gurs (a refugee camp) that is introduced when one character, Heinrich, mentions it to Arendt, but is never explained to the audience: “I thought he was talking about a lover or a husband!” (Nov. 3, 2013). Ferdinand argues that “it seems that through its assumption of knowledge on the part of the audience, this movie was intended for an elite or German crowd, though its deep adherence to the stodgy conventions of the biopic would argue otherwise” (Nov. 3, 2013).

But Ferdinand does have praise for the film as well, in particular for the actress Barbara Sukowa in her role as the philosopher Arendt. Ferdinand argues that “what works best in this film and what makes it worth seeking out is the very thing that may have made it seem undramatic in the eyes of its creators—the ideas Arendt formulated about the banality of evil” (Nov. 3, 2013). Arendt’s famous argument in her coverage of the Eichmann trial was that Eichmann was simply an efficient bureaucrat dedicated to Hitler’s ideals but seemingly far removed from the moral implications of his deeds, who did not see his place in The Final Solution and who had lost his ability to think for himself. A film that tries to illustrate abstract ideas such as these takes on a great task, but Ferdinand, in examining how it does this, also succeeds by noting, “Sukowa is as intelligent an actress as her character was a theorist, and you can actually see the wheels of thought turning as she watches a closed-circuit feed of Eichmann’s trial from the pressroom” (Nov. 3, 2013).

Ferdinand does not romanticize the filmmaker or Sukowa, but notes how such difficult material has been made more accessible through a competent and compelling performance. A week later, Ferdinand writes a detailed review of Lucretia Martel’s 2008 film, *The Headless Woman*, connecting the two films as enigmatic studies of characters’ inner life. She suggests early in this review that “As scary as it sounds, what would happen if we could actually experience the world as Eichmann did, from inside his head?” (Nov. 13, 2013). She applies this concept to Martel’s film, which involves Verónica (Veró for short), who is involved in a mysterious driving accident and is unsure if she has hit a boy and his dog while driving distractedly one day. In the days which follow the accident, which is never spelled out or even shown, Veró contends with the

guilt of what she has done and what she should do next, all while making a somewhat mysterious transformation. Ferdinand notes that “the terrible burden of moral culpability is what is on display in *The Headless Woman*...The withholding of information, the shards of relationships glimpsed in Arendt could not discover the mysteries of Eichmann, so here we cannot determine the whole experience of Veró’s trauma” (Nov. 13, 2013).

Ferdinand’s attention to character, plot, and narrative detail is informative and keeps the reader engaged and interested in seeing the films she critiques; however, in some cases her level of detail goes a bit too far, veering into spoiler territory. Ferdinand’s posts in this selection highlighted the work of women in two female-directed films, yet she does not romanticize or essentialize such work or use auteurist language or structures to discuss each film. However, given the opportunity to discuss both women and their careers in context, it is interesting that Ferdinand chooses not to engage with this particular aspect, given her self-proclaimed view as a feminist film critic, as noted in an earlier chapter. In addition, Ferdinand does not critique gender relations of any kind here, or present any consideration of stereotypes. It is possible that there were no such problems for Ferdinand to witness, in part due to each films’ less conventional, traditional approach to cinema (both films made outside of Hollywood), or to each film’s direction by a woman. This is not to suggest that feminist criticism only appears to highlight problematic sexual and gendered representations, but to question what feminist film criticism looks like and what it can accomplish. Bloggers often seek out films which they know they will enjoy, not films that might be more likely to be offensive or uninteresting.

Ferdinand and O'Malley are both vocal about their feminism and support of women in the industry—for greater representation on screen, behind the camera, and in writing film criticism. However, this does not always mean that their identification as feminists results in what we would typically identify as feminist film criticism. While I cannot definitively make this argument with such a small sample of reviews and blog posts, it is clear that their goals for film criticism are much broader in scope.

### **Blogathons as Cinephilic Activism**

Marilyn Ferdinand's blogging interests also include film preservation, and she has organized, participated in, and written dozens of posts over the years for film preservation blogathons. Marilyn Ferdinand and Farran Smith Nehme have hosted and participated in three film preservation blogathons since 2010, and both show enormous pride in this work to raise awareness and funds to support the important work of film preservation.

To understand this context, a blogathon is defined as an online event during which participating bloggers write one or more posts on a theme chosen by the host. The host blogger links each entry written for the blogathon on one central post on his or her blog. People who visit the host blog thus have a "table of contents" from which to go to read as many blog posts as they want. In turn, each participating blogger links back to the central post so that readers who want to see what else has been written for the blogathon can find that information easily and quickly.

The first blogathon in 2010 supported the restoration of two Westerns, *The Sergeant* (Boggs, 1910), which contains the earliest narrative footage from Yosemite, and *The Better Man* (Pattullo, 1915) a short film from Vitagraph with tinted intertitles. Both

films were rediscovered at the New Zealand Film Archive, and thanks in part to the money raised (more than \$30,000, which including matching funds), they were included in the *National Film Preservation's Box set, Treasures 5: The West 1898-1938*, which was released the following year.

In its second year, the blogathon, once again hosted by Ferdinand and Nehme, raised preservation funds for the Film Noir Foundation to restore *The Sound of Fury*, a 1950 thriller starring Lloyd Bridges and directed by blacklisted filmmaker Cy Endfield. While this blogathon was not as popular as the first, it still attracted dozens of film bloggers, including writers such as James Wolcott at *Vanity Fair* and Kim Morgan of the blog *Sunset Gun*, whose post on *Jacques Tourneur's Nightfall (1957)* was cross-posted on *The Huffington Post's* site, which brought more awareness to the blogathon.

In 2012, Ferdinand and Smith Nehme once again partnered with The National Film Preservation Foundation (NFPF) for a new blogathon, this time to support access to New Zealand's restoration project of *The White Shadow*, directed by Graham Cutts but perhaps more notable because Alfred Hitchcock wrote the film's scenario, designed the sets, and edited the footage, all while serving as assistant director to Cutts. (Hudson, 2012) Because restored films often cannot be shown outside of a museum or festival setting, it becomes difficult for these films to be seen by the public or a larger audience. In June 2012, the film site *Fandor* pledged to match the amount raised by this blogathon (\$6,000) and to host the film's web premiere on their site.

Ferdinand and Smith Nehme's work shows their commitment to film preservation, film blogging, and building awareness of neglected films through writing. The work of soliciting posts, organizing links, promoting and participating in the



blogathon itself as well as managing its technical aspects is all work that these bloggers do that is uncompensated. This dedication to film and its preservation can also be constructed as cinephilic activism. In the process of doing this work, Ferdinand and Smith Nehme have also raised their profiles in film criticism circles as these blogathons have helped to expand their network of film fans as well as making connections to other bloggers from around the world. In many ways, the network created and expanded by the blogathon has provided a space in which each bloggers' cultural authority and knowledge of the subject remain unchallenged, devoid of some of the gendered comments that might occur in other online spaces. The blogathons invite a very specific type of fan or reader that is less likely to troll their work but instead celebrate the efforts and achievements of these bloggers.

### **Lindbergs, the B-film Fan**

Kimberly Lindbergs did not actively blog at her personal site, *Cinebeats*, during my data collection period but blogged regularly on Wednesdays in November at *Movie Morlocks.com*, a companion blog for classic film cable channel TCM. Lindbergs is one of a dozen contributors to the blog, all who write posts to support TCM programming by highlighting directors, crafting incisive film histories, or discussing films in their generic context. Lindbergs personal interest in films from the '60s and '70s guides her contributions to the site, as does her interest in horror and B films. Lindbergs is the obvious choice to cover and preview TCM's Halloween themed-programming, and writes a detailed post on Vincent Price and Roger Corman. Her October 31 post highlights the work of Price in Corman's "Poe Cycle" of films, loosely based on classic Edgar Allen Poe stories, suggesting that it was Price's distinctive performances that made

these films successful and why they are now considered classics. In this post, Lindbergs underscores Price and Corman's personal reflections on what it was like on these low-budget films that often were finished in a mere few weeks. Lindbergs writes, "Vincent Price struts and preens through these period productions with complete confidence. He seems to relish every moment that he is in front of the camera and no matter how bizarre and bloody the proceedings get, Price offers a steady hand and a distinct voice to guide us through Corman's creative take on Poe's macabre tales" (October 31, 2013). While the post is a curated collection of quotes from Price and Corman, Lindbergs reveals unusual details from a variety of the Poe cycle films, from *The Haunted Palace* (1963) to *Masque of the Red Death* (1964) and *Tomb of Ligeia* (1964)—in this last, one key film set had walls coated with liquid cement, highly flammable materials which went up in flames one someone walked on and lit a match.

Lindbergs taps into key details as well in her post the following week on the auction event of materials from *The Maltese Falcon* as well as many other classic films in "What Dreams Are Made of: A Century of Movie Magic at Auction," curated by TCM. This post is another in which Lindbergs does not write extensively, but curates a collection of items carefully crafted for the film buffs who read *The Movie Morlocks* site. The remainder of this post is her personal own cinephilic selection of photos detailing the items in the catalog, which run from photos of the falcon statue used in *The Maltese Falcon* (Huston, 1945), Edith Head costume sketches for Elvis Presley, and the 1940 Buick Phaeton seen in both *Casablanca* (1942) and *High Sierra* (1941). She includes images of a painting Bela Lugosi commissioned of Clara Bow, to highlight his short-lived romance with the actress while touring the stage production of *Dracula* in 1927.

Other items selected based on her personal fascination with them include the apron Joan Crawford wore in *Mildred Pierce* (Curtiz, 1945); Mia Farrow's nightgown in *Rosemary's Baby* (Polanski, 1968); and the prop can from 1973's *Soylent Green* (Fleischer).

In subsequent entries, Lindbergs writes in more extensive detail about films that are being shown on TCM. On November 14, her post reviews the controversial film *House on Straw Hill* (also known as "Expose, directed by James Kenelm Clarke, 1976), a film that was part of the 1980s British "video nasty" scare, in which a moral panic is created when it was discovered that many graphic horror films meant for American grindhouses and drive-ins were renting in UK stores. (Nov. 14, 2013) The film was banned in the UK for 30 years. The timing of the review coincides with its re-release in the US on DVD and Blu-Ray, and Lindbergs notes her interest in the film comes from its inclusion in *The Encyclopedia of Horror Movies* edited by Phil Hardy, one of a handful of film-related books she read "religiously" in the early '90s. Also appealing to Lindbergs was how the film starred cult film favorite Udo Kier and was produced by Brian Smedley-Aston, who Lindbergs notes has a reputation for unusual, offbeat psychotronic (low budget sci-fi or horror) films.

While Lindbergs is a fan of horror and especially interested in obscure, offbeat titles, her review suggests in the first paragraph that this much anticipated "wasn't the lost treasure I was anticipating but in also wasn't the debauched disaster that so many critics claimed it was" (Nov. 14, 2013). The film centers on a writer who moves into an isolated home in the country in order to finish his latest book. A secretary sent by his publisher arrives to help with typing and organizing the manuscript, and later, the writer's

girlfriend shows up as well. The darkness and violence comes into play as the secretary begins a killing spree, sparked by revenge on two men who rape her.

Lindbergs' knowledge of the horror genre as well as many other key films of the '60s and '70s precisely situates this film within its genre, and her authority on its conventions and historical significance brings richness to the review. She notes that it:

borrows ideas from a handful of better movies including *Psycho* (Hitchcock, 1960), *A Quiet Place in the Country* (Petri, 1968) and *Straw Dogs* (Peckinpah, 1971) but it isn't anywhere near as creative or challenging as the films it apes. And while it does share a lot in common with some Italian giallo thrillers, the claustrophobic nature of the plot limits its scope. (Nov. 14, 2013)

Further, Lindbergs concentrates on the performances of Kier and Hayden, and says of the latter that "few actresses can manage to be utterly alluring and utterly terrifying at the same time, but that was Hayden's M.O...which made her a favorite among horror film aficionados" (Nov. 14, 2013).

These posts link to personal interest and anecdote, and it becomes clear that TCM encourages its bloggers to bring their personal passions as well as personal history to the review and criticism process. In many ways, this highly personalized mode reflects TCM's desire to show that their bloggers are not only experts but also fans. This is part of their overall strategy for attracting and maintaining their audience, and Alison Trope (2012) argues that niche cable programming (such as what can be found on AMC and TCM), strategically tap into a historical concept of "high" film culture, soliciting viewers as cinephiles and fans. (p. 130) TCM and AMC consciously developed a programming model based on a traditional film canon designed to elicit and confirm cinephilia and nostalgia for "classic" film (even if classic, in the case of AMC, now potentially dates from the mid-1980s) (p. 134).

The last post of Lindbergs that I explored features TCM programming that

commemorates the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. It highlights four films directed by Robert Drew, a pioneer of the cinema vérité movement. Lindbergs highlights key details in each film, and brings a contemporary political perspective reading to scenes in *Primary* (1960) which feature disgruntled voters who are concerned about Kennedy's Catholic faith:

It's surprising to hear citizen's reasonable concerns about mixing religion and politics in 1960. Today American presidential candidates are pressured into attending religious events and are encouraged to flaunt their faith at every opportunity. Watching *Primary* makes me long for a time when American voters seemed to know how important it was to keep a healthy distance between church and state. (Nov. 23, 2013)

Lindbergs review connects historical political material to contemporary political realities and provides a new point of access for the TCM reader. Lindbergs also suggests that audiences read across the films as a way to understand the history of the Kennedy presidency as well as insight into the famous family, noting the differences in how Bobby Kennedy is portrayed in the intense deliberations of race and de-segregation in *Crisis* to his "palpable" grief and anger in *Faces in November* (1964), Drew's short film focusing on the Kennedy funeral.

In Lindbergs blog posts for the *Movie Morlocks*, she engages with film history and film genres in a personal way without pretension. In a note at the end of her Kennedy-Drew post, she highlights that many of her observations were originally published in her personal blog, *Cinebeats*. Her work assumes an audience of devoted fans and cinephiles who are as interested and captivated by the details of film actors, directors, props and paraphernalia as she is.

## Carrie Rickey and Local Color

Carrie Rickey uses her blog as a repository for many of her writings published elsewhere on the internet. It is also as a space to start conversations about newsworthy film culture. While the posts and articles featured during November 2013 did not include reviews and film criticism, they highlighted newly-released books and industry research as well as film culture connected to Philadelphia, where Rickey resides. Early posts in November focus on the history behind the recently released *Monuments Men* (Clooney, 2014) and its related books and a documentary, and another that ponders the “what-if” scenarios in regards to films and their casting—for example, Daniel Day-Lewis in *Philadelphia* (Demme, 1993) or Will Smith in the *Matrix* (Wachowski & Wachowski, 1999). In both posts, Rickey makes observations and poses a question at the end of each post in an attempt to create a dialogue with her readers. While not always extensive, these posts do encourage discussion and often end with a question. In her November 11 post, “At the Movies: Fewer women, more gun violence,” Rickey highlights finding from two different research studies. Although she cites USC’s Annenberg School study, which found that the number of women in film is decreasing, she does not focus on this statistic at all but spends more time grappling with UPenn’s study on movie violence, which finds “gun violence in PG-13 films has increased to the point where it recently exceeded the rate in R-rated films...and it has more than tripled since 1985” (as cited in Rickey, 2013). Rickey does offer that in many films, violence is gratuitous, but does not go further with her opinion on this subject as she wants to hear from her readers. Former *Chicago Reader* critic Jonathan Rosenbaum replies to Rickey, noting,

The connection between these two phenomena may not necessarily be causal, but it’s hard to deny that it’s both irrefutable and profound. Much of it ultimately

comes from a conflation of targeting to teenage boys, contempt for the audience as a whole, and a lack of interest in or passion for good movies (as opposed to exploitable ones, by whatever means.) (Rosenbaum, Nov. 11, 2013)

Strangely, Rickey appears to ask questions to invite discussion, but in the posts noted she does not join or continue the conversation that her posts generate. This phenomenon might be limited to my collection timeframe, but in revisiting these posts in 2015, it appears she that she only returns to comment on one of them (“The Monuments Men,” Nov. 6, 2013). It is possible that such conversation continues in other spaces, such as social media, or even privately with posters, but this is speculative.

However, Rickey is dedicated to exploring film culture in Philadelphia, and November includes her feature for *Philadelphia* magazine, “A New Life for the Old Boyd Theatre,” which chronicles the history of the theater as well as the current conflict over whether it should be retrofitted for reuse as a multiplex/eatery. On her blog, Rickey posts a teaser for the article, and once again poses a question which can only be answered if you click to the full feature at philly.com: “The preservationist in me asks: Can we really afford to lose the city’s last movie palace, witness to so much cultural and civic history? The pragmatist retorts: Isn’t it about time that Center City—like South, West, and North Philadelphia—had a venue for mainstream Hollywood fare?” (Nov. 23, 2013). Rickey’s answer is to allow it to be used for mainstream Hollywood purposes, but her article explores how conflicted she feels as she reaches this decision. She highlights the premiere of *Philadelphia*, hosted by the Boyd, which impressed more than 1000 filmgoers as well as the stars of the film. She writes that, “if movies are your religion, as they are mine, a theater like the Boyd is your place of worship” (Nov. 23, 2013). Prior to 2013, there were many failed proposals to restore the Boyd, from a potential stage theater to a House of Blues and as a multipurpose venue, and in 2008, the National Trust for

Historic Preservation placed the theater the theater on its “11 Most Endangered Historic Places” list (Nov. 23, 2013). Ultimately, Rickey answers her own question: “As a journalist on the record about the importance of saving historic theaters, I feel hypocritical. Yet as I look at the plans, I see an elegant compromise between preserving the past and serving the needs of the present” (Nov. 23, 2013). Rickey understands the urge to preserve a historical landmark, yet thinks it serves everyone’s interest in the space it actually utilized so that local citizens can screen films in their community. Her response shows how the dedication to film, as well as to her city, pull her in different directions but ultimately one that can serve Philadelphia’s film going community.

### **Smith Nehme and Classic Film Fandom**

Farran Smith Nehme’s writing serves to highlight her consummate engagement with the medium. On *Self-Styled Siren*, Smith Nehme writes two comprehensive posts that are recommendations of classic films everyone should watch, especially if they have never seen a classic film before. The impetus for such a project, for which Smith Nehme also solicited suggestions from her contacts on social media sites Facebook and Twitter, was her visit to blogger and media studies professor Lance Mannion’s class at Syracuse University. Mannion’s course, titled Public Intellectuals and the Digital Commons, focused on new media and blogging culture, but many students were not film majors. On her post, “Easy to Love: Ten Classics for People Who Don't Know Classics,” Smith Nehme explains, “Lance asked the group if anyone had ever seen a Bette Davis movie. What followed was the most terrible 30-second silence of my life” (Nov. 24, 2013) Smith Nehme addresses this post with the students in Mannion’s class in mind, but also for movie-lovers and would-be movie lovers in general as well, creating a



recommendation list “for people who have seen little or nothing of pre-1960 cinema. The idea being that a person could pick out one and watch it recreationally, and maybe afterward, consider watching some more” (Nov. 24, 2013). Her list-making is not to promote specific auteurs, to school viewers on aesthetics or formalism, or even to prescribe a canon—but is connected to cinephilia and the *pleasures* of the moving image. Smith Nehme chooses films that might inspire cinephilia, not a lesson plan. As she explains, “nothing was picked for Film 101 [pedagogical] reasons. This list intentionally resembles a syllabus not one itty-bitty bit. These films were picked because they are easy to love” (Nov. 24, 2013).

Smith Nehme’s list does include films that might appear on a “Film 101” syllabus (including John Ford’s *Stagecoach* and Hitchcock’s *Rear Window*), but she discusses their merit to highlight intriguing narratives and performances. Her description of each film chosen is not lengthy but concise. On *Stagecoach*, she notes that “John Ford tells a bustling, exciting story, while looking at class differences and community in a way that remains frank and touching” (Nov. 24, 2013). On *All About Eve* (Joseph Mankiewicz, 1950) she presents an accessible portrait of why we should watch Davis:

Eve Harrington (Anne Baxter) becomes a star by latching onto Margo Channing (Bette Davis) and working her lying, conniving wiles on not just Margo, but everyone around her...Davis gave many great performances in her incredible career, but Margo is generally acknowledged as the crowning achievement. Margo is a star, and got there in part because she’s a smart cookie. How and why she is taken in by Eve’s act contains a great deal of existential truth about human behavior (and pointers on how to spot Eves in your own life; believe me, that skill comes in handy.) (Smith Nehme, Nov. 24, 2013)

Because the nature of list-making assigns value and hierarchy to films, Smith Nehme’s post received many comments (as of this writing there are 40 comments). However, Smith Nehme acknowledges many of those who added suggestions in a companion post,

entitled “Easy to Love: A Whole Bunch of Other Classic Film Suggestions.” She provides a comprehensive list of comments from Facebook friends (many of them fellow writers and critics, such as Carrie Rickey, Andrew O’Hehir, Marilyn Ferdinand, and David Edelstein). She was shocked at the “deluge, a cacophony, a landslide of recommendations” from so many cinephiles. In her crowdsourced post, Smith Nehme instructed readers to limit their recommendations to one per person, yet not many readers could adhere to that. Siren conducted the exercise for Mannion’s students but clearly to satisfy many of her readers who would appreciate such an exhaustive list. She also writes,

And the Siren has an oft-stated evangelical conviction, that the world of early-to-mid 20<sup>th</sup> century American film is vast and so brilliant that truly, there is something for everyone who isn’t the cinematic equivalent of tone-deaf. (Nov. 24, 2013)

These posts by Smith Nehme in this month embody her goals for her writing: to critically inform her readers and celebrate what classic cinema has to offer. Her commitment to providing compelling insights to readers and continuing to mine new gems from the vast output of the classical Hollywood period illustrate her cinephilic impulse which she shares with others.

### **Amy Monaghan “Enjoys Being a Girl”**

Amy Monaghan, who writes as “cinetrix” at her blog *pullquote*, calls attention to the portrayals of women and girls in film in posts that she specifically titles, “I Enjoy Being a Girl.” These posts are not a regular feature of her blog, but sporadic and fueled by a need to write about representations of women and about female directors who might not otherwise garner much attention. Aside from the writing and formation of *cléo* by Reardon, Monaghan is the only other film blogger who articulates a need to write about film from a focused feminist perspective. Her interest in *Lost and Delirious* (Pool, 2004)

stems from a recommendation of a friend, and her review is one that understands that this is a mainstream film made for a teen audience, and not much more: “Is *Lost and Delirious* one for the ages? No. Does it best the book that was its source? Uh-uh. But is it better than it has any right to be, giving the case of seeming to be *Maxim* bait? Hell, yeah” (July 14, 2005). Monaghan’s style is colloquial and often irreverent, often using slang and profanity as well as personal anecdote, more so with films that she enjoyed on a superficial level rather those films to which she is more critically engaged.

In a December 2003 post, Monaghan reviews the remake version of *Freaky Friday* (Waters, 2003), in part to note Jamie Lee Curtis’ nomination for her role in the film. Monaghan admires Curtis and says “Curtis just doesn’t care that she’s now being cast as the mom, not the ingénue. No collagen, no lifts, no botulism, no Vaseline on the lens. Just flat-out funny, fearless physical comedy” (Dec. 19, 2003). Monaghan uses this occasion to also re-watch the original *Freaky Friday* (Nelson, 1976), starring Jodie Foster and Barbara Harris. Monaghan compares the two films and notes a key difference between the two:

In the original, it’s the mother who’s sexy, and in the remake, the daughter is the character getting action. It’s true: Jodie Foster, inhabited by her mother, takes herself out for a makeover and a shopping spree, whereas Jamie Lee, inhabited by her daughter, is the one in need of a new look in the remake. It’s meant to be funny, but in both cases it does improve her sexual confidence. If only a credit card and a makeover was all it took to develop empathy and self-assurance. Oh, wait! I forgot! It *is*. See you at Hot Topic. (Dec. 19, 2003)

This (rather snarky) comparison serves to highlight the ways that the new version of the film encourages the mother, (Jamie Lee Curtis, who was 44 at the time), to rejuvenate her looks as a way to boost self-confidence and thus solve other problems—a narrative direction not illustrated in the 1976 film, suggesting ageism is at work. Monaghan explores what seems to be an innocuous film for teens, *13 Going on 30* (Winick, 2004),

in which 13-year old Jenna (Jennifer Garner) magically moves into the future and finds herself an adult, working a dream job as a high-powered magazine editor in New York.

But the film offers a set of false choices, according to Monaghan:

You can be...a bitch on wheels with a high-powered job in publishing who takes a car service everywhere, has a closet full of couture, and lives alone in a great apartment in a doorman building in Manhattan. Or you can stay true to your dork self and marry the boy next door and evince no outward evidence of any career ambitions whatsoever. That's it. Oh, and it's important to be nice. Any questions? (April 1, 2005)

Again, while Monaghan's writing is informal and sarcastic, she is primarily writing for a small group of peers (friends and other bloggers), but makes a very key point: that the film puts forth the notion that women cannot have it all, and if sacrifices are made they must be to career goals and not marriage-related ones. As is common of many critiques of Hollywood romantic comedies, the marriage plot gets in the way of female characters being fully developed and explored. Thus, without writing a scathing review in a serious tone, Monaghan uses her signature sarcasm to point out what is (for her) an exceedingly irritating trope in mainstream film—and thus providing her readers with an accessible feminist reading.

It is this same feminist impulse that drives Monaghan to question the assumptions behind a 2010 article at the *House Next Door* blog by Dan Callahan, called “On Rich Girl Cinema,” in which he explores the films of Sophia Coppola and Lena Dunham as a critique of their class privilege. Monaghan points out a series of flaws with his arguments in a two-page post, noting first and foremost that no one would run a piece called “Rich Boy Cinema”—highlighting the career of Jason Reitman as an example. She also asks, “Do I think that Dunham and Coppola and their respective work might benefit from examining the presumptions that come with class privilege? Sure. But I still don't think

even a 24-year-old, much less a woman approaching 40, should ever be referred to and dismissed as a “girl.” That’s some kind of bullshit right there” (Monaghan, Dec. 6, 2010).

Further, Monaghan dismisses Callahan’s point that no one will be able to identify with Coppola’s rich protagonist in *Somewhere*. (2010) She maintains that she’s never understood the “identify and sympathize” tack either in criticism or the classroom.

Callahan suggests that Coppola, “looks and sounds weirdly out of touch with what might interest a general audience” (as cited in Monaghan, 2010). Monaghan counters:

So what? What about Coppola’s upbringing, privileged or no, would suggest for a second that her main aim is interesting a general audience? (Didn’t she debut as the christened baby in *The Godfather* in part because her dad had lost his shirt over Zoetrope and needed the cash directing a Puzo adaptation would bring in?) Maybe this movie is not for *you*. Maybe that’s the problem being called “privilege.” (Dec. 6, 2010)

Monaghan identifies the true problem Callahan has with Dunham and Coppola: they are not making movies for a general audience, or perhaps even a male audience, and they are not making movies that he enjoys. Callahan wants to find a reason why he doesn’t like their films and a space for blame. Monaghan closes her post, noting “Maybe this wrongheaded piece is just a failure of performance or tone, too. Let’s hope that this blanket dismissal (of Dunham’s youthful ignorance, of Coppola’s chops) in service of such a specious premise isn’t meant to be taken seriously” (Dec. 6, 2010). Thus, films cannot be dismissed simply because their makers are women; Callahan’s article tries to hide behind a series of explanations that, upon inspection, do not hold up.

Ultimately, Monaghan’s “I Enjoy Being a Girl” posts, varied in topic, tone and critique, serve as the most uniquely focused feminist writing in this study. While her approach and writing techniques are more informal and her posts about films are less

conventional than perhaps a review, her goal is clearly to highlight the problematic ways in which women are presented (and received) on screen.

### **Online Identity and the Female Blogger**

The film bloggers in my study, with perhaps one exception, carefully select and curate their identity online for privacy, professionalism, and security. As Goffman (1959) argues, we try to manage our personal identities and how people observe and receive us through impression management, and that includes not only face to face but also media (p.13). A way to understand the identities of these bloggers collectively is that they choose to present themselves as passionate writers, film lovers, and in many ways experts in this particular field. As Nancy Baym (2010) notes, “digital media seem to separate selves from bodies, leading to disembodied identities that exist only in actions and words” (p. 105). To explain this concept, she notes that if you search for “Nancy Baym,” you will find her academic persona on her university website, a “trite self-presentation on Twitter,” and a more pop-culture oriented self on her blog. (Baym, p. 106) Baym writes, “these are genuine parts of me, but online they are segmented into separate spaces where they can become distinct identities” (Baym, p.106). This is certainly the case with the bloggers here, as some use pseudonyms on their blogs while providing more detail about their identities in other online spaces. For example, Farran Smith Nehme writes film reviews for *The New York Post*, a paid position for which she uses her full identity, while continuing to use “The Siren” as an alter-ego on her blog. Smith Nehme is very well-known in the film criticism community, and a majority of her followers know who she is; but this is a way to preserve her identity and distinct personality as a film blogger.

Smith Nehme says that the moniker “self-styled siren” was never a serious choice. While this pseudonym may sound provocative and even sexualized, this was never her intention. She started her blog from encouragement from friends (whom she met on a beauty and makeup board) who were also blogging, and she was inspired by their fashion-oriented blogs. It was never meant to be a long-term choice, and she would have picked something else if she knew her blog was going to last for many years. (she’s been blogging since 2005). She notes that the name was “a joke, I don’t think of myself as a siren at all. It was kind of like a...take on a persona that was more sophisticated than I really had any right to pretend to be” (Smith Nehme, October 4, 2013).

Despite Smith Nehme’s popularity and recognition, her blog has limited personal identifying information, with no photos and a blogger.com profile that does not reveal her full name. However, on the recent (2014) publication of her novel, *Missing Reels*, her blog has included information about book tours, links to reviews of her book, and includes an image of the book’s cover, which links to a Barnes & Noble page. Smith Nehme’s blog is devoted to her love of classic film but does not go beyond this to reference her personal or family life. The content and display of self here do not invite controversy, and she notes that “classic film fans as a group, tend to be a well-mannered lot” (Smith Nehme, Oct. 4, 2013).

Kimberly Lindbergs and Amy Monaghan are the most protective of their online identities, but this is articulated in different ways. While Lindbergs blogs both personally and professionally, and works mostly as a freelancer, there are many times in which her need for privacy conflicts with her desire and need to promote her work. In February 2013, after dealing with online conflict from trolls on her blog (as well as computer

issues and work obligations) she took a hiatus and stopped posting completely at *Cinebeats*. She re-started her blog on January 7, 2014. Lindbergs redesigned her site, which provides the reader with links to various posts, but in order to find out who writes *Cinebeats*, you need to go to her “about” page, accessible via a link. Like Ferdinand and O’Malley, this background information is extensive and provides links to her work and also highlights film publications that have mentioned her blog as well as interviews that she has done.

Amy Monaghan at *pullquote* has a minimalist look to her blog, which also echoes how much information she shares with readers about her background: minimal. On her about page, it simply reads, “The cinetrix c’est une figurante de cinema” (is a bit player of the cinema). Part of the reason that Monaghan is protective of her identity here is to separate her blogging life from her professional one as a lecturer at Clemson University in South Carolina. However, if one explores any of the links to other articles she has written on the web, they will easily find her name and occupation and other biographical information. Monaghan is quite limited in her use of Facebook and her tweets are protected from those who don’t “follow” her on the site. At *pullquote*, Monaghan is not trying to protect herself from hostile bloggers but preserves and creates an identity in this space that is distinct from her role as a teacher and scholar.

Perhaps logically, two of the most forthcoming blogs belong to Carrie Rickey and Sheila O’Malley, both who have extensive professional writing backgrounds. Rickey uses her site not only or primarily as a blog, but a portal to her work: “I wanted to continue a blog, and since a website is the contemporary equivalent of a business card or artist’s portfolio, I combined the blog with a website. I don’t own my *Inquirer* work, but I hoped



I could showcase the work I did own in one place” (Rickey, personal communication, October, 2013). For O’Malley, *The Sheila Variations* is not constructed or presented as a ‘film blog’ per se, but more of a personal site that happens to focus on film, books, theater, and includes numerous musings about her personal life. However, in the past few years she has scaled back her more personal posts, because of her experience with readers who take too much interest in her life, as O’Malley explains:

A reader who sort of becomes a little bit obsessed with you. Either negatively or positively...like a Rupert Pupkin, *King of Comedy* type feeling, that this person is really, really reading every word you write in a slightly obsessive way. I’ve had a couple of those and, they’re extremely disturbing. (O’Malley, 2013).

O’Malley refrains from posting personal information about partners or her social life on her blog to help discourage these types of responses. Otherwise, in many other aspects, *The Sheila Variations* invites the reader to know all about O’Malley, with links to her Flickr account (a social photo-sharing site) as well as her Twitter feed, and links to the blogs of friends as well as family members (two of whom work in the entertainment and theater business). O’Malley notes that “anonymity is kind of important even though you can find out anything about me,” suggesting that in the age of social media, some things will never be private again.

### **Conclusion**

Film criticism in blogging spaces allows the writer more freedoms: to construct longer essay-form criticism, to ask readers directly for feedback, and to crowdsource suggestions all readers can use to reinforce discussion and community. The women’s writing in these blog spaces encourage response while also showing the ways in which each writer expresses a highly personalized connection to film culture. With the exception of the selected pieces by Monaghan and Reardon’s work at her feminist film

journal, *cléo*, most women in this study did not bring a specifically feminist lens to their work. However, the writing analyzed in this chapter often explored representations of women and their role in the film narrative. The knowledge on display in all of these articles and blog posts illustrates each writer's passion and attention to film, its history, aesthetics and performance, and offers evidence that the critical film communities should not devalue women's voices and criticism.

## CHAPTER 6

### WOMEN, FILM BLOGGERS, AND THE CINEPHILIA OF (FEMINIST) INTERRUPTIONS

I was inspired to write about the cinephilia of feminist interruptions by some thoughts shared with me in an interview with film programmer, documentary distributor, and film blogger Erin Donovan. A champion of women's independent filmmaking (and an organizer for the Siren Nation Music and Arts Festival in Portland, Oregon), she recalls a particular "interruption" in watching the 2009 comedy written and directed by Jody Hill, *Observe and Report*:

You...see glaring differences when something like *Observe and Report* happens. The film had played at SXSW months prior to its wide release; the typical dude set had all written about it, but the rape scene went totally unmentioned until the "lady blogs" saw it in wide release. Critics are free to focus on whatever aspects of films they choose, but that the film received so much coverage and no one thought that was an important thing to mention is just shocking... it's absurd to me that none of these writers thought a sexual assault survivor wouldn't appreciate a heads up on seeing something like that in a Seth Rogen comedy.  
(Email w/author, March 6, 2009)

Donovan, who actively blogged about documentaries as well as features at *Steady Diet of Film* from December 2006 to December 2013, refers here to a date rape scene that is played for laughs in Hill's dark comedy. *Observe and Report*, a Hollywood film for which the critical community did not have high expectations, pokes fun at Seth Rogen as a seriously befuddled mall cop Ronnie, who dates the makeup counter girl Brandi (Anna Faris). Many critics voiced considerable outrage regarding the questionable scene, in which Ronnie has sex with an unconscious Brandi who is passed out with vomit on her face, which is supposedly un-problematized by Brandi waking up long enough to say,

“keep going, Motherfucker!”<sup>19</sup> Director Jody Hill says about the scene: “I would have been happy without any dialogue in that scene. I wanted to show them just having sex and her passed out, and I thought that would have been funnier” (as cited in Rabin, 2009). Hill’s comment suggests his indifference and ignorance regarding a representation of sexual assault and the effects that viewing such a scene might have on women.

Donovan’s comments suggest that women are driven by a different set of responsibilities in their writing, which interrupt a cinephilic writing impulse. While female critics might devote time for writing a defense for aesthetic choices and cinematic craft, for example, they also feel compelled to highlight what might be a glaring problem in filmic representation. Donovan’s reaction to *Observe and Report* might not seem to be an ideal way to explore this phenomenon, because the film doesn’t appear to be a “cinephilic text.” As a mainstream Hollywood comedy, many movie lovers will not have high expectations for its quality. However, cinephilia is rooted in the love of moviegoing and watching, not tethered to one single film or genre. In the process of consuming films, all cinephiles will encounter films or elements of films to which they are resistant. Yet for many women, this is not a reaction to aesthetics or simply personal taste but to identity and gendered representations. *Guardian* critic Danny Leigh (2009) writes on the publication’s blog about the controversy itself, “the people whose reaction really matters are women” (April 17, 2009). Further, Leigh focuses on the value of female critics in such a controversy, “it’s that gut-authentic response that I’m not sure any male commentator can compete with, whether dealing with Hill’s callow provocation

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<sup>19</sup> Critics such as Manohla Dargis of *The New York Times*, Stephanie Zacharek of *Salon*, and feminist writers at *Jezebel* and *Feministing* were shocked by the casual presentation of sexual violence in this supposedly comedic film and wrote about it in their reviews.

specifically or any film swimming in the same dank waters” (Leigh, April 17, 2009). Leigh respects the gendered and even essentialist response to a film that depicts many kinds of violence but is unaware of what impact it might make. This kind of interruption and its consequences will be explored as just one example of a “feminist interruption:” a critical moment that interrupts ordinary spectatorship and cinephilia and requires an articulated response to misogynistic representations of gender and identity. Manohla Dargis, co-chief film critic at the *New York Times*, reveals in a 2009 interview with Irin Carmon at *Jezebel* that she has her own “feminist interruption” in some of her own writing. Dargis doesn’t want to be labeled the feminist critic, but instead, “What I want to do is talk about the art that I love and point out, every so often, inequities. It’s a weird balancing act, and I’m not saying that there aren’t contradictions” (as cited in Carmon, 2009). Dargis reviews a variety of films, which in some cases underscores her feminist concerns, but also writes many features that directly critique Hollywood and its lack of roles on screen as well as behind the camera for women.

To explore this unique impulse and response, I borrow a term from Lalitha Gopalan’s 2002 book, *The Cinema of Interruptions*. Gopalan’s focus is on Indian action cinema, and the ways in which the so-called conventions of the genre, in its national permutations, embody elements that digress from the narrative and operate as both spectacle and interruption. Cinephilic feminist film critics (and bloggers) reading films often experience, respond to, and ultimately strongly identify with this notion of “interruption” when encountering and writing about films that reinforce gender stereotypes, which interrupt their cinephilic emphasis on aesthetics, narrative, or other filmic qualities to address inequalities or distorted representations. I explore how

cinophilic critics are interrupted by the critical desire to address problematic gender representations, most notably of women, which are often revealed through gendered spectacles. I will first present this in the context of contemporary criticism, noting certain patterns in cinophilic criticism, and the differences expressed through critics for whom cinephilia is interrupted by a feminist impulse to point out sexism or inequality that disrupts a narrative and the cinephilic response to it.

Gopalan draws on a variety of perspectives to formulate her ideas, but useful to this discussion is to highlight her interpretation of Mulvey and *Screen* theory.<sup>20</sup> Mulvey's focus was a critique of scopophilia, a sexualized pleasure of watching films, and she also argued that this mode of looking was built into the "apparatus" of cinema. The pleasures of looking are only granted to heterosexual men in this view, and this meant that the presence of a woman was often a spectacle, or disruption, that interrupted the narrative, and slowed it down. Gopalan's citation of Mulvey is used not to invoke Freudian politics, but the *disruption* to film narrative, noting that "we have habituated ourselves not to notice, in particular, the excessive focus on the woman's body that often breaks the diegesis" (cited in Gopalan, p. 25). Gopalan notes that she wants to explore the ways interruptions are connected to the structures of global genres, and "how my own reading strategies inherited from film theory accommodate local difference" (p. 28). Interruptions erupt from difference. Many women writing about film are practicing a cinephilia of interruptions: their attention to criticism and their passion for film is interrupted by a spectacle too disturbing to ignore. Just as cinephilia often expresses itself through

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<sup>20</sup> I do not want to argue for a return to *Screen* theory, or to emphasize psychoanalytic film approaches, which unnecessarily essentialize women and considers only what is happening on screen, and not the social, cultural, and industrial contexts under which women, and female film critics, watch cinema.

writing, the interruption also requires a written response, a desire and need to address misogyny, sexism, or an unnecessarily gendered spectacle. In addition, women's attention to such conflict and interruption should not negate their cinephilia—and should not invite other cinephiles to diminish, question, and fault the female cinephile.<sup>21</sup>

Most research on cinephilia that romanticizes this love of film, spends time uncritically looking at the objects of cinephilia and “digital cinephilia”—but rarely allows that love is sometimes interrupted, complicated, and challenged. Often, as this chapter will illustrate, those who are interrupted and dare to address it in writing are often labeled “feminist killjoys,” and online discourse often suggests that these folks are perhaps not invested in cinema enough to be cinephiles. Sara Ahmed (2010) writes:

Let's take this figure of the feminist killjoy seriously. Does the feminist kill other people's joy by pointing out moments of sexism? Or does she expose the bad feelings that get hidden, displaced, or negated under public signs of joy? Feminists do kill joy in a certain sense: they disturb the very fantasy that happiness can be found in certain places. To kill a fantasy can still kill a feeling. It is not just that feminists might not be happily affected by what is supposed to cause happiness, but our failure to be happy is read as sabotaging the happiness of others. (n.p.)

Ahmed's questions may sound rhetorical but addresses a common issue of affect and experience for feminists. While Ahmed considers how feminists are to blame for the “killing” of happiness, why isn't sexism itself to blame? The feminist female critic as feminist killjoy is stigmatized for doing what should be naturalized: calling out sexism where it is so obvious to see.

For cinephilia to be interrupted, therein lies an assumption that cinephilia first and foremost has a certain set of primary instincts and practices. Cinephilia is shared through

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<sup>21</sup> This is the reaction from several male scholars at a presentation of this research at a conference in 2012, one asking, “Where is the love?” and questioning the validity of examining interruption which he thinks cannot be reconciled with his own conceptions of cinephilia.

written expression, but what are the initial instincts of cinephiles, especially cinephilic critics? Cinephilia is expressed through writing and driven by a need to write and communicate movie love. Christian Keathley (2006) argues that writing is notable historically as a “record of cinephiliac encounters, but more importantly, acts as “crucial bridge between individual and cultural cinephilia” (p. 39).

For David Bordwell (2008) cinephilic criticism “typically focuses on evaluation and appreciation. The ideal cinephile critic has wide and subtle tastes and tries to expose distinctive qualities...through the skillful use of language, the critic tries to convey the film’s unique identity and to summon up, by a kind of tonal mimicry, the effects that the film arouses” (Bordwell). There are different levels of cinephilic criticism and expectations in a convergent era, as Ted Pigeon (2012) writes, “digital culture appears to grant the cinephile a level of participation in cinema previously only available to those in the professional ranks of criticism” (p. 164). Pigeon notes that cinephilia must be more than watching movies obsessively, as it now “requires individuals to gain insight into a multitude of factors contributing to the enactment of cinema as not just a visual narrative device, but as a cultural practice and a process of being” (p. 164). Because cinephiles often organize their film preferences around one genre or director, following films that belong to a canon, their form of criticism is often shaped by this cinematic preference. David Andrews (2013) notes that those “who have an inclination toward cinephilia will tend to believe that some directors are “better” than others and thus deserve the status of auteur” (p. 47).

One of the most prolific forms of cinephilic criticism is what I call auteurist excess. While many critics mention the filmmaker and his/her craft in their reviews and



criticism—which is, indeed, often necessary for historical and social context—auteurist excess relies disproportionately or solely on this framework to attribute an artistic vision that often neglects many other elements or details. Such romantic evaluation seals off critique and thus rules out the possibility for effective and productive criticism. This mode of criticism is, in many ways, what the cinephilia of interruptions resists and counters, for this mode not only neglects analysis of a film but also becomes exceedingly caught up in its own language. The “auteurist excess” form of cinephilic criticism relies on grand language and superlatives to describe a work, and operates as a blinded form of writing that often refuses to look at detail and contingency (ironically, key attributes for much of cinephilic criticism) while mostly ignoring problems of representation in favor of thematic romanticism.

Examples of such criticism are not hard to find, as they often dominate the critical conversation of many filmmakers’ work. For example, Lars von Trier’s *Melancholia* is praised by David Edelstein (2011) at *New York* magazine, who notes, “the fusion of form and content is so perfect that it borders on the sublime;” Peter DeBruge (2011) of *Variety* calls *Melancholia* “mind-blowing;” and Eric Kohn (2011) at *Indiewire* also calls it a “masterpiece,” and in the first graph lavishes the director with top praise: “von Trier has constructed a mesmerizing elaboration on his favorite motifs, masterfully elevating them to an epic scale” (2011). Perhaps such language is familiar to anyone who reads film criticism on a regular basis, but such proclamations are evidence that this auteurist mode is often so dominant it ignores or at least overshadows anything that might disturb its own exclusive paradigm. In the process of labeling these films as “masterpieces,” it also suggests that the critics who use these words have a sense of authority about the auteur in

question: that they possess the knowledge not only of a film, but the filmmakers' body of work. The ability to discuss a highly regarded auteur bestows authority on the critic in the process.

Yet this way of reading films is not original; romanticizing the auteur is nothing new. The auteur theory was originally put forth by Alexandre Astruc in 1948, but only widely popularized in France by Francois Truffaut in the '50s, who singled out American directors, including studio directors, for being responsible for shaping the aesthetics of films in *Cahiers du Cinema*. Andrew Sarris at the time controversially championed the auteur theory in the United States. (Sarris, 1962) Prior to the auteur theory, Sarris thought that film scholarship is mostly an "amateur" undertaking, but that auteurism could change that. Indeed, it did help "usher in a tradition of director-dominated film teaching which was essentially modeled on literary studies" (as cited in Turner, p. 55). Tania Modleski (2005) who analyzes gender in Hitchcock's work in her book, *The Women Who Knew Too Much*, examines auteurist excess in regards to film critic Robin Wood, who wrote two (academic) books on Hitchcock's films. Modleski notes his defensive stance as Wood asks, "the question must be, can Hitchcock be saved from feminism?" (2005, p. 88). Modleski notes, "though his very language, implying the necessity of rescuing a favorite auteur from feminist obloquy, suggests the question is fundamentally a rhetorical one" (p. 3). Ironically, Wood will later dismiss the machinations of auteurist criticism.<sup>22</sup>

For film critic and blogger Harry Tuttle (2010), this kind of problem is identified and labeled "bad auteurism:"

Bad auteurism creeps in when critics abuse of rhetorics to cover up and self-justify a subjective preference by constructing a seemingly rationalised

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<sup>22</sup> See Wood, *Responsibilities of a Gay Critic*, 1989.

argumentation. That's why a fallacious argument in intellectual communities is harder to dispute (and more important to dispute) than the clueless fanboy who will claim a widely recognised masterpiece is just bad. (April 23, 2010)

Kent Jones, a New-York-based film critic and programmer, echoes some of these sentiments, as he sees this as a problematic form of discourse:

Cinephile-based criticism treats pretty much everyone like an auteur, and this reverts back to a fundamental flaw in auteurism...This selective vision has been so pervasive over the years. The world is remade with every new review or commentary. (2011)

Jones suggests the inherent flaw in auteurist criticism is the lack of critical distance. In treating everyone like an “auteur,” critics not only elevate directors, but also place them on a pedestal, to be admired and revered but isolate them from real critique and analysis. Andrews (2013) argues that scholars have figured out that “auteurism shuts down other kinds of activity—for the academy, it often substitutes aesthetic myths for more rational truths” (p. 55). Cinephilic criticism might suggest that the love for films and moviegoing and knowledge of those films are inherently connected, and, problematically for some cinephiles, conflated: the only way to *know* a film and a filmmaker is to profess *love* for said filmmaker. This undermines critical distance and allows that cinephiles cannot possibly be critics if their love of a film outweighs their capacity to write about it responsibly.

As mentioned previously, Wood in later years distances himself from auteurist criticism. In “Responsibilities of a Gay Critic,” Wood (1989) states,

There is in a sense no such thing as ‘the films of Ingmar Bergman,’ existing as an entity that criticism could finally and definitely describe and interpret and place in the museum. Rather, the films exist as experienced and perceived by the viewer, with the precise nature of the experiencing depending on the viewer’s position in society and within ideology. (p. 14)

Wood's position allows for the critic's subjectivity to take a role in criticism, and his nod to ideology suggests his adoption of a cultural studies perspective, in which emphasis on power and identity become more central to analysis.

The criticism of feminist interruptions, I suggest, provides a framework that allows for difference and multiple subjectivities. The criticism of feminist interruptions can expose what might be overlooked in the auteurist excess of film criticism. I will show how various critics interrogate representations by examining the reception of controversial yet highly praised works of filmmaker Lars von Trier, as well as the reception of the independent film *Hannah Takes the Stairs* (Swanberg, 2007).

### **The Flaws of a "Masterpiece"**

Lars von Trier is a Danish film director who invites controversy with each new film he makes. In 1995 he partnered with filmmaker Thomas Vinterberg to form Dogme 95, an avant-garde filmmaking movement often dubbed a "vow of chastity" that rallied against using technologies excessively with a goal to make films more traditionally and "naturally," using available locations, no manipulation of sound and the exclusive use of hand-held cameras. (<http://www.dogme95.dk/the-vow-of-chastity>) While this is important to von Trier's career, (and his budding reputation as an auteur) it is his controversial depictions of women who, while often central as protagonists, are presented in undesirable positions of victimhood, doom, or hysteria; they are often beaten, raped, or murdered. From *Breaking the Waves* (1996) to *Melancholia* (2011), von Trier features women who are placed within a narrative of suffering, for which they are to blame. (Robinson, 2014) Yet at the same time, his critical reputation (as noted in the *Melancholia* reviews above) places him in the pantheon on international art-house

directors. As of 2016, four of his films, including *Breaking the Waves* and *Antichrist*, have been released as Criterion editions, which in itself defers status and distinction as it provides cinephile collectors with an often digitally remastered film with exclusive extras about the film and filmmaker that cannot be found anywhere else, providing authenticity and historical significance, elevating a film to high art through its value as an archival object. (Klinger, 2006) Andrews (2013) places von Trier squarely in the category of art film director; and he also suggests that *Antichrist* (2009) is von Trier's "torture-porn meditation, is a cult-art film in which it utilizes traditional devices of the art film combined with genre aspects (severed body parts, spasms of violence, etc.)" (Andrews, p.107).

Reception and reaction to *Antichrist* provides a useful case study to examine how the discourses of auteurist excess and blind cinephilia collide with those who call out the film for its misogyny via interruption. *Slate.com* critic Dana Stevens and *Artforum's* film critic, Amy Taubin, reveal mixed feelings for von Trier, but both point to the director's torturous visions of women. Amy Taubin (2011) of *Artforum* is initially put off by von Trier, but then changes her mind. In a critics' roundtable in which she discusses *Melancholia* and expressed her conflicted view of von Trier, Taubin writes:

I loathe most of his movies, "Dogville" included, primarily for their misogyny. von Trier's central female characters are tortured nonstop until they either achieve beatitude through suffering or take bloody revenge on their torturers. But it's not only the misogyny that makes the movies unbearable...So I was certainly surprised that "Melancholia" got to me from first to last when I saw it in Cannes ...And for the first time, the female character... isn't the Other. She's so clearly von Trier's female double. (Nov. 9, 2011)

Interestingly, Taubin points out the problems of representation that are so obvious in his other films, but is willing to critically examine gender in *Melancholia* because of her own

auteuristic tendencies. She views Justine's immobilizing depression as a projection of von Trier's own, and this seems to let von Trier off the hook for any type of misrepresentation or objectification, seemingly misled by her own auteuristic tendencies.

Writing at *Slate*, Dana Stevens' review of *Antichrist* (2009) contains the provocative headline and subhead: "Game Over. Why I'll Never Watch Another Lars von Trier Movie" (n.p.). Stevens notes that she's tired of watching the same movie over and over, in which a mentally unstable woman goes crazy and is (sometimes) killed. Stevens writes,

There's nothing wrong with an artist returning obsessively to the same set of themes and images. But von Trier's fetishistic re-enactment of psychological and physical torture scenarios seems to grow less, not more, nuanced with each go-round. (Oct. 22, 2009)

In a later review by Stevens of *Melancholia* (so much for Stevens never watching von Trier again), she notes that she "hated *Antichrist* so much that I don't even enjoy explaining why I hated it" (2011, n.p.).

*Antichrist* is a film in which the central topic is misogyny. He (Willem Dafoe) and She (Charlotte Gainsbourg) are a couple who lose their infant son when he falls out of a window while they have sex in another room. She is overcome with grief, filled with guilt and shame, and since He is a therapist, he insists on treating her depression himself, taking her to a remote cabin in the woods called Eden. What follows is strange, dark, and violent, resulting in paranoia, genital mutilation, and murder.

For the film, von Trier hired a "misogyny expert," suggesting that his intent all along was to explore the contours of sexism and to explore this in critical detail. (Winter, 2009) But intent should not discount reception, as so many critics attempt to undermine those who read this film (and others) as misogynistic. This also seems to provide an

excuse for some critics to dismiss any misogynistic representations, arguing that von Trier is engaging with them, and not representing them blindly. According to Kim Longinotto, a documentary filmmaker, “for it to be misogynistic, there would have had to be a distinct suggestion that she represented all women, and it doesn’t do that” (2014). Interestingly, Longinotto also notes, “I just thought it was too detached and dreamlike for you to get upset about it being misogynistic” (2014). Longinotto universalizes her experience, at once prescribing that there is a correct response, the one in which the film is not found to be misogynistic. Lisa Schwarzbaum sees through this strategy, and in her *Entertainment Weekly* review reads the film as a “good-looking, publicity-grabbing provocation, with an overlay of pseudo-Christian allegory thrown in to deflect a reasonable person’s accusations of misogyny” (May 17, 2009). Thus critics explore the ways in which misogyny can be ignored, dismissed, or deflected because other details in the film matter more—either for the critic or for von Trier himself.

Yet controversial films often spark these discussions about their reception, and in particular here it explicitly *questions* other critics’ attention to misogyny. Sheila Johnston, in her article featured in the British publication, *The Independent*, “Is *Antichrist* Anti-Women?” reaches the conclusion that it does have problematic representations, but that at least von Trier makes “clever characters” and sees them in “crazy flawed role models” (July 21, 2009). This type of argument once again forgives the filmmaker for misogyny since other auteur-like qualities present in the film redeem such a fatal flaw. For Johnston, *Antichrist* is clearly not in the same category as Judd Apatow and Seth Rogen comedies, and says “it’s in the lightweight arena that you find the prime offenders

against women: affable multiplex confections which insist, with a laddish laugh and a nudge, that anyone who objects is a killjoy” (July 21, 2009).

Some critics are quick to label von Trier’s characterizations of women as misogynistic, yet a handful of critics argue that misogyny is a naïve way to look at the film. For example, Rob White, editor at *Film Quarterly*, notes in an online discussion of *Antichrist* that,

Calling *Antichrist* “misogynist” is an opt-out from serious engagement, a critical short cut which reduces the film to the schematics of unconscious desire that von Trier so artfully dismantles...Maybe a better way of approaching the film’s gender politics is to observe that she is the much more interesting of the film’s characters. (December, 2009)

Similarly, Landon Palmer of the blog *Film School Rejects* writes,

Just because the idea [of misogyny] is introduced and explored does not mean the standpoint of the film, the filmmaker, or how we perceive the film simply and directly runs in line with that. To make such an accusation is dismissive and simplistic, ignoring the many ideas going on in a film whose central flaw lies in its very ambition ...But the only way these debates can be constructive is if one genuinely attempts to view this film outside its now-notorious knee-jerk reactions at Cannes and take it at face value. (Sept. 30, 2009)

Both critics argue that misogyny is not allowed to be the preferred, dominant reading of von Trier’s film. White’s reasoning here seeks to minimize the offensive nature of von Trier’s images and presentation of women, however crazed a character might be; for him, a better way to approach misogyny seems to be not to engage with its problems whatsoever. In this way, White is trying to “correct” or minimize the value of engaging with critical gender issues that interrupt the film for many viewers and critics, especially women. In Palmer’s case, he assumes that all viewers of the film will be colored by the reactions to the film at Cannes, suggesting viewers are going to be dismissive based on others’ opinions and not their own. Another aspect of these critics’ rejection of the misogyny reading is to suggest that it is a label that requires no thought or reflection; that



it is easy and quick to make what White mentions is “a critical short cut” (December, 2009). This type of discourse is also noted in a review by Matt Barone, who argues, “hastily saying that von Trier's film proves that he hates women is to both belittle his art and refuse to dig beneath the surface” (Nov. 16, 2012). Why must the recognition of misogyny be labeled simple, and not complex? The subtext suggests that anyone who dares make the argument for misogyny must not be very intelligent.

This line of thinking also reflects a discursive frame that many women bloggers find in the comments sections of their online writing, expressed as a challenge to the authority, opinion, and knowledge of the female critic and blogger. Stephanie Rogers, co-founder of the feminist film site *BitchFlicks.com*, points out these inequalities in her roundup of critical reception of *Antichrist*. Rogers indicates:

Many of the defenders of von Trier’s portrayal of women argue that he really attempts to explore people's relationship to nature, or depression, or how we’re all inherently evil, or that it’s just too brilliant a film to even warrant analysis— it just needs to be experienced. (Oct. 9, 2009)

Rogers suggests that the film is beyond reproach and untouchable for critics. She also notes that,

The over-intellectualization of films like von Trier’s (and Tarantino’s and other misogynist directors) irritates me not only because it tends to dismiss accusations of misogyny with ‘but you just don't *get* it!’ language, but critics who use that language also fail to convey what, for them, would actually qualify as misogyny. (Oct. 9, 2009)

Rogers points out key issues that are central not only to the film itself but also to the tone and response of criticism. Critics who suggest that to read a film by a critically-acclaimed director as misogynist is “wrong” create a hostile space that dismisses and attacks other film critics, who, in this particular case, are often female critics. Secondly, these critics are suggesting that their analysis of a film is intellectual, based on their knowledge (as

well as reverence for a director) and therefore more highly valued, while the response to a film in sexist or misogynist terms appears to be highly subjective or emotional. Such an assertion could quickly devolve into a gendered, essentialist, stereotypical notion that men are inherently intellectual and rational while all women are ruled by emotion. A blog poster writing under the pseudonym “Glosswitch” notes in an op-ed piece of the British political weekly newsmagazine *The New Statesman* (2015):

The defence of misogynist art is not dissimilar to the defence of misogynist everything else. Misogyny both creates and thrives on women’s intellectual insecurities, implying that dissent merely signifies one’s inability to access a greater, higher truth. Don’t criticise misogyny in porn or people will say you’re sexually repressed; don’t criticise it in comedy or they’ll say you’re humourless; don’t criticise it in art or they’ll say you’re stupid...Arguing that something is sexist instantly places one back in the “feeling, not knowing” camp. Hence it becomes harder and harder to say that anything is sexist at all. (Jan. 19, 2015)

This interpretation of misogyny as it is found in the criticism of art (the author discusses the reception of the book and film versions of *American Psycho* by Brett Easton Ellis as her case study) argues that too often there appears to be a false dichotomy at work—between knowledge and feeling, intellect vs. emotion. To suggest that the identification of sexism or misogyny is only based on feeling is not only a logical fallacy, but also an attack on decades of feminist activism, the work of feminist film theory, as well as a litany of other feminist achievements.

Secondly, to disparage any sort of affective response to cinema via criticism would not make sense. Writing in the Italian journal *Cinemascope*, Adrian Martin (2007) notes:

Critics should feel free to bring in their own emotional reaction to films—it is hard to keep them out of writing. But the phenomenon known as the gut feeling or gut reaction can become a terrible end in itself —‘this film makes me angry or it makes me happy, so it’s a rotten film or a great film, and I’m not going to discuss it further.’ The important thing is always argument, analysis, logic. I have an irrational side (critics need it) but my rational side believes in logical

demonstration: if you can prove to me that what you are saying about a film makes internal sense, if you can marshal the evidence from the film itself to back up what you say, then I too can be persuaded to disregard my own first gut reaction and explore that film again in a new more open way. (Feb. 16, 2007)

Martin reinforces an earlier point: that if you have decided a film is horrible or beautiful and refuse to engage with it on other terms, then your criticism is not responsible.

### **Criticizing the Critic: A Selected Reception Analysis of *Hannah Takes the Stairs***

Misogyny moves beyond the text in the criticism and subsequent fallout of bloggers exploring Joe Swanberg's 2007 film, *Hannah Takes the Stairs*. Female film bloggers who experience and write about the feminist "interruption" are often attacked by other critics for their feminist perspective. In 2007, blogger Cynthia Rockwell wrote a review of *Hannah Takes the Stairs*, on her blog *Wild Sound*. Her critique noted the problematic ways in which the main character (played by Greta Gerwig) was idolized and objectified by the camera's gaze. Rockwell (2007) writes:

To me, the film was about the relationship between Greta and the camera. It felt oppressive to me, and I really wanted it to back off. I wanted to know more about some other characters. I wanted to breathe; I wanted Hannah to have a chance to breathe. In one scene she's dancing crazily to some loud music and the camera holds her in a medium close-up as she thrashes her arms and fists wildly, and I like to imagine she is trying to break free of the camera's frame, its gaze. I have always felt that all of Swanberg's films have a very male perspective, but it has never bothered me until this film. It felt, overall, like nothing more than a chance to get Greta on film and stare, stare, stare. And for her to enjoy being stared at. And being female, that just doesn't speak to me. (April 30, 2007)

Rockwell's analysis clearly focuses on the gaze, and provides an example of how the camera enacts what appears to be an unnatural and fetishized framing of Gerwig beyond what the narrative expects or requires. This focus on the gaze suggests the "spectacle" of woman, as object, related to Mulvey's scopophilia, and a case in which both visual and

narrative techniques clearly interrupts the narrative and the enjoyment of the film for Rockwell, as noted in her cinephilic criticism.

However, independent filmmaker and blogger Sujewa Ekanayake, writing on his DIY Filmmaker blog, attacked Rockwell's critique in a bluntly titled post, "This is no way to write a movie review" (May 5, 2007). Ekanayake's complaint was that she did not "impart the essential information about a movie that would help the reader decide if he/she wants to check the movie out" (May 5, 2007).

The controversy over Rockwell's critique later becomes an extended conversation on the web at several blogs about the role of the blogger and what they contribute to the critical landscape of film. In regards to her writing, Chuck Tryon (2007) defends Rockwell's position in the comments on her post, noting:

Cynthia's review conveys one major "idea" about the film—its problematic gender politics, something that comes across in Cynthia's frustration with the lead actress's performance and the camera's approach to filming her. You can find plot summaries anywhere, but solid criticism like that is rare and takes the film far more seriously than any generic review ever could. (May 5, 2007)

Tryon suggests that what Rockwell is grappling with is actually one "major idea" about the film, while Ekanayake supposes that gender politics are only marginally important, as is the focus on Gerwig and the camera. Ekanayake argues further that,

Rockwell's review only offers the criticism of the movie re: its perceived relationship to women and a possible reason why the lead was cast in her role—That's important, but it's the kind of movie review that I find to be very frustrating since it is more about the ideas that the reviewer wants to talk about (using the existence of the film as a thin excuse) rather than a combination of what's actually in the movie. (May 5, 2007)

Ekanayake dismisses Rockwell's critique here as simply her preordained agenda, something she "wants to talk about," as if her response is not related to "what's actually in the movie."

Yet Rockwell's disdain for the film is not an anomaly. On [imdb.com](http://imdb.com), the average score of the film is a 5.5 (out of 10 stars). The film was only in limited release so it was not as widely reviewed as other indie films of the Mumblecore movement, but critics were split in the assessment. Bill Stamets (2007) at the *Chicago Sun-Times* argues that "Swanberg nails the inane fun of youth" and Matt Zoller Seitz (2007) suggests it is "an evolutionary entry in the Do It Yourself (or D.I.Y.) independent film movement" (n.p.). Others focused on its problematic self-indulgences, for its depiction of "childish men and women" (McDonaugh, 2007, n.p.) and Wendy Ide of the *Times* (UK) notes "There's only so much twenty something navel-gazing one can listen to before wanting to slap some sense ...into them all" (2007, n.p.).

Much adoration is lavished on Gerwig, however, and many reviewers compare her to French New Wave muse Jean Seberg, while Scott Foundas (2007) at *LA Weekly* called Gerwig a "revelation," and "like most of the men in the film, we would happily follow her anywhere" (Sept. 26, 2007). Foundas seems to bear an infatuation with the character and presupposes a primarily heterosexual male audience.

While it is clear that reviews and reception of *Hannah Takes the Stairs* were mixed, key is how a pronounced feminist perspective is the one that is considered by other male critics as "wrong," and too personal to be considered a legitimate point of view. Emily Gould at [Gawker.com](http://Gawker.com) suggests that the "fetishization" of the neurotic but attractive woman should be over, pointing to the film's over-reliance on a sexist trope. (Gould, 2007) However, Gould appears to be one of only a few commentators that

mention a sexist stereotype might exist in the film.<sup>23</sup> This focus on Rockwell and the criticism reception of *Hannah Takes the Stairs* illustrates an ongoing demonization of a feminist viewpoint, a valid critical perspective often marginalized by the predominately masculine domains of cinephilia and criticism.

### **Conclusion: Responsibilities of the Critic**

There is no singular, prescribed way to write film criticism. As discussed earlier, critics should feel free to examine whatever aspects of the film that they want. However, for critics to outright dismiss certain readings and to dictate what other critics observe misses the point of the value of criticism. Chris Fujiwara discusses the responsibilities of the individual critic (2010):

We also have a responsibility not to surrender to the overwhelming power of the film in a kind of ecstatic fusion, but to remain neutral before it. Not neutral in the manner of a judge who evaluates from a great height, applying invariable standards. But neutral in the sense that our own individuality and thought don't become submerged and our values remain distinct, so that we don't have to say yes to what the film says yes to, no to what the film says no to, but can hold everything in a state of suspension. The danger of love is that it seems to relieve us of the responsibility to speak. Not just the ability, which can also happen, but the responsibility. And the critic can never be without the responsibility to speak. (Feb. 28, 2010)

Fujiwara advocates for criticism to serve as a foil, for the critic to be conscious of cinephilia and its tendencies to romanticize the film object (or its director) as well as the experience. Fujiwara insists that critical sensibilities should not get lost or 'submerged' in the act of writing; therein lies a responsibility to articulate any and all meanings that were stirred in the critic as he or she watches a film. In many cases, this can be seen as an interruption.

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<sup>23</sup> Emily Gould was an editor for online gossip site Gawker, but became subject to many attacks online which forced her to leave her position after she was publicly derided for promoting celebrity stalking via her site's "Gawker Stalker" feature.

Relatedly, Jill Dolan (2013), who directs the Gender and Sexuality Studies program at Yale University and writes about theater and film at her blog *The Feminist Spectator*, writes about bringing subjectivities to criticism:

Many continue to buy into the myth of objectivity, insisting that to be balanced and fair, a critic needs to erase his or her predilections and prejudices and come to their spectating experiences as “universalist.” I don’t believe objectivity is possible or desirable; instead, it simply masks the biases that any critic, of necessity, brings to his or her work. Those biases, in fact, comprise a way of seeing that makes the critic’s work helpful and compelling. Such predispositions should be openly acknowledged and exploited. (p. 5)

Together, Fujiwara and Dolan advocate for criticism that draws on the unique experience, outlook, and perspective of the critic, no matter what space they occupy. This means that women (and men) who write feminist film criticism are drawing on their knowledge and experience to address feminist representation and misrepresentation. Feminist criticism operates within a space of interruption: as my examples of a Hollywood film, an independent film, and an art-house film and their accompanying criticism and reception illustrate, feminist critics who respond and react with their attention to gender are enacting an interruption to their cinephilic impulses, which also acts as disruption to critical film discourse.

We must understand cinephilia’s practice as unique for women, not because of what spectatorship and scopophilic theories have taught us, but because our media climate reminds us that women—as writers, actors, filmmakers, viewers and of course critics—occupy a marginalized space in the industry and thus a different relationship to Hollywood and film culture in general. As Dolan argues, “feminist critics have a responsibility to advocate for women artists and other cultural workers marginalized by modes of production driven by a bottom-line budget mentality” (2013, p. 4). While

women are rarely “hailed” as cinephiles, they still exist and do so most visibly through their written expressions (on the internet and beyond).



## CHAPTER 7

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In this dissertation, my goal was to understand what film criticism means to women writing online today. In its focus on women film bloggers and critics in the convergent era, this dissertation has made a contribution to the fields of Communication and Feminist Cultural Studies. While there has been a renewed interest in the lives of key female film critics, evident in recent biographies such as Robert Sitton's (2014) *Lady in the Dark: The Life of Iris Barry* and Brian Kellow's (2012) *Pauline Kael: A Life in the Dark*, there is little contemporary scholarship that focuses on women film critics in the convergent age. Through ethnographic interviews, historical, textual, and reception analyses, I have examined the ways in which women understand their writing and made a significant contribution to online film culture, all while having been forced to navigate and mediate misogynist reactions to their work.

In 2016, the discourse of "film criticism in crisis" has retreated, to some extent, and explorations that point out how women are often missing from these critical dialogues are emerging with more frequency. These articles collectively express bewilderment at the missing female critic, or why those who do write are not represented or highly networked. While many of the articles do emphasize this as a pressing problem, few seem willing to focus on one way of addressing it: pointing out where the female film critics blog or write and their achievements within online film criticism circles. Freelance film critic Diana Drumm has created Twitter and Facebook pages that serve to aggregate and promote #femalefilmcritics, which was highlighted in an article posted on the blog Women and Hollywood, "The Dudeocracy of Film Writers" (May 5, 2016).

Additionally, the women interviewed for this dissertation are tightly networked and often cross-promote each other's work, not only through blog comments and social media shout-outs but through more informal channels like referrals to other writing assignments. If critics and film journalists want to effectively highlight the problem and alleviate it, building awareness of and promoting the women who are doing the work needs to be part of the agenda.

This dissertation sought to examine why such marginalization occurs for female film critics, and in my "Cinephilia of Feminist Interruptions" chapter, part of the answer lies in how women have a different response to films and film culture, and this response is often criticized and unwelcome by the (male) majority of audiences and critics. It is clear from this research that as convergent criticism proliferates, with it comes a reproduction of patriarchal structures that make networking and community and assertions of authority more difficult for women—especially those who choose to write about film (or other media) from a feminist perspective. Prominent feminist video games scholar Anita Sarkeesian, who created a series of video games that critique misogyny and female stereotypes in video games, has been the subject of cyberbullying, hate mail, and death threats. In 2016, shortly after the release of her feminist memoir, *Sex Object*, Jessica Valenti was forced off social media sites after she received rape and death threats directed at her five-year-old daughter.

Those who take a feminist approach to film criticism are often criticized by fellow critics or bloggers, who deem their opinions and analysis simply wrong. There is a distinct hostility towards women who point out gender disparities and sexism in films, and the woman critic is often marked as the "feminist killjoy" who, although she takes on

the critical responsibility of highlighting how representations of difference are important, intervene with another's enjoyment of the film.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, many of the bloggers in my study have been subject to a very particular kind of “mansplaining”—schooled by men who doubt or scoff at their interest, knowledge, or authority on the subject in which they chose to write—even when they do not take a feminist approach. Despite the current U.S. population comprising 51% women, calling out attention to women's issues and gender representation remains unpopular not only in mainstream film criticism, but often in cinephilic criticism as well, as discovered in my reception analysis of key films by Lars von Trier. Feminist critiques of any kind are often received by many cinephile critics (but not all) to be an anti-intellectual shortcut to film criticism, even though it interrupts the often romanticized notion of a filmmaker as an artist who only makes “masterpieces.” Should sexism be ignored because it appears only as a by-product of true art? While the obvious answer is no, the feminist cinephile's criticism, which can hardly be considered anti-intellectual, is repeatedly discounted or marginalized in a convergent landscape that remains male-dominated.

I chose eight women for this study because they were seasoned bloggers and writers with a particular passion not only for film but also for blogging. Despite their diversified interests, these women all share a distinct form of cinephilia, even if that was not a term that they all embraced. While cinephilia has often been translated merely to “movie love,” that does not mean these women love *all* movies. Each expressed a deep connection to a certain genre, movement, or era of films and often wrote at length about these films on their blogs. Their writing was rarely limited to their blogs, and as of this

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<sup>24</sup> See Sara Ahmed, (2010), *Feminist Killjoys (And Other Willful Subjects)*. *The Scholar and Feminist Online*.

writing (August 2016) all of them have been recognized for their work in other arenas. In 2014, Farran Smith Nehme published her novel, *Missing Reels*, which follows a young '80s Manhattan cinephile who goes on a quest (with some help from a potential suitor) to find a forgotten silent film, starring her downstairs neighbor. The book has received high praise from *Kirkus Reviews*, *Publisher's Weekly* and *Entertainment Weekly*. Also in 2015, Kimberly Lindbergs was honored by the National Film Registry at the Library of Congress, when her 2010 essay on Arthur Penn's controversial film *Little Big Man* (1970), was selected by the National Film Preservation Board to be included on the National Film Registry website. Sheila O'Malley witnessed a short independent film based on her screenplay (*July and Half of August*) go into production, and Catherine Grant launched a journal (with fellow academics Christian Keathley and Drew Morton), called inTRANSITION, devoted to video essay film criticism. Like their predecessors, these film critics and bloggers see their writing as only one activity in a series of many cinephilic expressions.

While the impulse to blog about films and film culture comes easy, difficulties occur when bloggers seek to connect with others to start and build conversations. During my research period, Kimberly Lindbergs shut down her personal blog due to excessive trolling and negative comments directed at her writing and her personally. Marilyn Ferdinand found herself excluded from a critical film culture site, *The Critics Roundup*, which purported to aggregate only the highest quality criticism in one space, as an alternative to sites like Rottentomatoes.com and Metacritic.com. Founded in 2013 by James Kang, this site positions itself as "the first movie review aggregator to select critics and publications based on merit instead of popularity, notes he uses David Hudson (of

MUBI) as a personal barometer: “If you get linked to a lot by David, you almost certainly deserve to be here, but I’ve had to limit the number of critics and publications to favorites.” (2015; criticsroundup.com) Certainly, this exclusivity seems a bit arbitrary and merit is not the sole factor here, but clearly popularity within cinephilic critics circles also plays a distinct part in curating this film criticism. Research subjects such as Farran Smith Nehme and Sheila O’Malley are included at criticsroundup.com, yet the other women in my study are not. This example reinforces how, just like filmmaking in Hollywood, the world of criticism can be influenced by a “boys club” mentality in which a select few, primarily men, are repeatedly the center of cinephilic conversations.

Many of my expectations about how online film criticism operates and serves these bloggers was reinforced through my interviews; however, my research also unearthed a series of surprises which challenged how I understood film criticism in both historical and contemporary contexts.

First, I knew that I could draw connections between critics writing in earlier eras to their film blogging counterparts, but I was not sure how these connections could be made. Throughout history, it is clear that female film critics have always voiced concern regarding the portrayal of women as well as the representation of family and marriage in films, from Iris Barry in the ‘20s to Barbara Deming in the ‘40s and Molly Haskell and Pauline Kael in the ‘60s and beyond. These often feminist accounts illustrate an awareness of how films are products made for consumption, which influences their content but also shapes ideologies; films sell a lifestyle, and these critics observe how many films included only a limited range of possibilities for women. Women can do much more with their lives than what the screen prescribes, according to Iris Barry in one

chapter of her 1926 book, *Let's Go to the Movies*, which is still an argument made by female film critics writing about women on screen today.

Secondly, women film critics have always been fully immersed in film culture. Throughout history, some of the best critics writing about film also participated in film culture through other modes, such as filmmaking, scriptwriting, and curating. More than simply a cinephilic impulse, these other activities served to triangulate their knowledge about film through industrial practices and educational modes that inform the practice of criticism. This also connects a previous generation of female film critics to their current blogging counterparts.

Finally, I discovered that the dichotomies of print vs. convergent, commercial vs. amateur critic are not so hard and fast, and the similarities between the two eras, and the ways that they might overlap, are worthy of exploration. Paul Brunick, writing for *Film Comment*, evokes a powerful comparison of what “alternative” writing can be. Brunick illustrates this point by noting that although Andrew Sarris and Pauline Kael were both long-time professional critics for esteemed publications (Sarris at the *Village Voice* and Kael at the *New Yorker*), much of their acclaimed writing came from alternative spaces for which they were not paid: Sarris wrote frequently for the underground, DIY film magazine *Film Culture*, and Kael’s collected reviews found in *I Lost it at the Movies* are transcripts of KPFA public radio broadcasts. (Brunick, “Online Film Criticism: Part One,” 2010) As a rhetorical defense of the value of online criticism, Brunick asks, “Would iconoclasts and autodidacts like Kael and Sarris really have regarded the self-publishing power of the Internet as an unwanted intrusion?” (Online Film Criticism: Part One,” July/August, 2010). Thus, it is clear that the hostility toward the supposed

“amateurism” of bloggers in the Web 2.0 era is an antiquated reaction and unfair judgment of online writing, criticism, or scholarship. In addition, some of the best criticism could not fit into the confines of traditional print criticism, so to spend so much time lamenting its loss is not necessary. As Brunick illustrates, Sarris and Kael wrote some of their best work in long-form without the restrictions of word counts and institutional controls—thus, we should value the freedom of a new era of critics who take advantage of the Web’s capacity for these same forms of flexibility.

### **Future Considerations and Research**

In this study I focused centrally on the blogs that each woman wrote, providing a home and space to craft a writer’s identity while building conversations about film with other critics and film fans. However, during the course of my interviews it became clear that many of my bloggers have shifted many of their critical conversations and connections to other cinephiles and to social media sites, specifically Facebook and more frequently, Twitter. While my bloggers did not suggest this was an ideal space for in-depth examinations of films (noting that these platforms often invited a competitiveness distinct from those in blog spaces) it was the place where many critics could enter the conversation at once and link back to their own writing, using Twitter as a platform for cross-promotion. An in-depth, empirical study of film bloggers and critics use and their use of Twitter would be a logical next step in this research, as it would allow me to see how mainstream critics, film journalists, cinephilic bloggers as well as fans interact in a space that is often contested and conflicted, especially for women.

Another future path for this research on the women of film criticism is to expand my research area and interview more professional women film critics, in order to

discover if they have encountered similar challenges as my bloggers, such as Alison Wilmore at *Buzzfeed*, Manohla Dargis at *The New York Times*, and Stephanie Zacharek at *Time*. These critics can offer their insights on writing in a convergent era which includes understanding how their writing circulates in print, online, and through social media networks.

Lastly, another avenue of research is to explore the ways in which women participate in other aspects of film culture, such as film programming. Alison Cuddy's article, "The Female Film Critic: An Endangered Species?" laments the lack of female film critics but finds that women "are a significant presence among film programmers and presenters" (June 6, 2013). Cuddy cites Barbara Scharres at the Gene Siskel Film Center, Mimi Brody at Northwestern University's Block Cinema, Rebecca Hall of the Northwest Chicago Film Society, and Anne Wells and Nancy Watrous at the Chicago Film Archives. (June 6, 2013) Beyond Chicago, programmers (who also happen to be film critics) include Miriam Bale, who started the La Di Da Film festival in 2013, and Genevieve Yue, who currently programs independently but spent three years as the associate programmer of the Los Angeles Film Forum. (2015; [newschool.edu](http://newschool.edu)) Cuddy asks Scharres about the gender divide of programmers, who mentions that based on attendance at the annual conference of North American Film programmers, the male-female split was evenly divided. Cuddy cites Scharres, "women have a whole different take on things. Just even the obvious bullshit detection when it comes to film's portrayal of women" (as cited in Cuddy, June 6, 2013). Exploring this aspect of film culture might also illuminate why so many women prefer programming activities over criticism, especially since many programmers are also critics.



## **Conclusion: The Future of Online Film Criticism**

Online film criticism will continue to grow and flourish. New film journals, magazines, and criticism aggregators will expand. What matters, however, is *how* this will happen: Will women's voices be heard? Increasingly, the call for diversity in many sectors of the industry might support the change that film criticism also needs.

Responding to reports of sexism in Hollywood from the ACLU, in 2015 the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) began a serious investigation into discrimination of women, given that women directed less than 5% of studio films between 2009-2013 (Silverstein, 2015). In January 2016, the Academy Award nominations revealed that not a single actor of color had been nominated for an Oscar, leading to threats of boycotts, a viral Twitter campaign, #OscarsSoWhite, and the Academy's black president, Cheryl Boone Isaacs, announcing changes in membership policies, terms, and recruitment efforts to recognize diversity.

However, perhaps the most powerful call to change comes from Chaz Ebert (2015) as she asks, "Where Are All the Diverse Voices in Film Criticism?"

It is not enough to have reviewers who understand how to discuss film. We need reviewers who can speak deeply and with nuance because of their lived experiences. The trusted voices in film criticism should be diverse ambassadors who have access to the larger conversation. If we can't recognize ourselves within the existing public discourse, we are implicitly being asked to devalue our experiences and accept a narrative that is not our own... It is critical that people who write about film and television and the arts—and indeed the world—mirror the people in our society. (Dec. 1, 2015)

The future of online criticism must allow the growing number of women's voices to bring diversity to understanding and making meaning of films and their contexts. Female film critics are more likely to point out sexism, misogyny and gender inequalities, and in doing so may shift attention to the many ways that American cinema often fails its

female audiences. The feminist interruption, which serves as a disruption to critical film discourse, has value beyond its purpose of allowing women's voices to challenge the mostly white, male-centered criticism landscape. It also serves to call attention to the inequalities that inhabit an entire industry's labor and cultural practices. Because the motion picture industry creates cultural objects that also serve as symbolic representations of who we are and who we imagine ourselves to be, it is up to women film critics to de-naturalize the notion that the male experience has more validity and influence, and deserves more representation than women. Such work by female critics constitutes a form of activism, as changing the ways that people understand and consider film provides a path to social change.

## APPENDIX A

### INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR FEMALE FILM CRITICS AND BLOGGERS

1. Tell me about your blog. When did you start? What was your initial intention and goal for it?
2. How did you choose a name/title for your blog?
3. What is the blog's primary content (i.e. reviews, essays on filmmakers, actors, etc.)
4. Who do you see as your readers? Are they different from who you originally expected to visit your site?
5. Do you get a lot of comments on your posts?
6. How would you describe the comments you receive?
7. Do you work collaboratively with other bloggers?
8. Do you consider yourself a cinephile? Why or why not?
9. Would you consider those who visit your site to be cinephiles as well? Why or why not?
10. What is the most enjoyable aspect of blogging for you?
11. What is the most difficult or problematic aspect of blogging for you?
12. Do you think being a female blogger affects how people read and respond to your writing?
13. Do readers ever make comments about your gender?
14. Do you ever correspond or interact with posters in a forum outside of your blog?
15. Do you accept advertising on your blog?
16. Would you rather write for a print-based publication as opposed to maintaining a web presence?
17. Do you blog about other subjects besides film? If so, which topics?

## **APPENDIX B**

### **LIST OF INTERVIEW SUBJECTS**

Marilyn Ferdinand, [ferdyonfilms.com](http://ferdyonfilms.com)

Catherine Grant, [filmstudiesforfree.com](http://filmstudiesforfree.com)

Kimberly Lindbergs, [cinebeats.wordpress.com](http://cinebeats.wordpress.com) and [moviemorlocks.com](http://moviemorlocks.com)

Amy Monaghan, [pullquote.typepad.com](http://pullquote.typepad.com)

Sheila O'Malley, [sheilaomalley.com](http://sheilaomalley.com) and [RogerEbert.com](http://RogerEbert.com)

Kiva Reardon, [cleojournal.com](http://cleojournal.com)

Carrie Rickey, [philly.com](http://philly.com) and [carrierickey.com](http://carrierickey.com)

Farran Smith Nehme, [selfstyledsiren.blogspot.com](http://selfstyledsiren.blogspot.com)

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