

How to Be a Film Critic in Five Easy Lessons

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By

Christopher K. Brooks

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Lou Lopez and his Emerson Biggins Staff

The disenfranchised of the English Department:
Rebecca Bree, Fran Connor, Margaret Dawe,
Darren Defrain, Albert Goldbarth, Jean Griffith,
and Sam Taylor

Brian Evans, Mary Sherman, Kerry Branine, Mythili Menon,
and T.J. Boynton.

Peter Zoller, William Woods, Kim Hamilton, and Susan
Wilcox

Mary Waters and Ron Matson, forgiven . . .

This book is for all of you

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INTRODUCTION

A BACKGROUND TO FILM CRITICISM AND MILLENNIAL VIEWERS

In March of 2017, a provocative claim was made that brings attention to the nature and corporate practice of *film evaluation*. It seems that the *evaluation process* has not been fair to certain films or genres of movie. This first passage, posted by *msmash*, clarifies this errant machinery:

These days, it takes less than 60 seconds to know what the general consensus on a new movie is—thanks to *Rotten Tomatoes*, the review aggregator site that designates a number score to each film based on critical and user reviews. Although this may be convenient for moviegoers not necessarily interested in burning \$15 on a critically subpar film, it is certainly not convenient for those Hollywood directors, producers, backers, and stars who toiled to make said critically subpar film. In fact, the site may be "the worst thing that we have in today's movie culture"—at least according to Brett Ratner, the *Rush Hour* director/producer who recently threw the financial weight of his RatPac Entertainment behind *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*. Sure, the blockbuster made over \$850 million worldwide in spite of negative reviews ... but just think of how much more it could have made had it not had a *Rotten Tomatoes* score of 27 percent!¹

¹ Despite the 27 percent assignment from *Rotten Tomatoes*, a significant portion of millennial viewers enjoyed *Batman v Superman*. Here is 17-year-old *Quanzilla12* stating a review:

“Despite the somewhat discouraging reviews that this movie earned, it was nothing short of amazing. It does an excellent job keeping the audience engaged with its delightful cast of characters, one that anyone from a comics diehard to a brand-new fan can enjoy. The premise of a superhero movie implies violence, which definitely existed (characters fighting, one character branding criminals, and some explosions) but fight scenes avoided graphic blood or beatings, the most intense violence occurring when two characters mutually stab one another. However, the somewhat fantastical nature of the violence decreases its graphic intensity. The movie is deserving of its PG-13 rating, with a mild make out scene and characters that show flesh but never in an overly suggestive manner. Still, the suspenseful action and dramatic plot make this film a marvelous selection for everyone except the younger

Last week, while speaking at the Sun Valley Film Festival, Ratner said, "The worst thing that we have in today's movie culture is *Rotten Tomatoes*. I think it's the destruction of our business." (<https://entertainment.slashdot.org/story/17/03/24/1243259/hollywood-producer-blames-rotten-tomatoes-for-convincing-people-not-to-see-his-movie>.)

This passage is echoed by the following statement made by Nolan Moore, who also mentions the impact negative reviews have on one particular age group: millennials.

Movie studios have a love-hate relationship with *Rotten Tomatoes*. If the site says a movie is "fresh," they won't stop touting the rave reviews. (Just look at any trailer for *Get Out* or *Lady Bird*.) On the flip side, Hollywood executives often blame *Rotten Tomatoes* for declining ticket sales, especially when it comes to blockbusters. The argument goes that if audiences learn that a big-budget film is "rotten," then they'll stay home instead of spending their hard-earned cash on a poorly-reviewed movie.

So does *Rotten Tomatoes* actually influence moviegoers? Well, a study by USC's Entertainment Technology Center says no, but internal studies by Paramount and 20th Century Fox say yes, especially when it comes to millennials. In other words, it's a hotly contested topic. (<https://www.looper.com/132620/movies-that-got-decimated-by-terrible-rotten-tomatoes-scores/>).

The gist of the argument is that many millennials purchase tickets days ahead of time to ensure seat selection and so are selective about where they spend their money.² Others plan to buy on the morning of a film's debut. When *Rotten Tomatoes* then pans a film, millennials, 30% of all ticket buyers, know in advance and stay home. Moore lists the following films as having been *decimated* by day-of-release, very negative *Rotten Tomatoes* reviews: *The Lone Ranger*, *Fantastic Four*, *Gods of Egypt*, *Live by Night*, *Baywatch*, *Dark Tower*, *Ghost in the Shell*, *King Arthur: Legend of the*

audience of kids. However, older kids, teens, and adults up? It's an unforgettably enjoyable movie that does a great job bringing favorite DC comics characters to the big screen." (<https://www.common-sense-media.org/movie-reviews/batman-v-super-man-dawn-of-justice/user-reviews/child>). The Audience Review is *35 points higher* than that of the professional critics, so for what audience are the professionals penning their reviews? The millennial reviewer saw the film in spite of the low professional reviews. What does that signify?

² Meriah Doty states, "Younger millennials also prefer to see movies on opening weekend — making up 47 percent of those in Gen Y who go to the theater in that timeframe." (<https://www.thewrap.com/millennials-box-office-study/>).

Sword, The Mummy, and A Wrinkle in Time. Although many ultimately turned a profit, Paramount and 20th Century Fox maintain that their profits were significantly reduced by the weak reviews. And since many of these films are first noticed by younger and more selective millennial viewers when they reach pay-cable, even more trouble awaits:

\$45 billion: The amount six major media companies—21st Century Fox, CBS, Discovery, Time Warner, Viacom, and Walt Disney—lost in market value in six weeks this spring. The drop was blamed on investors who were concerned that millennials are cancelling their cable subscriptions in favour of streaming services (the trend known as cord-cutting). eMarketer estimates that a fifth of US households will have taken that route by 2019. (Melina Druga, <https://mipblog.com/2016/07/millennials-changing-face-entertainment/>).

And these film giants are not the only disenchanted production companies.

Netflix takes issue with how *Rotten Tomatoes* evaluated its original production *Bright*, assigned a 30% “splat” at the film evaluation sight. *Bright* did well commercially, inspiring a sequel, leading one Netflix official to respond, “Critics are an important part of the artistic process, but [they are] pretty disconnected from the commercial prospects of a film,” chief content officer Ted Sarandos said. “[Film critics] speak to specific audiences who care about quality, or how objectively good or bad a movie is—not the masses who are critical for determining whether a film makes money.” CEO Hastings chimed in to add, “The critics are pretty disconnected from the mass appeal.” (<https://entertainment.slashdot.org/story/18/01/26/1858211/netflix-executives-say-bright-success-proves-film-critics-are-disconnected-from-mass-appeal>). The *critics* are not *the general audience* but a separate constituency charged with weighing the virtues of a film and indicating its watchability to a lay-audience. And they clearly have different expectations. Hastings identifies a crucial point: professional critics are targeting a *specific audience* and not writing for a general audience, in particular not a millennial one. Those who overlook millennials are losing billions.

Yet consider this statement from Eric Kohn:

That challenge has only increased for longtime distributors in the indie space, most of whom target older moviegoers. That’s not changing anytime soon. Many established players like Bleecker Street, Sony Pictures Classics, and Roadside Attractions target older audiences with festival hits that have national appeal. “We remain committed to cultivating our aging boomer

demo,” said Kino Lorber CEO Richard Lorber. “We love expanding our base, but chasing the elusive millennial may be ill-conceived.”

(<https://www.indiewire.com/2017/03/a24-neon-blumhouse-moonlight-get-out-colossal-distribution-1201791026/2/>).

So target audiences do exist, and film critics have to select the audience for whom they write. Sony and others produce films for *baby boomers* who are now 55-80, the same age as many *Rotten Tomatoes* professional critics. But new film producers are looking away from older audiences. Kohn describes how *Neon* and *Blumhouse* of *A24* Films have created a “young cinephile audience.” Films such as *Get Out* and *Moonlight* are among their productions. Kohn writes,

One distinguishing characteristic of A24’s releases is its ability to apply the playful mentality of a millennial audience in its marketing strategies, from the “Consider This Shit” campaign for James Franco in “Spring Breakers” to the viral campaign on Tinder for the release of “Ex Machina.”

Kohn also quotes Cinetic Media Sales veteran John Sloss about Neon’s strategy: “They’re going to target millennials and focus on genre. Their goal is to find a way to reach a specific audience through social media without breaking the bank on traditional media.” Here *specific audience* finally refers to **millennials**. Movies are made about this age group, they feature actors from this age group, and now films are designated *for* this age group. And many of those films fall into the *action/superhero* genre and young-adult romance. How will this impact veteran film critics who write for the “aging baby boomers” of the more established film companies? How are these critics perceived now?

Some viewers take negative evaluations of their favorite films hard. Fans of *Suicide Squad*—mainly millennials-- were so chagrined at the *Rotten Tomatoes* review of that film that 13,000 signed a petition for its removal:

“Suicide Squad” fans launched a Change.org petition with the intent of shutting down film review aggregator *Rotten Tomatoes* after the tentpole received a slew of negative reviews from critics. Abdullah Coldwater, the DC Comics fan who drafted the petition, accused the site of giving “unjust bad reviews” that “affects people’s opinion even if it’s a really great [movie].” He added, “Critics always give The DC Extended Universe movies unjust bad reviews.” (<https://variety.com/2016/film/news/suicide-squad-fans-petition-rotten-tomatoes-bad-reviews-shut-down-1201829631/>).

Coldwater’s petition reads, “There’s A Disconnect Between Critics And Audiences. You may enjoy a movie regardless what the critics say about it.

We must get the people to know that the criticism [is] not the measure of the quality of movies, it's just the opinions of the critics" (<https://www.change.org/p/don-t-listen-to-film-criticism>). The films cited—mostly *DC Extended Universe* movies aimed at a 12-27 age group—suggest a rejection of establishment film evaluation on the part of motivated millennial viewers. A review of the *Rotten Tomatoes* website verifies the claims of Coldwater's statement: the professional critics award *Suicide Squad* a 27% *Splat* while the audience score is 32 points higher. Matthew Rozsa was one of the few professional critics to offer a positive review, writing, "Based on the screening I attended, I can attest that audiences seemed to genuinely enjoy the jokes and get swept up in the action sequences" (https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/suicide_squad_2016). Rozsa watched the film amid the millennial and post-millennial *audience* for whom it was made on the opening weekend.³ Many other professional critics, it appears, screened the film at a special viewing with other critics. "Quality of the movie" clearly is being separated by the petitioners from "the opinion of the critics," resulting in distrust of the long-established professional reviewer website and its professional members.

Rotten Tomatoes has made some changes since Brie Larson spoke up:

Oscar-winning stars like Brie Larson ("Room") have also drawn attention to the lack of critic diversity. "I do not need a 40-year-old white dude to tell me what didn't work for him about 'A Wrinkle in Time,'" Ms. Larson said in June. "It wasn't made for him." Her comments came as she announced that the Sundance and Toronto film festivals had vowed to dedicate 20 percent of press credentials to underrepresented journalists. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/28/business/media/rotten-tomatoes-critics.html>).

Once again, the question of audience is raised. How many movies rated lowly by *Rotten Tomatoes* evaluators were made for a different audience? How many of the *underrepresented journalists* will be under the age of 30?

³ According to Rachel Taylor, "As a film goer, you have a lot more power than you might think. Big studios will make movies according to what makes money. So if you want a certain type of film to be made, you have to take a stand and put your money toward the box office sales in the first weekend." (<http://timidmonster.com/3-reasons-you-should-go-see-a-movie-opening-weekend/>). Of course, *Rotten Tomatoes* issues reviews on opening weekend, so the race is on between avid film viewers eager to be the first to see a film and those who wait for a review. Taylor claims that if one doesn't see a movie quickly, it may move on. Moreover, film companies will notice the low turnout and make fewer movies of that genre. Fittingly, the image on Taylor's web page is that of fans waiting in line to see *Star Wars*—many *young* fans.

25? Will *any* work for an aggregate film review site? *Rotten Tomatoes* plans some changes. In the same article, the film review site has announced,

Gone are requirements for publications based on print circulation. And online critics will no longer be required to have published a minimum of 100 reviews of at least 300 words in length across two calendar years at a site with at least 500,000 unique monthly visitors. The new standard is simply “consistent output for a minimum of two years.”

What millennial or Generation X novice to film evaluation can make claim to those numbers? Would one review each month for 24 months qualify? Larson’s point needs elaboration: 77% of the reviewers at *Rotten Tomatoes* are male, and *most* are over 50. None have yet risen from a *young cinephile audience*. Something’s gotta give.

How do millennial viewers fit in the scheme of movie-making and reviewing?⁴ An unnamed Top Executive at a Disney rival made this claim to *Buzzfeed* journalist Adam P. Vary: ““Right now, *Star Wars* is powered by an intense sense of nostalgia for the people who grew up on *Star Wars*, but, you know, 20 years from now it’ll be entirely relying on what millennials think of *Star Wars*. And they’re wavering.” He adds, “If millennial and Gen Z moviegoers stop feeling passionate about *Star Wars*, why would they spend hundreds of dollars to bring their kids to ride the Millennium Falcon?” Given that *Star Wars* is a 1977 film, much could change. (<https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/adambvary/disney-hollywood-20th-century-fox-marvel-outlook>). Some movie makers have their eyes on the dollars spent by millennial movie fans and are seeking the film packages that will secure their viewing. At the same time, *Star Wars*, *The Last Jedi* does indicate that fans of the *Star Wars* franchise are indeed thinning out: “They made a joke out of Luke,” moans one of the *audience reviewers* at *Rotten Tomatoes*. “Star Wars might have died with this last

⁴ *Hollywood Elsewhere* feature writer Jeffrey Wells cites an exchange about *millennial viewers* that bears quoting: “In weird ways, the Millennial film fans I know or read, you’re always between a rock or hard place. They’re more easily offended by content and nihilism than even some ‘old man’ critics....yet they also have a sociopathic resistance to any warmth or earnestness in film.” (<http://hollywood-elsewhere.com/2013/12/millennial-film-critics/>). Wells also writes, “Millennials have a much more pronounced sensitive side and tend to be horrified by mean or fratty/bro antics (specifically someone whose background reads Harvard/Westlake, Yale, Village Voice).” Such a citation implies an anti-intellectual or perhaps anti-establishment perspective from millennial viewers, but those I have read cover a broad spectrum of viewpoints, one that suits the categories of this study.

production,” claims another audience reviewer, while a third stoically states, “Worst Star Wars ever.” This is the *target audience* speaking.

(https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/star_wars_the_last_jedi/reviews?type=us). The professional reviewers at *Rotten Tomatoes* assign *The Last Jedi* a 91% score; the audience reviewers respond with a 44% mark. That’s a 47-point difference between *Star Wars* “mass” junkies and ivory tower critics, or so it seems. That’s a lot of wayward box-office dollars as well. Something is terribly amiss.

So for whom do professional critics write? Clearly “the masses” that Ted Sarandos identifies are **not** identified with “specific audiences,” while the designated target audience for *Bright*, *The Lone Ranger*, *Fantastic Four*, and *Gods of Egypt* are likely millennials and even post-millennials—aka, those very masses. *Top Critics* tend, as mentioned, to be established and 50ish. *All Critics*, meanwhile, include every age group down to teens. Is Hastings correct? Have critics with refined, experienced tastes skewed the ratings to a more mature viewing appetite? If so, and CEOs at numerous major production companies believe this to be the case, what can be done to *balance* the reviewing processes at such well-established websites as *Rotten Tomatoes*? Has the website’s revised criteria for membership done enough?

Perhaps the *target audience* should be heard from: millennial film critics. Perhaps box-office profits should be considered, *People’s Choice* and *MTV Awards* given a place in the process, and some weight given to the *target audience* comments. Professional critics who are fans of *Ben Hur* or *The Godfather* are not likely to award Five Stars to *Suicide Squad*—but some *layperson viewers* have done so. Whose review matters? Professional critics seem to endow *The Last Jedi* with the magic of the entire *Star Wars* series, while true fans—those composing a young cinephile audience—see the weakest entry ever. Do these constituencies ever converse? Can you “review” a movie for an audience whose tastes you do not or perhaps cannot understand—as Brie Larson contends—or is a review *generational* and/or *personal*? *Commonsensemedia.org* always provides a sizable number of reviews from kids and teens—many cited in this study. It may be time to bring some *new reviewers* into the fold. How does this start?

Almost every university has film classes filled with students, many of typical college ages, their 20s. Over 200 schools are listed as having *Film Majors*, and others have film certificates or minors. Students taking film courses make up a significant box-office constituency. They react to

professional reviews. They write for academic evaluations, and many earn excellent grades. **Have these students learned a *skill* or just written another thesis to be folded into a backpack?** They are one audience of this study, while film course teachers are another. The film lover of any age or profession, however, is always the traditional target, because I identify mostly with them. And, of course, if some film critics read this, they may wish to rethink their generational assessments. Clearly, there is a *new audience* in town, aching for a voice. From time to time, in the footnotes where certain marginal or underrepresented voices symbolically end up as *footnote genres*, I offer a number of reviews written by millennials—for your approval, disapproval, or for mere curiosity's sake. I think them all worth reading.

HOW TO BE A FILM CRITIC IN FIVE EASY LESSONS

A PRIMER FOR FILM STUDENTS AND CRITIC WANNABES

My local paper, in my case that's *The Wichita Eagle*, publishes a Friday *GO* section that lists all of the weekend events coming up in the area. That section also catalogs all the movies playing, those premiering that weekend as well as those carried over for another week or two, and provides a thumbnail sketch—technically, a brief *review*—of all of the films playing locally. The lone exception to this practice occurs when a movie is brand new, premiering that very Friday, and so has appended to it an italicized phrase, *not yet reviewed*. Hmm. A film is playing at a first-run theater for the usual ticket price that is *not yet reviewed*. This led me to do a quick check of the other films—those with 30- to 80-word reviews, some even with stars and half-stars to evaluate them. And while at one time the local paper had a full-time film critic, he retired a few years ago, and no local was found to replace him. Who, then, provided my local paper's film reviews?

What I discovered were reviews—reprinted reviews, that is—from critics in Los Angeles, Chicago, New York, and Dallas. I found *Associated Press* and *Gannett News* reviews. I found a review about *Moonlight*, which is set entirely in Miami, written by a San Antonio critic. I read a review of *The Fault in Our Stars*, a young-adult film, written by a 72-year-old. I read a review of *Mission Impossible: Fallout* written in French and translated to English when I clicked on a flashing arrow. I Googled the names of all of these critics and followed links to *The Movie Review Query Engine*, *Rotten Tomatoes*, and *Metacritic*. They wrote for *The New York Times* and *Chicago Tribune*. Besides these mega-sites, many had their own archives of past reviews, some going back decades. At *The Internet Movie Data Base* I saw that the ratings for movies are provided by laypersons of all sorts. I found at *Rotten Tomatoes* the categories of *Top Critics*, *All Critics*, and *Audience Reviews*, this latter category broken down into *Super Reviewers* and non-*Super Reviewers*, with that last group ranging from high literacy, poignancy, and class to utter thoughtlessness and irreverence. I found reviews written

by family groups, religious groups, pop culture ideologists, siblings, and Mr. Cranky. It also made me think about the film classes that I regularly taught: what was the *outcome* goal of all those class discussions, of those many, many papers? What was the *framework* of our class discussions besides film evaluations of many sorts, including those composed by the students themselves? What could those 30-some students per class do with the *work product* of a foundation class in our film certificate program? Indeed, *how does one express a love of film?* How about taking those writing skills, analytic talents, and argumentative acumen to a writing opportunity, penning film reviews for the local paper or an online platform?⁵ How about a *popular culture* conference? A reading at the local library?

This made me realize, especially after reading some of the glorious and disastrous *audience* reviews, that **anyone** can be a film critic, but students who take a college film course are particularly well situated.⁶ They have experienced film discussions in an *academic* setting, heard the language of film evaluation, have a novel viewing eye (as many films are made for their age group) and been made aware of the best *film review* online sites where professional critics post their film reviews. Everyone has an opinion, almost

⁵ A quick glance at many of the critics cited within this study reveals the college backgrounds of notable film reviewers. Chris Agar, Melissa Anderson, Amy Nicholson, Alex Hess, Chris Bumbray. Mark Jackson, Ty Burr and many, many others hold university degrees, many bachelor's degrees, in Communication, English, Film Studies, and Media Studies among the various disciplines available. Pulitzer Prize winning film critic Roger Ebert has a degree from the University of Illinois. A.O. Scott, chief *New York Times* film critic, has a B.A. degree from Harvard. Both left graduate studies to write about film. Some critics hold only Associate's degrees. As film and media programs grow in the university systems of the globe, and as streaming systems multiply almost weekly, *someone* will be needed to evaluate the new programming, films, and documentaries of those multifarious production companies. Seeing the different educations, tones and perspectives of these educated reviewers can inspire film class students to find their own voices.

⁶ The ensuing quote provides one of the reasons for this study targeting *academic students* in its message: "there has been a growing belief in the film industry that critic aggregators (especially Rotten Tomatoes) are increasing the collective influence of film critics. The underperformance of several films in 2017 was blamed on their low scores on *Rotten Tomatoes*. This has led to studies such as one commissioned by 20th Century Fox claiming that younger viewers give the website more credibility than the major studio marketing, which undercuts its effectiveness." The so-called *professional critic* may have become overly selective in assigning high marks to studio films. As the quote gestures to *younger viewers* to take up the mantle, this study moderates its prose and sense of humor to appeal to that constituency. See this citation at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Film_criticism.

everyone sees a movie from time to time, and most of the student and layperson population has access to the internet—and that is all it takes to be a bonafide and independent reviewer of film. *You* can be a film critic in a flash. See your name at the *Rotten Tomatoes* web site. Post your cinematic thoughts at *The Internet Movie Database*. Share reviews at *Commonsensemedia.org*. Establish your own weekly film blog. Add to your burgeoning *curriculum vitae*.⁷ It really is that easy. Ah, but that creates a significant question: *What kind* of reviewer will you be? Kind? Forgiving? Brutal? Forever honest? Will you evaluate films by the director of the work? The *genre* of the film? The number of recognizable *stars* that perform in it? Will you assess the film in and of itself or immediately compare it to other films similar in content or appearance? Will you review foreign films, animated films, and documentaries? Will you access other critics to evaluate their reviews before writing yours, or will you write straight off the cuff? These are crucial questions to answer before you post your first review, that is, if you want people to read and remember what you have said. From my experience as a *reviewer of reviewers of film*, I will provide you with some examples and some counsel about your potential new career. Your targets, I will propose, would be twofold: to become a *Super Reviewer* at *Rotten Tomatoes*, your facial image displayed with a *Star* before your name, and with a respectful growing readership looking for your latest posting. And to present a paper at an academic conference, your name in the program with perhaps an opportunity to publish your paper in *the proceedings* of the conference. You would become someone *whose opinion matters*. Does that sound good? Let's start.

⁷ “If you're thinking about a career as a movie critic, you will likely need a bachelor's degree in film studies, journalism or cinematography. Internships are a good way to gain experience in this field.” Many also have a Bachelor's Degree in English. So say the experts at *Study.com* about becoming a film critic. https://study.com/articles/Movie_Critic_Job_Description_Duties_and_Requirements.html.

CHAPTER ONE

BADASS REVIEWERS

Part One

This category of film reviewers is by nature dauntless. Think *Divergent*. The simplest way to explain their approach is they call it like they see it, even if that means going *way* against the popular tide of opinions. They can be aggressive, hard-minded, and acid-tongued; likewise, they can be subtle, tactile, and wily. To be *badass* requires an attitude, not a given vocabulary, a certainty, not an inkling. No matter which, when you have finished reading their reviews, you can see the dagger still protruding from the wound. They know their way around a review. Here's the first example.

The Edge of Tomorrow is a film that pulls a fairly impressive 90 rating from *Rotten Tomatoes*, both from the *Audience* scores and that of the *Critic Reviews*. Four *Top Critics* award a *Tomato* (a thumbs-up) and copious praise. Christopher Orr of *The Atlantic* enjoys the “ever-revolving tale with visual style, narrative velocity, and a wonderful dose of dark humor” the film offers.⁸ Mara Reinstein lauds the fact that Tom Cruise “gets to be smarmy, duplicitous, exasperated, intimidated, bad-ass and wise.”⁹ Geoff Pevere states, “All in all, a perfectly superior example of industrially fortified Hollywood fun.”¹⁰ And David Sims opines that “*Edge of Tomorrow* is the perfect mix of blustering action and sci-fi thinky nonsense.”¹¹ The acting, the action, the genre, and the visuals are all

⁸ Orr calls Douglas Liman’s film an “infectiously entertaining sci-fi thriller” in his review at <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2014/06/the-unexpected-pleasures-of-edge-of-tomorrow/372335/>.

⁹ See Reinstein’s exuberant review at <https://www.usmagazine.com/entertainment/news/edge-of-tomorrow-review-tom-cruise-movie-gets-3-12-out-of-4-stars-201426/>.

¹⁰ Pevere calls Cruise a “21st-century Cary Grant” in his review at <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/film/film-reviews/edge-of-tomorrow-and-the-immigrant-double-feature-from-the-edges-of-hollywood/article19008163/>.

¹¹ Sims suggests, “It’s worth seeing just for the performances,” high praise for a special effects-laden festival. See his review at

praiseworthy, right? These reviews set the table for a pleasant viewing, no? Not for Sarah Marris.

Here is lesson one in becoming a *Badass* reviewer:

I am concerned about critics calling *Edge of Tomorrow* good. Because it's not. At best, it's a competently made action movie that's boring as fuck. . . . *Edge of Tomorrow* spends about a third of the movie trying to explain to us what is happening with a bunch of science mumbo-jumbo that DOES NOT MATTER because we bought into the premise when we bought the movie ticket.

Here we go! The use of an expletive is, of course, eye-catching in a nationally posted review, but this is more common than you might think. Marris goes beyond cursing: she challenges the 90% of the *Rotten Tomato* "Star" reviewers who approved of the film that they are simply and utterly *wrong*. She insists that much of the exposition of the film, the setting-up of the story, is unimportant. She does this, more importantly, by looking at how *other* films handle the science:

The thing that both *Source Code* and *Looper* did so well—and so smartly—was just wave their hands at the mechanics of the plot. *Source Code* spent about two minutes explaining how Jake Gyllenhaal's character was able to go back in time and re-live the same day on repeat, and that bit of exposition ended with, "It's quantum stuff, no one gets it." *Looper* went for straight-up humor when a character said, "It's time travel. If we start explaining it we'll be here all afternoon, making diagrams out of straws." Both of those movies understood that the audience knows that what is happening is not actually possible, but they do pay service to the internal logic of the story.

This comparative mode serves Marris well because it illustrates how science fiction movies work by offering the *fiction* of their tales openly and moving on to the adventure by contract. No one wants a course in physics. This is *essential* to lambasting a film if it takes itself too seriously. Science fiction is, in fact, *fiction*, Marris contends. That established, Marris also argues that the antagonists are important: we need a reason to see them slaughtered. She reaffirms this with more examples of "good" science fiction:

More recently, the two best action movies I've seen this year, *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* and *X-Men: Days of Future Past*, used highly personal antagonists in order to create narrative tension. But in *Tomorrow*

the antagonists are neither personal nor interesting. They're just faceless alien invaders trying to conquer the world because SPACE ALIENS.¹²

The Earth *cannot* be attacked by “faceless aliens”—never mind *The Thing* in its various versions. The enemy has no personality, so seeing them defeated brings minimal joy. In many ways, Marris is right. The *nature* of the enemy is crucial. Hans and Luke fight the *Empire*; Dr. Who contends with Daleks; Bond battles *Spectre* and its charismatic madmen/assassins. Blunt and Cruise kill whirligigs. Can anyone remember the different *types* of whirligigs?

But Marris *does* respect one aspect of the film: the acting.

There is some good stuff in *Tomorrow*, though. Cruise is as effective as ever as an action hero. And in the most interesting element of the story, his character, Cage (of course that's his name), is a jerk and kind of a coward, while Emily Blunt's Rita (why doesn't she get a cool name, too?!) is the real hero, the actual soldier who knows what the shit she's doing. It's a nice turn of convention and Blunt is fantastic every moment she's on screen.

This is a valuable discernment. Marris has lowballed this film in spite of the fine lead performances *because* it underestimates the intelligence of the viewer. The *script* tries to explain the unexplainable and unbalances everything. Cruise and Blunt, then, are wasted in an overexposed sci-fi adventure where one or two sentences should have been availed to science. The lead performers do their best with what they are given and carry off their parts rather well.¹³ But this is not enough for Marris. She blasts *The*

¹² See Marris' totally engaging review at <https://cinesnark.com/2014/06/10/edge-of-tomorrow-not-original-or-smart/>.

¹³ Let's see what a true millennial says about *Edge of Tomorrow*:

“Quick, entertaining, and interesting, but a little excessive.

These trailers were really lame so I had no interest in this until I saw the highly surprisingly positive reviews. I had no expectations so I guess those nonexistent expectations were surpassed, if you're going just by how this film is marketed. It looks tired and boring, and while it is derivative to a rather high degree, it's also pretty entertaining. There's a lot of humor and a bit of self-awareness which helps a ton, and Tom Cruise is good. I've heard people talking about how Emily Blunt owns this movie, but really, she's just as good as Cruise if not better, but probably because she's more strait-laced of a character in a way. The film never feels repetitive, ironically, since its editing is so tightly done. Nothing feels like fluff since something new is always happening. However, the third act feels like the second act was just stretched out and given this sort of narrative structure where one event is replayed increasingly differently over and over, it would be so incredibly easy to shorten the duration by removing some scenes or blending them together. Also due to the

Edge of Tomorrow for overtaxing its audience, viewers who understand that in such a film, *science* is a fictional construct unworthy of detailing. Nothing about the alien war is real, so why belabor cause?

Marrs finishes off poor old *Edge of Tomorrow* with this salvo: “*Edge of Tomorrow* is never compelling, never even engaging, and it certainly isn’t original. It isn’t even all that smart.” Take that, reviewers from *The Atlantic* and *US Weekly*: you missed the boat! Tom Cruise and Emily Blunt have starred in a stinker, a dumb one at that. That’s okay, everyone has a bad day from time to time. Marrs will not yield to acceptance, for to do so is to give in to the institution of too-casual approvers. She *stands her ground* against the 90%. That’s *bad!* That’s *badass*.

But 10% of the reviewers nixed this film, suggesting that Marrs is not alone. Let’s see what another critic used to justify her *splat*, the term for a negative review at *Rotten Tomatoes*. And keep in mind that two intelligent young critics are evaluating a new *sci-fi* film, not *The Queen* or *The Bucket List*. They know their audience because they *are* the audience.

Perri Nemiroff writes for *Shock Ya*, a reputable web site that has produced fair reviews for years. Nemiroff thumbs-downed *The Edge of Tomorrow* with her opening inquiry: “Vicious aliens, wicked combat and Tom Cruise charm are all good fun, but what’s the point when the story makes no sense?” Let’s see her explanation of the senselessness of this storyline:

It’s no secret that *Edge of Tomorrow* takes a *Groundhog Day* approach to its alien war, but that awareness doesn’t lessen the excitement of the scenario in the least. Even though you know Cage will eventually die and then get another chance, that first time he wakes up, it will rouse a sigh of relief. You’ve come to know and like the guy, and then experienced roughly ten minutes of very intense combat with him. When he comes to safe and sound, you’re genuinely pleased to see him alive.

Cage’s first attempts at figuring out what happened to him and how he can use it to his advantage works exceptionally well.¹⁴

narrative structure is the problem that the resolution is predictable.” B-K Matash, 17 years old. <https://www.common-sense-media.org/movie-reviews/edge-of-tomorrow/user-reviews/child?page=2>. Note the awareness both of marketing and the positive reviews. 75% of the millennials at this site evaluate *Edge of Tomorrow* with 4 or 5 stars. They are one of the target audiences.

¹⁴ Nemiroff’s review is accessible at

<http://www.shockya.com/news/2014/06/06/edge-of-tomorrow-movie-review/>.

So the movie *establishes* character and plot efficiently, establishing sympathetic identification with the male lead. The review to this point is, well, *positive*. What happens to bring about a negative review? Here is Nemiroff's explanation:

Just before the joke expires, Rita comes in. With Rita's help, Cage can use his condition in new ways, keeping the concept fresh and giving the narrative loads of forward momentum. But then that's it. Roughly halfway through the film, their mission and relationship peak and after that, it's a mindless mad dash for the end.

Hmm. The plot indicates that the Mimics will launch their final world-ending attack the next day, when the film is 90 minutes in, not halfway, forcing Rita (Blunt) and Cage (Cruise) to expedite their last-ditch, Hail-Mary effort without any help. The "mindless mad dash" is part of the tension of the narrative, the ticking clock, the fuse burning down, is it not? At any rate, Nemiroff closes her review with tiered scores: Technical B+; Acting A-; Story C; overall, B-. *Rotten Tomatoes* explains its *Tomatometer* as follows: Fresh (a Tomato) is for 60% or higher; Rotten (a splat) is for 59% or lower. Nemiroff assigned the film a B-, academically about a 70-75% evaluation. She *approves* of the acting and technology. She only *moderately* punishes the plot. She doesn't curse at the movie or call the approving critics *stupid*. Indeed, she takes issue only with the timing of the denouement.

This is **not** *badass* reviewing. Marrs took the film to task—called it "not smart," declared it "unoriginal," and barbed it "uncompelling." Nemiroff is actually rather kind to the film.

Deborah Ross of *The Spectator* takes on Martin Scorsese's *The Wolf of Wall Street* in great vitriolic fashion. She opens her first jab at the DiCaprio-led film with this set of *pointed* questions:

This time out, the blah-blah jabber-jabber will, I imagine, take the following form: does *Wolf* exult in the excesses it intended to satirize? Does it get off on its own virulent misogyny rather than indict it? Why aren't the swindled victims portrayed? And, hopefully: can you really hire a midget in a Velcro hat to throw at a giant dartboard? (I have a milestone birthday coming up and would like to lay on some kind of unusual entertainment, so am seriously interested.) However, it may not be worth getting het up about any of that, if only because this is such a monotonous, repetitive piece of work.¹⁵

¹⁵ Ross' measured rebuke is available at <https://www.spectator.co.uk/2014/01/fists-of-cash-hookers-and-a-candle-in-your-bum-palls-after-a-while/>.

Labeling a Scorsese film “monotonous” and “repetitive” is bold and completely accurate in the case of *Wolf*. Her summary of the plot is expressed here, as is her frustration:

But it’s also three hours of the same events, over and over. Make a ton of money, get totally whacked on drugs, have sex with hookers. Make a ton of money, get totally whacked on drugs, have sex with hookers. And sometimes, for variety: make a ton of money, get totally whacked on drugs, buy a yacht, buy a helicopter, have the hooker stand a candle in your bum. Sounds riotous, I know—fists of cash, yachts and a candle in your bum!—but, trust me, it palls after a while.

Not a word of *genuine* praise appears in the review, just some appreciation of scenes where one of the gluttons gets some comeuppance. One is described here:

As the engine of the film keeps replaying itself, and getting nowhere in particular, one hangs on in there for those set pieces and gloriously dark funny moments: Jordan taking super-strong Lemmon ludes, drooling, unable to stand and trying to get into his car with a foot (DiCaprio proves himself a marvelous physical actor in this scene, by the way).

Fittingly, Ross’ one complimentary statement about the film describes the title character when incapacitated. Scorsese, though, is rarely mentioned, though he is a noted *reputation* director. The roles of the women characters are lamented. No credit is given the screenplay, supporting cast, score, cinematography, or thematic values. None. Ross has *cold-shouldered* Scorsese’s film, something all young critics should know how to do.¹⁶

¹⁶ And not just women despise this film. 15-year-old *Whatnoonesays* provides this millennial review:

“*The Wolf of Wall Street*: In the Running for the Worst Movie Ever--
The Wolf of Wall Street is the only movie I have ever walked out on in my entire life. The film is nothing but a nonstop orgy of sex and drugs. It is not only terrible without any kind of redeeming quality, but just disturbing. I am a healthy teenage boy, and I have the same hormones and urges I’m supposed to, but even I thought this was too far. Female breasts every five seconds, an entire scene dedicated to the hookers these people use, and the bachelor party, a mass of naked bodies having sex with anything they can get their hands on, are all prime examples of how bad this is. If I could go back in time, I would go to 5 pm today to tell myself to watch another movie just so I could forget what I watched.”

(<https://www.common-sense-media.org/movie-reviews/the-wolf-of-wall-street/user-reviews/child>). Welcome to the club. Recognizing that the film offers no “redeeming quality,” *Whatnoonesays* has joined a pantheon of adult reviewers who say something

This is one way to savage a film. Don't say it is not worth a fuck. Don't say other critics are wrong. Write 800 words for *The Spectator* on a noteworthy film with a strong cast without lifting your prose to *anything* positive. Leave the stylus on lower case. Never ascend into missed potential. And end your review as follows:

And it doesn't feel as if this [film] has created much of anything either. No character makes any kind of journey, because no character is capable of making any kind of journey. Belfort is ultimately brought down, which is satisfying, but he never learns anything. He has no self-awareness and would, I'm betting, do it all again tomorrow, if he could. (Belfort is currently a motivational speaker and cites Gordon Gekko as his hero, just so you know.) So there is no psychological insight, no moral insight, just no insight, full stop. And it palls after a while.

It seems logical that leaving a candle in your bum would *pall* after a while, that seeing multiple scenes with hookers (cheap and otherwise) would *pall* after a while, and seeing millionaires drunk, high, and stupid would *pall* after a while. The kicker is to have to sit through a film in which *nobody* learns *anything*—a film that offers *no insight*—well, there come to mind many phrases to describe such a fruitless, tiresome, empty experience. To have to engage it intellectually, cinematically, and psychologically when it has so little to offer, then be obliged to publish a review in a popular journal—one could say that would *pall* after a while. And for some time thereafter. Ross reveals one aspect of films that is often taken for granted: we expect to learn some moral lesson, to be edified in the ways of life. Good narratives, we learn in many ways, teach us something. *Wolf of Wall Street* fails in all arenas. Deborah Ross would not call herself a *badass*, but this review is among the best of that ilk. It *lingers* with the flavor of a burned roast and rotten cheese. Full stop.

And yet, a colorful word tossed in alerts the reader that the critic's dander is up. Here is a fine example from Anne Brodie, who has just sat through Quentin Tarantino's *Hateful Eight*, a film called "Tarantino's crowning

very similar. Still, over 100 millennials offer opinions at *commonsensemedia*, and almost half rate it with 4 or 5 stars—almost all males, 16 and older. The other half of the reviews range from 1 star to 3 stars—often 15-year-olds and younger. Perhaps Scorsese's film is written for the 18-year-old mind after all.

achievement” by Robert Kojder¹⁷ and described by Daniel Keefe as “damn if it isn’t a lot of fun.”¹⁸ Here is Brodie’s counterstatement:

When critics and moviegoers come out of Tarantino’s latest bloodbath and say they enjoyed it and its cinematic inspirations and history and whatnot, I’m pretty sure they’re lying. Tarantino has his adherents, come hell or high water and they’re busily giving it 100 and praising its artfully regurgitated and painfully sycophantic, tired old movie tropes.

I call bullshit. *The Hateful Eight* is not masterful or thrilling as much as a slog through pools of bad blood. *The Guardian* hails it as “breathtakingly stylish and clever film”. It is so “breathtaking” that you’ll be looking at the exit counting down to your chance to run and shower and perhaps lose the expensive lunch you just had.¹⁹

Brodie employs an intelligent strategy into her barb: target Tarantino’s fan club, those critics who find something to admire in anything he creates. In many ways, she’s the critic who recognizes a men’s club that is up to no good. Hence, if you wish to dish out vitriol, Brodie illustrates one effective method: attack the peanut gallery, and do so more than once. They are *lying*; you *call bullshit*. Don’t let up, not even a little. If another journalist praises the targeted work, undermine their prose, their imagery, and their logic. Create some attractive words of **contempt**: *sycophantic*, *regurgitated*, *tired*, *old*, and the like. Be certain to entertain what other critics have said—those wrongheaded folks—and undermine it completely:

“People say ‘but *Hateful Eight* is funny!’ It is so not funny; it’s shocking, ironic, startling and off beat at times but saying that it is funny is delusional. It is a film that celebrates hate through abuses of all kinds, gunshots and rivers of blood.”

This is an ingenious gesture: reduce all the other critics to *People* and insist that the views they hold are *delusional*. If they offer a term of description (here, “funny”), offer a handful of alternative adjectivals that counteract their claim: It may be *all of these* but it isn’t *funny*. Remind them of the

¹⁷ See Kojder’s positive review at <https://www.flickeringmyth.com/2015/12/movie-review-the-hateful-eight-2015-2/>. Kojder has a degree from a community college and has risen with his notable reviews.

¹⁸ See Keefe’s amiable reading of Tarantino’s film at <http://www.columbusalive.com/content/stories/2015/12/31/movie-review-quentin-tarantino-hateful-eight.html>.

¹⁹ Brodie’s pointed attack can be found here: <http://www.whatsheaidradio.com/what-she-said/the-hateful-eight-by-anne-brodie/>.

beating taken by the female lead, Jennifer Jason Leigh as Daisy Domergue, and inquire if seeing a woman belted in the face so hard that a tooth flies out is *funny*. Now you have them: “funny” does not apply to much of the film, but rather is a forced response from an audience who is too shocked to see anything but dire, dark, sadistic pseudo-humor. It is the chortle, one might say, of a numbed patient.

Brodie makes her sense of anger clear by pointing her critical scabbard at Tarantino, doing so for the audience: “Tarantino plays his predictable and here-we-go again game well though, pushing ever further into savagery for laughs, indulging in his characters’ evil psychopathy and brutalizing not only them but his audience.” Brodie’s notion of “here-we-go-again” hearkens to the Nazi-bashing of *Inglorious Basterds* and other Tarantino films, aligning the carnage of the film with the so-called humor and fun that Tarantino admirers identify as the director’s genius. This, too, is a significant motion: the film is filled with violence and death, served up—one would think—for the audience, but Tarantino is a *self-indulgent* director, willing to sacrifice his viewers’ ease, intelligence, and taste for the sake of his idiosyncratic statement.²⁰ And it is clearly *not* necessary:

Tarantino isn’t to be dismissed out of hand. Indeed, *Jackie Brown* was nothing short of feminist awesome and the feel-good Holocaust bloodbath *Inglourious Basterds* was exhilarating because the right people—the entire Nazi leadership—were blown away by a woman.

An artful reminder works: This director has done *much better* than *The Hateful Eight*. It gives Brodie standing as she demonstrates her awareness of Tarantino’s canonical works, appreciating those with which the audience—the discerning audience, that is—can identify. Tarantino *can*

²⁰ 17-year-old *ManofMidnights* offers a millennial’s review of *Hateful Eight*: “All-in-all, this is not for the squeamish. This movie is equally enjoyable by both genders, with very interesting characters, setup, and unraveling. It is also very energetic, despite being very dialogue-heavy and slow-boiling. However, those unacquainted with the likes of *Pulp Fiction*, *Django Unchained*, and similar flicks should be prepared for a painful surprise (some of the violence may actually make you cringe in pain). If your kids are still innocent, don’t take them to this movie (unless you REALLY want to be cool). Still, a captivating and stunningly unusual film that definitely warrants a viewing from capable audiences.” The reviewer is aware of “unacquainted” viewers and “capable viewers,” which elsewhere he assigns to Tarantino fans. I guess a 17-year-old is no longer innocent in the world of Tarantino films. (<https://www.commonsemmedia.org/movie-reviews/the-hateful-eight/user-reviews/child/>). Of the 18 reviews at *commonsemmedia*, the majority approved of the film, averaging 4 stars.

treat his female characters with respect: in *The Hateful Eight*, he chooses not to. Brodie recognizes the significant gap between what the director *could do* and what he did with this film and has hammered on it. She will not abide those who write off the violence of this film to “It’s a Tarantino movie.” To her, it is worse than that. It offers toxic masculinity. She is taking on the critics in the rave cave. Would you?

What lesson should we learn from Brodie’s review? To complement your skewering of a film, suggest physical distress. Brodie’s image of a viewer frantically seeking a shower or a vomitorium is classic negation, a picture of intellectual dismay. If “they” say *hyperbolized*, you answer *excessive*. If “they” say *ingenuity*, you say *tactlessness*. To rise to this level of reviewing repute, start practicing now. At work or at the dinner table, when you hear something that is simply wrong, raise your hand and clearly articulate “I call bullshit.” When it feels natural, satisfying, and morally right, find a movie you dislike and render it into fragments. Anne Brodie would approve.

Keep in mind one can only be a *Badass* while taking on a critically *acclaimed* film, not some box-office sewage that everyone has lambasted. Amy Nicholson sets her discerning laser eyebeams on *Sicario*, a film netting a 92% approval rate at *Rotten Tomatoes*. Nicholson is having none of that. She starts at her title: *Grueling Drug-War Drama Sicario Loves Corpses More than People*. This is a film about dead people, dead *Mexicans* in particular, made mostly dead by white *Americans* who call themselves officers of the law. Here is Nicholson’s summary of her dismay:

Villeneuve’s voiceless victims begin to smell, especially when the film isn’t much interested in them while alive, save for a Sonoran cop who spends most of *Sicario* in what may as well be a separate movie. Screenwriter Taylor Sheridan views Mexico with a dystopian cynicism; its citizens can’t save themselves, and foreigners make things worse.

I left the film sickened and scrambled, much as I did Villeneuve’s previous films *Prisoners* and the double-Gyllenhaal head-scratcher *Enemy*. Villeneuve’s proven he’s got a strong punch. The trouble is, he barely aims. With Blunt sidelined as the film’s angry, clumsy conscience, it’s left to Del Toro to rescue us with campy humor, at one point torturing a druglord with a wet willie.²¹

²¹ Nicholson’s torching review can be accessed at <https://www.villagevoice.com/2015/09/15/grueling-drug-war-drama-sicario-loves-corpses-more-than-people/>.