



Hatchet Job: Love Movies, Hate Critics

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For decades, the backbone of film criticism has been the hatchet job -- the entertaining trashing of a film by professional reviewers, seen by many as cynical snobs. But with the arrival of the internet, have the critics finally fallen under the axe? With movie posters now just as likely to be adorned by Twitter quotes as frosty reviewer recommendations, has the rise of enthusiastic amateurism sounded the death knell of a profession? Are the democratic opportunities of the internet any more reliable than the old gripes and prejudices of the establishment? Can editing really be done by robots? And what kind of films would we have if we listened to what the audience thinks it wants? Starting with the celebrated TV fight between film-maker Ken Russell and critic Alexander Walker (the former hit the latter with a rolled-up copy of his Evening Standard review on live television) and ending with his own admission to Steven Spielberg of a major error of judgement, Mark Kermode takes us on a journey across the modern cinematic landscape. Like its predecessor, *The Good, The Bad and The Multiplex*, *Hatchet Job* blends historical analysis with trenchant opinion, bitter personal prejudices, autobiographical diversions and anecdotes, and laugh-out-loud acerbic humour. It's the perfect book for anyone who's ever expressed an opinion about a movie.

Hatchet Job: Love Movies, Hate Critics Details

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Anna says

‘Hatchet Job’ contains Kermode’s hilarious and digressive meditations on film criticism as it was and as it is now. The chapters proceed in a rambling form, structured through lengthy and artfully articulated anecdotes. At the outset, Kermode comments that his best-known and most popular reviews are deeply negative ones. This accords with my tendency to seek out his views on anything made by Michael Bay. Moreover, my favourite review of his has to be the magnificent rant about Sex and the City 2, in which he sings the Internationale. I’ve previously read his book The Good, the Bad and the Multiplex: What’s Wrong with Modern Movies? which critiques chain cinemas and 3D. This one is very similar in tone and structure, although perhaps not quite so entertaining. Probably because I have stronger (mostly negative) feelings about 3D than I do about film reviewing in the 21st century. Still, the comparisons between book and film reviewing were interesting, as they made me wonder how much more effort I’d put into goodreads reviews if they were my job rather than a tool of procrastination.

Overall, this book was entertaining and fun. I am still not ready to rediscover ‘AI Artificial Intelligence’ as a hidden gem, though. As far as I’m concerned, that film was too long and excessively schmaltzy.

Muhammed says

Really enjoyed this amusing, entertaining look at the relevance of film critics and film criticism in an age of blogs, Twitter reviews and internet leaks, written by one of the UK's leading film critics Mark Kermode. As a film blogger myself (shameless plug www.moaboutmovies.wordpress.com) Kermode makes sound points about amateur film critics, and makes a great case for the continued place of professional film critics today. Along the way he throws in some entertaining anecdotes, including the time he apologised to Steven Spielberg for trashing 'A.I.'

Ugh says

I like Mark Kermode as a broadcaster, but going by Hatchet Job I don't think he's a very good writer – at least not of books.

I found HJ lacking rather lacking in insight, certainly repetitive and roundabout, linguistically uninspired, redundant (we're told that podcasts are “(an Internet innovation)”) and that “everything in this book is written by me”), and too full of asides, self-criticism/modesty and borderline sycophancy. I also thought it lacked structure: it's about the business of film criticism, but gives little sense of what's ahead or why.

However, there were positives:

- A quote from Stephen Fry that's delightfully dismissive of things like the above paragraph (and what Kermode does for a living): [A critic to Saint Peter at the pearly gates]: “Other people wrote things,

performed things, painted things, and I said stuff like “thin and unconvincing”, “turgid and uninspired”, “competent and serviceable””.

- The recognition that many people turn to criticism after they’ve experienced the thing for themselves, not before.

-The chapter on the use by studios of audience previews.

-Kermode’s memories of the film *Jeremy*, which he saw once as a kid and then again 40 years later.

Ultimately, though, I felt this needed considerably more care and attention – either from Kermode or the editor.

Finally: Kermode has a thing about critics needing to have skin in the game in order for their opinions to be taken seriously, a point he makes ad nauseum. Well, I can be tracked down with little effort, Mark, and I live in London. If you want me to say the above to your face, I’ll buy the beers.

Ruth says

For anyone not familiar with Mark Kermode’s work, he is the Chief Film Critic for The Observer newspaper, he presents The Culture Show on BBC2, and he is part of ‘Kermode and Mayo’s Film Review’ programme on BBC Radio 5 live. In this book, he talks about his role as film critic, and more specifically, the role of a film critic in today’s world, where the internet allows pretty much everyone to be a critic about pretty much anything. And you don’t need to have any specialist knowledge or qualifications to be an internet critic. (I’m well aware that as a blogger, I’m one of these people that he talks about – I’m not particularly qualified to write about books or movies or theatre, but I do anyway, although I don’t claim to offer anything other than my own opinion, for whatever that’s worth.) So with the growth of blogging, tweeting etc., the role of professional film critic has come under some threat.

Kermode eloquently makes the case for the necessity of professional film critics in such a world – he certainly convinced me, although to be fair, I agreed with his point of view in the first place. He also discusses how advertisement posters for films have now started using quotes from Twitter users as endorsements, and points out the obvious problems with this. For all this though, Kermode does seem to want to embrace the internet and the rise of online bloggers, is also quick to point out the advantages of it – both to himself and to others.

The book is very well written and engaging, and often very amusing too. Each chapter is about a specific point relating to the main theme, but Kermode often goes off at tangents, and uses lots of anecdotes to illustrate what he’s saying – at the end of the chapter, everything ties up nicely.

Overall, if you like Mark Kermode’s film reviews, you will like this book. If you don’t know anything about Mark Kermode or his film reviews, there’s a strong chance you will like this book. I don’t think you even need to be particularly cineliterate to enjoy it – my basic knowledge of any film extends as far as whether or not I enjoyed it. I started reading the book on a long flight, and usually when I’m flying, I end up listening to music, watching a film, or trying to sleep. However, I found myself not wanting to do any of those things, and instead just wanting to keep reading. So for me, this was definitely a winner, and I would recommend it.

Michelle says

Probably the best Kermode I've read so far - maybe because he spends less time talking about himself in this book than he does in the others I've read. In this book he tells about the value of film critics (i.e. he justifies his own existence) but, more valuably, makes some interesting points about the nature of criticism itself, and of course how it's changed since the explosion of social media (a case in point since I am now 'reviewing' this). He mentions us Goodreaders, and also talks about how to 'vote wash' on Amazon, something I didn't know was possible. Anyone interested in *How Amazon Works* would do well to read that chapter. What stayed with me most of all though was his discussion on audience testing and how movies are often changed to give the audience the ending they want. Kermode argues that the best movies end with the audience getting what they need, rather than what they want. Hmm. One of my favourite movies, 'Last Night', ends in a very ambiguous way, which leaves me screaming in frustration at my beloved TV, no matter how many times I watch it. But maybe I should stop screaming - maybe it's the ending I need. Hmm... But I need to know, dammit! Argh!

Patrick says

I can't quite put my finger on exactly why I didn't enjoy this book as much as Kermode's previous books about movies. Maybe it is simply that he has already used so many of his best anecdotes in his previous books. Or maybe it's just that I'm not as interested in what he, a film critic, has to say about film criticism as I am in what he has to say about films.

And it probably doesn't help that I've heard many of the best lines in the book before. The one-sentence hatchet-job review of *The Straight Story* (which I liked) as 'Forrest Gump on a tractor' or *Mannequin* "by, for and about dummies" or *Knowing* "You're better off not." Some of his pet grumbles, such as people reviewing films that they haven't actually seen (apparently not so unusual as you might think) or attention-seeking internet critics deciding to undermine how the whole press-screening system works by ignoring embargoes I have definitely heard before on his Friday afternoon *Wittertainment* show. And I'm already well aware of his (probably perfectly reasonable) opinion of the works of Michael Bay (I've only ever seen one Michael Bay film, *Bad Boys* and if it is typical of his output, then I've no desire to watch anything else he's done. No, actually, that's not quite true. I've seen the first *Transformers* film in Dutch. The fact I didn't understand a word of what any of the characters were saying might not have made a great deal of difference.)

All that said, it's reasonably diverting – I quite enjoyed his explanation, using the example of *Casablanca*, of why audience-testing films can ruin them, and for all that Kermode has the same slightly distracting habit of disappearing off on tangents that last for several pages before returning to his original point that I'm guilty of myself, it didn't take me long to read.

Laura Armstrong says

Having listened to Mark Kermode's other, in my view more rounded and engaging books, I think this could be a book too far. There were some interesting topics covered i.e the reach of the online film reviewing community, the power of audience feedback and other mildly diverting aspects of the critical film process. Sometimes I feel Kermode gets a little too passionate about his subject, which can (well it did for me) be to the detriment of the the overall enjoyability of the read.

Tomrhys says

Just by typing this sentence I have already placed myself in the category of the apocalyptic anonymous blogger. I am immediately turned into someone who seem to think that, just because that a vast majority of the western world has access to the internet, they all must surely be interested in my inane opinion about everything under the sun. One of those individuals that Dr Kermode points at as an issue in the current world of criticism. And the interesting thing is... I agree with him, I am an incredibly dangerous thing.

First off, I need to declare a vested interest. I am a huge fan of Mark Kermode's work, and even though I don't always agree with his views, I respect his dignity as a critic, and will always place stock in his views (and will often pass off his analysis as my own, when my intelligence fails me). And to an extent, with this book he is already preaching to the converted, as I do believe that the presence of professional, identifiable critics are vitally important in the analysis of human culture. However, with all this being true, I can't help being disappointed with his latest book.

Kermode sets out to examine the death knell of the professional critic. The internet has well and truly pulled the rug from beneath the feet of printed media, and the role of the traditional critic is uncertain. When anyone with an internet connection can opine about a certain film, or spew their bile, or make money from false opinions, it begins to cheapen the value of The Honest Critic. However, Kermode has a handy tool against this potential problem. Strip anonymity from the critic. This way there is jeopardy to the review. Why would this person say this if he had something to lose in saying it? Or conversely, it is easy to track down an affiliation between the critic and the film. I think there is great value in this, and will always prioritise the views of those identifiable critics and those (often silly) anonymous critics. Kermode himself has himself reaped the rewards for being a 'brand' (although I am sure he would hate that word) to attach a review to. And even if I disagree with him on a certain review, I always appreciate his honesty and passion about films. When Kermode believes something, he BELIEVES it (often in the face of common critical consensus, a habit that has led to him being branded a contrarian).

In the end (spoiler alert) Kermode sees the value of the internet, and attempts to reconcile old printed media and digital media. In effect, printed media needs to stop being so fusty and 'Move with the times granddad' and digital media needs to grow up from it teenage stroppiness and not assume that freedom is the be all and end all of cultural development (well done you, you have the right to your opinion but that does not automatically give it weight or validity). When done right (i.e. with identifiable critics and accountability), such as denofgeek or empireonline, it works!

I have only focussed on one aspect of Kermode's thesis in this review, as I feel it is the most topical aspect, but there are other very interesting arguments. The idea that getting the first review is not necessarily guaranteeing a correct review, and also having to be dignified enough to admit your wrong, and the idea of being snippy (read: nasty) in a review doesn't give the opinion more weight.

So all very interesting and well argued. So why was I disappointed? To be honest, I felt that there were to many digressions in the arguments. All these digressions were interesting, but only succeeded to muddy and dilute the strength of the argument. There were many asides that I felt were unnecessary, and would only

lead me to lose track of Kermode's point, and had to flick back a few pages to reacclimatise myself. And with one of the Good Doctor's main strengths as a critic being that he pinpoints exactly the areas of a film that work and those that don't (again, although I don't always agree with him, I always understand WHY he feels a certain way towards a film), it only serves to frustrate me when he takes so long getting to his main argument.

With all that being said, why listen to me? Who am I anyway?

Holly Cruise says

I've already read both of Mark Kermode's previous books on cinema and the contents thereof, so I am definitely the target audience for this book. Sure enough, I enjoyed it, although I suspect it was more of an appendix to the previous books rather than a great standalone in itself.

I like Kermode's writing/ranting style - being a listener to the Five Live film podcast and all - and this definitely supplies plenty of that. There are also some interesting insights into the, admittedly somewhat niche, world of the film critic. It doesn't have the firm narrative structure or thesis of his previous books, but there are entertaining anecdotes to be found and it never lost my interest.

Lightweight but enjoyable.

Barry Pierce says

Mark Kermode is my favourite film critic. I listen to his radio show with Simon Mayo religiously. This book is Kermode's views on himself and his use in the world. Basically it's a book on film criticism and the function of film critics in society today. It's written in Kermode's distinctive anecdotal prose which is very easy and enjoyable to read. You don't have to have a massive knowledge of film to enjoy this book, I feel like it was written to appease even the least cineliterate people. My one reservation about this is if you are a regular listener to his show you already have heard the majority of the anecdotes presented in this book, this isn't a major thing though because the majority of them stand up to repeat readings. This was really interesting and I'd definitely recommend it to people who are interesting in reading about the world of the film critic.

Anthony says

Kermode is back again, and this time he's defending his profession and job. Hatchet Job is Mark Kermode writing about film criticism in an age when everyone can create a blog and express their opinions to the world on the internet. Also exploring the questions of why people should even bother listening to critics, and why movie studios pulling tweets for movie posters is less reliable than someone who has been paid for their review and had their work run past an editor. Often citing Roger Ebert as the benchmark for criticism, he goes into past instances when critics have got it very wrong about movies and very right, only for the film to tank at the box office.

But rather than be against the rise of online reviews and blogging, he actually defends and says when it's done well they're as valued to the world of critiquing and cinema as some who's a 'professional'. He's trying

to embrace the future rather than fight it.

It's very well written and, in some points, even funny. As someone who listens to him weekly on his film review podcast, I notice that sometimes his books can often be made up of stuff he's just repeating that he read on the radio, but there wasn't much of that here (the only example I can think of is his the A.I Artificial Intelligence anecdote).

He may come across as an old grumpy man ranting about how 3D is ruining cinema and that Michael Bay is the devil, but for the time being, at least, he's still worth listening to.

Clara says

Let me state first off that I am a big fan of Mark Kermode, and that this two-star rating might be a little mean. But as The Good Doctor himself taught me, diminished expectations count for a lot, and when you know that something has the potential to be so much better (I devoured "The Good, the Bad and the Multiplex" with glee), the disappointment is that much greater.

"Hatchet Job" meanders in no discernible order through the world of film criticism and puts the case forward for the sanctity of good old-fashioned film journalism in an area increasingly dominated by the blogosphere. Kermode talks about his life as a critic, making the most of free sandwiches, the arrival of the fax machine, then the internet, and a bit about his dog (in fact, too much about his dog). By far the thing which he does most, however, is go off on pages-long mildly amusing asides about particular films or various anecdotes from his time in the business.

The book is by no means a disaster. It provides enough entertainment to keep you going to the end pretty painlessly. It's just that the urgency of the central argument is somewhat watery, and after 300 pages or so, I couldn't help feeling that the topic of film criticism was just a loose vehicle for writing a book about 'funny film stuff' and a chance to throw about as much Kermodean wit as possible.

Kaoru says

His first book was about all the mad stories he experienced in his life as a movie reviewer, his second one was about the sorry state that mainstream cinema more or less is in these days... and since both of these things are pretty much the topics he loves to talk about the most, there's actually not *that much left* for him in his third book. But here it is anyway, and its topic is about... movie reviewing. What it used to be like, how it's happening today and what it might evolve into. Or something.

Of course, there are some very interesting bits and chapters about Roger Ebert, Amazon-reviews, test screenings and bloggers. But Mark Kermode is Mark Kermode, so very soon he will go off into tangents so far off the original topic that you wonder how the hell he even got there. He can't even tell the story about his encounter with a furious director straight without interrupting it with a very lengthy detour about his love for "Shock Treatment" (That sequel to "Rocky Horror" that almost no one on earth has ever seen). Not that I mind or anything. Because, really, if you pick up a book by Mark Kermode this is *exactly* what you want.

(And aside from his movie reviews this is exactly what you're listening to his radio show on BBC 5 for.) Here's no Simon Mayo who impatiently demands "So on with the *actual story....!*" or a news feature forcing a break. This is raw and (mostly) unedited Kermode stuff from beginning to end. And it's entertaining, incoherent, funny, irritating, insightful and sometimes infuriating. Certainly, it won't win over anyone who isn't a fan already but for everyone who already *is* in for a treat.

And you would want the audiobook version, of course. Because what's the point of a Kermode text if the words aren't spoken by the man himself?

Tom Bensley says

Resident film critic over at BBC Radio 5 Live with Simon Mayo, droll counterpart to his unfettered enthusiasm, Mark Kermode is well-known for his encyclopaedic knowledge of movies, big flappy hands and cringeworthy impersonations of movie stars. He's also a fantastic film critic. Learned, insightful and always scathingly honest, much to the delight of his listeners every time another of Michael Bay's crimes against cinema sends him into a near-possessed rage.

Central to *Hatchet Job* and Kermode's biggest concern is the question of whether film critics are relevant anymore. In the pre-internet days, newspapers bestowed the news and opinions from on high—film critics had desk jobs, they were paid to watch movies and their opinions mattered to the public; they were the men and women who talked about movies. Nowadays, absolutely everybody throws around their opinions and hardly anyone is getting paid. Kermode makes the point that, with the advent of user reviews and blogs, film criticism is becoming more of a hobby than a profession.

To answer this question, Kermode talks at length about a lot of different things. He begins with a few choice selections from hatchet job reviews (i.e. very negative takedowns) written by other critics including a typically savvy remark from Roger Ebert's review of *Pearl Harbour*: 'A two-hour movie squeezed into three hours, about how ... the Japanese staged a surprise attack on an American love triangle.' Kermode inserts his own less elegant snippet from his review of *Marley and Me*: 'Less fun than having a real dog put down.'

Eventually Kermode gets around to some historical analysis, charting the advent of the internet and what it has done to the published word. He points out that professional film critics put their reputations and jobs on the line with every review, which gives their reviews more credibility. Anonymity means a writer can get facts wrong, dish out personal attacks and pretty much write a shoddy review without so much as a lick of consequence. Tracking the rise of *Ain't It Cool News*, Kermode also wonders whether, in the days of instant publication and viral news stories, is being there first the only thing that matters? He even delves into the algorithm behind Amazon's 'user reviews' and questions the reliability of editing done by robots, especially when there are so many ways to cheat the system.

In his typically entertaining style, Kermode regularly wanders off on tangents and waxes poetically about movies and directors. The book is always a fun read and is a very well-researched work of non-fiction, but the wide range of topics covered and anecdotes thrown in leave it feeling like a rather loose and baggy undertaking, a shotgun blast that hits the target but shreds a few too many trees around it to be deemed a great shot. Explanations of his morning routine, a lengthy encounter with a filmmaker supposedly scorned by his review and some nostalgic gazing back into the past all take away from what is otherwise a good book on criticism, films and the rapidly evolving publishing industry.

Paul Bryant says

In a continually annoying, longwinded, blokey-jokey, sickeningly ingratiating manner Mark Kermode makes a few interesting observations. These have to be quarried out of the endless self-congratulatory froth that is your standard Kermode paragraph. I was interested in the following.

CRITICS : WHY DO THEY EXIST?

Answer : because you know that their opinions and comments have not been invented by a studio publicity team, unlike the random Amazon or IMDB or Twitter one-liner you may have seen. MK knows, as do we all, that online “amateur” reviews can be gamed. So critics are honest. Well, yes, but does that make them useful? All the film critics in the world were raving about *I, Daniel Blake*, *A Girl Walks Home Alone At Night* and *A Pigeon Sat on a Branch*, to mention three recent films, and each one was a turkey in my little opinion. And then again, if it wasn’t for critics I would not have seen *Beyond the Hills* (a 2 hour drama about a Romanian nunnery), *Love and Friendship* (a costume drama from a Jane Austen short story, yawn), *James White* (an indie about a guy whose mother is dying) or *Rams* (a drama about two elderly sheep farmers in Iceland) – all of which were brilliant.

You can’t win with critics – Mark Kermode thinks Inarritu’s great movie *Babel* to be complete rubbish – he’s so wrong! – but he also thinks *The Exorcist* is one of the all time great movies – he’s so right!

(Note the festoons of quotes from apparently intelligent people persuading you to see this load of old codswallop.)

DO CRITICS HAVE A FUTURE?

Or have the amateur loonies (that’s us) taken over the asylum? Well, did critics ever have a future? Did fans consult Roger Ebert or Philip French before heading for the cinema? Reviews and metacritical scores mostly work on me by putting me off things - if the tomatometer reads 35% I no longer want to see your movie. But it doesn’t work the other way round - *Mad Max: Fury Road*, *It Follows* and *Finding Dory* all get 95%-plus at Rotten Tomatoes and they were unwatchable, tiresome and dull respectively. In my opinion.

Perhaps you can find either a critic or blogger or (even) Goodreader whose taste is somewhere near your own and stick with that voice. But basically you can’t trust anyone – even though you still need to be able to make some kind of reasonable guess about which film or book is worth devoting your time and money out of the ten billion on offer in our everything-permanently-available culture.

CAN YOU TRUST YOURSELF?

MK discusses the dark filthy secret of preview audiences in the movie business. This is where an audience of allegedly normal people are shown a movie before it’s been finally edited. They are then asked what they thought. In the famous example of *Fatal Attraction*, the original version has Alex Forrest (the Glen Close character) committing suicide. The preview audience hated that, they wanted Michael Douglas to “kill the

bitch" as the phrase was. And the problem is – they were right. Their crass knee-jerk lust for revenge made Adrian Lyne the director reshoot the entire end and come up with the fantastic blood-bath we get in the movie we know and love or hate. Well, you know, it's a great piece of trash, it ain't *Citizen Kane*, so who cares about artistic integrity.

But what if there were preview audiences when Shakespeare was around and after they saw the first version of Hamlet they complained that it was too depressing and they really wanted Hamlet and Ophelia to get together in the end, and what if Willie the Shake had thought oh well, these plays of mine, who really cares, I only write to them to pay the bills, I'll do a rewrite, it's not like Hamlet is *Citizen Kane*.

That said, I think all movies which have had reshoots done after previews should be flagged as such, like you have to identify artificial flavourings and colours in food products.
