

Dissecting the Sundance Curse: Exploring Discrepancies Between Film Reviews by Professional and Amateur Critics

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Abstract

There has been a growing discrepancy between professional-critic film reviews and audience-originating film reviews. In fact, these occurrences have become so routine, industry writers often reference a “Sundance Curse” – when a buzzy festival-circuit film bombs with the general public, commercially or critically. This study examines this inconsistency to determine which aspects of a film tend to draw the most attention from each respective type of critic. A qualitative content analysis of 20 individual reviews was conducted to determine which elements present in a film garnered the most attention from the reviewers, and whether that attention was positive, negative or neutral. This study indicates that audience film reviewers overwhelmingly focused on the “emotional response” gleaned from their movie-going experience above all other aspects of the film, whereas professional critics focused attention to more tangible – above-the-line contributions, such as direction, performances, and writing.

I. Introduction

As one of the most talked-about films of the 2018 Sundance Film Festival, the A24-released *Hereditary* became the breakout horror film of the year, opening in nearly 3,000 theaters and raking in \$79 million while produced on just a \$10 million production budget (Cusumano, 2018). Despite the obvious box office success, *Hereditary*'s word-of-mouth power seemed to have mostly been driven by glowing critical reviews, rather than by the opinion of audiences who paid to see the film. Indeed, *Hereditary* entered theaters as critics raved, marking the film with a 90% critic score on review aggregation site CinemaScore. Opening night audiences, on the other hand, awarded the highly-anticipated film a D+ on the same site (Thompson, 2018).

While *Hereditary* went on to become its distributor's highest-grossing film to date, the discrepancy between lavish reviews by critics and outraged critiques by audiences is too drastic to be ignored (Cusumano, 2018). This film has not been the only offering in recent years to exemplify the ever-increasing divide in opinion between members of the press and the public. A multitude of films, primarily in the horror genre, display similar critical discrepancies and indicate a fundamental difference in opinion as to what makes for a quality film. Occurrences like this have become routine; industry writers now bemoan the speculative “Sundance Curse” in the event a buzzy festival-circuit film bombs with the general public, commercially or

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critically.

To understand this phenomenon, this study conducted a qualitative content analysis to examine film reviews that do not converge. Ultimately, this content analysis sought to understand whether this disparity in opinion is based on knowledge of the medium by the different types of movie critics, or if it is simply due to cases of false advertising where audiences may have entered the theater with incorrect, preconceived notions about the film in question due to misleading trailers or marketing campaigns by distributors.

Specifically, the methodology involved conducting a qualitative content analysis of the reviews of five individual movie titles that display this discrepancy between professional critical reviews and audience scores. These titles were chosen from films that show a drastic difference between audience average scores and critical scores – at least a 30% gap. The positive reviews written by professional critics were obtained from *Variety* magazine, due to its prominence, reputation, and influence in the entertainment industry. In addition, the coding exercise examined each title's first three audience reviews on the industry-standard review aggregator *Rotten Tomatoes* to gauge initial audience reactions.

The goal of this study was to look for defining characteristics, phrases, and mentions within each review to determine what aspects of each film the professional critics focused on, and which aspects were deemed more important by audiences. With four reviews being included in the coding for each of the five titles, the total amounted to twenty reviews being coded.

II. Literature Review

The advent of Internet pop culture communities and streaming websites were instrumental in the development of general movie-going audiences becoming more acutely aware of the world's cinematic catalog. With this development came a new balance of power; rather than relying on critics to curate choices for them, audiences became more well-versed in navigating the staggering variety of films released each year. The idea of a figure who acts as a "vanguard" to culture – especially culture prized in being obscure or esoteric – is critical to the identity of film critics from a historical perspective. As a tastemaker or vanguard, the critic is at once the discoverer and the sharer of any cultural content that thrives on the illusion of exclusivity (Taylor, 2015). This exclusivity, powerful in its comparison to an in-the-know community, was once a more tangible aspect of media and art consumption in the age of print media – a time in which the distributors of opinion-based content held significant sway due to their market share and lofted status (Porton, 2013).

The explosion of Internet globalism and people's near-universal participation in various subcultures goes counter to the role criticism has previously played in a society of well-standardized art and creative content (Taylor, 2015). Today's Internet-enabled "sharing" culture, fostering the demolition of barriers between critics and the general public, has shifted the epicenters of cinephilia so that "everyone seems to be claiming cultural authority and specialized cultural knowledge at the same time, and both are so readily available" (Taylor, 2015, p. 25).

Being a vanguard also implies inherent risks with the championing of any work. As criticism boils down to both professional expertise and subjective opinion, the vanguard must toe a precipitous balance: curating an output of criticism toward any work that is capable of resonating with the less niche-savvy public, while at the same time not sacrificing their own status as gatekeeper-of-the-esoteric by stooping to pander to the public's whims (James, 2015). Such is the fear of a traditional critic: to preserve the exclusivity and artistic standards of the film medium while avoiding "catering to the adolescent taste and the Hollywood hype machine" (McNeil, 2015, p. 61). In some regards, presumption on the part of the critic was a driving force behind the degradation of what it takes to become a "critic" in the Internet Age – disregarding explicit aesthetic standards for more elusive insider knowledge, "specialized cultist knowledge and liberated camp taste" (Taylor, 2015, p. 26).

Thus, from the ashes of the old model of critical culture, audiences have arisen as the new authoritative voice in criticism (Elsaesser, 2015, 195). Gone are the days in which power existed solely in the pages of an A-list magazine or major newspaper; more and more, the driving power behind criticism is sourced from online review aggregates that consider audience reactions similarly to those of the more typical critics (Weinstein, 2012).

This new phenomenon in film reviewing has led to a leveling of the playing field; rather than

presenting themselves as authoritative figures, modern film critics present themselves “as audiences, trying to understand (a film’s) characters and, with or through them, the society that we live in” (Elsaesser 197). Additionally, film studios and production companies have even begun to consider the importance of audience viewpoint and the authority of audience tastes in modern review aggregators in the development, production, and marketing of their own content.

Though more films are being made now than ever before, critics of the old variety note that “the abundance of websites calling (the public’s) attention to small, off-the-radar movies may be the single best way of preserving the culture” (Panayides, 2015, p. 232). Indeed, the critic’s most basic, existential function, “to explain using expert knowledge, remains timeless – and a true critic, one who illuminates instead of just offering opinions, is as rare and valued in the age of the Internet as he or she ever was” (Panayides, 2015, p. 233).

The most popular of these film review aggregator sites, the Warner Brothers-owned Rotten Tomatoes, commands a unique place in the film market; it receives over 9 million unique viewers any given month (Wasserman, 2015). The practice of Internet browsing by its very nature does not facilitate sustained attention on any long-form piece of journalism, underscoring the unprecedented expediency and convenience at which anyone can view the critical consensus of any particular film (Young, 2010). The method by which Rotten Tomatoes portrays its consensus is taking effect on the industry via its power to sway word-of-mouth opinion depending on its “Tomato Meter” score, which congregates the percentage of reviews that were at all positive or negative (or “Fresh,” in the website’s own terminology) (Weinstein, 2012).

It is clear that audiences and professional critics have become almost equally influential voices to the consequences of film criticism, bolstered by ease of access to an entire history’s worth of film projects and the instant sharing culture that exists due to widespread Internet use. However, when films such as 2018’s *Hereditary* become notorious for the widespread chasm between the reaction from professional critics and audience reactions, a clear gap is brought to light. Despite the supposed elevation of audiences in the critical realm, there are varying standards used to determine the quality of a film, depending on whether the review comes from professional critics or general audience members (Cusumano, 2018). To help understand the reasons for the gap that happens sometimes between professional film reviews and audience film reviews, this study seeks to provide answers to the following research questions:

RQ1: Which components of a film are professional critics most likely to respond to, both positively and negatively?

RQ2: Which components of a film are audience critics (amateurs) most likely to respond to, both positively and negatively?

RQ3: Why do certain variables elicit stronger responses in amateur critics than in professional critics?

III. Methods

To determine why a strong discrepancy exists sometimes between the average of audience reviews and the average of professional critical reviews, a qualitative content analysis of reviews about five films was conducted. These films were selected based on the notable difference between average audience scores and average professional critic scores. The “gap” between each respective average score is at least a 30% difference, according to the scores accrued on Rotten Tomatoes, in comparison to the professional critics’ average rating.

For each film chosen, four reviews were selected for coding. The review from a professional critic was sourced from *Variety* magazine, due to its prominence, reputation, and influence in the entertainment industry. In addition, each title’s three first-listed audience reviews on the industry-standard review aggregator *Rotten Tomatoes* were also coded, to gauge initial audience reactions. Within each review, salient phrases, key words, characteristics, and examples were coded to glean which aspects of each film the professional reviewers chose to focus on or found more glaringly positive or negative, as opposed to what captured the attention of standard audiences.

The five films coded in this qualitative content analysis are *Hereditary* (93% critic score vs. 60% audience score), *Blockers* (84% critic score vs. 51% audience score), *The Witch* (91% critic score vs. 57%

audience score), *It Comes at Night* (87% critic score vs. 44% audience score), and *We Are What We Are* (82% critic score vs. 49% audience score). Each film being analyzed was released post-2010. The average difference between audience and critic scores in this sample is 33%.

The coding categories were salient phrases and keywords in each review, and a reviewer’s reactions to aspects such as characters, performances, casting, direction, cinematography, music, sound design, plot (by act), set design, writing, camp factor (aspects that are meant to be enjoyed ironically), emotional appeals (emotional responses), action, pace, and marketing. Each aspect was coded as present or absent in the review and, when present, the review’s positive or negative take on the respective aspect was also coded. The length of the review also was recorded.

IV. Findings

Each film’s reviews were analyzed to account for the presence or absence of sixteen individual variables related to the composition of each film. If the variable was found to be present, it was further sorted into a “positive” connotation, “negative” connotation, or “neutral” connotation. Figure 1 consolidates the data from the five separate qualitative coding sheets.

Unsurprisingly, the reviews that came from a professional source (in this case *Variety*) were always longer than their audience-sourced counterparts. As such, they tended to cover a more complete spread of the available variables. Reviews sourced from Rotten Tomatoes were significantly smaller on average; while the word count of each *Variety* article averaged to around 1,001 words, the average Rotten Tomatoes word count came out to 305 words.

While the narrative structure and content of the *Variety* reviews varied considerably – some espoused mostly plot and subtext-focused interpretations, whereas other chose to spend more time invested in the technical and performance aspects of the film – a common thread between the professional reviews was that they on average provided more complete coverage of the available variables, while non-professional reviewers would more often fixate on a more limited scope of factors in order to issue praise or criticism. For example, the *Variety* review for one of the films included in this study, *The Witch*, included details on individual performances, the effectiveness of the production design, and the bleak thematic content within the screenplay, while one of the featured audience reviews found on Rotten Tomatoes simply mentioned how they reacted to the film (specifically, how “boring” they found it).

What Critics Addressed in Reviews

Variable	Review Source	Positive Responses	Negative Responses	Neutral Responses	Absent Response
Writing	Audience	3	6	1	5
	Professional	4	1	0	0
Plot [related to structure and clarity]	Audience	3	2	5	5
	Professional	1	0	3	1
Characters [Relative to character depth, arcs, and growth]	Audience	2	3	2	8
	Professional	1	0	4	0
Performances [By actors]	Audience	7	3	0	5
	Professional	4	0	1	0
Casting	Audience	2	1	0	12
	Professional	2	0	1	2

Direction [choices that led to overall takeaway]	Audience	5	1	0	9
	Professional	5	0	0	0
Cinema-tography	Audience	4	0	1	10
	Professional	2	0	0	3
Music	Audience	0	0	0	15
	Professional	2	0	0	3
Sound Design	Audience	0	0	0	15
	Professional	0	0	0	5
Production Design	Audience	1	0	0	14
	Professional	4	0	0	1
Camp Factor [Aspects of the film meant to be enjoyed ironically]	Audience	1	3	5	6
	Professional	1	0	1	3
Emotional Response [empathetic reaction noted in review]	Audience	5	8	1	1
	Professional	2	1	2	0
Action	Audience	1	1	1	12
	Professional	4	0	0	1
Pace	Audience	1	3	1	10
	Professional	1	0	1	3
Marketing Effectiveness	Audience	0	1	1	13
	Professional	0	0	0	5
Length	Audience	0	0	0	15
	Professional	0	0	1	4

Figure 1

Unsurprisingly, the variable that most captured the amateur reviewers' attention from the films was "Emotional Response." This label describes anything included in a review to indicate how the film affected reviewers viscerally or mentally, including their feelings and reactions toward the film. Of the 15 amateur reviews, 14 contained some reference to reviewer' emotional responses. Five of those 14 responses indicated positive emotions toward the film, eight of the responses indicated negative emotions, and one response indicated a neutral emotional response.

The variables of "Writing," "Characters," "Performances," "Direction," and "Emotional Response" were represented in all five coded professional film reviews. Performances appeared to be the variable that best indicated audience excitement and positivity, since seven of the variable's 10 occurrences were coded as "positive" reinforcement. The variable that tended to turn an audience reviewer against a film the most, was the most widely-cited variable – emotional response. Of the 14 reviews that indicated audience critics' emotional response, eight of them indicated a "negative" emotional response to the respective films.

V. Discussion

As discussed in the previous section, the reviews written by Rotten Tomatoes audience reviewers tended to be about one-third the length of the typical *Variety* review, and thus they usually were not able (or chose not) to cover the full berth of available variables. The data suggests that professional critics tend to give a more well-rounded and nuanced approach to understanding a film.

Audience reviews suggest that general consumers – not professional critics – will allow their overall impressions of a film to be heavily dictated by one or two prominent variables that they notice. For example, if a film contains an outstanding performance from one of its cast members (as was the case for *Hereditary* star Toni Collette, who was widely acclaimed for her performance), an audience reviewer will be more affected by this variable than, for instance, widely-acclaimed writing or direction, as was the case for *The Witch*, which took home awards for both categories (Best First Screenplay at the 2016 Independent Spirit Awards, Best Director at the 2015 Sundance Film Festival) (Thompson, 2018).

While emotional response tended to be the most easily-observable of these factors, it was also the most subjective, as one's emotional response is entirely dependent on an individual's values, beliefs, experiences, and knowledge of film repertoire. Amateur reviewers tended to judge a film's quality on how it made them feel – in other terms, whether or not they felt that, as a whole, the film left a "good" or "bad" impression.

For horror films such as *Hereditary* and *The Witch*, the disturbing nature of the narratives may have left an unsuspecting audience member with feelings of unease or disgust. While a seasoned film critic might have recognized this visceral response as the mark of an effective movie in terms of writing, direction, and performances, a less-experienced amateur critic may interpret those negative feelings as an indicator of a "bad" movie. Perhaps in a future iteration of this research, more specific emotional keywords could be coded for as a subset of the emotional response variable, such as fear, joy, anger, disgust, and sadness toward the film in question. This would not have been possible with the current methodology, since the reviewers do not necessarily indicate which emotion the film in question triggered for them. Future research could incorporate individual in-depth interviews into the data collection process.

While the data collected from professional film critics also indicated the significance of emotional response, they equally valued the merits of other variables, namely writing, characters, performances, and direction. In other words, professional film critics seemed to equally value the parts of a film over the sum; they took good directing, writing (character writing as well as action), and cast performances as seriously as the emotional response that was elicited due to these components. This is indicative of the "gatekeeper" knowledge of professional film critics that was discussed in the Literature Review section.

While modern audiences have likely seen far more films in their lifetimes than counterparts in previous generations, they lack the formal education, insider industry experience, and knowledge of the filmmaking process that many professional critics take for granted as part of their skillset. As such, their opinions – while not necessarily invalid – are likely to be emotionally driven, rather than influenced by the quality and/or originality of the film's construction.

Another interesting finding is the lack of attention to some variables. For example, sound design (an element crucial to any film) seemed to be taken for granted, or perhaps the audience and critics merely found the sound design in each film similarly unremarkable. A film's music similarly did not tend to invoke much attention; of the fifteen audience reviews, none mentioned a film's score. The music most likely had an impact on the film's emotional response, especially for the films belonging to genres that rely heavily on music to define dramatic beats and create tension and fear. However, this methodology is unable to discern exactly how little or how much a film's music may have had on the emotional response of the reviewer. Two of the five professional film reviews referenced the respective film's score in a positive manner, while the remaining three reviews contained no mention of a film's music. While a film's score is inherently an artistic contribution to the film, it may be viewed as a "technical" aspect by members of the audience, and thus above their immediate awareness in terms of a film's overall quality and impression.

This mindset can be observed in the reactions to "Production Design" (this includes set design, set dressing, lighting, costumes, and props). While four of the five reviews by professional critics positively referenced the respective film's production design (with one review making no reference to production design), only one audience review referenced that factor. Production design, as an element of the film that

generally is not as apparent to a casual audience as other aspects like performances, seems to have been noted much more frequently by professional critics, who have the industry and filmmaking knowledge to notice when set design elevates the film.

There were other limitations to this study. Only a small number of featured audience reviewers from each title were selected for coding, simply due to time and resource constraints. More detailed results would have undoubtedly brought a more nuanced look at this topic.

VI. Conclusion

In summary, this study indicates that, compared to audience reviewers, professional critics tend to compile a more comprehensive consideration of the film. Professional critics provided equal attention to above-the-line variables such as writing, characters, performances, and direction. All professional reviews also featured commentary on each film's emotional response, though this variable was treated generally as a culmination of all other above-the-line variables, rather than as a consequential stand-alone element. Amateur film critics treated emotional response as the single most important factor in a film, as it was the most-mentioned variable present in the coded selections.

Ultimately, this indicates the extent of the knowledge gap between professional and amateur critics. Professional critics, tasked with discerning quality content from the vast swathes of new releases, generally are more well-versed in the filmmaking process and the application of elements such as writing and performances. Members of the audience usually have not studied these aspects in the same way as professionals, and thus gravitate toward their own emotional response as an indication to the film's overall quality. Whereas professionals incorporate the building blocks of a film into their consideration, audiences are left focused on the sum of a film's parts - especially with regard to the film's overall emotional impact.

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