

## Jason Fraley, Film Critic, WTOP Radio Matt Razak, Film Critic, Flixist

### Michael O'Connell, producer, It's All Journalism

Welcome to "It's All Journalism", my name is Michael O'Connell. I'm here with fellow producer Julia O'Donoghue. We've got two guests today: Matt Razak, who worked with Julie and I at The Connection Newspapers in Northwestern Virginia. He was an entertainment reporter there and he has gone on to be a movie reviewer, game reviewer. Who is it you work for now?

### Matt Razak, film critic, Flixist

I work for a site called [Flixist](#) for movies and [Destructoid](#) for video games.

### Julia O'Donoghue, producer, It's All Journalism

Aren't you a founder of Flixist?

### Matt Razak

I am. I started it off.

### Michael O'Connell

Also sitting in the room with us today is Jason Fraley, who is the [WTOP](#) movie reviewer. WTOP is a sister station of the station I work for, WFED here in D.C.

### Jason Fraley, film critic, WTOP

Yeah thanks for having me. I'm Jason Fraley. I've been working here at TOP just upstairs in this same building for almost five years now. I write our morning show during most of the week and then Friday mornings I'm on air as our movie critic. It's a blast. Thanks for having me.

### Michael O'Connell

Well good. I'm hoping this is going to be a fun podcast because we are going to be talking about something I think a lot of people sort of dream of and think would be an ideal job, which is being a movie reviewer. Well, let me ask you that as a first question. Is that an ideal job?

### Jason Fraley

It's a fun -- It's a dual-edged sword I guess. It's a lot of fun because you are doing what you love for a living. If you can't, I can't imagine living without movies so that part of it is great. I guess the dark side of it for people who think it's glamorous sitting at home in their basement wanting to do it.

You know, it can be late nights. You go out to a screening. At least for me I have to get up and write the morning show in the morning. I think the positives far outweigh the negatives. It's an exciting gig. You're almost the gatekeeper of the movies that come out, and that part of it's thrilling to me.

### **Matt Razak**

I think what most people don't realize is that the majority of film critics, you know people I see every week at screenings and stuff, you know, it's not their full time gig. So, you know, to be a film critic, it's a full time job. You have a full time job in the day and then you're also spending another three hours every night -- not every night -- three nights a week or so, depending on how many movies you're reviewing, taking up time there too. It can be really time consuming, especially, you know, I've love when people say 'Oh, all they do is watch movies'. Most film critics are not just watching movies, you know, they have another job where they're doing something else. .

### **Jason Fraley**

Yes, it definitely has to be that labor of love, passion thing on the side. I'm sure it's only the upper upper echelon people who've been doing it awhile, so brand name recognition, really get to do it full time. It's got to be something, for anyone out there that wants to do it, make sure you have something else lined up full time. And just make it your craft. You have to do it on the side for awhile.

### **Michael O'Connell**

So what about the person who's got their blog, you know, what differentiates you or how do you differentiate yourself from someone who has a blog and just, you know, writes up something about every movie they see?

### **Jason Fraley**

I actually talked about this with a mentor when I was getting my master's in film over at AU a few years ago. I was talking with Desson Thompson. He used to write for The Washington Post, except I think his byline back then was Desson Howe. We talked extensively about this because he had gone and talked at -- Desson if you are listening thanks for all of the pointers -- but he was going on about how it was kind of a sea change in the film critic community, where a bunch of people with The Washington Post who had taken buyouts, they had been doing it for years and years and years. We have just talked back and forth about this cacophony of Internet bloggers now, where everyone and their mother wants to go start a website and do some reviews.

Desson and I were just kind of talking about how, kind of the negative part of that is that you get people who aren't actually academically trained in it or maybe don't even know their movie history. I'm sure we all in this room do. But you know, it could just be someone who knows the last 10 years or the movies of their lifetime. And I think it's important to know what all comes before. That way

when you are sitting in the theater, maybe more of a spring chicken reviewer would see something on the screen and say 'Oh that was great. Such an original concept.' But if you really know you're history and where things come from you might say that's been done a million times. So I think that affects how everything has been done or if you just see all the really great movies. I mean, to me, I think only a handful to a dozen truly great movies come out every year so a lot of it is working through the slog of mediocrity week to week.

So for me, I actually really enjoy the looking at the bigger picture of the last 100 years and seeing, you know, you take that handful of great movies every year, but you add 2008, 2007, 1946, and 1947. You know you have a huge swath of great movies to look at. I guess what you try to differentiate yourself with is to know your history and know the art and the craft of it rather than just going on a whim and a prayer.

### **Michael O'Connell**

So it that your perspective?

### **Matt Razak**

Yeah I definitely think it is the history, especially founding a blog where I brought in writers from everywhere. I know what we looked for was someone who, in our writers, was someone who knew old movies. I mean our target were blogs so we're 18-35 men so the majority of our stuff is explosions and breasts. But what we wanted in the background there so we could have interesting features along with that is someone who knows film history. So when we ask their favorite films didn't just list something in the past 10 years, but had things from the golden age.

### **Michael O'Connell**

Explosions and breasts from the 1940s.

### **Matt Razak**

Yes. Exactly. Right. We want things like that. So that's really important. A lot of, when I'm working with new writers, I say you need to go sit down and you need to watch some of these classics. When we first launched we put together a list of movies, not our, not the Flixist top ten movies, but a list of movies you needed to watch in order to understand the site. Half of them were pre-1960 or so. The difference between someone just hoping on and saying 'I love this' is someone who will watch the classics, watch the crap, you know, the mediocrity as well. One of things that I love to say is that people will always say 'Critics are so harsh. Why are you always coming down on romantic comedies and stuff?' Because we see that romantic comedy every week. You see that one romantic comedy every three months. We see it every other week.

### **Jason Fraley**

Well that was a fun date night out, but yeah exactly.

### **Michael O'Connell**

You've seen "The Philadelphia Story" so you can look back and see..

### **Matt Razak**

Right. Exactly.

### **Jason Fraley**

"It Happened One Night", I mean all of these movies. It gets recycled so much and when you see it done the first time or even better and then you see recycled again I mean that's why, where someone else might say, 'Oh wow. That was a really cool movie'...

### **Julia O'Donoghue**

I mean, that is an interesting thing about film critics as opposed to other culture critics is that they tend to review the gamut. Like, stuff that is really schlocky and stuff that is masterpieces. I don't know, like, you know, if you're book reviewers, you're not reviewing like romance novel and also "The Marriage Plot". I mean that's not the way other types of, or music reviewers, I don't think are necessarily are reviewing whatever, you know, I don't know, whatever Justin Bieber is doing and also, you know, whatever their specialty is.

### **Matt Razak**

The classical guy isn't doing hip-hop as well.

### **Julia O'Donoghue**

Yeah I mean can you talk a little bit about that? I feel like the people who review film do really see, like, everything.

### **Michael O'Connell**

The gamut. But you know, just sort of, to add onto to that. Roger Ebert sort of reveled in the fact that he was into low art and high art at the same time.

### **Jason Fraley**

Personally, it's kind of my life's movie critic mission to balance the high brow and the low brow. I mean actually before I started here at TOP. Similar to you here, I founded my own blog. It was called "The Film Spectrum" and the whole idea was that movies were on a spectrum of art on one side and entertainment on the other side. And I think you can have great movies on both sides. I mean entertainment -- "Raiders of the Lost Ark" "Back to the Future" -- I mean these are great movies, and they are just thrilling entertainment. On the art side, "8 1/2" "Citizen Kane," these are great movies too.

For me, the reason I love a Hitchcock is that I think he mastered both. I mean he never -- he's known as the master of suspense for a reason. He was a showman. Come on TV. "Good evening" and all that. He would make these really thrilling suspense movies on the surface. Then you go back and watch them 20, 30 times later in an academic setting and a film class. I just showed a bunch of high schoolers over at AU in a class that I'm teaching "Vertigo". We broke it down. Just, it really cooked their noodle how much is actually going on under the surface on the art side of it. So people like that, I think, are the truly great ones are John Ford or whoever who can master both. It gets back to what you are talking about with the gamut. You have to kind of keep both in mind when you go to review a movie. It can be kind of tough because you don't want to go in there and watch "Iron Man 3", and be like, 'Oh it didn't have this maison seine that Orson Welles had. You know you don't want to get to highbrow on it. You almost have to kind of flip the switch in your mind and say, 'OK. Is this the art or the entertainment right here and how does it relate to average people going to the movies?'

### **Michael O'Connell**

And the other thing is the filmmakers themselves, the directors, the auteurs. They study film. They watch the gamut. I mean the easy example to give is Quentin Tarantino, who immersed himself in all this slash cinema and he found all the gems and now he is stringing them together to make movies. I mean, in order for you to sort of speak that language, you need to go in and research and see all these films to see what the director is, what influences are playing to him or her that are coming up on the screen.

### **Matt Razak**

I think it is changing a bit though, with the web, because before, in a print world, you had a film critic at a newspaper and he did all of the movies. But now, you have sites devoted to horror films, sites devoted to drama, sites devoted to art film. I know a lot of our writers -- I mean I review a ton of art movies -- but I know a lot of our writers for Flixist don't feel comfortable reviewing certain types of movies, you know. We got a guy who loves Korean film, and I wouldn't review a Korean film now because I read his review and I think I know half of what you just said. You are clearly an expert in this. So the Web has really allowed a sort of branching out for film criticism in many ways.

### **Jason Fraley**

I actually remain, you know, there is a lot of talk about societies getting dumbed down and no one's watching the classics. I have a lot of hope in this new, in the new millennium of movie watchers and movie critics. Yeah you get the cacophony of Internet bloggers writing from their basement or whatever, but I'm hopeful because the notion of time is almost being erased from the process. What I mean is you can watch, with Netflix or DVR or On Demand, you can go back and watch any movie ever made with the click of the button. And there is

DVD special features, you can sit there and hear the filmmakers actually giving the audio commentary over top of the movie. These are advantages that didn't exist back then. And also we are kind of living in a, right around the millennium, came this huge explosion of the listology craze I call it. Everyone wanted to look back on the millennium, the 20th century, and do their best list.

## **Michael O'Connell**

AFI's Top 100.

## **Michael O'Connell**

You say Scorsese, he's done a couple of documentaries where he talks about his influences that are really kind of fascinating, just from a personal perspective of the disparate movies that sort of built his story. Seeing that and knowing that other directors have gone through the same sort of journey, you know, he mentioned schlocky movies and Westerns and things that he saw as a child that influences that he does. So, you know, understanding the history of film and entertainment I think is really kind of important.

I think we are all kind of anxious to go into the second half of our discussion here. We are going to talk about the press and Hollywood and how Hollywood, either through television or through movies, has kind of portrayed journalism. We're going to talk about some of the best and the worst presentations. Some of the best and worth movies TV shows that either have protagonists and are somehow themed about the media. I put on our various social media platforms, just the question, you know tell us what your favorite media-related movie or TV show is. And I got a ton of responses, however you measure a ton on social media. A lot of the ones are similar. Alison Burdo, on Facebook, said "Newsradio", the Phil Hartman years as a TV show. I've got another people who think obvious ones like "All The President's Men" and "Network". "Citizen Kane" - I had forgotten that "Citizen Kane". I mean obviously he was a baron of media, but he was also the story itself was told by a newsman going to cover a story, so you actually get to see the news process. Let me ask each of you: Matt, do you have any favorites or ones that come to mind?

## **Jason Fraley**

Oh yeah, I taped them all on VHS. They were great. Every year, they would do one a year on CBS. You literally hear Spielberg, Scorsese, like talking about what makes all these movies great and they talk down through them. So I think just that, people growing up now and this is how I did it. You print off a bunch of best lists from all the different publications, you go through with a highlighter -- this sounds like what you do with your people who want to write -- you say these are the movies you must see. I think there are exciting opportunities for everyone to go back and rediscover everything. What was it -- William Faulkner? -- You know the past isn't even past. Or the past is never dead. In fact, it's not even past. So I think it is an exciting time for it, if you really bear down and try to learn the greats.

**Matt Razak**

My absolute favorite journalism is "His Girl Friday".

**Jason Fraley**

Yes. I was absolutely going to say the same thing.

**Matt Razak**

It is so, it is one of the greatest screenplays ever written. It is, while the idea of journalism in it is still quick-talking, get to the phone, I got a breaking news story -- It's got a strong female protagonist, Cary Grant, all these great -- one of the great things about that is it shows how journalism was a field where in a male-dominated culture of that time, women could be strong and lead forward. The entire premise of it is she's leaving the news -- she's this hard-nosed journalist Lois Lane style -- she's leaving the news to get married and settle down and Cary Grant spends the entire movie wise-cracking and conniving to get her to stay because you know she loves her work more than becoming a housewife.

**Michael O'Connell**

And that was remade as, actually, not too bad a movie, "Front Page" right? From the 70s...

**Jason Fraley**

"His Girl Friday" was actually, I think, maybe like the second version of it. I think there was originally "The Front Page" before too, and I think it might have been two male characters, and then the Howard Hawks version that we all know and love put Rosalind Russell in there as a female role.

**Michael O'Connell**

Well the one in the 70s was Jack Lemmon, Walter Matthau vehicle, which there were a lot of those post "Odd Couple". One of the other ones that people mentioned, particularly current TV shows, "The Newsroom". Have you guys seen that? What are your thoughts on that?

**Julia O'Donoghue**

Ok. Well, a few different reasons. One is that they are actually covering real news stories. This has been talked to death about the show, but they are covering real news stories, but they are two years behind. So they always get things right about like what should be covered. Like, for example, I forget, because I have not seen the show in about a year, but when the oil rig exploded in the Gulf, it was overwhelmed by some other news story. And I guess, in the context of "The Newsroom" the show, they focus on the right issue or something.

**Michael O'Connell**

They make the right choice..

**Julia O'Donoghue**

They make the right choice. I mean I find that to be Aaron Sorkin at his worst. I like Aaron Sorkin a lot. I like his shows. I actually, in terms of newsrooms that I think were covered well, I think "Sports Night" is a great example of a news show. I know it's about sports, but I really enjoy it. I've never been at ESPN, but I suspect that some of that is actually the way that goes down. But "The Newsroom" man, I mean, it's just, it's him at his most self-righteous and that drives me crazy about it.

**Michael O'Connell**

I kind of bailed after a few episodes just because I thought it was a little too preachy. Well, if you are going to stand on the mount and tell me you are going to be right all the time, then I'm less interested. It's less engaging for me as a viewer.

**Julia O'Donoghue**

Right and cable news, they make mistakes because they are covering things fast. I'm sure WTOP does too. We need to be, we need to hold people accountable when they make, you know, I think the Boston bombing -- not to then go on a tangent -- like I think some of that, yeah, we need to hold you accountable for getting certain things wrong. But you are going to change things rather quickly. You can't always get things right, and so that aspect of it really frustrates me. I mean, you know, we don't have to go into Aaron Sorkin's issues with ladies, powerful ladies, who act dopey...

**Michael O'Connell**

Who are scatter-brained all the time.

**Julia O'Donoghue**

Yeah, that really drives me crazy. I would say, you know, best television show probably ever -- awful, awful portrayal of a newsroom. I mean "The Wire" in the fifth season, that newsroom, we're talking about in the middle of the 2000s, of the ought's, had no Internet presence. There's none of it in the show. That's also sanctimonious. That's David Simon saying I think certain things should be covered and certain things shouldn't.

And the management in the show, for a show that had all sorts of complex characters all over the place, the management of the newsroom in that show, those people are portrayed as being one dimensional and power-hungry. And I just don't believe the editor of The Baltimore Sun is really in it to give, I don't know, The Tribune Company as much money as possible. They have a lot of

pressure on themselves. It showed no understanding of the change that the industry was going through.

### **Michael O'Connell**

My take away from that, in particular, we had a couple of people who mentioned the fifth season of "The Wire" as an example of a newsroom both good and bad. But my take away from it was, from the standpoint of the people who are getting laid off, I think there was one scene where they had the copy editors -- you had these guys who had been at the paper for years and years and years and years -- debating the use of a particular word and that was, like, knowledge. And the impression was what was happening in journalism at that point, and this was probably David Simon's bemoaning the death of the large newsroom.

In a moment of time showing that this is what is happening, that the great experience that's being lost. Again, there is a problem that they don't mention digital, even at all. Because I think that figures into it a lot. I think he was more addressing the economics of what was going on in journalism at that moment, where staffs are getting laid off because the ad revenue was drying up.

### **Jason Fraley**

Well then, you mention the digital, and then there's "House of Cards". Kate Mara's character goes to work for this hip upcoming online publication called Slugline. I actually, I'm really enjoying "House of Cards". Some of it's hard to judge, with these television shows, until we've seen them in their entirety. You know, we are only a season into each of these, "The Newsroom" and "House of Cards". But yeah, it kind of portrays Slugline as a bunch of people laying around in an office.

### **Michael O'Connell**

In a coffee bar. There are no cubicles. There don't seem to any phones. There's certainly no desks.

### **Jason Fraley**

I'm curious to see where they take that show from the journalism perspective because it seems almost at the end of season one. They've started to plant the seed of an "All The President's Men" going on. No spoilers, but a big twist at the end of season one will become something that Kate Mara's character and the rest of their journalism folks start to pursue with deep throat leakers all over the place you know.

### **Julia O'Donoghue**

Props to "House of Cards" for portraying Kate Mara's character as being rather poor. Sometimes that's another news problem.

**Jason Fraley**

The tiny apartment? Yeah.

**Julia O'Donoghue**

Yeah the tiny apartment...

**Jason Fraley**

with the spiders crawling all over it.

**Michael O'Connell**

But you know that's a show. I like the show, but I did see the problems that they had. There's a moment in it where one of the editors made some grandiose statement, dismissive statement about Web journalists, that no real editor today would really say.

**Julia O'Donoghue**

The supposed Washington Post editor makes this very dismissive comment.

**Michael O'Connell**

Maybe he loses his job over the process or something, but I mean, I don't think we've yet had. ... It's still too early for us to have a journalism movie or television show that's kind of reflective of what is going on at the moment, right now, I think.

**Julia O'Donoghue**

I will say, is the name of the show -- the movie -- "State of Play", the one with Russell Crowe and Rachel McAdams?

**Matt Razak**

Yes.

**Julia O'Donoghue**

Ok so that had a little of the awful, like, Internet verses print people.

**Matt Razak**

Russell Crowe is sitting behind these stacks of papers going "I'm a journalist".

**Julia O'Donoghue**

That had a little bit of that. I mean what is disappointing about "House of Cards" is that came out in 2013 and still had that. Ok, "State of Play" I thought though, in some respects, gets some things ok. I really enjoyed the movie and I was not upset by the awful way the journalism was portrayed.

**Matt Razak**

Just to go back to -- I guess -- the historical context of how journalism is in film. I think ...

### **Julia O'Donoghue**

We haven't talked about "Superman".

### **Matt Razak**

The greatest hero in the world.

### **Jason Fraley**

Which was left out of "Man of Steel". They totally got rid of that. That was my least favorite part. There was not enough "Daily Planet" in there.

### **Matt Razak**

We will have a two-hour long conversation if we get on to that.

### **Michael O'Connell**

But we did see a reporter follow up a story.

### **Jason Fraley**

And she's a Pulitzer Prize winning reporter.

### **Michael O'Connell**

We saw her go from source to source to source to source to piece together a report.

### **Matt Razak**

And what a wonderful multicultural newsroom.

### **Michael O'Connell**

What are you saying?

### **Matt Razak**

But from a historical -- and I'm not sure if this is art reflecting life or life reflecting art -- but I feel like journalism now in movies is far more blown open, even if it's realistic or not. But back in the day, they sort of like decide to let's take gumshoe reporter look at things. And now you've got "Broken Glass" where like the story is about journalism doing wrong -- or journalists doing wrong. There's still good journalists movies, where journalists do something right, but it's very, it's a much deeper look at journalism in modern film.

### **Jason Fraley**

And I think the turning point is, was 1976. You have, to me, is still the two best journalist movies. For print, it's "All The President's Man" and, for broadcast, it's "Network". And kind of what you are talking about, if we are going to draw an arc in history to see that shift, that's where it is. Because "All The President's Men" is the idealistic, it's these are the guys going after him. Even the way they shoot it with the lights in the newsroom, it's like, 'This is the place of enlightenment'. It's a fabulous movie. But in the same year, you get "Network", which is the, maybe the first truly really cynical -- look out this is where we're headed. You have Faye Dunaway, who is this TV producer at the network who is so involved in it that even in, there's a scene where she's having sex with William Holden..

### **Michael O'Connell**

Like a man. That's the joke.

### **Jason Fraley**

Oh that's the joke. But you don't know whether she's getting pleasure from the sex or talking about ratings. So she's off the deep end. She is television incarnate. I think that's where the shift happened. I think it is the peak of the idealistic with "All The President's Men" and starting to foreshadow the dark side predicting cable news, like 20 years before it happened. .

### **Michael O'Connell**

Yeah and speaking as somebody who was cognizant of what was going on in the mid-70s. I can tell you both of those movies had a really big impact. "All The President's Men" had a huge impact on me personally. That was one of the movies, like a whole generation of journalists, that inspired me to be a journalist. And yeah I understand it's a little overblown in the way that it turned them into saints, the saints of journalism. That we are going to go and we are going to solve all the problems. You know this is post-Nixon. There was a lot of this feeling that we need to root out this evil or whatever these evils would be.

But at the time, [Network], which I think at the time people recognized as a very important film, they didn't understand it as being prescient. They thought it was 'On, this is just a crazy farce'. This will never happen. But now with the perspective of time, everything in that movie is correct. Sadly. The other thing that I think, I think that movie, more so than "All The President's Men," I think plays better to our times because you forget, you mention the way of Holden's part, the emotional core of that movie that this was a generation of the people who had had founded broadcast news, who were, you know, going out to the elephant's graveyard and everyone thinking it was being taken over by this younger, newer thing. And I think that speaks very much to what is going on in journalism right at this moment. There are people who are bemoaning, who wish for the days of old, but that's just not happening.

### **Jason Fraley**

Yeah, to me, I'm fascinated by -- there's always been this interplay between film critics and filmmakers, almost like a symbiotic relationship, where, you know, back during the war years, a bunch of French critics didn't get to see all of the American movies because the Nazis occupation. And then once the war ended in '45, all the French critics started going back and looking at American movies and they invented the term film noir, dark movies. So there's critics creating a whole genre. Flash forward a little bit later, the French critics again -- there at it again - they do the Cahiers du cinema and become -- this is a magazine out there where they are reviewing art around the late 50s. And in this '59 you have Murnau, Francois Truffaut, Godard -- they all move being critics to actual film makers on the leading end of the art side of film making, which then inspires all of our Hollywood renaissance of Scorsese, everyone in the slate. Yeah, like the whole "Easy Rider" to "Raging Bull" thing. So there's critics both inventing genres in the way they're writing about it and also inventing or becoming filmmakers themselves and inspiring other filmmakers. So it is an interesting interplay, and I'd almost like to see a rebirth, this is idealistic of me, a rebirth of the critic filmmaker. That'd be interesting.

### **Matt Razak**

I don't think that's going to happen. I think Ebert changed the entire thing. Because now you have. Before him, the idea of a film critic was almost an art commentator. You are not really giving your opinion on if someone's going to enjoy the movie, but the art of the film and what it represents and what is being done.

### **Michael O'Connell**

Sort of a Pauline Kael.

### **Matt Razak**

Yes, exactly. Who gave "Dr. No" a bad review because it wasn't artistic, like that's a famous example.

### **Jason Fraley**

Who got fired for panning "Sound of Music"

### **Matt Razak**

Right. Exactly. So I think, in the grand scheme of things, I don't think we are going to go back to that. You're still going to have critics who become filmmakers. That's going to happen. But I think the job of a critic now is far different from when critics were sort of turning into the art-house filmmakers, and the people who changed cinema. Now it's to tell people what movies they're going to like or not like. Which...some of that's good and some of that's bad. On the flip side of that, again, the web is revolutionizing everything. So you do have a lot of people who are publishing great content and 90 percent of them aren't being read because they are just throwing it up on their Wordpress or whatever. But they,

someone out there is going to be writing, writing, writing writing and then say I'm going to make a movie. And they're going to be able to because it is so easy to make a movie now and they are going to be the next great filmmaker.

### **Michael O'Connell**

Well wasn't the joke that dismissing critics is that they are all frustrated filmmakers, that they are all frustrated creators?

### **Matt Razak**

I made a film in college. No way. I'm going to critique.

### **Jason Fraley**

You definitely hear that. At the same time I think I'm it couldn't hurt if you have to. Even if you did it once and you never did it again, it couldn't hurt to know the process works. But yeah, you mentioned Ebert and with his passing a few months ago, I guess, in a way, it's a line in the sand, end of an era. Now, I guess, I mean obviously the Internet era existed in his later years too, but maybe we can finally close the chapter. And now, let's see what awaits now.

### **Julia O'Donoghue**

And we should give Roger Ebert credit for I mean, like, in the digital age, being pretty relevant. .

### **Michael O'Connell**

And forward thinking.

### **Julia O'Donoghue**

I mean best transition from old school media to twitter ever I think. He was great on Twitter.

### **Michael O'Connell**

And he had this club. He was trying to monetize on the Web as well so ...

### **Jason Fraley**

I was talking about the "best lists" that started coming up. Ebert web reviews and he had a section where regular reviews, but he has the Ebert "great movies" list. This is transitioning into the web and so I think he deserves immense credit. And the day he died, the newspaper in Chicago, their website just totally went down - the Sun-Times. It crashed because so many people flocked there. I think we may look back actually -- you raise a good point -- we may look back and say he was that transitional figure. Siskel passed away with still the TV era, maybe still. Thumbs up. Thumb down. But Ebert kind of made that transition.

### **Michael O'Connell**

Well, the two of them kind of created the role of the celebrity critic. And then there were a lot of people who came in after them, Roeper as well. There are others, who were magazine and TV critics and whatnot. But certainly Ebert was the biggest of them.

### **Julia O'Donoghue**

I think they also, you know, I read in some of this obits that he did transition from print to television to digital pretty seamlessly.

### **Michael O'Connell**

And he was a screenwriter. He did write "Beyond the Valley of the Dolls".

### **Julia O'Donoghue**

I mean I used to love like his, like, 'Here's something you should see that's on Netflix' I was like, 'this is great. This is a personal note from Roger Ebert, saying watch this', as I'm sitting overwhelmed about what I should watch on Netflix.

### **Matt Razak**

What made him really work was that, you know -- I feel like I sounded like I was coming down hard -- what made it really work was that he had the art-house along with that pop culture together. And while I may think it has lead us into a different role in culture. It still one important role, and it might be even a better role because it has art-house and pop culture combined instead of just the art-house.

### **Michael O'Connell**

Since you brought up pop culture, I mean in that really kind of where everything sort is coming together. I mean you also do game reviews and things like that. You know I've been to Comic Con a couple of times, which has graduated from being a comic book convention and a science fiction convention to being just everything.

### **Matt Razak**

Ever.

### **Michael O'Connell**

Ever. And that, there's sort of homogenization of pop culture so that it includes if you going to write about movies, you are going to write about games, you are going have to do all sort of the stuff.

### **Matt Razak**

You might not need to write about them but you need to understand them, like you can't be film critic any more without knowing comic book history. I can't go into Superman without knowing the character of Superman. Thankfully I grew up

in an era and I read comic books. I'm on top of it. Less so with video games but becoming more so, you need to know the cultural impact of video games, the stories they are telling because video games are becoming one the biggest storytelling genres out there. Before it was get to the end of the level and now it's learn about your character.

### **Michael O'Connell**

No, I know. You know I hear this all the time. People are very dismissive about what is going on in Hollywood right now, where you are going from one big blockbuster superhero movie to the next, giving people what they want to get. And you know I think I mentioned the Scorsese thing, the documentary. There was some other documentary I saw when they talked about the movies of the 1970s and how influential those were. When studios would actually make good movies. They would make movies for different types of people. Oh, this is only going to make a couple of million dollars but we going to make it because we think it's an interesting story. And so because of that, you had an era where you had a lot of really important and really good movies. And now I don't know if we are even that space anymore.

### **Jason Fraley**

But what you're saying is that back then even the mainstream movies had like crazy artistic things going on. Like, I mean, think about "The Graduate". Oh we are going to appeal to all these kids. I mean that was like "Twilight" then, but it's "The Graduate" and it has, you know, it had -- There are so many things going on in that movie directing wise and writing and acting. Or "The Godfather". That is one of the most -- that in Part I and Part II -- are one of the most artistically done movies ever, but those were the huge blockbusters at the time.

### **Michael O'Connell**

Can you imagine how if they made Godfather I as a blockbuster, what it would be?

### **Jason Fraley**

It would not be operatic. It would not have the 30-minute wedding opening. And it's kind of sad if you think about it that way. In a way, we're getting much shorter attention spans I guess. I do kind of miss. Don't get me wrong. I think great movies are still being made, like we said. I think there's the handful to a dozen, and there's still great filmmakers out there like the Cohens and Wes Andersons and P.T. Andersons and all those. Aronofsky, Fincher - those are some good ones. But I do kind of long for the days where -- what we're saying -- where the mainstream movies were also important movies.

### **Matt Razak**

It's such a different release world though. Back then, you released "The Godfather" and it ran for a year you know.

**Julia O'Donoghue**

A year? Are you serious?

**Michael O'Connell**

No, I remember in the 1970s we would go see -- there would be a movie and they would have a little thing at the box that said 46 weeks, and in the same theater. One-screen theater would show one movie and it would just be.

**Matt Razak**

You didn't have the glut of movies coming out every single week, and as long as the movie still made money -- It was more like a theater run than a movie run. And so now, the opening weekend is the only deal. That's all. It's got to be big on the opening weekend.

**Michael O'Connell**

Well that's why criticism is so important at this point and word of mouth that you want to know whether "Oh, Superman: Man of Steel is coming out this weekend. I really want to see it because the commercials look really neat. I wonder what the reviews say." And you know, some people are just going to go anyway. But other people are still going to try to look to make that decision.

**Julia O'Donoghue**

I'm someone who won't. It's too much money to go to a movie if I, like I will not go to a movie in a theater unless I have checked out multiple reviews. And, I'm sorry, forgive me, what is the movie -- speaking of kind of dumb movies I'm interested in seeing -- the Melissa McCarthy movie?

**Jason Fraley**

"The Heat"

**Julia O'Donoghue**

Yes. I'm confused about whether I should see it in the theater. I got invited. Right. But that's an example.

**Matt Razak**

It's actually, that's a discussion because "The Heat" is a really -- It looks like a dumb comedy, but because it has two female leads, it's a really complex --

**Jason Fraley**

It has more going on than you think.

**Julia O'Donoghue**

Do I want to support this movie because there are two women in it and buy a ticket? Or is it going to be really bad? So I think because it costs so much to go to the movies, people actually also seek out a lot of input before they go. Because other they are like, 'Oh I can just wait a few months and on my HBO, this movie will appear'.

### **Jason Fraley**

To me, that kind of ties into the ray of hope I was talking about, with people now being able to access anything and the best lists and Internet age - looking on IMDB, Rotten Tomatoes. I think every is more cognizant of let's pick and choose a little bit. So I think the idea of seeing a Rotten Tomatoes consensus percentage or Metacritic or IMDB. I think most it's a positive thing. I do also worry about critics who maybe, who will maybe see how something is breaking nationally with the Rotten Tomatoes score, they just kind of want to jump on the bandwagon. It's kind of like, 'Oh, do I really want to be part of the 10 percent that liked that movie?' So I don't know how much - I mean speak to that. Do you think critics feel pressure to go along with the tide or do they want to break the mold?

### **Matt Razak**

I don't know if you've noticed this but you can see it really easily on Twitter. So the way that critics see movies is at film screenings beforehand, and we all see them together basically. Sometimes, there are multiple ones, but you are usually with the same people each week. And so if you go on Rotten Tomatoes, and you look at all the Washington D.C. film critics, it's not 100 percent, but you'll notice that the opinions there are all around the same. It's a bubble because what we do when a movie is over is we talk about it. A film critic doesn't exist in a bubble either. You need to toss ideas around. Or any journalist doesn't exist in a bubble. So I think you're right in that, critics do get swayed by other critics if they are seeing all this stuff come up. But it's not an entirely bad thing because you don't want to review solely on your initial reaction. You want to review on what you think the world's reaction will be. Because your job is to give an opinion to other people so that they will know if they want to see the movie or not. So the majority of your review is your opinion but being able to bounce ideas off other people or go online and say 'Oh, wow, everyone else panned this. Maybe I did miss something there', is I think a good thing.

### **Michael O'Connell**

Actually, I did some reviews for a website and then I saw one of the movies I remember seeing was 'Scary Movie'. I was really kind of concerned about that movie. On paper, it's not a particularly good movie. But you go into with an audience and it's an incredible movie because then it becomes an experience. Then, your review is you have to kind of review about viewing it. Ok, if you just watch this by yourself, maybe you're not going to have the same reaction, but you have to recommend it because, well, it's a very strange movie but it's funny.

**Jason Fraley**

The communal experience of going.

**Michael O'Connell**

It's the communal experience of going to a movie. I mean you kind of have to speak to that.

**Matt Razak**

The perfect example of that is "Snakes On A Plane", which I saw at the midnight opening. I think it actually some people.

**Julia O'Donoghue**

I think it was Connection people.

**Matt Razak**

I think it was a group of Connection people, yeah, went to a midnight opening of it, and it was incredible. It was like going to "Rocky Horror Picture Show" actually.

**Jason Fraley**

I think you have to factor that in - the movie-going experience.

**Matt Razak**

And so my review was "Wow. This is so much fun! Blah blah blah. And then I watched it again, just by myself on TV. And I was like, this is horrible. What was I doing?"

**Jason Fraley**

You raise another interesting point though, which is how individual experiences of where you watch it and who you watch it with, you know, have that affect. Also, what were the five previous movies that you just saw? if they were all great, you are kind of itching to pan something or vice versa. I mean if you've seen a lot of bad stuff, and then all of the sudden there's something that is actually pretty decent, you might even overrate it a little. It's funny how that works out.

**Matt Razak**

You stub your toe on the way into the theater. You know you try to sit there and go -- this isn't affecting me, but your toe is throbbing the entire movie or something. This is just something I made up. That has never actually happened to me, but..

**Jason Fraley**

So you give this two toes down?

### **Michael O'Connell**

Some of the more interesting reviews that I think Roger Ebert did were ones where he did a follow up review where he changed his opinion or where he had a really visceral reaction to something and then seeing it again or seeing a different edit. I think "Brown Bunny"? Was that the famous one where he really really trashed the director and then the guy said "Well, no, that was an early draft." Then he rethought it, and I don't think he loved the movie, but he thought it was a better movie. Have you ever had an experience and you've gone to see a movie again and you're like -- well maybe it wasn't quite as bad or quite as good as I thought it was the first time around. Maybe I would rated the movie differently.

### **Julia O'Donoghue**

Other than "Snakes On A Plane".

### **Jason Fraley**

Well, I mean, I know it happens a lot when you're going back and looking at, you know, the classics. I saw Scorsese speak at the Kennedy Center a couple of weeks ago. "Vertigo" is one of my favorite, is like maybe my all time -- that or Godfather -- favorites. That's a movie that always puzzles people on first watch I think.

### **Michael O'Connell**

I've seen it a couple of times, and the last time I saw it, I came out with kind of a negative feeling to it. I know that you've - this is a big thing for you. You said go see it again. So I'm going to go see it again.

### **Jason Fraley**

Yeah, so anyway, what Scorsese was saying is that you haven't seen "Vertigo" until you've seen it again. And I only mention that, in that I think you truly can't judge whether a movie is great or not until you've seen it a couple of times. But you also have to factor in that gut reaction. The other part of your job is, you know, most people are only going to go see it once in the theater. And your job is trying to say 'Hey, do I go out on Friday and see this or not?' So that has to be first of mind when you're reviewing something, but I'm talking more big picture, trying to determine whether a movie is great over looking back in hindsight. I think you really need to see something a couple of times. In terms of a new movie, yeah, for me, the thorn in my side is a I gave a rather mediocre - two and a half out of four stars - for "Avengers", and then I felt -- yeah look at those eyes. That's a good example of something where I went and there was all of these technical glitches in the theater. The eye went out.

### **Matt Razak**

That screening was awful.

### **Jason Fraley**

Oh yeah, and it was almost like a DVD skipping when you were watching it. One of the eyes of your 3D glasses went out entirely. I was like, 'Is that a Nick Fury eye patch?' So, I don't know I walked out, and you know there was a lot I loved. There was so many cool pop culture references that Joss Whedon was doing, but maybe it was just that experience or it was a late night or something, but you go back and watch it again after the huge phenomenon. And you're like, 'Oh, that was better' when I watched it again on DVD. And then, lo and behold, I loved "Iron Man 3" this year. I thought it was great. I thought it was way better than "Superman". So that's an example of it. You know, we're not always right. We're not always right and what is right.

### **Matt Razak**

I'm always right. My opinion is 100 percent correct.

### **Michael O'Connell**

My own experience with The Washington Post critics, when they had a whole staff of critics. There was one, in particular, critic -- I won't name this person -- but whatever that critic said, I would.... If they said, don't go see this movie. I would see that movie because I trusted their taste enough. I kind of had a sense of where that were shooting from, that if it was a movie that the person didn't like that it would be something I probably would like. So again, it's important to -- you know -- know your sources to identify things. Well, let's sort of wrap this up. What's your thought right now about criticism moving forward? Do you think we're in a good place? Is it going to change? Are you sort optimistic about this type of journalism continuing to get better or is it going to stagnate? What's your thought?

### **Jason Fraley**

Well, we've kind of talked about it a little bit already. I'm kind -- I try to be hopeful. It is so easy to be cynical about it. When you see the old channels and avenues you used to have to go down to become a critic -- go to film school and all, work your way up at a paper -- when those walls got totally shattered by the internet, it's easy to be cynical about it, but I like to remain hopeful for some of the reasons that I said about this whole way of -- a whole new generation -- coming up where they're sifting through which movies do I have to go back and rediscover by the IMDB top 250 or whatever.

### **Michael O'Connell**

It's the same problems they still had to deal with, but now...

### **Jason Fraley**

I think this is an exciting time, and we will still see how it shifts you know whether I think most -- like 70 percent movie gross -- comes from home video whether it's on demand or DVD sales or whatever, Netflix. I think we are going to start shifting

to that. I think there will always be a place for going to a theater, and seeing it in a dark room without distractions. You're not folding your laundry while you're watching it on a tiny screen on your bed on your iPad. That's an extreme example of why I think going to a theater will still matter. But I think it will be less and less. I mean you were saying you pick and choose whether you want to go spend the money. I think there will always be a place for the movies, but I think how it is distributed is definitely - we're already seeing a change right before our eyes. People binge watch "House of Cards" or "Mad Men" over a weekend. Actually, a lot of TV is getting better than movies now. "Mad Men" or "The Wire" or "The Sopranos" so...

### **Matt Razak**

In terms of journalism, I think, you know, anyone can be a film critic, anyone can get online, but what happens is that the good stuff still rises to the top. Yes, there's sensationalism and bad reporting, but what you'll see is that great writers are at the great sites putting out great stuff. It is a world where it is much easier to become a film critic, but I think the good film criticism gets out there and gets people reading.

### **Michael O'Connell**

How can people find out about you guys? Where can people get your information? Oh you have a question.

### **Julia O'Donoghue**

Yeah. Can you guys real quick maybe give one or two places that you go for film criticism, either people or podcasts or websites? Not Flixist. Or WTOP.

### **Jason Fraley**

I mean I check out Metacritic a lot. I mean because it's more of a global consensus. I mean Rotten tomatoes too.

### **Michael O'Connell**

It's amazing how it's grown.

### **Jason Fraley**

What Rotten Tomatoes? Yeah. But what you are saying too is that the major publications on there. I mean they still get more weight I think. I mean you see The Washington Post, Anne Hornaday gave this or Time or Rolling Stone. I actually like checking out Richard Roeper's -- he has like a YouTube video review every time. I like seeing things like that too, where you are not just seeing a print thing because I think it can be helpful to see how the story can be told broadcast wise for a video, and audio is kind of the same deal. But year, are there any that you check out?

**Matt Razak**

This is going to sound a little cliché, but there's a reason A.O. Scott writes for the New York Times because he is absolutely fantastic. And then, The Onion's A.V. Club is awesome.

**Julia O'Donoghue**

Yeah I go there for television reviews a lot.

**Jason Fraley**

They have some good bests list too.

**Julia O'Donoghue**

I'm going to throw in Film Spotting. It's a podcast that is done on WBEZ. It's really great. It's not always on topic so it's not always movie of the week, so sometimes they're like let's just talk about Hitchcock films.

**Michael O'Connell**

Well, that can be useful.

**Julia O'Donoghue**

No, that is useful. But like, I don't know if I need to talk about Westerns made in a certain decade. That's not useful to me necessarily.

**Jason Fraley**

Give them a chance. Westerns are awesome.

I actually kind of hope more critics will, you know, if they have a show, maybe highlight something new that came out and then something, "Let you said, here's something you can watch on Netflix even if it's something old or new or whatever." Kind of fold in the "Here's where you can go in the old way of going to the movies. Here's the new release. For everyone else, who seeks these other avenues, check this out", which brings guys to your Hitchcock thing.

**Michael O'Connell**

Which is a thing that Netflix does. You watched this. You gave this significant review. Maybe you'll like this movie. And so that's sort of a way they do that. How can people reach you? Follow your work? Learn more about the reviews your doing?

**Jason Fraley**

Under our living section on WTOP.com, there's a section called Fraley on Film that has a running list of all the web reviews. You can hear my audio reviews

Friday mornings at 40 past the hour, but it's only on the odd hours - 5:40, 7:40, 9:40, 11:40.

### **Michael O'Connell**

Do those go online? The audio?

### **Jason Fraley**

Yeah I always embed the on-air audio within the web piece. I like to write up a longer web piece too. I mean that's like the old school film critic. I mean you can only so much in a minute of on-air. So you really expand it out. Twitter: Nickname around the office is J Fray - Jason Fraley. So it's @abovethefray is the Twitter handle. @abovethejfray. And filmspectrum.com. The blog is still going.

### **Matt Razak**

You can find my writing on flixist.com, and we do hourly news. Mostly, with a humorist slant and then reviews every week and in-depth features, things like that for reading. I am on Twitter. It's Matthew\_Razak, which now sounds really uncreative.

### **Jason Fraley**

But you're easier to find. What is Above the Fray?

### **Matt Razak**

And then I also do reviews for examiner.com every so often.

### **Michael O'Connell**

Thanks for coming in. This has been great.