CORRELATION BETWEEN FILM CRITICISM, SOCIAL ISSUES AND STUDENT AUDIENCE RECEPTION

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AIM AND PURPOSE OF THE PAPER

• The aim and purpose of this paper, focused on media and information literacy, is to define today’s **role and need for criticism**, establish the correlation between film criticism, social issues in films, and student audience reception, and define how books and university lectures affect this process.

• We established a research model using Croatia as a case study, with three in-depth interviews with university professors, and a questionnaire answered by 338 students of social sciences and humanities in six universities, in order to understand how students’ media literacy is influenced by film reviews, books and lectures.

• We found out how often they read film reviews and where, and the way the reviews, social issues and film courses affect their decision to watch a film and their opinions about it.

• We also determined which books influenced their film choices and reception
Film has adapted itself to the new technologies of the 21st century:
• we can still watch movies in cinemas and festivals (which survived the lockdown period of the pandemic)
• we can watch more films than ever using various streaming platforms
• we can watch them on our tv-sets which are getting bigger and bigger
• on our apartment walls using home projectors that are constantly improving their picture quality
• or we can watch them like many students do: on their laptops, tablets or even on mobile phones during train or bus rides to their universities or home towns.
Film is a contemporary component of mass media, and in the context of information and communication sciences, we should emphasize that the basis of a film work is its informational and communicative role.

- Film can be included in various forms of the communication process.
- Film should also be viewed from the perspective of its role as an interpreter of the socio-cultural reality from which it grows and with which it inevitably achieves a specific type of dialogue.
THE ROLE OF FILM CRITICISM TODAY

• What is the role of criticism today?
• How relevant it is in the era when everybody can publish their reviews online on personal web pages, social networks or video blogs?
• Is film criticism (or, broadly, cultural criticism) an element of media (film) literacy?
• Is the role of film criticism today to upgrade the film literacy of the audience?

We will try to answer these questions in the continuation of this paper.
THE ROLE OF FILM CRITICISM TODAY

• “A critic must not have any prejudice – political, ideological, ethical, or aesthetic, and must possess independence, neatruality, power of comparison, concentration on details and remain outside of all the usual publicity campaigns, lobbyist claims, and marketing tricks of the producers”, stated Anatolij Kudrjavcev.

• In the world of interactive technology, the role of the critic is increasingly important and valuable, and criticism becomes practically a subversive political act, opposing the consumerist approach to culture and resisting the monetization logic of the cultural market, wrote Ryan Gillespie.

• Criticism gives way to user reviews in the spirit of democracy and the consumer mentality of user reviews encourages the treatment of art and entertainment as mere pleasure, thus eliminating respect and consideration of challenging, experimental, and avant-garde works.
• Most serious art critics know a great deal about the field they cover and can evaluate a particular work based on years of serious study and experience, and were vetted by their employers, noted Michael Kaiser. Anyone can write a blog or leave a user review, but just because someone writes about art does not mean they have professional judgment. Great art should not be judged by a popularity contest, otherwise, art that meets the taste of the widest audience will always be considered the best.

• Daniel Mendelsohn presented the equation “knowledge + taste = significant, meaningful judgment” as the essence of cultural criticism, arguing that not everyone can be a critic because very few people have the rare combination of qualities that make a good critic. Good criticism, in his view, involves the ability to intelligently and stylishly mediate between a work and its audience; to educate and enlighten the reader.
THE ROLE OF FILM CRITICISM TODAY

• Norwegian researchers Jan Fredrik Hovden and Karl Knapskog made a distinction between professional critics and culture journalists who are more anti-elite and populist in their view of culture and support the idea of culture as a private realm of leisure which should be more strongly driven by economic interests.

• The interconnected processes of commercialisation, professionalisation, digitalisation, and globalisation have expanded and revitalized journalism in culture in society, wrote Danish theorists Nete Nørgaard Kristensen and Unni From. Today it includes economic analyses of cultural industries and discussions of the social impact of contemporary media culture, while the media assigns the role of the cultural critic to various experts, media professionals and celebrities from the cultural scene.
Swedish theoreticians Kristina Riegert, Anna Roosvall, and Andreas Widholm came to the conclusion that the representation of journalism in culture is growing, and the boundaries in relation to other types of journalism are becoming increasingly porous as more and more general practice journalists are writing about culture.

In a later study, Kristensen stated that although interviews and analyses have become more and more present in journalism in culture, this has not led to a decrease in the number of critical reviews or a radical weakening of critical discourse. Also, she wrote that critical intellectual discourses in newspaper reviews played a significant role in legitimizing new cultural subfields such as popular music or TV series, and turning them from entertainment into art.
THE ROLE OF FILM CRITICISM TODAY

In modern times, discussions about film criticism in the world are mainly reduced to a few questions:

• should evaluation be a function or the main goal of film criticism?
• what should be the relationship between critics and the audience?
• in what way have new media changed film criticism?
• which are the effects of the greater democratization of the media?
THE ROLE OF FILM CRITICISM TODAY

• Indicating which films have aesthetic value is still crucial today because the absence of critical evaluation would lead to general relativization, concluded Rónán McDonald. He points out that the development of cultural studies has contributed to the fact that film is evaluated less aesthetically in academic circles.

• The primary role of critic is not to describe films, demystifying hidden meanings or latent ideologies, but to evaluate the artistic aspects of the film, without neglecting the interpretation and contextualization, wrote Noël Carroll.

• Christian Keathley emphasized the new form of criticism, video essays, that allow completely new possibilities and presentation of impressions to film critics.

• Mattias Frey nominated authority as the main advantage of a critic. Although film criticism on the internet is more democratic than in traditional media, such as radio and television compared to older media, the mentioned change in democratization is not as radical as it seems at first glance.
THE ROLE OF FILM CRITICISM TODAY

• The basic characteristic of daily newspaper film criticism is drawing conclusions in connection with broader social, political, and cultural issue, as pointed out by the Croatian theorist Iva Rosanda Žigo. Research of daily film reviews in the period from 2001 to 2022, in which Croatia was a case study, has confirmed the mentioned theory and determined that there was a higher level of affirmative criticism towards films that indicated current social problems.

• Film criticism has the ability to stimulate the communication process and then develop it further through different channels and forms of communication, whereby criticism actually significantly influences the further expansion of the reception role of the film in the wider socio-cultural ambient. It does not only convey the story of a film, it does not have to refer exclusively to directorial, dramaturgical, and stylistic specificities, but also brings a broader context that transmits to the viewer.

• Film criticism has also become the most present form of newspaper criticism, it does not contribute to the decline of serious journalism in culture and reaffirms film as an important art, proved Annemarie Kersten and Susanne Janssen.
CORRELATION WITH THE BOX OFFICE

• Eliashberg and Shugan empirically proved that critical reviews correlate with late and cumulative box office receipts but do not have a significant correlation with early box office receipts. This finding suggests that critics, at least from an aggregate-level perspective, appear to act more as leading indicators than as opinion leaders.

• Eagan proved the influence of contemporary film reviews, especially negative ones. His findings show that film critics have a moderate influence on wide releases and a weak influence on limited releases based on reviews from critic aggregators. Also, negative reviews had more of an impact than positive reviews on both types of movies, and this moderate influence could have a significant impact on box office revenue.
Students in the 21st century all over the world are “swimming in an ever-changing world of media, technology, and popular culture”, as Hobbs noted in her book Social networking, music, and movies are their key pleasures and there is “so much entertainment and information competing for our attention at all times, and the scarce resource is human attention. In the age of information overload, learning to allocate one’s attention to high-value messages is the most important skill that will continue to reap benefits”

Head and Eisenberg in their research on student information literacy and connecting culture and lectures found out that students conceptualize research and seeking information, as a “competency learned by rote, rather than as an opportunity to learn, develop, or expand upon an information-gathering strategy which leverages the wide range of resources available to them in the digital age”.

In today’s world, information literacy is essential for survival and success; if left unchecked, the social consequences of information illiteracy will continue to grow more dire, thus its study must be at the core of every education, warn Taylor and Jaeger
The main objective of our research was to
- define the correlation between film criticism, social issues in films, and student audience reception
- how media and information literacy affect this process.

In order to find answers to the research questions, and to understand how students’ media literacy is influenced by film reviews, books and lectures, we used Croatia as a case study and conducted a survey at six Croatian universities of humanities and social sciences.
METHODOLOGY OF THE CASE STUDY

• In this case study quantitative-qualitative research was used as the main method. A Google Form questionnaire was used to question 338 students in six Croatian universities. We found out how many of them read film reviews and where (printed media, review aggregators, web portals, radio, video blogs, social networks), and the way the film reviews and different social issues in the films affect their decision to watch a film and their opinion about it. We determined which film books they read and which university film courses affected their film choice and reception of films.

• Qualitative research methods were also used, with in-depth interviews with three university professors, in order to see how they present the importance of film criticism to students, what social issues in films they discuss with students, how the students react to film reviews, and to films that deal with different social issues in their discussions on classes and in written papers.
RESULTS OF THE QUANTITATIVE-QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

• The average age of students participating in the survey was 21. 75.1% of the students were female, and 25% were male.

• The participating six universities were:

• University of Zagreb (Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Academy of Dramatic Arts, Faculty of Croatian Studies), Catholic University of Croatia

• University of Rijeka (Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences), University of Split (Arts Academy, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences), University of Osijek (Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences) and University North.
1. DO YOU FOLLOW FILM REVIEWS?

As a first question, we asked them if they follow film reviews, on a scale from 1 (never) to 5 (very often), and 9.5% replied with 1, 34% with 2, 32.5% with 3, 17.2% with 4 and 6.8% with 5 (very often). The average result was 2.77.
2. DO REVIEWS INFLUENCE YOUR FILM CHOICE?

We also asked how much do reviews influence their choice of film, on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (strongly). Most of them, 38.2% replied with 3 (moderately), 33.7% with 4 (considerably), 12.4% with 2 (slightly), 10.1% with 1 (not at all), and 5.6% with 5 (strongly). The average result was 3.12.
3. Do reviews influence your opinion on the quality of the film?

When asked how much reviews affect their opinion of the quality of the film, on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (strongly), most of them, 34.6% replied with 3 (moderately), 25.7% with 2 (slightly), 24.3% with 4 (considerably), 12.4% with 1 (not at all), and 3% with 5 (strongly). The average result was 2.79.
4. WHERE DO YOU FOLLOW FILM REVIEWS?

When we asked them where they follow reviews (multiple answers were allowed), most of them (62.1%) replied that they follow them on social networks, 44.4% replied on review aggregators (Metacritic, Rotten Tomatoes), 42% on portals, 38.8% on video blogs, 28.1% on online editions of printed newspapers, 8.8% in the printed newspapers and 4.7% on the radio, while 11.2% use other sources to find out about the quality of films (such as word of mouth recommendations).
5. WHAT SOCIAL ISSUES IN FILMS INFLUENCE YOUR CHOICE AND ATTITUDE TOWARDS THE FILMS?

We also asked them what current social issues that the film deals with influence their choice of film and their attitude towards the film (multiple answers were allowed).

Most of them replied human rights and freedoms (50.3%), which is followed by films with no social issues (42.6%), then violence, defence, and security (38.2%), gender equality (31.7%), ethics and religion (28.7%), politics (26.3%), health (18%), other topics (14.5%), finances (14.2%), ecology (12.1%).
6. TO WHAT EXTENT DO THE SOCIAL ISSUES INFLUENCE YOUR FILM CHOICE AND ATTITUDE?

We asked them to what extent the current social issues that the film deals with influence their choice of film and their attitude towards the film.

On a scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (strongly), their replies were: 30.2% replied with 3 (moderately), 27.5% with 4 (considerably), 18.9% with 2 (slightly), 16.6% with 1 (not at all) and 6.8% with 5 (strongly). The average result was 2.89.
7. BOOKS THAT INFLUENCED THEIR CHOICE OF FILMS

We asked them to list the books that have influenced their decisions about choosing movies to watch. One hundred fourteen out of 338 replied with titles. Most answers (109) were fiction books, while five books were books on cinema. Lord of the Rings was mentioned 13 times, Harry Potter 11 times, followed by Pride and Prejudice (four times), while other fiction books were mentioned twice or once.
We also asked them to list the film books that have influenced their opinions about movies and their film taste. Twelve film books were mentioned, no book was mentioned twice, and among film books were: The Great Movies by Roger Ebert, Film by Ronald Bergan, and three film books by Croatian film scholar Ante Peterlić (Film history, Film theory and Studies on 9 films).
9. TO WHAT EXTENT DID THE FILM LECTURES INFLUENCE YOUR FILM CHOICE AND ATTITUDE?

Finally, we asked the students to what extent did the film lectures they attended influence the choice of films they watch and their attitude towards these films. On a scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (strongly), their replies were: 30.8% replied with 1 (not at all), 21.3% replied with 3 (moderately), 20.7% with 4 (considerably), 16% with 2 (slightly), and 10.9% with 5 (strongly). The average result is 2.64.
We conducted three in-depth interviews with university professors at the universities of humanities and social sciences taking part in this research, in order to see:

• how they present the importance of film criticism to students
• what social issues in films they discuss with students
• how the students react to film reviews, and to films that deal with different social issues in their discussions on classes and in written papers.

In this chapter, we present the most important findings from their replies. The professors we interviewed were Iva Rosanda Žigo, University North, Koprivnica; Dejan Durić, University of Rijeka and Marijan Krivak, University of Osijek.
1. HOW THEY PRESENT THE IMPORTANCE OF FILM CRITICISM TO STUDENTS?

- ŽIGO teaches literary criticism, theatre criticism, and film criticism. Considering that for today’s generations, in the context of these three media, film is still the closest, favourite, and often the most understandable medium – students regularly respond best and show the greatest interest in film criticism, because of film’s visual component, brevity (compared to literature and theatre), and the convenience of watching.

- the film is always in the position of an analyst of society and various social problems, which makes it easier for students to think about this medium, and opens the way for them to critically reflect on what they saw.

- DURIĆ: students are given several different film reviews to read so that different types of film reviews are covered. Then they work on the texts: they analyse the component parts and structure of the reviews, as well as different ways of argumentation, and evaluate how successfully it was written.

- KRIVAK: students are drawn into the competitiveness system exclusively on the metric level of ECTS points and they do not read anything beyond what is given there (if even that much)
2. WHAT SOCIAL ISSUES IN FILMS THEY DISCUSS WITH STUDENTS?

• The discussion very often depends on some current social event, characteristic of the moment in which the course takes place, replied Rosanda Žigo. Given that we are talking about journalism students, she thinks it is important that students learn to react quickly and that they can argue their conclusions with concrete examples. In this sense, they discuss, for example, violence, corruption, and politics. Equally, they very often touch on some timeless topics that are always in some way present as a problem in society, for example, the problem of male-female relations; feminist themes, the status of LGBT individuals in society, and religion.

• Social issues that are discussed are related to economic issues, human rights, gender issues, and vulnerable social groups, but also the way in which a film work represents reality, can have an ideological role, in creating stereotypes, or even propaganda, and what strategies are used in these purposes it serves, said Durić.

• Krivak tried to thematize some philosophic themes such as truth, justice, morality, but mostly about the political achievements of certain classics, as well as Croatian films of recent production.
3. HOW THE STUDENTS REACT TO FILM REVIEWS?

• Žigo: In the discussion about criticism in the form of an essay students show a kind of discomfort, so they hesitate to oppose authority, and find it too demanding, and insufficiently understandable. But, they often show an exceptional capacity for critical reflection, so it proves to be useful precisely in the context of the discussion and deeper consideration of the role and significance of film criticism for the understanding of film. However, given that newspaper criticism is the closest to them because they read it most often on their own, they still show the best results in the discussion with this genre.

• Students generally react positively to film criticism and are ready to try their hand at writing, says Durić. For them, film criticism primarily has the function of directing viewing in the sense that it facilitates the selection from the multitude of titles offered. However, it should be emphasized that they point out that positive or negative criticism is not necessarily a condition of whether or not they will watch the film, so it partly has an informative role. they understand the importance of film criticism for the development of film culture and the education of the audience.

• Krivak: students do not really consider written reviews of individual films (neither printed nor from various portals) too important. Closer to them is the conversational argumentation. So, they quite well capture the psychoanalytic moments in Hitchcock films, but also in Fincher's Fight Club, for example. However, given their moderate literacy, their ability to articulate their position is limited.
4. HOW THE STUDENTS REACT TO FILMS THAT DEAL WITH DIFFERENT SOCIAL ISSUES?

• Sometimes students react surprisingly conservatively to certain social problems, or rather to the way they are portrayed in films, says Rosanda Žigo. We would think that younger generations have fewer problems with the reception of explicit scenes, such as violence or sexual relations, but often the opposite is true. When they discuss films that portray a social problem in an explicit, often painful way, they very clearly and sharply represent their position in the conversation. However, in written essays and reviews, they show some restraint.

• Durić replies that his students respond well to films that consider a certain social issue. The impression is that it is easier for them to discuss social issues in films than about the formal aspect of the work and film language, because that requires more knowledge and practice.

• Students read very little printed media, or not at all, and dialogue (polylogue) works best in the classroom, says Krivak. However, recognizing the real socio-political context is still quite far from them. Krivak adds that in every generation there is someone who takes a deeper interest, usually two out of a group of 30 students.
CONCLUSIONS BASED ON LITERATURE ANALYSIS

• After consulting and analysing the most relevant works of renowned researchers in these fields, the conclusion that can be drawn is that art criticism should be supported and protected as the last barrier opposing the growing consumerist approach to culture.

• Also, in the abundance of amateur reviews on the Internet, readers still value the reviews of renowned and experienced film critics from prestigious daily newspapers and magazines, which are available to a wider range of readers through publications on newspaper websites and social network pages, especially important for the younger generations of readers.

• Furthermore, digitalization and democratization have not led to a decline in the importance of film critics, because in the abundance of audio-visual content, the viewer needs a quality guide and recommendation for choosing the best one, and this can be provided precisely by film criticism.
CONCLUSIONS BASED ON LITERATURE ANALYSIS

• By adapting to new media, film criticism found its place in the digital age, and daily newspaper film criticism still has the greatest influence for the general audience due to the continuous professional involvement of the best critics and the reputation of the daily newspapers.

• We determined that cultural criticism is an important element of media literacy, and that film criticism role to upgrade film literacy of the audience is still very relevant.
CONCLUSIONS BASED ON QUANTITATIVE-QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

• The quantitative-qualitative research showed that students of humanities and social sciences sometimes follow film reviews, but when they do, the reviews moderately influence their film choice, more than their opinion on the quality of those films.

• They prefer following reviews on social networks, review aggregators, portals, and video blogs rather than in printed newspapers and on the radio.

• Social issues that the film deals with moderately influence their choice of film and their attitude towards the film, slightly more than film lectures.

• They are more interested in human rights and freedoms, violence, defence, and security, moderately in gender equality, ethics, religion and politics, and less in health, finance, and ecology as social issues in the movies.

• The books that influence their film choice are predominantly fiction literature, rarely books on cinema (scientific literature).
CONCLUSIONS BASED ON IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

• In-depth interviews with university professors have shown that they try to present the importance of film criticism to film students, but the students prefer and are more open to discussing films than writing about them.

• The professors discuss various social issues with students (mostly gender issues, politics, and human rights) and notice that students like to speak more about social issues than about the artistic aspects of films.

• Overall results have shown a mediocre level of media and information literacy.
FINAL THOUGHTS

• On the basis of this research an evaluation model is established, applicable to other countries, that could have a wider impact on research at universities, and could also be applied to theatrical and literary criticism.

• Therefore, we believe that this research gave relevant scientific results, and will inspire new studies in mentioned similar contexts and give valuable input to a better understanding of media and information literacy.