



## Do film critics still matter?

**Blockbusters have become seemingly review proof**

The Associated Press

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LOS ANGELES - Let's review movie reviews. Millions read them. Actors covet nice ones. Studios scour them for positive nuggets to cram into advertising blurbs.

But how much influence do reviews really have on a movie's fate?

Virtually none on big action flicks and lowbrow comedies, which can pack in huge crowds despite rotten reviews. Family audiences and horror and sci-fi fans can turn out to see practically anything in their genre, no matter what reviews say.

Critics of critics say professional reviewers have snooty tastes, applying the same criteria to an Eddie Murphy comedy or Vin Diesel bust-'em-up as they would to a Kurosawa or Fellini film.

The Web has given movie buffs a broad forum to carp about traditional reviewers and post their own opinions, which often reflect more populist tastes than those of professional critics.

"You do wonder what kind of limited power we have," said USA Today movie reviewer Claudia Puig. "But we do it because it's a great job. I can't tell you how many people tell me, 'You've got the best job in the world.' When you love something, you're so excited to be able to tell people, and when you hate something, you love to be able to tell people, 'Don't see that.'"

It's in their passion for film — and their ability to scout out little gems — that professional critics hold sway.

### Reviews can help small films

This time of year, the awards prospects and commercial fortunes of many small films rest with reviewers, whose praise can help them gain a toehold among the holiday box-office behemoths.

Mike Leigh's abortion drama "Vera Drake," Alexander Payne's road-trip tale "["Sideways"](#) and David O. Russell's ensemble comedy "["I \(Heart\) Huckabees"](#) debuted strongly in limited release on the strength of good advance notice from critics. Their prospects for wider release and awards attention hinge heavily on continued critical praise.

Unlike the gradual rollouts of old Hollywood, when reviews helped spread the word on new movies, summer popcorn flicks and other big releases now roar into as many theaters as possible, backed by colossal marketing campaigns to grab moviegoers over opening weekend.

"Movie reviews don't mean jack to summer blockbusters. It's pointless to even review it," said Will Smith, who has scored July hits with such critically drubbed flicks as "Independence Day," "Wild Wild West," "Men in Black II" and "Bad Boys II."

"People are going to see the movie that gets \$60 million worth of advertising in July. Summer movies are almost review proof," said Smith, who got the best of both worlds this past summer, scoring another hit and passable reviews with "["I, Robot."](#)"

Smith struck again this fall with his animated hit "["Shark Tale."](#) Trashed by critics, "Shark Tale" filled a void for family fare at theaters, with parents and kids rushing to see it.

Similarly, horror fans flocked to 2003's "["Freddy vs. Jason"](#) and "["The Texas Chainsaw Massacre,"](#) which critics hated. Last summer, the horror tales "["Alien vs. Predator"](#) and "["Exorcist: The Beginning"](#) debuted as the top weekend movies, though they were so bad their studios did not screen them for critics beforehand.

Reviews were mixed on Mel Gibson's "["The Passion of the Christ,"](#) with many top critics loathing it. But no critic on Earth was going to keep avid Christians out of theaters, along with a more general audience intrigued by the religious firestorm the movie caused. "The Passion" took in \$370.3 million, No. 3 on this year's domestic box-office chart.

This year's list of top hits is crowded with movies poorly received by critics, among them "["The Day After Tomorrow,"](#)" ["Van Helsing,"](#)" ["Troy"](#) and "["The Village."](#)

### Who reads the reviewers?

Most of those top releases are aimed at viewers in their teens and 20s. Older adults, the segment most likely to read and heed reviews, have been supplanted over the years by teenagers as Hollywood's prime demographic.

"How many 14-year-old boys are reading Time magazine for the reviews?" said Hollywood publicist Tony Angellotti.

A survey of 2,000 people by three business school researchers found that television ads and recommendations from others were the biggest influences on movie-going habits, each factor cited by about 70 percent of respondents. Professional reviews ran a distant third at 33 percent, while online ratings on such sites as Yahoo and the Internet Movie Database influenced 28 percent.

Sites like [Rottentomatoes.com](http://Rottentomatoes.com), which compiles reviews from professional critics but also Internet newcomers, have become more valuable to many consumers than the opinions of individual critics, said Chris Dellarocas, one of the researchers who conducted the survey as part of a study on how online reviews can predict a movie's box-office performance.

"I think there's a shift away from trusting the experts and more toward trusting the opinions of many," said Dellarocas, an associate professor of information technology at the University of Maryland.

Top-name critics such as Roger Ebert of the Chicago Sun-Times and TV's "Ebert & Roeper and the Movies" still carry considerable clout.

Chicago native Philip Levin, 37, of Los Angeles decided against seeing the fright film "[The Grudge](#)" because Ebert gave it a one-star review. Levin instead chose to catch "[Surviving Christmas](#)," which Ebert had not reviewed.

"If he had seen this and didn't like it, I probably would have skipped it," Levin said of "Surviving Christmas," whose almost universally lousy reviews contributed to its box-office bust.

If today's audiences are looking more for strength-in-numbers consensus than the voice of individual critics, the Internet still has advantages for reviewers.

Many astute critics have cropped up online who otherwise would not have had a forum. Newspaper critics who once had mainly local followings have found national exposure on the Web.

And sites such as [Rottentomatoes.com](http://Rottentomatoes.com) or rival [Metacritic.com](http://Metacritic.com) provide cyber hangouts for film fans interested to read what critics in general have to say.

"It's the whole idea of united we stand, divided we fall," said Paul Lee, marketing manager for Rottentomatoes.com. "The Internet allows critics to come together and have collectively a bigger voice."

#### **Big opening weekends are vital**

Studios once rolled movies out slowly, counting on word of mouth and praise from critics to help build interest. In 1975, "Jaws" set Hollywood on the instant-blockbuster path that now dominates.

For their biggest releases, studios stage advertising blitzes and debut movies in as many as 4,000 theaters — two-thirds of the total number of cinemas — essentially buying huge opening-weekend grosses.

"Any film that can spend tens of millions of dollars on advertising can effectively obliterate any critical comment," said Los Angeles Times critic Kenneth Turan.

Though the marketing barrage trumps reviews, studios still plaster movie ads with glowing critic blurbs, often lifted out of context to imply that reviewers who hated a movie actually liked it.

When they cannot find positive snippets from top-name critics, studios load ads up with blurbs from tiny media outlets or online amateurs, some of whom can always be counted on to praise even the worst movies.

Why do studios do it? Mainly because everyone else does. Movie ads would look naked without critic blurbs, potentially signaling viewers that the film is so bad the studio could not find anyone to say something nice.

"The whole notion of press in newspaper ads has become so bastardized over the years. Every movie is one of the best movies of the year, one of the funniest comedies of the year," said Russell Schwartz, head of domestic marketing for New Line Cinema. "Do I think it sells one extra ticket? No."

The year's two top-grossing films received almost universally favorable reviews. Yet "[Shrek 2](#)" owes its \$436.5 million haul and "[Spider-Man 2](#)" its \$372.6 million take to the fact they were sequels to enormously popular movies and hit theaters preceded by ubiquitous hype and promotion.

#### **Too high-minded?**

Commercial and critical sensibilities often run counter. Critics tend to savor high-minded drama and artistic production, while the average male viewer might rate a movie for its explosion and babe factor.

"You can't take a movie which is designed to be an action-adventure film and have it critically reviewed by somebody who's interested in independent, intense, dark, in-depth character portrayals like 'Taxi Driver,'" said Nicolas Cage, whose adventure film "National Treasure" opens just before Thanksgiving.

An Academy Award winner for his dark character portrayal in "Leaving Las Vegas," Cage has taken his lumps from critics since for such action flicks as "The Rock," "Con Air" and "Gone in Sixty Seconds," all hits.

Audiences may grumble that critics are snobs, but Ebert of the Chicago Sun-Times said reviewers have to stay true to their tastes and let people know about worthy independent features, foreign films and documentaries lurking in the shadows of the latest blockbuster.

"You don't need a critic to tell you about 'Titanic,'" Ebert said. "You really need a critic to tell you about good movies you might miss or might not have heard of otherwise. You don't need a critic to tell you the box office is right."

The one sure value of movie reviews is that they are part of the fun of show business. People often read them to disagree, even curse critics for their know-it-all sensibilities.

Reviews get people talking about movies, and sometimes, lead them to a cinematic jewel they never would have found on their own.

Moviegoers looking for a reliable critic should simply test-drive a few.

"People should pick a critic whose temperament suits theirs. If you really want to get the benefit, read several critics and find the one that suits you, then stick with him," said the Los Angeles Times' Turan, whose new book — "Never Coming to a Theater Near You: A Celebration of a Certain Kind of Movie" — is a collection of his reviews of cherished smaller movies, such as "In the Bedroom," "You Can Count on Me" and "The Station Agent."

"Unless film is your life, you're going to be overwhelmed by the choices," Turan said. "You need a guide, and I think people are grateful to be guided to something they like, because otherwise, it's a crapshoot."

Here's a sampling of reaction from top critics on some of 2004's top hits:

**"Shrek 2" (\$436.5 million domestic gross)**

- Roger Ebert, Chicago Sun-Times, positive
- A.O. Scott, New York Times, lukewarm
- Kenneth Turan, Los Angeles Times, positive
- Claudia Puig, USA Today, positive
- Owen Gleiberman, Entertainment Weekly, positive
- Christy Lemire, The Associated Press, positive

**"Spider-Man 2" (\$372.6 million domestic gross)**

- Roger Ebert, Chicago Sun-Times, positive
- A.O. Scott, New York Times, positive
- Kenneth Turan, Los Angeles Times, positive
- Mike Clark, USA Today, positive
- Lisa Schwarzbaum, Entertainment Weekly, positive
- Christy Lemire, The Associated Press, positive

**"The Passion of the Christ" (\$370.3 million domestic gross)**

- Roger Ebert, Chicago Sun-Times, positive
- A.O. Scott, New York Times, negative
- Kenneth Turan, Los Angeles Times, negative
- Claudia Puig, USA Today, positive
- Lisa Schwarzbaum, Entertainment Weekly, negative
- Christy Lemire, The Associated Press, lukewarm

**"The Day After Tomorrow" (\$186.7 million domestic gross)**

- Roger Ebert, Chicago Sun-Times, positive
- A.O. Scott, New York Times, lukewarm
- Manohla Dargis, Los Angeles Times, negative
- Mike Clark, USA Today, negative
- Lisa Schwarzbaum, Entertainment Weekly, negative
- Christy Lemire, The Associated Press, lukewarm

**"I, Robot" (\$144 million domestic gross)**

- A.O. Scott, New York Times, lukewarm
- Manohla Dargis, Los Angeles Times, negative
- Roger Ebert, Chicago Sun-Times, negative
- Claudia Puig, USA Today, negative

- Owen Gleiberman, Entertainment Weekly, negative
- Christy Lemire, The Associated Press, lukewarm

**"Shark Tale" (\$137 million domestic gross to date)**

- Roger Ebert, Chicago Sun-Times, negative
- A.O. Scott, New York Times, lukewarm
- Kenneth Turan, Los Angeles Times, negative
- Claudia Puig, USA Today, lukewarm
- Lisa Schwarzbaum, Entertainment Weekly, negative
- Christy Lemire, The Associated Press, negative

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