

Saving the Cinema: The Auteurs as a Case Study for Digital Distribution

The first generation of audiences for Internet video, still in its infancy, has yet to develop a systematic approach for watching movies. By contrast, theatrical and home viewing habits remain virtually unchanged since the advent of the projector. Despite more than a century of cultural and technological developments, these experiences continue to involve the same underlying environmental conditions, particularly when juxtaposed with the fragmented qualities associated with the consumption of online media. For nearly a decade, web surfing has been noted as a key agent of change in the behavioral tendencies involved in the consumption of content. In 2001, Howard Besser noted that “today’s primary multimedia delivery vehicles (both DVDs and the Web) are enhancing user expectations of extensive interactivity.”<sup>1</sup> Even as digital distribution pervades the marketplace, few of its leading proponents have figured out a proper method for packaging this content. Commercially-driven services such as iTunes and Netflix provide streaming and download options for thousands of movies, but they do not reflect the unique and mutable conditions under which online viewing takes place. Video sites mainly comprised of user-generated content fail to encourage widespread interest in long-form content typically associated with the cinematic experience.

As both a “virtual cinematheque” and a social network, The Auteurs (theauteurs.com) offers a potential solution to this problem by enabling movies to be experienced and develop popularity online without neglecting theatrical distribution.

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<sup>1</sup> Besser, Howard. “Digital Preservation of Moving Image Material?” *The Moving Image*. Fall 2001. <http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/~howard/Papers/amia-longevity.html>

Launched in November 2008, the site allows users to create free accounts and access over 750 international films from several collections. The films are viewable on a streaming basis through the Flash plug-in installed in users' Internet browsers, but additionally available for streaming on Sony Playstation 3 systems. Most titles can be rented for five dollars, although some are made available for free. Viewers are encouraged to share their preferences with other members of The Auteurs's network and engage in a dialogue about the films on the site, which are defined in its mission statement as "visionary," "wonderful new cinema" and "classic masterpieces." Championing conventional notions of elite cinefilia with a sleek design and collaboration with like-minded institutions such as the Criterion Collection and Martin Scorsese's World Cinema Foundation, The Auteurs presents itself as an online hub for "serious" movie buffs, meaning audiences attracted to cinema beyond the latest releases playing at the multiplex.

Numerical data suggests that it has attracted audiences on the basis of this appeal. Although technically still in beta mode, the site has rapidly generated a significant online community, which actively contributes to an ongoing dialogue on its message boards and film pages. In its 2009 executive summary, released in November, The Auteurs reported a user base of 150,000 registered members, and 500,000 visitors in the month of October, an all-time high after traffic increased at an average of 25% each month. Overall, The Auteurs reported 1.5 million unique visitors since its launch. To date, 15,000 films have been reviewed and 200,000 posts have been left in the forums.

In this paper, I will argue that The Auteurs provides an ideal model for adapting movies for online viewing habits without cannibalizing the future of the theatrical marketplace. In fact, with its methodological approach to generating interest in a wide

variety of cinema, The Auteurs seeks to maintain and even broaden demand for theatrical distribution, particularly for older films. Despite some issues surrounding the sustainability of its content, the site allows users to “see” film history online in a systematic fashion and seek it out in a variety of formats. It accomplishes this goal by taking advantage of pre-existing impulses in the Internet age: Sharing, networking, commenting and viewing.

Conceptually, The Auteurs engenders a hybrid of technological, aesthetic and communal aspects necessary for cinephilia to successfully adapt to current trends in new media. In addition to introducing a streamlined process for viewing the films in its library, the site generates its own metadata with both user comments and an editorial supplement, and directly applies this information to the cinematic experience. Thus, The Auteurs provides as much a forum for the discovery and discussion of movies as it does for viewing them. With its emphasis on this trio of behaviors – discovering, discussing and viewing – The Auteurs forms an innovative approach to sustaining online film culture that stands to benefit nearly every facet of the international film community. The site generates a multiplicity of content for each film in its library, responding to a shift highlighted by Howard Besser as “an increasing need for lower levels of granularity than a completed work.”<sup>2</sup> Today’s online viewers require a thorough package of information to accompany the actual features.

In this sense, The Auteurs has emerged at a decisive moment in the history of theatrical attendance. In 2008, a study conducted by the Motion Picture Association of America and Yahoo! found that 73% of U.S. moviegoers consulted the Internet before

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

buying movie tickets. The following year, a separate study found that 94% of American moviegoers use the Internet in various capacities when deciding which movies they chose to watch. While Hollywood studios and their specialty divisions can easily take advantage of this tendency with online marketing campaigns, the niche markets for noncommercial cinemas present greater challenges, particularly in the United States.

Since roughly 2008, numerous distributors focused on distributing art house cinema went out of business. These include both independent companies with longstanding pedigrees such as New Yorker Films and the “specialty” divisions of Hollywood studios such as Paramount Vantage Warner Brothers’s Picturehouse. As a result, fewer conventional resources exist for international cinema to build audiences.

The repertory business has suffered for different reasons. In the 1980s, repertory theaters such as Film Forum in New York City successively managed to convince archives to create new prints by promising to screen them for weeks at a time, generating significant revenue and renewed interest. Today, it has become difficult to provide such a guarantee, as predicting the success of a theatrical release remains an intangible practice all across the board.

If the long-term theatrical future of popular cinema is in jeopardy, the situation is far more tenuous for the state of "specialty" films. In the film industry, the "specialty" moniker generally describes new releases on the art house circuit; in the case of this paper, I will use it in this capacity while also extending the term to older films that either played at art houses in the past, current repertory theaters, or at least evoke the various set of aesthetic or historical concerns typically associated with such films.

As Chuck Tryon notes in *Reinventing Cinema: Movies in the Age of Media Convergence*, many of the behaviors associated with film culture have migrated to the Internet over the past ten years. “Digital cinema...is not merely the replacement of film projectors with digital technologies,” he writes. “It also engages cinema as a range of social practices, beyond theaters and our domestic screens and into the wider social world as well.”<sup>3</sup> While the advent of iTunes and Netflix’s Watch Instantly function led to a coherent approach to the commercialization of digital distribution, the widely reported success of *The Blair Witch Project* in 1999 proved that online marketing could impact theatrical attendance. More recently, the influx of blogging about films and filmmakers directly marketing and distributing their films to audiences has shown that the Internet can play a crucial role in the distribution of specialty films as well.

The Auteurs capitalizes on this confluence of events. A few other streaming sites, particularly YouTube and SnagFilms, have experimented with the combination of streaming feature-length video and theatrical marketing. However, none have taken this possibility to the extreme that The Auteurs, with its social network functions, has managed to reach. As the site’s CEO and co-founder, Efe Cakarel, explained in a recent *Variety* article, the meager financial and marketing success of most “indie film sites” offering streaming or downloadable movies reflects that they “were not social enough.”<sup>4</sup>

With its synthesis of old and new media, the cultural value of The Auteurs is informed by scholarly perceptions of changes in the landscape of media consumption. In his analysis of cultural convergence, Henry Jenkins writes of a “Black Box Fallacy,”

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<sup>3</sup> Tryon, Chuck. *Reinventing Cinema: Movies in the Age of Media Convergence*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2009. Page 3

<sup>4</sup> Kirsner, Scott. “Indies still looking for Internet equation.” *Variety*, October 2, 2009. <http://www.variety.com/article/VR1118009503.html?categoryid=13&cs=1>

disputing the assumption that “sooner or later, all media content is going to flow through a single black box into our living rooms.” Instead, “old media are not being displaced. Rather, their functions and status are shifted by the introduction of new technologies.”<sup>5</sup> If the modern media consumer owns many black boxes instead of just one, then media has to be transplantable. The Auteurs, which is accessible online to both Mac and PC users, addresses this contemporary need in its mission statement: “Your own little cinema, anytime, anywhere.”<sup>6</sup>

The Auteurs has managed to be effective predominantly as a result of its social networking capabilities. Users are encouraged to share their viewing habits and spread their interests across other networks, including Twitter and Facebook. They post their reactions to films featured on the site, engaging in constant discussion stimulated by the presence of multiple outlets for doing so. The ensuing online dialogues create the unique form of metadata that is often the outcome of a vibrant social network. As new media scholars dana m. boyd and Nicole B. Ellison write, “what makes social networking sites unique is not that they allow individuals to meet strangers, but rather that they enable users to articulate and make visible their social networks.”<sup>7</sup>

By making viewers’ interests accessible to the general public, The Auteurs creates a model for potential theatrical attendance and can determine which films in its library are in greatest demand. This information is useful for distributors and filmmakers alike, many of whom have entered into partnerships with The Auteurs.

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<sup>5</sup> Jenkins, Henry. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York: New York University Press, 2006. Pg 14

<sup>6</sup> “About the Auteurs.” <http://www.theauteurs.com/about>

<sup>7</sup> boyd, dana m. and Ellison, Nicole B. “Social Networking Sites: Definition, History and Scholarship.” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 13 (1), article 11. <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol13/issue1/boyd.ellison.html>

On a superficial level, there are immediate and familiar dangers associated with this business model, simply because it involves capitalistic interests that threaten to compromise the quality of the site's creative content. The Auteurs emphasizes its marketing value when pitching its services to filmmakers and other distributors, which could imply that a profit motive dictates its content. Nevertheless, the site's staff has maintained consistent standards of quality, turning the site's function into less of an objective commercial vehicle than a form of curatorial outreach. The contemporary theatrical releases promoted on The Auteurs received positive critical notice at the Cannes Film Festival and other internationally recognized venues. As such, it has been warmly received by the international media, including *Cahiers du Cinema* and *Le Monde*, the latter of which recently labeled the site "le Facebook cinéphiles."<sup>8</sup>

This perception has been cultivated by the site through its association with like-minded institutions. It initially generated international media attention at the Cannes International Film Festival in March 2009, when co-founder and CEO Efe Cakarel appeared at a press conference alongside Martin Scorsese, World Cinema Foundation executive director Kent Jones, and Chris Hyams, the CEO of Austin-based aggregator and distributor B-Side Entertainment. After complaining that "film preservation is always an uphill battle," Scorsese announced that the World Cinema Foundation, the non-profit organization he founded in 2007, was forming partnerships with B-Side, The Auteurs and the Criterion Collection. In the new arrangement, the films restored by the WCF (under Jones's leadership) would play at the Cannes Classics sidebar at the festival while simultaneously streaming for free on The Auteurs. They would then screen at universities

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<sup>8</sup> Regnier, Isabelle. "The Auteurs, le Facebook cinéphiles." *Film Bazar* (*Le Monde* blog). October 17, 2009. <http://cinema.blog.lemonde.fr/2009/10/17/the-auteurs-la-vod-20/>

and film clubs (via a grassroots campaign managed by B-Side) followed by special edition Criterion DVD releases. Scorsese explained the rationale behind this arrangement as an attempt “to find as many ways of raising awareness of these films as possible, and to find as many public opportunities to show them as we can.”<sup>9</sup>

Scorsese’s basic mission was an immediate success. The initial arrangement launched that day, as The Auteurs posted four films from the WCF’s library on the site: *The Housemaid*, *Touki Bouki*, *Dry Summer* and *Transes*. Boosted by the exposure of the press conference, these specialty films were collectively viewed 1,000 times within two days of the announcement.<sup>10</sup> (Unlike YouTube and many other streaming sites, The Auteurs counts each “view” as when a film is streamed for more than ten minutes.) In conversation with this author, Cakarel positioned the high traffic for the WCF films as a rationale for re-releasing them in theaters: “These films are meant to be watched on the big screen...if there’s more awareness, there are more theatrical opportunities.”<sup>11</sup>

This online popularity is supported by distinct changes in audience behavior. A study conducted by the Pew Internet & American Life Project in 2007 found that 57% of “online adults” use the Internet to watch or download video, while 57% of that sample share links to videos with other people, and 75% said that they receive links to videos sent to them from other people. The Auteurs applies its feature-length content directly into this tendency toward sharing online video by providing users with the proper tools to disseminate information about the movies.

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<sup>9</sup> The Scorsese press conference is viewable at <http://www.festival-cannes.fr/en/mediaPlayer/9791.html>

<sup>10</sup> Kohn, Eric. “A New Global Cinema.” *The Wrap*. May 19, 2009. <http://www.thewrap.com/ind-column/new-global-cinema3169>

<sup>11</sup> Kohn, Eric. “Partners in Cinema.” *Movie Maker*. Summer 2009. Issue 82, Vol. 16. Pg 26



Through this method of spreading attention to the movies, The Auteurs can easily model the amount of demand that exists for them. For example, the 1,000 viewers of the WCF films posted in May 2009 parallels an abstract audience set forth by technologist Kevin Kelly in his influential essay, “1,000 True Fans.” Kelly explains his titular edict thusly: “A creator, such as artist, musician, photographer, craftsman, performer, animator, designer, videomaker or author – in other words, anyone producing works of art – needs to acquire only 1,000 True Fans to make a living.”<sup>12</sup> If the 1,000 viewers of the WCF films on The Auteurs are considered “true” fans for watching the films for more than ten minutes, then, in accordance with Kelly’s model, they should be able to sustain the film’s financial prospects in all of its permutations (online, theatrical, and DVD).

Critics of Kelly’s model argue that it neglects the importance of casual fans. This group, which Kelly identifies as “Lesser Fans,” will “more or less disappear”<sup>13</sup> if only true fans matter. The Auteurs, however, offers a lure for Lesser Fans with its regular inclusion of free content. Criterion regularly curates five new films each month that are streamed at no cost to anyone with an account. Because of their accessibility, these selections receive the greatest amount of exposure on the site. Based on this effect, The Auteurs adheres to a top-down structure, where a large number of users engage with its free content, propelling them toward other aspects of the site.

This feature of the site enhances the marketing of theatrically distributed films in its library. For example, on April 26, 2009, The Auteurs entered into a partnership with Zeitgeist Films to make Nuri Bilge Ceylan’s *Three Monkeys* available online for free

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<sup>12</sup> Kelly, Kevin. “1,000 True Fans.” March 4, 2008.

[http://www.kk.org/thetechnium/archives/2008/03/1000\\_true\\_fans.php](http://www.kk.org/thetechnium/archives/2008/03/1000_true_fans.php)

<sup>13</sup> Schlosberg, Jeremy. “Farewell to the Casual Music Fan.” *Fingertips Music Blog*. November 9, 2009. [http://www.fingertipsmusic.com/comment\\_casual.htm](http://www.fingertipsmusic.com/comment_casual.htm)

ahead of its theatrical release on May 1, 2009. Although, likely due to exclusive contractual obligations, *Three Monkeys* only remained online for a day, Zeitgeist also allowed The Auteurs to stream Ceylon's first feature, *Climates*, from April 23 to May 3. The strategy created an "event" based around the theatrical release of *Three Monkeys* that was accessible to both casual and true fans, a combined interest that furthered the awareness of its theatrical release. The Auteurs plans to continue working on new releases, including the 2010 European distribution of *A Prophet* and Michael Haneke's *The White Ribbon*.

Since these films do not have major studio budgets, nor do they attract mainstream audiences, they inhabit a niche in the marketplace for international film. As such, they are part of the Long Tail, the theoretical dominant aspect of the industry as formulated by Chris Anderson. In Anderson's model, small individual sales constitute the majority of the marketplace and thrive on these terms. Many of the films in The Auteurs library stand to benefit from their existence in the Long Tail.

With its technological capacity to spread awareness of both older films and new releases, The Auteurs shows major potential as a resource for several categories of the film industry, including distributors, archivists, curators and filmmakers. However, while its conceptual arrangement has already generated promising results, there is nothing embedded in the site's design to guarantee its ongoing existence. The staff comprises of eleven full-time employees, the majority of whom work out of the company's headquarters in Palo Alto. Carkarel, whose previous credentials include work at Goldman Sachs and advising the president of the European Parliament, handles a large amount of the company's outreach efforts in addition to serving as its business leader. With its low

overhead and functionality as Cakarel's "brain child," the sustainability plan for The Auteurs is difficult to determine. However, its tightly wound structure also gives it more efficiency in the short term. Whereas other movie streaming sites, such as Jaman, suffered from overextended budgetary needs, The Auteurs consolidates its immediate interests while retaining the autonomy necessary to maintain the quality of its product.

Nevertheless, it should not be considered as a storage device. The encodings for films on the site are stored on a Content Delivery Network, and the files are backed up in case of an emergency. But, as Cakarel explains, "digital archiving of films is a problematic and controversial issue that we prefer to leave to archivists."<sup>14</sup> The site purchases streaming rights for the films in its library and does not retain physical copies. While it cannot replicate the function of archives – a possibility that future movie streaming sites ought to consider – The Auteurs does allow for the monetization of archives, and the ability for home video content to naturally migrate into a new media environment. Researchers in need of access to certain films on an ongoing basis should look elsewhere, at least for now.

At the same time, The Auteurs conveys a deep concern for the quality of its content, which makes it as valuable as any well-programmed art house, if not more so, given its international reach and the flailing nature of the current distribution climate. The (albeit informal) language of the site's mission statement conveys its allegiance to quality. "Popular doesn't always mean good," it reads, and continues:

Our film library is brimming with visionary films that wouldn't fill a single cinema in Belgium for a week – not even a day. But if you searched the world (all of it), you might just find an audience of a thousand for these rare cinematic treats. And we don't think a thousand people should be ignored just because they happen to live in different time

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<sup>14</sup> Personal e-mail to the author from Efe Cakarel on October 19, 2009.

zones or far away from Belgian cinemas. If someone needed to make such a precise film, it means that someone, somewhere needs to watch it. More importantly, that someone might be you.<sup>15</sup>

Buried in the prose is a practical explanation of The Auteurs's social networking capacity, with a hypothetical audience that correlates in size with the number of fans mentioned in Kelly's research. However, the emphasis on specialty films — i.e., non-popular films — brings the service into the realm of quality guarantees set forth by a number of distributors and screening venues. On its website (which is partially designed by The Auteurs), Criterion ensures a “commitment to publishing the defining moments of cinema for a wider and wider audience,”<sup>16</sup> echoing The Auteurs's formulation of combining quality with dedicated outreach efforts.

Other distributors emphasize the cultural and ideological value of cinema as a guiding ingredient in their selections. Milestone Films, which focuses on restoring neglected films, states an interest in “films [that] have profoundly moved us, taught us about human nature, introduced us to other cultures and fundamentally changed the way we see the world.” Film Forum, a New York-based repertory cinema, aims to present “an international array of films that treat diverse social, political, historical and cultural realities.” Art house distributor Zeitgeist Films develops its library based on the following criteria: “Passion for the film, its quality and prestige, and its marketability.”

The Auteurs itself engages this ideal in the following terms:

The Auteurs is not just about discovering wonderful new cinema or classic masterpieces. It's also about discussing and sharing these discoveries, which makes us like a small coffee shop—... a place where you can gather and talk about alternative endings, directors' cuts, and whatever

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<sup>15</sup> “About the Auteurs.” <http://www.theauteurs.com/about>

<sup>16</sup> “About Criterion.” [http://www.criterion.com/about\\_us](http://www.criterion.com/about_us)

those frogs in *Magnolia* meant. Heated debates and passionate arguments are welcome.

The Auteurs, unlike the aforementioned distributors, must form complex network of partnerships for every film in its library. Since the site only purchases streaming rights, it works in conjunction with many distributors around the world. Hence, not every film on The Auteurs can be streamed from every country, due to limited rights. To navigate these concerns, it employs the aggregator Content Republic, which is based in the United Kingdom. Identified as “Europe’s leading digital film distribution company,” Content Republic also represents streaming sites such as Babelgum, Joost and SnagFilms. Despite this pedigree, the aggregator functions separately from The Auteurs and should not be considered responsible for adhering to the goals established in the site’s mission statement.

While I do not mean to imply that Content Republic lacks ethical standards of its own, the company’s middleman status needs to be established in this evaluation of The Auteurs as a case study in digital distribution. Aggregators remain a vital aspect of the process in making movies available over the Internet, whether for streaming, download or other means. Although a detailed evaluation of Content Republic does not appear in this paper, it is essential to note that a distributor must exercise extreme caution when selecting an aggregator so as not to endanger the consistency of the distributor’s stated purpose.

Along with employing an aggregator, The Auteurs also collaborates with other entities in the film community in its quest to maintain high quality films. Criterion curates a monthly online “festival” on the site, containing several films united by a single theme, all of which stream for free. The diverse selections are culled from multiple eras,

genres and national cinemas. Consider October's "Scary Movies" festival (tied to Halloween season), which included the widely known American films *Sisters* and *Carnival of Souls* in addition to Japanese director Kaneto Shindo's *Onibaba* and the French thriller *Eyes Without a Face*. To date, the festivals have adhered to a generic definition of film curatorship free of capitalistic pressures. As Laura U. Marks writes in "The Ethical Presenter: Or Have to Have Good Arguments Over Dinner," "curated programs are driven by concepts rather than by the need to survey developments in a particular area of film and video practice."<sup>17</sup>

If The Auteurs succeeds at facilitating the migration of film culture online, it is mainly a result of its partnerships. Cakarel confessed in an interview with *Film Comment* that "I only became a cinephile after I founded The Auteurs,"<sup>18</sup> suggesting that his professional experience did not endow with him with the specialization needed to curate films on the site. However, he and other members of The Auteurs staff actively interact with users in the forums about issues pertaining to content and interactivity in The Auteurs' community. This forms one of two ingredients that contribute to the "small coffee shop" vibe mentioned in the mission statement.

The second ingredient is The Notebook, an editorial supplement on the site containing essays, reviews and related material written by critics such as Glenn Kenny (formerly of *Premiere* magazine) and others. The implementation of critical voices alongside posters in the forums holds almost as much significance as the films themselves in cultivating an active community on The Auteurs. As Greg Taylor's asserts

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<sup>17</sup> Marks, Laura U. "The Ethical Presenter: Or How to Have Good Arguments Over Dinner." *The Moving Image*. Vol. 4, No. 1, Spring 2004. 36

<sup>18</sup> "Beta Male: The Auteurs' Efe Carkarel interviewed by Paul Fileri." *Film Comment*. January/February 2009 (online only). <http://www.filmlinc.com/fcm/jf09/uncutauth.htm>

in *Artists in the Audience: Cults, Camp, and American Film Criticism*,<sup>19</sup> where he argues that “the gulfs separating artist, critic and spectator have narrowed to the point where the special authority of the filmmaker seems an outdated notion: now anyone and everyone, it seems, can make movie art.”<sup>20</sup>

The blend of films, dialogue in the forums, and editorial content yields unpredictable results, reflecting the “dinner-party model” of curatorial work explicated by Marks in *The Ethical Presenter*. “Let the party happen, don’t try to control it, and trust that something interesting and satisfying will happen in the course of the evening,” she writes. “The dinner-party model is performative in that it depends on the unfolding of unforeseen events.”<sup>21</sup> In this sense, The Auteurs is defined as a synthesis of its official content and constantly evolving material contributed by its users.

This paper has asserted that The Auteurs serves as an ideal case study for digital distribution – and, by extension, the digital presence of film culture – because it contains a formalization of pre-existing tendencies listed as sharing, networking, commenting and viewing. It engages with numerous facets of the international film community and addresses recent changes in audience behavior by simultaneously driving interest in the viewing of its films and contributing to the viability of the theatrical marketplace. The ongoing presence of an active audience — the site reported 10,000 views in October 2009 — shifts its methodology from a theoretical conception to a credible business model

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<sup>19</sup> Taylor’s book focuses on two early critics of camp and cult films in America, Parker Tyler and Manny Farber. Appropriately, The Auteurs recently posted Farber’s multi-part 1943 essay “The Trouble with Movies,” bringing the value of his work into the digital domain along with other essential aspects of film culture.

<sup>20</sup> Taylor, Greg. *Artists in the Audience: Cults, Camp, and American Film Criticism*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999. 8

<sup>21</sup> Marks, 38 – 39.

that will continue to remain pertinent as the Internet remains a vital factor in the future of cinema.