

Some Alternate Solutions

In my last post, I argued that the New York Times has become too crowded with film reviews for it to be as helpful as it once was in discovering films. Lots of people argued against this premise, with most of the arguments boiling down to: it's the best thing we've got, it remains influential, my film (or other great ones) won't get discovered without it and if there's too many reviews for your taste, just don't read them, you pinhead.

I don't disagree with this generally, but as I said, this would be all fine and dandy if it was working well for everyone, but it actually isn't working. If you think this system works, stop reading now, as we'll never agree. If, however, we can agree there is a discovery problem, even if we disagree that there are too many reviews, might we agree that even the current Times system could be improved upon? Perhaps further, might we agree that even if you love the status quo, that it might not hurt to think about other ways to make sure your film gets discovered? Or to help people discover great films? That was the point of the post. I threw out a few thoughts, but let me be more specific.

First, I still think and am willing to bet that the Times will actually change its policy soon. We'll see if I'm right or not. What I'd rather see is a more massive change. As if I haven't been blasphemous enough yet, I think that the Times needs to not just review less films, but actually have less reviewers. Gasp! Adding extra reviews by assigning critics to them who have no film credentials does no one a favor (yes, this is being done right now). Good review or none should be the mantra, and that doesn't mean positive reviews, just well written ones. Yes, the Times could just hire more great critics to handle the reviews, but curation is what matters in an age of superabundance. The Times should curate its critics and they should curate their reviews (and this means not every Hollywood movie needs a review, either, especially since these films have long been critic-proof). I don't think this will happen, so here's some other ideas.

Second, the Times needs to modernize, at least online, and think about the role of a newspaper today in discovery and remembrance of films. They've done some amazing work in other sections of the online Times, and need to put that focus to films as well (and the other arts too). While this can't be done in print, there's no reason the Times can't offer smart tools to sort, select, mark for later reading and otherwise make their reviews and film articles more useful. As someone suggested in the comments to my last post, why not be able to sort by critic, sort by rating, or by genre. Heck, this would even allow you to keep all the reviews online, if done right. I could sort out everything by the hacks and just read the three good critics they have. I'd take it a step further, and add in tools that allow me to connect the review more directly to my viewing experience. I should be able to easily link to and buy the films, be reminded when they come to my town, or on VOD. I should be able to cross-reference reviews and find more data on earlier films by the same director and/or cast, and see those earlier Times reviews. Heck, if I'm reading the story on my iPad, I should be able to bring all of these titles up immediately and start watching them. This is all kinda the basic starting premise of what we were supposed to be able to do on the web by now, but the experience is still lagging.

But the Times isn't the only possible solution to the discovery problem. We need more discovery tools. Luckily, IndieWire recently launched its CriticWire feature, smartly aggregating the disparate critical voices into one location online. This is a great first step, and I'm anxious to see how it gets better over time (they too will have to figure out how to make the good stand out in an aggregation of plenty). We need to see more experiments and tools like these to discover films. Look at the music world, for example, I use at least a dozen different music discovery tools and services, and rarely rely on the Times to discover music anymore at all (but I still do, from time to time). There are currently very few similar options for film, but that will change soon. As they say, there's an app for that, and I'm building one too (see Flicklist, but that's truly not the point of this post).

We also need to take a hard look at the entire theatrical and nontheatrical release strategy for films. This is not an anti-theater screed, but rather an acknowledgement, as Ira Deutchman pointed out in the comments to my post, that the week-long release business model doesn't make sense for many arthouse and indie films. The festival model works better, and in time, I think curated strands and series of films will become a close second to this. No one has cracked this nut yet, however, and it's not from lack of trying. Tribeca, Sundance and a few others have tried variations on using festival buzz to release films, and few of their efforts have succeeded. That said, a festival brings greater audiences and usually better reviews (often contextualized in relation to the other programming) to many of these films, and there remains lots of room for experimentation here.

Most importantly, we also need more direct connections to our audience. This is nothing new, it is the mantra of the new digital age, but people forget it all the time. New tools and business models will come around, but none of these tools will be able to help each and every filmmaker connect to their audience. That's going to remain the prerogative of smart filmmakers (and cast, and their helpers), and they need to realize what good festival programmers, theater owners, and presenters have long known – building an audience is hard work, it takes time, but once you've built it, it is review proof and will stick with you over a long period of time. That's why I'm such a fan of new, often younger (and usually Asian) filmmakers like Freddie Wong. He's built an audience of millions – more people see his shorts than watch episodes of Mad Men, with no NYT support or marketing spend. Yes, of course, not all artists make content that fits this model, but all of them can now build more direct connections to their fans, increase that fan base over time and use it to their success.

Of course, artists aren't always good at being marketers, and no matter how many of them succeed by connecting directly to their fans, a large number of important artists won't ever embrace this thinking. It's not always a fit, or sometimes is just too much work. This to me is a great opportunity for the nonprofit sector. For a long time, the sector has focused on problems like access, education, production, funding, and more recently, distribution. These are all good things, and I'm not arguing that any of them should stop doing this, but we're solving a lot of those problems. The problem that needs

to be solved today is building connections to the audience, helping with outreach and new (and old) modes of marketing to reach them.

All of this, however, takes an entirely new way of thinking about things. It seems subtle at first, but its an important change – everything we do needs to be audience centric. Superabundance is good for audiences, good for consumers. A plethora of choice is not a bad thing. But a multitude of good content offerings makes it harder to keep track of what you care about, or to discover the gold in the shit pile. We need to help audiences find the gold. This isn't elitist – I'm not defining what that gold is, and what it isn't. By focusing on helping audiences to find the best stuff to watch, the best artists to support and then going on to find more great stuff, we'll end up helping all filmmakers. But to get to that place, we need to focus not on the needs of the industry, but on the needs of the audience. That means quality, curation and weeding out, not showing more. Sorry folks, but luckily if its done right, and we get more tools, it helps the industry (and your film) as well.

Quality matters and less is more. Duh, right? But again, we see this concept skipped left and right. In a world of superabundance, we need real curation. Thus far, the collective internet seems to think that means just throwing shit together, but curation has always been about less, not more. It impacts every part of the film world. Film festivals need to select less. Every time we trudge off to Sundance, it's amazing to think of all the films that didn't get in, and everyone in the business knows of lots of great films that got rejected. But we get there, and nearly ¼ of the films are crap. We need less. Theaters might make money in the short term by four-walling anyone who walks in with a wallet, but this is not a long-term strategy for the business. Grant makers need to think about giving less, but larger, rewards. Perhaps contrary to received wisdom there isn't too little money out there, it's just spread too thin across too much junk. The Times needs to cover less, and so do other curatorial outlets. Less can also literally mean more – with CriticWire, for example, I can quickly skim less of the critics review to make a decision, but have the option to delve in for more. So perhaps its not always less, but sometimes just smarter ways of helping people cull through the crap to find the good stuff. In the end, this will help everyone.

But less is more doesn't apply to the filmmakers. Like it or not, filmmakers are artists and they will create. Some less than others, but trying to get them to produce less, or trying to get less of them to produce just isn't happening. And it shouldn't. Artists should make great art against all the odds. Yes, they should do some things to connect directly to their audiences, build relationships with curators who will get them discovered, and what not, but they should just keep making too much stuff.

It's the rest of us that need to narrow our focus.