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## ROTTEN TOMATOES IN THE FIELD OF POPULAR CULTURAL PRODUCTION

**Résumé:** *Rotten Tomatoes* est un site Internet qui rassemble des critiques de films de sources journalistiques et non professionnelles et qui offre des ressources complètes aussi bien pour l'utilisateur ordinaire que pour le mordru de cinéma. Cet article examine comment *Rotten Tomatoes* fonctionne comme un exemple de critique cinématographique « en ligne » dans un champ de production de la culture populaire. *Rotten Tomatoes* se situe aussi bien à l'intérieur du contexte d'une entreprise de critique cinématographique que dans le réseau global des conglomérats médiatiques. Je propose de considérer que l'assujettissement de la critique cinématographique aux impératifs commerciaux a pour résultat la renégociation de la fonction traditionnelle de la critique et de l'implication populaire dans les communautés de cinéphiles. *Rotten Tomatoes* nous fournit une étude de cas sur la façon dont le discours populaire fonctionne dans l'industrie culturelle contemporaine marquée par la convergence.

In short, we're living in a transitional period where enormous paradigmatic shifts should be engendering new concepts, new terms, and new kinds of analysis, evaluation and measurement, not to mention new kinds of political and social formations, as well as new forms of etiquette. But in most cases they aren't doing any of those things. We're stuck with vocabularies and patterns of thinking that are still tied to the ways we were watching movies half a century ago.

– Jonathan Rosenbaum<sup>1</sup>

In the quotation above, film critic Jonathan Rosenbaum exposes the fallacy in claims that online film criticism presents a solution to the current malaise facing film reviewers under “critical constraint before globalization’s monolith.”<sup>2</sup> Film criticism online can be considered as a departure from traditional criticism in terms of the diversity of its venues, from web versions of established publications such as newspapers and magazines, to exclusively online critics such as bloggers. Given the proliferation of so much critical discourse, it is important to consider how the global industry behind popular cinema<sup>3</sup> remains implicated in this Internet version of criticism. Do Internet sources change the ways critics gain their authority or distinction, and in turn, their influence on movie produc-

tion? This paper uses a textual and structural analysis of the website RottenTomatoes.com (RT) to look at how it negotiates film criticism. I have chosen RT because it is unique as a composite site that aggregates reviews from diverse sources and organizes them according to its own schematics. It is also significant as one of the most heavily trafficked sites on the Internet, with 60-120 million page views per day.<sup>4</sup> Beginning with a description of RT that outlines its main areas, the paper focuses on the site's structures and functions. After this, an outline of the works of Pierre Bourdieu and others contributes to a theoretical framework that helps clarify the way that RT as a vicissitude of film criticism operates within the field of movie production. Finally, RT is analyzed along the lines of its organization of critical discourse, and its commercial and community functions. The site boasts nearly 700,000 non-professional members who contribute to its collection of review criticism, suggesting that the Internet holds the capacity to renegotiate this field of critical discourse.

### **ROTTENTOMATOES.COM'S ORGANIZATION OF FILM DISCOURSE**

RT was started by "movie-buff" Senh Duong in 1998, as a way of compiling reviews from U.S. film critics. Today, the site describes itself as a preeminent resource for review criticism:

Over 7 million readers each month use RT globally as a dependable, objective resource for coverage of movies and DVD. With more than 250,000 titles and 850,000 review links in its ever-growing database, RT offers a fun and informative way to discover the critical reaction on movies neatly summarized via the Tomatometer [sic].<sup>5</sup>

The Tomatometer, one of RT's main features and a crucial part of its branding, represents the percentage of "Approved Tomatometer Critics" who recommend a certain movie. A "fresh" designation is awarded those films with a Tomatometer score of 60% or greater, anything less is deemed "rotten." Distinct from a film's average rating score (a number out of ten, determined by averaging critics' individual scores), the Tomatometer score drives the site's main search function, the Tomato Picker. Users can search for films based on their Tomatometer percentage, including the highest-scored films or those "Certified Fresh." In order to be Certified Fresh, a film must score over 75% on the Tomatometer, and have received reviews from at least forty critics, including five "Cream of the Crop" critics. RT's Cream of the Crop represents "popular and notable critics from the top twenty US newspapers and top five Canadian newspapers by circulation. Popular magazine, web, TV, and radio critics are also included."<sup>6</sup> The playful references to various aspects of tomatoes in the site's labeling serve RT's branding, giving it a coherent identity despite the fact that its content is culled from heterogeneous sources.

To organize RT's varied content, the main areas of the site are navigable

from a banner of links at the header of each page; in order from left to right, these are: Home, Movies, DVD, Celebrities, News, Critics, Photos & Trailers, The Vine, and Forums. Both the Movies and DVD sections serve as central portals for accessing the site's database of reviews, promotional materials, news and member discussion for each individual film. For example, in the Top Rentals chart for DVDs, *No Country for Old Men* (Ethan Coen and Joel Coen, 2007) holds the number one spot for the weekend of March 16, 2008. Following the film's link from this chart leads to its own page, headed by the graphical Tomatometer indicating its score of 94%. Below this is a one-sentence critics' consensus that the film "has the perfect mixture of suspense, humor, and compelling performances," followed by information such as the film's running time and original theatrical release date, and a series of hyperlinks that enable a user to search other films by members of the cast and production crew, or similar generic characteristics (i.e. "drama," "drugs," "suspense," "thriller," etc.). Following this, and taking up most of the page space, is a compendium of brief excerpts from a variety of film reviews. These excerpts are displayed beside either a fresh or a rotten tomato icon in speech-bubbles hovering over small avatars of the individual reviewers. Most of the critics write in English (although two excerpts here are in Spanish), and they represent a broad sampling of journalistic sources, including the *Guardian* (U.K.), *Uruguay Total*, *Bangor Daily News* (Maine), and *eFilmCritic.com*.

Individual film pages, like the one for *No Country*, also link to forum discussions, trailers, news, and film stills, but the way they incorporate review criticism is important to describe in more detail. A film's RT page displays twenty critics and their review excerpts that can be clicked on for the full review. Yet there are dozens of additional pages of these review excerpts that can be accessed and rearranged via a navigational bar, which offers to sort reviews by date (the default), name, "fresh," "rotten" and source. Reviews can be further sorted by navigational tabs that enable access to T-Meter Critics, Top Critics, RT Community, My Critics and My Friends. These sources for review discourse are clarified under the central "Critics" section off the main site. Here, following the link "Critics Criteria" in the right-hand navigational bar leads to the Help Desk area of the website, arranged in FAQ format that explains "T-Meter Critics":

The Rotten Tomatoes Tomatometer is our unique rating system that summarizes the opinions of respected film critics into an easy-to-use percentage.

The Tomatometer is comprised of a discrete list of film critics from accredited media outlets and online film societies so that an identical set of opinions is reflected from movie to movie.<sup>7</sup>

The "STRICT criteria" required to be a Tomatometer critic include affiliation with one of a list of major film critics societies/associations (for example, Toronto Film Critics Association), and/or current employment as a film critic ("i.e. NOT

freelance or a staff reporter”) with at least fifty published reviews in an established journalistic outlet (for example, newspaper or magazine) in the U.S., Canada or Australia. In addition, at least fifty film reviews need to be available online, each review must be three hundred words or greater, and the reviewer must use RT’s web-based Article Submission Tool to submit reviews (although in the case of certain Approved Tomatometer Critics, RT site administrators will post reviews automatically on the morning of a film’s release date). According to these criteria, RT currently compiles reviews from 857 Tomatometer critics, who can be listed alphabetically by name, publication or society affiliation on the Critics section of the site. From this section, reviewers’ articles can also be accessed through links to Latest Film Reviews, Latest DVD Reviews, Latest Interviews and Latest QuickRatings. The emphasis on most recent content here parallels the emphasis on new and upcoming releases in the Movies and DVD sections of RT, and indeed, most other areas of the site.

The rhetoric of newness and obvious promotional elements of RT—apparent especially in its Celebrities, News and Photos & Trailers sections—relate to its position within the entertainment industry. Since 2004, RT has been owned by parent company IGN Entertainment, Inc. In addition to RT and men’s lifestyle magazine AskMen.com, IGN’s assets include several videogame-related websites; as their “About” page claims, IGN “is a leading Internet media and services provider focused on the videogame and entertainment enthusiast markets...and attracts one of the largest concentrated audiences of young males on the Internet.”<sup>8</sup> IGN is a subsidiary of FOX Interactive Media Inc., which oversees the online business operations of major media conglomerate News Corporation.<sup>9</sup>

Within this corporate milieu, RT has opened platforms for user-created content and community through its Forums and “The Vine.” Within the popular General Discussion forum,<sup>10</sup> for example, members can initiate (moderated) discussion on topics that are directly related to RT’s promotional discourse (e.g. “What is the best movie soundtrack ever?” and “Rank & Rate Your Top 5 Schwarzenegger Flicks”), but also those of a more critical nature (e.g. “The Complaint Thread” and “Am I the only person who thinks *Batman Begins* is no good?”), or even topics considerably unrelated to RT’s content (e.g. “The Official RT Football/Soccer Discussion Thread” and “The Man Talk Thread”). Complementing the varied and dialogic member interactions on the forums, RT’s The Vine offers an online-journaling platform for members to contribute to the site’s agglomeration of review discourse. These journals tend to exhibit greater fidelity to RT’s movie-centric content, yet they also offer a degree of the same creativity and member dialogue as the forums. By opening up these platforms for users to contribute to its database of film-related discourse, RT has branded itself as a “one-stop shop” for film enthusiasts. Unlike its closest competitor, the aggregate-review site Metacritic.com, RT consolidates not only professional criticism, but varied forms of movie-related discourse accessible from a central Internet site.

## THE FIELD OF CULTURAL PRODUCTION

In order to analyze RT's structures, functions, and situation within popular cinema's greater cultural milieu, I turn first to sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural hierarchies in *The Field of Cultural Production*. Bourdieu describes the field as a structured set of position-takings, "defined by possession of a determinate quantity of specific capital (recognition) and, at the same time, by occupation of a determinate position in the structure of the distribution of this specific capital."<sup>11</sup> Bourdieu asserts that in order to study an art world, one needs to inquire about all of the various players and how they assume certain positions within the field. While popular cinema might be debatable as an "art world" in the classical sense of high art or literature, this paper argues that much of what Bourdieu identifies as central components of artistic fields of production also applies to the way movies are made and received. That is, movies are produced and circulated as the focal manifestations of an entire network of actors, including the artists, dealers, producers, crew, critics, audience and other contributors to the creation of cultural capital.

One of the key components of art worlds involves the production of critical discourse. For Bourdieu, the work of the critic not only contributes to the consecration of a product as "art," but also to the legitimacy of the critic and of criticism itself:

All critics declare not only their judgment of the work but also their claim to the right to talk about it and judge it. In short, they take part in a struggle for the monopoly of legitimate discourse about the work of art, and consequently in the production of the value of the work of art.<sup>12</sup>

In characterizing the critic's role within a hierarchized "struggle" around discourse, Bourdieu alludes to the way that critical discourse is located within his seminal analytical framework of taste. "The Aristocracy of Culture," in Bourdieu's *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, posits taste as a marker of class, mobilized within different publics as "cultural capital." The cultural capital required for participating in critical discourse tends to be cultivated both through formal education and, more importantly, through the "cultural pedigree" stemming from social/class origin.<sup>13</sup> What Bourdieu terms the "entitlement effect" describes how the capital guaranteed by family (class) and schooling translates into a general disposition toward legitimate culture.<sup>14</sup> The critical enterprise hinges on the marketing of this cultural capital to constitute its own legitimacy while consecrating artistic works.

The critic's work of position-taking within an art world thus employs cultural capital in the struggle to attain further capital in the form of reputation. As Bourdieu asserts, reputation comprises "making a name for oneself, a known, recognized name, a capital of consecration implying a power to consecrate

objects...or persons...and therefore to give value, and to appropriate the profits from this operation.”<sup>15</sup> The most obvious source of economic capital that the critic appropriates from this cultural capital comes from employment with a recognized publication. Each particular publication or source of critical discourse also participates in the acquisition of cultural capital in what Bourdieu identifies as a “perfect circle” of classificatory space.<sup>16</sup> A publication appeals to a readership of a certain educational level, creating its own distinct discursive system that actively promotes this distinction, especially in relation to other similar publications. One of Bourdieu’s central tenets—that taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier—can be seen at work in the way critical discourse performs taste in accruing cultural capital through distinction.<sup>17</sup> Shyon Baumann describes a practical manifestation of this idea in his *Hollywood Highbrow: American film critics of the 1960s who broke away from journalism by treating film as art with their “lengthy, analytically sophisticated critiques.”*<sup>18</sup>

In addition to demonstrating how critics actively assumed prestige positions through the consecration of film as art, Baumann’s example also highlights the role of discourse in distinguishing an art world. As Bourdieu explains in relation to the art trade, critical discourse is complemented by the role of the dealer as “symbolic banker,” proclaiming the value of works and authors.<sup>19</sup> Yet aesthetic discourse extends beyond the “official” institutions of discursive production, such as catalogues and reviews, to include the general public’s appropriation of art works. As part of his holistic approach to cultural production as an entire field of agents implicated in the struggle for various kinds of capital, Bourdieu contends that reception is in fact productive:

Among the makers of the work of art, we must finally include the public, which helps to make its value by appropriating it materially (collectors) or symbolically (audiences, readers), and by objectively or subjectively identifying part of its own value with these appropriations.<sup>20</sup>

This idea resonates with Michel de Certeau’s description of the tactical positions assumed by the less-powerful agents of cultural commodities, for example in the fragmentary and unconventional use of products by what he terms the “consumer-sphinx.”<sup>21</sup> It also invokes Henry Jenkins’ case studies of consumer contributions to the value of movies in *Convergence Culture* (2006). One of the most vivid illustrations Jenkins provides of this phenomenon is his discussion of the way fans work to guarantee the success of Japanese animation franchises in North America through their multiple, creative (and “unofficial”) appropriations of anime.<sup>22</sup> In this case, consumers, rather than dealers or critics, played a key role in constituting the value of anime products.

In relation to domestic American film production, consumers’ tactical position-takings have likewise proven critical to the creation of films’ value.

Baumann locates this trend historically within a climate of declining critical authority in the blockbuster era. Critics are less relevant, Baumann claims, because “we live in an age of aesthetic relativism, where audience preferences are just as ‘legitimate’ as critics’ preferences.”<sup>23</sup> In this sense, popular film represents somewhat of a departure from Bourdieu’s conception of an art world. Film has been thought of as a more “middlebrow” cultural form than high art or literature; as Baumann notes in relation to film criticism, reviews exhibit middlebrow concerns in their focus on narrative as opposed to formal aspects of movies.<sup>24</sup> In addition to their content, another sense in which film reviews reflect less prestigious cultural capital is in their mobilization for marketing purposes. If, as Bourdieu claims, an express disinterest in economic capital provides the necessary disposition for refined aesthetic sense (taste),<sup>25</sup> then the economic function of film reviews confers them with a lower degree of cultural capital. Baumann describes how reviews were commonly used as marketing tools beginning in the late 1960s.<sup>26</sup> Yet over time, as noted above, reliance on film criticism for marketing purposes has declined due both to its devaluation through overuse and to the rise of aesthetic relativism. Baumann asserts that since the popularization of blockbuster films in the late 1970s, film criticism has become less important as an authoritative evaluation or marketing instrument, and has instead come to represent the “*Consumer Reports* of films.”<sup>27</sup> By designating the audience members as consumers, recent trends in film criticism reflect the growing importance of winning over particular consumer groups—the number of which increase in a transnational economy of cultural production—rather than constructing a distinct art world.

Critical discourse plays a key role not only in the consecration of cultural objects, but also in creating the value of products, and of the critical enterprise itself, within local fields that comprise a global economic structure. As Bourdieu asserts, the production of art requires a deliberate distancing from economic need that in fact belies an underlying economic imperative. The “‘refusal’ of the ‘commercial,’” Bourdieu writes, found in “the most ‘anti-economic’ and most visibly ‘disinterested’ behaviours...contain a form of economic rationality [and] in no way exclude their authors from even the ‘economic’ profits awaiting those who conform to the law of the universe.”<sup>28</sup> His sardonic tone here underscores the way that different kinds of capital (cultural, symbolic, economic) remain *capital* in the predominantly profit-oriented marketplace of cultural products. So while he describes cultural fields as somewhat autonomous spheres of production, Bourdieu also acknowledges the play between individual fields and a heterogeneous dependence on outside forces, including economics.<sup>29</sup> In recent years, this economic marketplace has become more visibly global; as Simon During contends, film today operates within a transnational economy that has produced a sense of “the global popular.”<sup>30</sup> As such, film criticism serves as one of the discourses of “value-added labour” guiding consumer choice:

[...] leisure markets require incessant discursive supplementation (commentary, criticism, celebration) because consumer preferences are unpredictable and supply constantly exceeds demand. Reviewing, in particular, must be semi-independent from producers in order to protect its impartiality and its capacity to guide consumption choices.<sup>31</sup>

For During, reviews contribute to the marketing of cultural products worldwide by helping to produce specialized and knowledgeable consumer markets amid a fragmented global marketplace. Review criticism works to guide consumer choices in this expanding field, but it also “continues to be affected by the laws of the field which encompasses it, those of economic and political profit.”<sup>32</sup> As Baumann cautions, critical discourse cannot be seen as separate from the economics of publishing and society in general.<sup>33</sup> The global popular is thus partially created by its attendant discourses, which operate under the economic logic of transnational capital.

A central component to the global popular in recent years has been the possibilities for transnational information flows afforded by technological developments in “new media.” The Internet and digital technologies offer new ways of conceptualizing audiences and consumers of cultural products, most notably extending much of their tactical capacity by “democratizing” certain channels of production and discourse. As de Certeau surmises, new conceptions of space and place arising from this technology affect consumer activity:

The generalization and expansion of technocratic rationality have created, between the links of the system, a fragmentation and explosive growth of these practices which were formerly regulated by stable local units. Tactics are more and more frequently going off their tracks. Cut loose from the traditional communities that circumscribed their functioning, they have begun to wander everywhere in a space which is becoming at once more homogeneous and more extensive. Consumers are transformed into immigrants.<sup>34</sup>

The contextually-dependent aspects of tactical maneuver get displaced by new technological capacities, creating a situation where the global popular indicates an increasing fragmentation of cultural practices. For de Certeau, consumers have become “immigrants,” recalling Arjun Appadurai’s presentment of “the steady erosion, principally due to the force and form of electronic mediation, between spatial and virtual neighbourhoods.”<sup>35</sup> Despite the negative consequences of this displacement, it opens space for the kind of positive tactical consumption that Jenkins attributes to *Star Wars* fan fiction and video. In this new spatial arrangement, critical discourse likewise alters along with changes in reception context; Bourdieu argues, “a critic can only ‘influence’ his readers in so far as they extend him this power because they are structurally attuned to him

in their view of the social world, their tastes and their whole habitus.”<sup>36</sup> As the Internet and other technological developments change the conditions of global production, distribution, and consumption, the critical enterprise must renegotiate the terms of its cultural capital.

### **ROTTENTOMATOES.COM: DISCOURSE, COMMERCE, AND COMMUNITY IN THE FIELD**

RT represents one of the major ways that film criticism is being repackaged under the terms of a new media economy. The site’s aggregation and supplementation of journalistic review criticism with auxiliary promotional discourse highlights the changing *habitus* of film audiences. For example, RT aims to offer a comprehensive online portal for reading reviews and making recommendations, as well as for purchasing theatre tickets and DVDs. In its consolidation of discursive and commercial functions, RT reflects a widespread tendency toward media convergence brought on by transnationalism and digital technologies. This development presents some challenges to Bourdieu’s sense of discrete fields of cultural production, in that the traditional sources for distinction and cultural capital seem to have eroded. Writing for *Variety*, Jeff Goldsmith characterizes the rise of Internet criticism in just this way: “Film critics used to be a rarified group; they honed their craft for years before earning a print venue for their views. But as with most things, the Internet has changed all that. Now anyone with an opinion and a keyboard can post their views for the whole world to see.”<sup>37</sup> In its nostalgic valorization of the film critic, its assertion that the Internet has changed everything, its assumption of the democratic access afforded by technology, and its illustration of the global reach of online activity, this statement sets up a discussion of RT’s regulation of film review discourse.

By aggregating reviews from critics who work for both online and print sources, RT’s database tends to flatten out some of the hierarchical distinctions Bourdieu ascribes to different publications seeking to secure their positions in the field of cultural production. From an individual film’s RT page—one of the easiest ways to access reviews—a selection of twenty reviews is featured according to the default criterion of publication date. As indicated on the *No Country* page, the sources of these reviews range from the *Guardian* (U.K.) to *eFilmCritic.com*. For the casual RT user, the differences between these sources may not be readily apparent. The lack of distinctive source attribution here indicates one of the ways that Baumann’s characterization of aesthetic relativism plays out on RT. Without apparent distinction, each source would seem to carry commensurate import. Moreover, for the critic behind each review, represented on RT with either equal-sized photos or a generic avatar, this leveling of status could potentially translate into an automatic gain or loss in cultural capital. Lest a critic be devalued by this schema, RT aims to maintain the prestige of “Top Critics” and the “Cream of the Crop” by labeling them as such wherever their

work appears on the site. Yet the relative lack of sophistication of this three-tier classificatory scheme (Cream of the Crop/Top Critic/critic) loses much of the qualitative difference between the weightings that these print and online sources might have outside RT.

While distinction between critical sources may not occur in the same way on RT as it does elsewhere, the site attempts to retain aesthetic credibility through alternate means. For instance, the strict criteria for involvement in RT's Tomatometer ratings—the focal function of the site—include professional affiliation, reputable employment, accessible online reviews, and reviews of three hundred words or longer. Of these “quality-control” measures, the length requirement for reviews resonates with one of the ways that film criticism contributes to the production of cultural value around movies. As Baumann explains, reviews grew steadily longer in the 1960s as part of film's consecration as art. Baumann attributes the increasing length of film reviews to “the expectation that critics who are taking film seriously will write lengthier reviews. Longer reviews allow them to provide in-depth, fully elucidated analyses, as opposed to the more superficial treatments of earlier periods.”<sup>38</sup> RT retains this development in film review length, displaying the advantages of an Internet site over a print source for the pragmatic capacities of greater information storage and hyperlinking.

Despite RT's length requirement and capacity to store long reviews in an accessible manner, “bite-size” information—such as review excerpts and the Tomatometer—remain central to its discursive organization, and presumably, popularity. In order to access longer reviews from either individual film or critic pages, the user must click on hyperlinked review excerpts that often contain only a few words. For example, review excerpts on the RT page for *No Country* include “creepy time down south” (Christopher Smith, *Bangor Daily News*), “A f\*\*\*\*\* [sic] masterpiece” (Walter Chaw, *Film Freak Central*) and “Is it a masterpiece? Not even close” (Sukhdev Sandhu, *Daily Telegraph*).<sup>39</sup> This compacting of information seems to counter Baumann's description of lengthening movie reviews and corresponds rather with his analysis of reviews as marketing instruments and consumer advice.<sup>40</sup> By reducing entire reviews to a tagline, RT complements its leveling of distinctions between sources with an equally simplistic treatment of critical discourse. Moreover, the Tomatometer's presence as a central aspect of the site attests to the reductive logic behind RT's aggregation of reviews. As the site claims, the Tomatometer offers a “convenient at-a-glance consensus” for the casual user as well as the “hardcore movie fan.” This single-number summary is achieved through an averaging of recommendations (not ratings) from approved critics. Averaged recommendations indicate how the site fulfills a *Consumer Reports* function,<sup>41</sup> along the lines of quantified informational and economic logic.<sup>42</sup> Rather than emphasizing qualitative aspects of film reviews, the site points to the primacy of numbers in communicating a film's value to a wide range of users who might not be attuned to subtle distinctions in critics' levels of cultural capital.

Another way that RT renegotiates the realm of movie criticism is through its solicitation of member contributions to critical discourse through the forums and online journals. While often puerile and off-topic,<sup>43</sup> forum posts can sometimes reveal members' sincere attempts at contributing to the site's movie review database. For example, on the board "The Official *There Will Be Blood* (Paul Thomas Anderson, 2007) Anticipation/Reaction Thread," member "TheMostGorgeous Situation" writes:

[Paul Thomas Anderson] treats religion and capitalism, the guiding forces behind USA's development as a nation, as two halves of the same coin, but whereas he finds value in the self-determinism of the 'frontier' mentality (despite it being fundamentally sociopathic) he condemns a stagnation of American industry starting with the model-T, mass production, etc etc.<sup>44</sup>

This assessment contains similar ideas (if dissimilar analytical depth and writing style) as professional reviews of the film, including Manohla Dargis's for the *New York Times*:

"*There Will Be Blood*," Paul Thomas Anderson's epic American nightmare, arrives belching fire and brimstone and damnation to Hell. Set against the backdrop of the Southern California oil boom of the late-19th and early-20th centuries, it tells a story of greed and envy of biblical proportions.<sup>45</sup>

With apparent contrasts in stylistic conventions, both reviews nonetheless convey the film as a comment on Anderson's statement about America's history of religion and capitalism in similar terms.

Even more so than the forums, The Vine prompts members to adopt the terms of professional review discourse in their online journals. The most viewed of these journals is *Heist's very lame journal ~ Jesus Hates You*. Heist's entries include the following assessment in his "semi-formal" review of *AVPR: Aliens Vs. Predator: Requiem* (Colin and Greg Strause, 2007): "Its biggest problem would actually be derived from all the fan-service it delivers; the movie lacks its own voice."<sup>46</sup> Again, this member review shows similarities to professional reviews, such as the following from *Variety's* Joe Laydon, who comments on the film's final scene, "the meaning of which will be lost on anyone who isn't intimately familiar with arcane aspects of the 'Alien' mythos."<sup>47</sup> Despite notable differences between member reviews and professional reviews—mainly in literary sophistication and aesthetic appreciation—discursive similarities appear across RT. Corresponding to Barbara Klinger's observation that fan discourses such as trivia are "substantially informed (though not wholly determined) by industry discourse,"<sup>48</sup> member reviews likewise reflect the sanctioned modes of review offered by professional critics. The inclusion of member contributions thus represents a key

way in which RT paradoxically offers both an alternative to, and reinforcement of, traditional movie criticism through its exploitation of the Internet's participatory potential.

By aggregating different types of professional film criticism (from varied sources) alongside amateur member contributions, RT renegotiates the way that criticism functions in relation to class. Maintaining some of what Bourdieu sees as the critic's prestige position in relation to the class structure in art worlds, RT also enables a degree of upward mobility for non-professionals by soliciting member contributions. In a recent editorial in *Cineaste*, the editors summarize this trend in online criticism sites like RT:

Varying widely in quality, and incorporating everything from the musings of outright cranks to the collected reviews of professional critics, these sites perform a significant function...Internet personal sites provide a useful training ground for young critics. Whether dispensing crackpot advice or sagacious insights, these sites are nothing if not antidotes to the blandness of official film culture which is more preoccupied with box office gross than artistic excellence.<sup>49</sup>

Reflecting a popular conception of film websites as channels for the industry to "discover" budding talent,<sup>50</sup> the editors emphasize how apprenticeship functions to maintain "artistic excellence" amid the "blandness" of economic preoccupations. Such an assessment can be seen as *Cineaste's* position-taking move in aligning its publication with the distinction of an art world by distancing itself from economic concerns. While its attempt to incorporate online criticism in this move may seem incongruous, the editorial goes on to endorse *Cineaste's* own recently updated and "improved" website.

Despite the transparency of *Cineaste's* celebration of online criticism, Todd McCarthy of *Variety* concurs that sites like RT offer positive developments in the critical enterprise:

The personal, frank and breezy tone of most bloggers has influenced more mainstream criticism to a certain degree, a positive development in the sense that it encourages individual voices and erodes stodginess and academicism. ...As in the democratization of any endeavor, the aristocrats will be humbled somewhat, but those with something valuable to contribute will continue to be heard, no matter the commotion stirred by the parvenus.<sup>51</sup>

Here, McCarthy explicitly comments on the way class underpins film criticism, hailing the democratization of online contributions as an antidote to the "aristocratic" and "stodgy" aspects of criticism. Contrasting *Cineaste's* championing of "artistic excellence," this commendation of online criticism as anti-academic

reflects its source: *Variety*, a publication focused on industry over artistry. While the distinctions between *Variety* and *Cineaste* confirm Bourdieu's notion of the way publications shore up their positions (and capital) within fields of cultural production, they also reflect some prevailing notions about the Internet's potential to moderate audiences' relationships to culture industries.

Part of the Internet's capacity for more involved or "democratized" forms of cultural consumption ties in with the recent climate of convergence, or the consolidation of media through both technological (i.e. digitization) and political-economic developments. In terms of technology, as Jenkins explains, digital production and distribution mechanisms enable audiences to actively participate in cultural production.<sup>52</sup> In addition to participatory strands, convergence is also manifest in the remediation central to a site like RT. RT repackages and repurposes film reviews from other sources, both print and online, resulting in both shifts and defenses of established levels of cultural capital. Another result of this repurposing, which Klinger sees as "a definitive practice of the film business," is its alteration of the contexts of film reception.<sup>53</sup> Without extensive ethnographic research, it remains difficult to assess how review reception changes when reviews are remediated through a composite website like RT. Yet RT's reorganization of reviews according to film charts, rating systems and search engines seems to indicate that users engage in a more targeted reading of review discourse, as contrasted against reading an entire newspaper or magazine. This situation becomes further complicated, however, by an additional degree of repackaging of RT's content, such as its review excerpts and Tomatometer appearing in print sources such as the *Toronto Star*, or its "Certified Fresh" logo licensed for use on DVD packaging. As Klinger notes, this trend toward remediation subtends media convergence, where "newer forms borrow from older for the sake of familiarity and credibility, and older borrow from newer to maintain currency and legitimacy."<sup>54</sup> In this way, remediation functions as an exchange economy for cultural capital, which ultimately could be considered as a closed circle of production.<sup>55</sup>

The consolidation impulses that characterize convergence also relate to the popular mythology of a "global village" fostered by Internet technology. McCarthy reflects this idea in his evaluation of recent convergence-related moves by local newspapers to replace their in-house critics with syndicated big-name review columns:

One upshot of the cutbacks is that lots of disenfranchised critics have started their own websites or have become bloggers. The result is a free-for-all, an opinion consumer's wet dream, a bazaar of commentary that constitutes the critical world version of a global free-trade agreement.<sup>56</sup>

McCarthy's rhetorical invocation of the "free-for-all," "bazaar" and "global free-trade

agreement” point to some of the ways that the global village myth obscures the situatedness of actual persons using the Internet. For example, RT is run by an editorial/webmaster group of nine people (eight of whom are men) out of Emeryville, California, a town in the San Francisco Bay area that is part of the high-tech nexus of Silicon Valley—representing not a democratic but rather an exclusive control over critical discourse. Moreover, the Internet in general has been plagued by the issue of uneven access, meaning that users of RT must fulfill certain socio-economic conditions in order to access the site at all. As such, the site does not offer a “free-for-all,” but rather a restricted-entry platform targeted at a desirable niche audience. As Goldsmith claims, “Just as independent film has found a broader audience via DVDs, online film criticism with a niche angle remains one of the fastest-growing areas of entertainment journalism.”<sup>57</sup> At the same time as it attempts to distinguish itself by acquiring cultural capital, online film criticism contributes to the fragmentation (not cohesion) of specific (not general) audience markets.

Another aspect of the Internet’s “global” reach ties into the transnational corporate structures that support the major players in contemporary culture industries. In this sense, convergence describes what Tom Schatz has termed “Conglomerate Hollywood,” the result of a series of mergers that took place in the 1990s, producing the “Big Six” media titans, which includes RT’s parent, News Corp.<sup>58</sup> As such, RT functions as a branch of a larger film production industry in an even more direct sense than Bourdieu’s theory would predict. RT’s shop portal, for example, allows users to purchase theater tickets, DVDs, movie posters or soundtracks easily, often without having to leave the site. Moreover, its links to gaming sites such as IGN implicate RT within a larger convergence economy of entertainment media. Less directly, RT also works commercially through advertising, which is omnipresent on the site, and is often targeted to its core demographic of young males (e.g. ads for Sony’s Playstation3 and the U.S. Army). It also presumably works, like most other user-generated content sites, by way of data mining. That is, by requiring members to register in order to access the site’s participatory features, RT collects user information that most likely becomes aggregate data used for subsequent product marketing.<sup>59</sup> Moreover the site itself functions on the basis of its intellectual property rights over user-created content, where user content is provided for free not only to RT, but to “anyone they permit” for further profit-based endeavors.<sup>60</sup>

Despite the site’s legal ownership of user content, RT’s participatory aspects can also be argued to offer users space for processes of expression and community-formation. On the other hand, in relation to film-related message boards, the editors of *Cineaste* refer to “the (now perhaps dated) claims that a genuine form of ‘virtual community’ will emerge on the Internet.”<sup>61</sup> To this end, Jenkins offers a way to sidestep competing (and possibly anachronistic) claims about the status of online community by employing the broader concept of participation.

Participation consists of open-ended consumption practices shaped by “cultural and social protocols.”<sup>62</sup> Perhaps instead of characterizing RT as a community space, it is more productive to think about its relationship to audience participation. The site’s name engenders just such a reading; Rotten Tomatoes refers to how, “back in the days of the open theaters, when a play was particularly atrocious, the audience expressed their dissatisfaction by not only booing and hissing at the stage, but throwing whatever was at hand—vegetables and fruits included.”<sup>63</sup> While not all users of the site contribute in involved ways—in fact, most readers do not—simply seeking out and reading through the website can itself be considered participatory.<sup>64</sup>

The visibility of users who do contribute to RT’s content (and the methodological difficulties in accessing information about those who do not) prompts a discussion of their relationship to the cultural capital associated with fandom. Specifically, users engage in deliberate position-taking on RT based on their competence in movie criticism, trivia, discussions, and journaling. The visibility of this process and the internal mobility of users within RT’s user community invoke notions of movie fandom that account for members’ competencies and affective connections to film. Part of RT’s origin story trades especially on the affective dimensions of film fandom and cinephilia:

Hi there. Like most of you, we love movies ... all kinds of movies. Whether it’s the latest sci-fi mindbender, visual effects romp, or intimate and personal character-driven independent film, we’re there front and center, popcorn tub in lap. Life before RT and our Tomatometer was fairly tough when it came to organizing weekends of movie watching at the local cineplex. Sure, we could rely on our local critics or word of mouth, but where was the consensus? Why should we rely on a single critic who may have a particular taste in film different from ours? Couldn’t we organize and collect all of the reviews from a variety of sources (newspaper, online, magazines) and average them into a single score? We could and did.<sup>65</sup>

This characterization lends the site a personal feel, connecting RT’s present incarnation to its original status as one person’s hobby. By distancing itself from promotional and marketing functions, moreover, RT gains proximity to its users by positioning itself as part of a movie fan community. While RT in effect (and ironically) exploits the free content it gains from members, here the site channels their love of movies within a rhetoric of democratizing access to criticism rather than relying on a small group of experts.

Another caution to raise in light of the positive aspects of this fandom is its exclusionary aspects—RT does not represent the utopian “free-for-all” as some have claimed.<sup>66</sup> Rather, the site’s members seem to be composed mainly of young males. As IGN’s “Advertising Solutions” page claims, its group of websites boasts

“the coveted and elusive 18-34 male demographic at its core.”<sup>67</sup> RT’s mainly male audience seems to correspond with the privileging of the men’s market for entertainment technologies such as DVDs and computers. As Klinger argues, men comprise a particularly significant demographic in cinema viewing culture because many of them are “‘gadgeteers,’ men preoccupied with the acquisition and operation of technology”: “it is especially the cadres of white male ‘-philes’ and young male viewers who attain a level of visibility that forges an implicit relationship between certain social identities and cinema technologies.”<sup>68</sup>

A key corollary of this distinctly male techno- and cine-philias relates to the apparent inequalities of participatory culture in general. For example, Jenkins’s assessments of fan participation in cultural products such as anime and *Star Wars* belie the way that male fans comprise the most visible forms of participation.<sup>69</sup> Gender (and other) inequalities persist in online cultural participation, relating to users’ own stratified senses of empowerment within the larger field of cultural production. The male majority of RT can indeed be surmised to include mostly white men, following the logic of the site’s U.S.-centric content and baseline criterion of Internet access.<sup>70</sup> While this hypothesis is difficult to prove by reading through the site, a cursory summary of users’ profile photos indicates that many members self-identify as white males. Thus the glimmer of “democratization” provided by RT ultimately serves to paper over its presumable maintenance of traditional hierarchies of gender, race and class. Moreover, RT works to uphold these lucrative allegiances in the service of a corporate conglomerate mandate.

## CONCLUSION

Many aspects of RT seem to confirm Baumann’s chronology of the way that professional film reviews may have begun as artistic criticism, but today primarily serve as a kind of *Consumer Reports*. The site’s aggregation of reviews from varied sources into single-number scores, combined with its solicitation of member reviews, indicates that in an era of convergence, film criticism has lost some of its exclusivity and cultural capital. Perhaps the same will soon be said of cinema awards, since RT has also attempted to encroach on that territory with its Golden Tomatoes, awarded to the best-rated films of the year. In a sense, RT does offer a “democratized” version of cultural consecration by valuing the popular. At the same time, however, its appeals to member discourses are heavily mediated and ultimately serve the proprietary goals of its parent corporate conglomerate. Like a pre-fabricated tactical arena, RT manages popular contributions to film criticism while capitalizing on its dominant position in this field of cultural production.

## NOTES

1. Jonathan Rosenbaum, “Film Writing on the Web: Some Personal Reflections,” *Film Quarterly* 60.3 (2007): 77.
2. Richard Armstrong, “Editorial,” *Film International* 4.2 (April 2006): 4.

3. "Popular cinema" is used here to refer to mainstream, mass-marketed films and their attendant promotional discourses. While popular cinema is in some ways hegemonic, it also contains elements of its own resistance. This idea of the popular as contentious and historically/ geographically contingent can be traced to the concerns of British Cultural Studies. See for example, Stuart Hall, "Notes on Deconstructing the Popular," in *People's History and Socialist Theory*, ed. Raphael Samuel (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), 227-240 and Tony Bennett, "The Politics of the 'Popular' and Popular Culture," in *Popular Culture and Social Relations*, eds. Tony Bennett, Colin Mercer and Janet Woollacott (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1986), 6-21.
4. "Rotten Tomatoes," Wikipedia, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rotten\\_tomatoes](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rotten_tomatoes) (accessed 30 March 2008).
5. "About," RT, [http://www.rottentomatoes.com/help\\_desk/about.php](http://www.rottentomatoes.com/help_desk/about.php) (accessed 27 March 2008).
6. "FAQ," RT, [http://www.rottentomatoes.com/help\\_desk/faq.php#creamofthecrop](http://www.rottentomatoes.com/help_desk/faq.php#creamofthecrop) (accessed 27 March 2008).
7. "Critics Submission," RT, [http://www.rottentomatoes.com/help\\_desk/critics.php](http://www.rottentomatoes.com/help_desk/critics.php) (accessed 27 March 2008).
8. "About IGN," IGN, <http://corp.ign.com> (accessed 25 March 2008).
9. News Corp. is "The world's #3 media conglomerate (behind Time Warner and Walt Disney)," according to financial information website Hoover's. See "News Corp. – Company Overview," Hoover's, [http://www.hoovers.com/news-corp./-ID\\_41816-/free-co-factsheet.xhtml](http://www.hoovers.com/news-corp./-ID_41816-/free-co-factsheet.xhtml) (accessed 1 May 2008).
10. General Discussion is billed as conversation about movies "with film critics and moviegoers alike," and boasts nearly nine million posts (as of July 2009).
11. Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* (1986), ed. Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 29.
12. *Ibid.*, 36.
13. Pierre Bourdieu, "The Aristocracy of Culture," in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (1979), trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 63; Bourdieu, *Field*, 37.
14. Bourdieu, "Aristocracy," 23.
15. Bourdieu, *Field*, 75.
16. *Ibid.*, 87.
17. Bourdieu, "Aristocracy," 91.
18. Shyon Baumann, *Hollywood Highbrow: From Entertainment to Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 155.
19. Bourdieu, *Field*, 77.
20. *Ibid.*, 78.
21. Michel de Certeau, "'Making Do': Uses and Tactics," in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1974), trans. Steven Randall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 31.
22. Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 156-61.
23. Baumann, 169.
24. *Ibid.*, 164.
25. Bourdieu, "Aristocracy," 55.
26. Baumann, 140.
27. *Ibid.*, 169.
28. Bourdieu, *Field*, 75.
29. *Ibid.*, 40. According to Bourdieu, cultural production negotiates between the heteronomous principle, which organizes production according to the profit motive, and the autonomous principle, which valorizes independence from economic imperatives.

30. Simon During, "Poplar Culture on a Global Scale: A Challenge for Cultural Studies?" *Critical Inquiry* 23 (1997): 808.
31. *Ibid.*, 821.
32. Bourdieu, *Field*, 39.
33. Baumann, 159.
34. de Certeau, 40.
35. Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 189; see also Constance Balides's discussion of the way that the discursive authority of economics naturalizes deterritorialization and turns workers into consumers, in "Jurassic Post-Fordism: Tall Tales of Economics in the Theme Park," *Screen* 41 (2000): 158-9.
36. Bourdieu, *Field*, 96.
37. Jeff Goldsmith, "Filling the Niche," *Variety* 397.8 (January 10-16, 2005): A4.
38. Baumann, 121.
39. "No Country For Old Men," RT, [http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/no\\_country\\_for\\_old\\_men](http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/no_country_for_old_men) (accessed 31 March 2008).
40. Baumann, 160.
41. *Ibid.*, 157.
42. The reduction of criticism to a numerical value resonates with Theodor W. Adorno's critique of the standardization of mass culture, especially the way that the culture industry offers audiences "pre-digested" rather than challenging products: see "The Schema of Mass Culture," in *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. J.M. Bernstein (New York: Routledge, 1991), 53-84. To update this idea, Barbara Klinger associates short bursts of information/ entertainment online with the contemporary conventions of web surfing and multitasking: see *Beyond the Multiplex: Cinema, New Technologies, and the Home* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).
43. e.g. "In which we post pics of kid actresses from our youth and go 'Whoa! She's a fox now!'"
44. TheMostGorgeousSituation, "The Official There Will Be Blood Anticipation/Reaction Thread," RT, 30 December 2007 <http://www.rottentomatoes.com/vine/showthread.php?t=591495&page=10&pp=30> (accessed 31 March 2008).
45. Manohla Dargis, "Movie Review: There Will Be Blood," *New York Times*, 26 December 2007, <http://movies.nytimes.com/2007/12/26/movies/26bloo.html> (accessed 31 March 2008).
46. Heist, "=Semi-formal review for AVP:R=," Heist's very lame journal ~ Jesus Hates You, [http://www.rottentomatoes.com/vine/journal\\_view.php?journalid=66401&entryid=467893&view=public](http://www.rottentomatoes.com/vine/journal_view.php?journalid=66401&entryid=467893&view=public), 27 December 2007 (accessed 31 March 2008).
47. Joe Laydon, "Aliens Vs. Predator: Requiem," *Variety*, 22 December 2007, <http://www.variety.com/VE1117935716.html> (accessed 31 March 2008).
48. Klinger, 73.
49. Cynthia Lucia and Richard Porton, "Editorial: Film Criticism in Cyberspace," *Cineaste* 28.4 (2003): 1.
50. Klinger also notes this apprenticeship function of the web in relation to online short films, 231.
51. Todd McCarthy, "Crix Mix Needs Fix," *Variety* 408.9 (October 15-21, 2007): 90.
52. This idea forms a central argument to his *Convergence Culture* (2006).
53. Klinger, 7, 8.
54. *Ibid.*, 235.
55. As indicated in the quote from Jonathan Rosenbaum that introduces the paper.
56. McCarthy, 90.
57. Goldsmith, A4.

58. Tom Schatz, "The Studio System and Conglomerate Hollywood," in *The Contemporary Hollywood Industry*, eds. Paul MacDonald and Janet Wasko (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 25-27.
59. For example, see John Edward Campbell and Matt Carlson, "Panopticon.com: Online Surveillance and the Commodification of Privacy," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 46.4 (2002): 586-606.
60. "Rotten Tomatoes: User Agreement," RT, [http://www.rottentomatoes.com/help\\_desk/legal.php](http://www.rottentomatoes.com/help_desk/legal.php) (accessed 26 March 2008).
61. Lucia and Porton, 1.
62. Jenkins, 133.
63. "FAQ," RT, [http://www.rottentomatoes.com/help\\_desk/faq.php#name](http://www.rottentomatoes.com/help_desk/faq.php#name) (accessed 25 March 2008).
64. RT has more readers than members, as indicated by the disparity between its 60-120 million page views per day and membership of nearly 700,000. The importance of readers or "lurkers" who do not contribute content to internet sites they frequent is difficult to measure, but according to the prevailing consensus that consumers/audiences are active rather than passive, it can be surmised that lurkers actively use and appropriate internet content to their own ends.
65. "About," RT, [http://www.rottentomatoes.com/help\\_desk/about.php](http://www.rottentomatoes.com/help_desk/about.php) (accessed 15 March 2008).
66. See for example: Lucia and Porton, 1; McCarthy, 90.
67. "Advertising Solutions," IGN, <http://corp.ign.com/advertising-solutions.html> (accessed 1 April 2008).
68. Klinger, 13, 245.
69. Jenkins, 133, 149. For a pertinent discussion of the inequalities of participatory culture through the example of YouTube, see John McMurria, "The YouTube Community," *FlowTV* 5.02, <http://flowtv.org/?p=48> (accessed 2 January 2009).
70. In its courting of advertisers, IGN bills RT as attracting an audience with "Household income: \$85,352" and "Broadband access: 96%," according to Nielsen ratings systems: see "Media Properties," IGN, <http://corp.ign.com/media-properties.html> (accessed 31 March 2008).

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