Studying American Films through the Internet

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For much of the 20th century, movies have been one of the most creative expressions of popular culture. Hollywood has shaped not only Americans' sense of identity but also how people around the world think of their own lives and societies. As the 21st century begins, the internet has emerged as another vibrant locus of popular culture, the most advanced technology of the "information" age. This paper examines one intersection between these two dynamic dimensions of popular culture—film criticism on the internet—with the particular goal of exploring methods to study film and criticism using the internet.

The wealth of data on the internet seems boundless. In order to manage this massive amount of information, this article is limited to two important areas of internet coverage of films: 1) popular websites containing film criticism, a rich vein for assessing the cultural meaning of films, and 2) sites and methods for more systematic academic research using the internet. In both areas the sampling of websites is not scientific but rather impressionistic. Sites are chosen in part for their widespread popularity as evidenced by their high ranking on common search engines, in part for their quality compared to similar
sites, and in part simply because they are the ones I have turned up in my idiosyncratic searches.

For those who do not often surf the net, the following may seem arcane. Even experienced surfers may find the lists of links provided here dense. But hopefully both the novice and the veteran will find new ideas about how to use a powerful but as yet not well understood research tool.

I. Popular Websites with Film Criticism

Sites that Catalog Reviews of Current Films

Not long ago it took considerable effort to research overall critical perspective on any particular film. Today with a few clicks of the mouse one can access literally dozens and sometimes more than a hundred of reviews of any particular film. There are several websites that catalog a wide range of reviews of almost all current films released in the U.S. Among the most comprehensive of these are http://www.rottentomatoes.com/, http://movies.go.com/reviews/, and http://www.metacritic.com/film/. Trailers to recent releases can also be found at each of these sites.

These sites not only link to the actual reviews, but also rate the films based on how favorable the reviews are. Each of these sites also has features that utilize the interactivity of the net. For recent major films, each of these sites allows readers to rate the film themselves, post their own reviews or comments, and dialogue on a running message board. These sites are invaluable to get a quick, broad view
of how any film is being received by critics in the popular press and the public.

Sites that Review Films Released before the Rise of the Internet

The websites listed above generally do not cover well movies that were made before the website began operation. Reviews of films before the late 1990s are harder to find on the net. The Internet Movie Data Base at http://us.imdb.com/Find has information on seemingly every major motion picture ever released in the U.S. and many foreign films. It includes trailers to most films, a user rating system, and the most extensive amateur reviews and interactive message boards of any site I have found.

Roger Ebert, perhaps the dean of American critics, widely known for his two decades of popular TV review programs, has a searchable database that goes back to 1985, which has reviews of almost every major film since then at http://www.suntimes.com/ebert/ebertser.html. Rotten Tomatoes has cataloged some well known and critically acclaimed movies from before the 1990s, mostly from the 1980s.

Greatest Film Lists

For study of the history of American cinema, there are several lists of greatest movies ever. Examining these lists gives insight into the development of cinema and aesthetic standards. There is even a list of greatest film lists at http://filmsite.org/greatlists2.html. Perhaps the most prestigious of these lists is the American Film Institute's 100
Greatest Films at http://www.afi.com/tvevents/100years/100yearslist.aspx. An interesting variation on the original AFI list is the Los Angeles Daily News Readers Poll which took the same 400 films AFI nominated and asked its readers to vote for their own favorites. That list can be found at http://filmsite.org/dailynews.html.

The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences has its own site at http://www.oscars.org/ with a searchable database. Past winners can be found at http://www.oscar.com/legacy/pastwin_main.html.

Rotten Tomatoes has a page called Top Movies http://www.rottentomatoes.com/top/ which lists films based on the percentage of favorable reviews, searchable by year and by genre. This page also gives information on winners of the Academy Awards, Golden Globes, Cannes Film Festival, etc.

Roger Ebert’s great movies page http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll?section?category=REVIEWS08 has many innovative if not always broadly popular films. A particularly offbeat list is the Rolling Stone top 100 “Maverick Movies”, at http://filmsite.org/rstone.html. These films were chosen because they “busted rules to follow their obsessions...in the defiant spirit of rock & roll.”

There are also greatest movies lists broken down by genre. The AFI top 100 list generated so much interest that the AFI has subsequently put out lists on the 100 greatest stars, funniest comedies, most thrilling films, most romantic films, greatest heroes and villains, and greatest movie songs, which can be accessed from http://www.afi.com/tvevents/100years/movies.aspx. Rotten Tomatoes lists films by percentage of favorable reviews in 10 different genres. At the Internet Movie Data Base a similar function can be found based on member ratings at http://us.imdb.com/top 250 films which can also be broken down by 21
genres and by decade of production.

The internet is also permeated with fan websites, many of them little more than pictures and gossip about celebrities, and far too numerous to cover here. One example of the more sophisticated is by a dedicated fan of director Oliver Stone http://www.oscarworld.net/ostone/.

II. More Systematic Academic Research

Online Journals

Serious academic journals increasingly publish on the web. Some journals put their entire contents on the net while other journals publish only tables of contents. In between are journals that publish summaries of articles or selected articles online. The websites of journals cataloged on the ISI Web of Science (which includes the Social Science Citation Index and the Arts and Humanities Citation Index) were visited. The box below shows which journals have online contents.

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<thead>
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<th>Journals that put all or most of their contents online</th>
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<tr>
<td><em>Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies</em></td>
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<td><a href="http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/co/">http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/co/</a></td>
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<td><em>Cinema Journal</em></td>
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Journals that put some of their contents online

Sight and Sound
http://www.bfi.org.uk/sightandsound/
online book reviews at http://www.bfi.org.uk/bookvid/books/catalogue/
category.php?sertype=Film%20Criticism/%20History/%20Theory
Cineaste
http://www.cineaste.com/main.htm
Film Comment

Journals that limit their online viewing to basic information such as tables of contents

Historical Journal of Film, Radio, and Television
http://www.iamhist.org/journal/
Film Quarterly
http://www.filmquarterly.org/index2.html
Screen
http://screen.oupjournals.org/
Literature–Film Quarterly
http://www.salisbury.edu/lfq/
Links to several film journals at a single site can be found at Film Journals on the Web http://www.people.fas.harvard.edu/~kakoudak/Film_journals_on_the_web.htm and Films and Media Studies http://library.wustl.edu/subiects/film/#fulltext. Cinema Spot http://cinemaspot.com/industry/magsjournals.htm has a similar list although its mixes academic journals with popular movie magazines and some links are dead.

There are several other journals that while not prestigious enough to be indexed by the Web of Science make good use of the capabilities of the internet. The Journal of Film-Philosophy http://www.film-philosophy.com/journal/ is a particularly interesting site. Its front page catalogs many online journals and features. Along with its own articles, it also has a “Salon” which is a forum for online discussion of articles. Another useful feature is its “Portal” which links to film organizations, film philosophers, bibliographies, and other journals and online writings. The Journal of Religion and Film http://www.unomaha.edu/~wwwjrf/ has similar multiple online features. Other useful online journals include Scope: An Online Journal of Film Studies http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/film/journal/, Wide Angle http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/wide_angle/, and Images: A Journal of Popular Culture http://www.imagessjournal.com/.

Film societies and festivals can also be accessed through search engines like Yahoo or Google. Two prominent film societies with highly developed websites are the British Film Institute http://bfi.org.uk/ and the Film Society of the Lincoln Center http://www.filmlinc.com/. One less well known but particularly interesting film society is the Political Film Society http://www.geocities.com/~polfilms/index.html which every year selects top films in the categories democracy, expose,
human rights, and peace.

Online Databases

For researching particular films, directors, subjects, etc., there are several online databases available to subscribers. An exhaustive study of such databases is not possible here, but most larger university libraries belong to one or more social science and/or humanities databases. My university subscribes to ProQuest and Project Muse.

To illustrate what can be found through such databases I entered the names of a prominent director, Spike Lee; a leading actress, Nicole Kidman; an Academy Award winning film, A Beautiful Mind; and a film genre, science fiction into both Project Muse and ProQuest.

Project Muse returned 90 hits for Spike Lee, 23 hits for Nicole Kidman (although often only containing brief mention that she acted in a particular film), 8 hits for A Beautiful Mind, and around a thousand hits for science fiction. Limiting the search term to “science fiction film”, put in quotation marks to require the exact three word term, reduces the number of hits to 41. Two useful features of Project Muse are that hits are listed on a scale of relevance, so the most useful hits are likely to be listed first. Also, by just a click you can view the sentences in which the search term is mentioned in each document, which allows you to quickly assess the possible usefulness of each hit.

The total number of hits in ProQuest was high for all the search terms so I limited the searches to peer reviewed academic journals, a useful feature of ProQuest. Spike Lee returned 65 hits, Nicole Kidman 8 hits, A Beautiful Mind 25 hits, and “science fiction film” 55 hits.
III. Researching Particular Films

Fahrenheit 9/11

To illustrate how particular films can be researched in depth I have chosen two recent critically acclaimed movies that have gotten a lot of buzz. Michael Moore’s Fahrenheit 9/11 takes up the theme of the place of war in the American soul and America’s view of the external world. It is the most commercially successful documentary in film history, at one point topping the U.S. box office, the first documentary ever to do so. Lost in Translation is an idiosyncratic portrayal of individual Americans immersed in the vagaries of globalization.

The official Fahrenheit 9/11(911) site front page, http://www.fahrenheit911.com/, includes links to the trailer, a TV commercial for the film, a summary of the film, a teacher’s guide, a page of links to readings on the Iraq war and the terrorism campaign, a page called “How can I help the soldiers?”, and, of course, instructions on how to purchase the DVD. Moore’s official website, http://www.michaelmoore.com/, includes links to the 911 site, selected news, mostly of the war in Iraq, suggestions to political activists of things “to do”, letters from soldiers serving in Iraq, pictures of Americans who have died in battle, a frequently updated message from Mike, and a store where products can be purchased.

Rotten Tomatoes links to 201 reviews of 911, with an 85% favorable rating. Metacritic links to 43 reviews and gives 911 a composite score of 67 out of 100. 417 Metacritic users rated it 6.1 out of 10. Movies.com links to 16 reviews, with an average of 4.38 stars out of 5. Movie.com readers were more mixed, giving it a score of 3.46 out of 5.
The Internet Movie Database has 29,861 fan votes, with a score of 7.9 out of 10. All these sites also provide user reviews or comments on 9/11: 402 at Rotten Tomatoes, 299 at Movies.com, 407 at Metacritic, and 1,274 at The Internet Movie Database.


Online databases are not very productive when searching for scholarly articles about recent releases because the academic publishing mill grinds slowly. Proquest, an online database available at my university library, returns 28 hits for the search term “Fahrenheit 9/11”, none from scholarly journals. Entering Moore’s name and requesting only scholarly articles gets 26 hits, including 18 full text articles. Project Muse, another online database my university library provides, returns no relevant hits for the search term “Fahrenheit 9/11”. Searching for “Michael Moore” returns “An Interview with Michael Moore”, in Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Film and Television Studies, but mostly irrelevant citations.

Lost in Translation

The official Lost in Translation(Lost) website includes a trailer, music from the film, more than a dozen favorable reviews, a photo gallery, a behind the scenes page with an extended interview with director Sophia Coppola, bios of cast and crew, and of course, links to buy the DVD and the sound track. Rotten Tomatoes links to 200
reviews of *Lost*, 94% positive. Metacritic links to 43 reviews and give *Lost* a composite score of 88 out of 100. 327 Metacritic users score it 6.1 out of 10. Movies.com links to 13 reviews with an average of 4.81 stars out of 5, and a readers score of 3.78 out of 5. 35,184 fans voted on the Internet Movie Database, giving *Lost* 8.0 on a 10 point scale. Rotten Tomatoes has 297 user comments, Movies.com has 122, Metacritic has 327, and the Internet Movie Database has 1,264.

Again, online databases did not produce much useful about the recent release *Lost*. Entering "Lost in Translation" into ProQuest illustrates one of the pitfalls of online database research. Translation is a common term in genetic engineering, and many articles in biological journals seem to have glommed on the hip phrase to give a witty title to a piece of scientific research. Most ProQuest hits for "lost in translation" are about biology, not film. However, ProQuest itself suggests an alternative search "motion pictures and Coppola, Sophia", which gives 81 relevant hits, most of which are not very substantive news features or interviews, although a few reviews are mixed in. Only one scholarly magazine article was listed by ProQuest. Project Muse also gives irrelevant hits for "Lost in Translation" and no hits for "Sophia Coppola".

IV. Researching Genres of Films on the Internet: Analyses of Hollywood at War

How can one access information about a whole genre of films? To illustrate this, I have chosen war movies in general and *Rambo* and *Platoon*, two war films from the 1980s that present starkly different images of the United States and the Vietnam War. *Rambo* and *Platoon*
differ from *Fahrenheit 9/11* and *Lost in Translation* in that they predate the rise of the Internet, so information from contemporary websites is harder to find. On the other hand, these films have been around long enough to be analyzed in scholarly works.

**Movie and Book Websites**

Rotten Tomatoes does not have a basic genre classification of war movies, but under the “action/adventure” genre it has a subgenre of war, which yields 207 hits, almost all highly relevant and most leading to useful pages of links. Entering the name of countries where major wars have been fought is also useful. Entering “Iraq” into the simple search yields 11 hits, mostly useful. Entering “Vietnam” into the simple search yields 168 hits, almost all documentaries about the war. Using advanced search and choosing “Vietnam” in the *Plot Contains* feature and a rating of 70% or higher favorable reviews (Tomatometer) yields 34 hits, most of which are highly relevant and useful.

The Internet Movie Database has a genre classification of “war”, although the genre pages are a bit difficult to find since they are not clickable from the front page. The war genre page has a list of fans’ highest ranked war films and a “luminaries of the genre” page linking to actors and directors as varied as John Wayne and Oliver Stone. The frame links to sections on “common countries” which includes not only the U.S. and the Soviet Union but also Japan and South Korea. The common keywords frame allows you to search common subgenres and particular wars and styles of war films. Metacritic does not seem to have a genre function but entering “war” into the general search function yields 155 hits, most of which are highly relevant and useful.
The Rotten Tomatoes *Platoon* page has 24 movies reviews and 11 DVD reviews, all favorable. Oliver Stone, the director of *Platoon*, has a page in Rotten Tomatoes that lists 37 movies, 22 of which have several reviews. 16 of Stone’s films were generally rated favorable and 6 unfavorable. *Rambo: First Blood, Part II*, the most widely known of the Rambo series, has 18 reviews, 4 favorable, 14 unfavorable. *Rambo: First Blood* has 17 reviews, 15 favorable, 2 unfavorable. *Rambo III* has 14 reviews, 4 favorable, 10 unfavorable. Rotten Tomatoes also has 24 reviews of the DVD set of all three Rambo titles. The *Platoon* page has 19 user reviews, the *Rambo I* page has 9 user reviews, the *Rambo II* page has 3 user reviews, and the *Rambo III* page has 1 user review.

The Internet Movie Database *Platoon* page shows a user rating of 8.1 out of 10 with 32,083 votes. It includes 307 user comments and has an extensive message board. *Rambo: First Blood* has a user rating of 6.8 out of 10 with 10,728 votes. *Rambo: First Blood Part II* has a user rating of 5.1 with 8,695 votes. *Rambo III* has a user rating of 4.0 with 6,981 votes. Rambo movies drew 139, 81, and 81 user comments respectively.

Online bookstores are another source of information on film genres. I searched the most popular online bookstore, Amazon.com, at [http://www.amazon.com/](http://www.amazon.com/). Entering “war movies” and searching only books yields 338 results, led by *The Encyclopedia of War Movies: A Complete Guide to Movies about Wars of the 20th-Century* by Robert Davenport, *VideoHound’s War Movies: Classic Conflict on Film* by Mike Mayo, and *Hollywood Goes to War: How Politics, Profits, and Propaganda Shaped World War II Movies* by Clayton Koppes and Gregory Black. Amazon.com features include lists of similar books bought by purchasers of the selected title, online professional reviews...
and customer reviews, links to similar items by category and subject, and in some cases a "look inside" feature. Look Inside allows you to view online the front and back covers, the table of contents and index, and selected pages of text.

Online Databases

Entering "war movies" into the ProQuest search yields 690 hits, most not very useful to scholars, but including news stories about the controversy over TV broadcasting of the graphic violence and foul language in the critically acclaimed Saving Private Ryan. Limiting the search field to scholarly journals limits the returns to 18 mostly useful hits. Proquest's search function suggests searching "motion pictures AND war", which yields 236 hits, mostly newspaper and magazine articles about war movies and popular culture. Limiting that search to scholarly journals yields 43 hits, mostly useful.

Entering "Oliver Stone" into ProQuest yields 1,883 hits, mostly irrelevant, and when relevant mostly superficial news. However, limiting the search to scholarly journals produces 65 hits, mostly useful. Entering "Platoon" and "Rambo" into Proquest yields thousands of irrelevant hits about army platoons or using the pop culture term Rambo to describe something tough. Limiting these searches to scholarly journals does not help much. Another approach is entering a particular war plus "motion picture" into Proquest advanced search. For example "Vietnam War" AND "motion picture" yields 234 hits, mostly useful. Limiting that search to scholarly journals yields 14 mostly useful hits.

Entering "war movies" into Project Muse yields 1,774 hits, which are sorted by relevance in the default option. Using Advanced Search
options can limit the returns. For example, limiting the search to only Library of Congress subject cataloging of the terms war and movies yields only one hit. Limiting “war” to only Library of Congress subject but leaving movies in all fields yields 74 hits, almost all of which appear highly relevant.

Entering “Platoon” into Project Muse yields only irrelevant hits about army platoons. “Oliver Stone” yields “The Movie Version of Recent American History”, in Reviews in American History and many irrelevant hits. Entering “Rambo” into Project Muse yields the articles “Culture, US Imperialism and Globalization”, in American Literary History and “The Power, the Glitter, the Muscles: Movie Masculinities in the Age of Reagan”, in Reviews in American History and then a lot of irrelevant citations.

V. Conclusion

There is a wealth of data on the internet. This article simply skims the surface of film criticism available on the net and gives some suggestions about how to search the data. The key to successful surfing is flexibility. A wide range of information can be accessed by using both popular movie sites and specialist websites like online journals and databases. Sometimes searches produce hundreds or even thousands of irrelevant results. Sometimes the most obvious search term produces few or no hits at all. In both cases, more useful outcomes can often be obtained by trying different search terms or combinations of search terms or by utilizing advanced search features which focus results returned.