The Rivals? A Treatise on Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert’s *Howard Stern* Appearances and an Extended Commentary on *Opposable Thumbs*

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In his book, *Opposable Thumbs: How Siskel & Ebert Changed Movies Forever*, Matt Singer provides readers with a thoughtful examination of the twenty-three-year collaboration of two of the most successful and widely known film critics ever to appear on television. As the author discusses, Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert worked at rival newspapers—the *Chicago Tribune* and the *Chicago Sun-Times*—and they were fiercely competitive, even “mortal enemies” (3). They fought with each other to write the best reviews and land the biggest interviews. In 1975, this sense of competition became even more pronounced when Roger Ebert won the Pulitzer Prize for Criticism. One year later, however, the two newspaper journalists set aside their differences to argue the merits of current films face-to-face on a small screen pilot on *WTTW*, Chicago’s public television station.2

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2 Singer (2023) writes that WTTW were the call letters for Window to the World, which reflected the lofty ambitions of the original executives to become one of the most-watched television stations in the United States. Incidentally, Eliott Wald is someone Roger Ebert publicly credited as creating the first version of *Siskel and Ebert* which appeared on WTTW in 1975. Wald would later go on to become a Hollywood screenwriter and would co-write the Richard Pryor and Gene Wilder comedy, *See No Evil, Hear No Evil* (1989). Upon its release, Siskel and Ebert gave the film two thumbs down—which is surprising considering all that Wald had done to launch their successful television careers.
By all accounts, the pilot did not go well; in fact, both men looked “slightly miserable and intensely nervous” (4). Still, despite their unimpressive performance, Thea Flaum summoned Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert to the Oxford Pub, a popular Chicago hangout for reporters in the 1970s. The purpose of the meeting was to invite both men to be the onscreen talent for a television show titled, *Opening Soon...at a Theater Near You* to review new upcoming movies. Roger quickly agreed to serve in this capacity; however, Gene was noncommittal and even hostile due to the lack of communication he received from the network after appearing on the TV pilot. Fortunately for everyone involved, the show would come to fruition and eventually become nationally syndicated, first at Tribune Entertainment and later at the Walt Disney Company’s Buena Vista Television. In the mid-1980s, Siskel (known by fans as “the Bald One”) and Ebert (who was known as “the Fat One”) would introduce their trademark *thumbs up and down* rating system.

It is clear from reading Singer’s book that Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert quarreled over just about everything. During their long collaboration of twenty years, the television film critics even argued over something as simple as what to order for lunch. For a period in the 1990s, staffers resolved this issue by forcing both men to eat the same meal every workday: a tuna salad pita from D.B. Kaplan’s, a famous Chicago deli. As the show grew from “a cult series on public television to one of the biggest syndicated series in history,” the two men found ways to argue with one another even when they agreed a film was worth seeing. For example, the author notes while both critics recommended Oliver’s Stone’s (1987) *Wall Street*, they disagreed on why it was good. According to Singer, Gene Siskel felt the film was merely a pulp drama and Michael Douglas overacted in his portrayal of the conniving corporate raider, Gordon Gekko. Roger Ebert, on the other hand, argued the film was a masterpiece, and he particularly praised Douglas’s performance which led to an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor.

**A New Era of Film Commentary**

Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert began writing about films during the midst of what Peter Biskind (1998) and others have referred to as one of the golden ages of American filmmaking. From the release of *Easy Rider* (1969) to *Raging Bull* (1980), directors were given free rein to create films with limited interference from studios. During this period, “movie brats,” such as, Steven Spielberg, George Lucas, Francis Ford Coppola, Brian De Palma, Martin Scorsese, and others directed what can only be
described as cinematic works of art like: *Godfather II* (1974); *Jaws* (1975); *Taxi Driver* (1976); and *Star Wars* (1977)—just to name a few.3

It is likely a few pivotal films, such as, *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) helped open the floodgates leading to what Singer describes as a period “marked by widespread experimentation in mainstream motion pictures” (61). Roger Ebert’s review of *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) also marked the beginning of a new era of film commentary—which may be one of the reasons he would later go on to win the Pulitzer Prize for Criticism eight years later in 1975. Though Ebert’s analysis of the groundbreaking film proved to be spot-on, he was initially one of the only critics who recognized *Bonnie and Clyde* as a masterpiece. As Ebert (1967) eloquently writes in his review:

“*Bonnie and Clyde* is a milestone in the history of American movies, a work of truth and brilliance. It is also pitilessly cruel, filled with sympathy, nauseating, funny, heartbreaking, and astonishingly beautiful. If it does not seem that those words should be strung together, perhaps that is because movies do not very often reflect the full range of human life.”

Roger Ebert’s words proved to be prophetic, and *Bonnie and Clyde* would go on to be nominated for nine Academy Awards and make $70 million dollars on a budget of $2.5 million dollars. The *New York Times* columnist, Bosley Crowther, who wrote three negative reviews of the film was ousted after he was viewed as being out of touch with his readers. Some film critics—who were acutely aware both films and film criticism were changing—watched *Bonnie and Clyde* a second time and wrote updated reviews where they reversed their previous opinions. As Singer points out in his book, Joe Morgenstern of *Newsweek* is one of the critics who conceded he was wrong about the film. In fact, Morgenstern

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3 Most of Quentin Tarantino’s (2022) favorite movies were released during this renaissance period in filmmaking. One of these lesser-known films is *Rolling Thunder* (1977) which was co-written by Paul Shrader (who also wrote the screenplays for the Martin Scorsese films, *Taxi Driver* and *Raging Bull*). *Rolling Thunder* (1977) has an infamous scene where its protagonist’s hand is ground up in a garbage disposal—John Flynn, the film’s director, was specifically instructed by his producer to make this scene look like “open-heart surgery.” Amazingly, the film managed to get an R-rating from the Motion Picture Association of America with the director not having to make any cuts whatsoever. While some scholars may see this film as little more than a blood-drenched, *vetsplotation* revenge thriller, it has an 86% on *Rotten Tomatoes* based on fourteen reviews from various critics. Gene Siskel (1978) even went as far as to rank *Rolling Thunder* #10 on his year-end list of the best films of 1977.
even apologized to his readers for initially giving the film a negative review. Warner Brothers took advantage of this faux pas by announcing that a major film critic reversed his decision about *Bonnie and Clyde* (see Harris, 2008). Interestingly, almost 40 years later, Joe Morgenstern would become the third film critic to be awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Criticism in 2005.4

**The Art of Reviewing Films on Television**

In the early iterations of the show, Siskel and Ebert’s staff had to make their own clips at the show’s expense. This was during a time when movie studios did not make “electronic press kits” available for journalistic purposes. During the screenings, both critics would point out specific scenes they wished to discuss on the show, and staff members would take reels with the requested clips to a local film-transfer company. The reels were hauled away in twenty-pound cans and converted to videotape and were then shown to Siskel and Ebert’s television audience. As Matt Singer points out in his book, it is amazing that Hollywood studios allowed a TV show to freely edit clips of their movies and incorporate these into their program.5 The shows’ producers had permission from Hollywood studios—though they never had this explicitly in writing. As Singer notes, the only person who objected to the above practice was Woodly Allen, who had just won two Academy Awards—Best Director and Best Original Screenplay—for his 1977 film, *Annie Hall*. The eccentric director was extremely reluctant to allow edited clips from *Manhattan* (1979) to be used on Siskel and Ebert’s show and even personally called their office to find out what they were planning to say about his upcoming movie.

As it states in the book, both critics loved *Manhattan*; but nevertheless, and despite giving the film a positive review, Allen yet again refused to

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4 Novelist and film critic, Stephen Hunter, was the second person to be awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Criticism in 2003 for his written reviews of movies. Hunter would not become a film critic until 1982 when he was 36-years old. Still, decades after *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) had proven to be a smashing success, Hunter took it upon himself to publish a scathing critique of the film in an academic journal (see Hunter, 2009).

5 Singer writes in 1977, the title of Siskel and Ebert’s show, *Opening Soon...at a Theater Near You*, was changed to *Sneak Previews*. The reason for this is that a shorter show title was needed so it could neatly fit in the television listings of the TV guide and newspaper arts and entertainment sections. This section of the book made me feel a bit nostalgic and reminded me of when I was a ten-year-old kid and waited every Sunday for the TV guide to arrive so I could diligently pick out what to watch for the week.
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let the show edit scenes from his faux documentary, *Zelig* (1983). The director again personally contacted the show—this time writing the critics a long letter—which not only explained his decision but also ended on a humorous note with the following suggestion: “Perhaps you might try reviewing my film showing clips of *Mommie Dearest* or *Conan the Barbarian*, both of which could help me enormously at the box office” (92).6

By the early 1980s, Siskel and Ebert’s show was seen on hundreds of PBS stations and aired in both New York and Los Angeles. Siskel and Ebert’s no-nonsense, Midwestern style talk was resonating with a large national audience, and high-powered people in the entertainment industry, such as Woody Allen, were beginning to take note of this. Late night talk show host, David Letterman became especially intrigued with the two reviewers and frequently invited them to appear on his NBC show—which had a 12:30 a.m. time slot. Letterman was not permitted have regulars from the show’s lead-in, *The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson*, as his guests. This was a decision made by network executives to ensure the two NBC shows would not compete with one another. As Singer writes in his book, “Letterman’s staff had to send Carson’s staff the names of potential guests to confirm compliance” with this rule (103). This regulation forced Letterman to search for talent in unusual places, and Siskel and Ebert, who certainly did not look like TV stars, were quickly deemed to be perfect guests.7 The critics made their first appearance on March 1, 1982, exactly a month after *Late Night’s* first episode.8

There was tremendous on-air chemistry between Gene Siskel, Roger Ebert, and David Letterman. Gene and Roger quarreled offscreen about who would get the chair which was closer to Letterman’s desk. They both believed Letterman would direct more questions to whoever was

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6 Today, according to Singer (2023), every film that gets nationally distributed comes with an “electronic press kit” filled with scenes critics can use in their reviews.

7 By this time, the two reviewers were already quite well-known and an article in *Variety* claimed they were the highest paid film critics in the world. According to the article, after considering the annual proceeds from their newspaper and television gigs, Siskel was earning approximately $200,000 (or $650,000 in today’s dollars) while Ebert was making around $180,000 a year (or $590,000 adjusted for inflation).

8 That same year, Siskel and Ebert also guest-starred on the season premiere of *Saturday Night Live*, which was hosted by Chevy Chase, the show’s original and former cast member (with Queen as the musical guest host). The duo would appear two more times—however, Singer insinuates they may not have been invited back for a fourth appearance after mocking the show for its uneven writing. However, in all fairness, Lorne Michaels asked the critics to evaluate SNL skits and short films, and they were just doing their job, as the author points out in his book.
seated closer to him—which meant more opportunities to talk. As Singer writes, “At first, a flip of a coin determined who sat where…Though he never proved it, Roger always suspected Gene had somehow acquired a weighted coin” (116). For quite some time, Siskel and Ebert held the record of having the most guest appearances on Letterman’s show. As it states in Singer’s book, the duo had six appearances alone in 1994. The two critics were such popular guests that even Johnny Carson started booking them—which technically broke the arrangement where both shows were not to share the same popular guests.9 The pair also began appearing with regularity on The Tonight Show once Jay Leno replaced Johnny Carson. Leno was a huge movie buff and was known to hang out in Gene and Roger’s dressing room until right before he had to deliver the opening monologue of his show. Leno usually tried out his jokes on the two critics to see if they would work for his live audience.

**SISKEL AND EBERT’S STERN SHOW APPEARANCES**

Though Matt Singer is quite thorough in discussing the various late night talk shows Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert appeared on, it is noteworthy he does not mention the critics were also regular guests on The Howard Stern Show. When I was sixteen years old and a junior in high school, I discovered Howard Stern when he showed up on the 1992 MTV Music Video Music Awards Show dressed as “Fartman.” At this televised award ceremony, Stern descended at least 50-feet from the ceiling in a “Fartman” costume—which exposed his bare buttocks—before blowing up the podium with his fake flatulence. He and the late Luke Perry presented the 1992 Best Heavy Metal Video Award to Lars Ulrich and Kirk Hammett of Metallica for the video, “Enter Sandman.” The day before Stern’s MTV appearance, his syndicated morning radio show made its way to the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex. I quickly discovered it and tuned into 97.1 – The Eagle every morning in my Ford Taurus on the way to Plano Senior High School. Today, thirty-two years later, I frequently listen to The Howard Stern Show on the SiriusXM

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9 In a Tonight Show appearance on December 12, 1986, Johnny Carson asked Roger Ebert if there was a really bad movie playing in theatres. Ebert was sitting next to Chevy Chase who just starred in Three Amigos, which he was promoting on Carson’s show. Rather than hurt his credibility as a critic, Ebert bashed the movie and said it was the Christmas picture he liked the least. This was met with heavy boos from the audience. It is rumored after the show, Chevy Chase dropped by Siskel and Ebert’s dressing room and confided to Ebert that he also did not like The Three Amigos.
mobile app while driving my Mercedes C300 to and from Lamar University—my place of work.

To highlight the notable moments from Siskel and Ebert’s guest appearances on *The Howard Stern Show*, I searched the archives of websites, such as, *YouTube*. My “analysis,” and I use that term loosely, is limited only to content I could find online and is not very methodical. I used search terms, such as, “Howard Stern,” and “Gene Siskel,” and “Roger Ebert.” This brought me to several hours of archived audio and visual recordings. Usually, I listened to these Siskel and Ebert *Stern Show* appearances while taking leisurely strolls throughout the neighborhood. If I came across something of interest, I made a mental note and reexamined this aspect of the appearance at a later time. The above strategy is by no means a systematic scientific content analysis—it was, instead, an enjoyable way for me to feel nostalgic while hopefully making my own small contribution to the unique body of research displayed in Matt Singer’s book, *Opposable Thumbs*.

One of Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert’s early appearances on the *Howard Stern Show* occurred on Friday, October 14, 1988—the day after the televised presidential debate between Michael Dukakis and George H. W. Bush. In the middle of this particular *Stern Show* episode, while Gene and Howard were laughing and exchanging jokes, almost out of nowhere Roger proclaimed:

> “I watched the debate last night…I was appalled at the fact that the American people, us, could sit around and look at these two people [Dukakis and Bush] saying nothing. Not only last night, but for week after week after week.”

Ebert also suggested that journalist and news anchor, Ted Koppell, who analyzed the debate, would be a better candidate for president than either Dukakis or Bush who were “basically robots.” It was clear both critics preferred Michael Dukakis over George H. W. Bush. Gene suggested that if Bush won, his “handlers” would run the presidency. Roger chimed in and claimed these were the very same people who helped Richard Nixon get elected twenty years ago. Both critics provided candid and completely unsolicited political opinions on Stern’s radio talk show. Even though Ronald Reagan was President, and it appeared evident that George H. W. Bush would handily defeat Michael Dukakis (which he did), neither Gene nor Roger seemed even remotely concerned they might potentially alienate some of the Republican viewers who
tuned into their weekly show. Their political commentary on this Stern Show appearance went largely unnoticed—which may be due to the fact that once things became overtly political, Howard Stern quickly steered the conversation back toward movies saying he wanted to “lighten things up.”

In a 1990 televised appearance of the Stern Show, the shock jock put together a faux movie and asked the critics to review it. Stern handed Ebert a small bowl of popcorn and candy, but Ebert pushed these away and said, “We have a rule. We never pose with popcorn because we feel that it cheapens our job.” Stern then played a short, five-minute film that was a parody of the Robin Williams and Robert Deniro film, Awakenings (1990). Howard Stern said he wanted a “serious review” and warned the critics, “don’t do shtick!” After watching the short film, Siskel stated he did not like the fact Howard’s film poked fun at one of the character’s physical deformities. Stern tried to object to this, and Siskel cut him off saying, “I had to watch this for 5 minutes, you can listen to me for one minute, thirty seconds.” Howard asked Roger Ebert his opinion of the film, and he responded, “I liked it. I laughed. I must be honest as critic. I did think it was funny and I laughed… I also thought it was an interesting satire of that movie [Awakenings].”

Roger Ebert always was a bit more willing to give a thumbs up to comedies than Gene Siskel. As he once told Johnny Carson, comedies were one of the easiest genres to review because if he laughed, it meant the film worked. In this same appearance, Howard Stern seemed intrigued that Roger Ebert was dating an African American woman [Chaz Hammel] and constantly referred to interracial love as being one of the most “taboo” types of love. He told Ebert, “I always thought that you were gay.” Howard then asked him personal and inappropriate questions, such as, “When will you get married?” and “Do you ever act like the great slave master in bed?” Roger Ebert responded by saying, “Howard, you are a very sick person.” Howard ended the segment by having a blonde woman in her mid-twenties in a pink two-piece bikini sit on Roger Ebert’s lap. Siskel said, “He is handling this extraordinarily

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10 In this same, Stern Show appearance, it was also revealed that Siskel and Ebert bet $50 on whether there would be an act of terrorism at the 1988 Summer Olympics in Seoul, South Korea. Siskel enthusiastically said, “I won,” while Ebert said he never wished to see anything bad happen.

11 In 2004, Roger Ebert again got political on the Howard Stern Show when he stated, “We have a guy that’s going to be in the Senate from Illinois named Barack Obama, who’s going to be, I think, very important to the future of this country” (Coscarelli, 2013)
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well right now…Maybe, this is part of his appeal…He smiled every time you said the word, taboo.”

While some observers might assume Roger Ebert and Gene Siskel were offended by Howard Stern’s antics on his television show, this is not the case, as the duo would make subsequent Stern Show appearances—both together and individually—right up until Gene Siskel died of brain cancer. In 1992, Howard Stern called Gene Siskel at home and spoke with him for about twenty minutes on the air. Almost immediately, Siskel talked about their previous television appearance where a twenty-something-year-old swimsuit model sat on Ebert’s lap.

“I think he was very gracious, and you’ll have to admit, it was a difficult position to be in. Not for you, but for a polite person. And he handled it very well. And I don’t hand out too many compliments to Roger. But he did a good job.”

The call must have been before July 18th—which is the date Roger Ebert married Chicago attorney, Chaz Hammel. In this segment, Howard Stern asked, “Hey, is Roger marrying that Black chick?” To this Siskel responded, “That’s one way to describe her, Howard. Or, you could also say he is marrying that Chicago attorney.” Gene Siskel and Howard Stern talked about Roger’s upcoming wedding, and Gene said he was “very pleased” one of his daughters had been asked to be the flower girl. While Siskel planned to attend the wedding, he stated Roger Ebert did not attend his marriage to Marlene Iglitzen twelve years ago earlier. Siskel told Stern that Ebert opted to go to a film festival in Dallas instead and jokingly suggested Roger’s absence saved his mother-in-law a “fortunate” on the catering bill. Gene Siskel was always quick to make fat jokes about Roger Ebert, and he especially liked to do this on the Stern Show. However, in his solo appearance in 1992, he came to Roger Ebert’s defense by lightly chastising Howard Stern for asking insensitive questions about Ebert’s interracial romance. Siskel stated to Stern, “You’ll use any excuse to talk about, as you call it, the most taboo type of love.”

Ebert’s Outed Himself as an Alcoholic on the Stern Show

In many of the shows following Gene Siskel’s above solo appearance, Howard Stern continued to ask probing questions about Roger Ebert’s romance with his wife, Chaz. This is especially true in episodes where Ebert appeared by himself. When asked where he met his wife, Ebert
said they met at a restaurant with mutual friends. Howard Stern interjected by asking, “Was it a soul food place? With ribs or something like that?” Ebert responded, “No, it was a vegetarian restaurant…She was at a table with some people I knew.” This is consistent with Roger’s memoir where he writes he met his wife in a Chicago restaurant while having dinner with the advice columnist, Ann Landers. However, as Matt Singer points out in his book, “in the documentary version of *Life Itself*, Chaz says Roger saw her for the first time at an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting” (182).

In the above 1995 *Stern Show* appearance, Roger Ebert told Howard he was a recovering alcoholic and said: “I’ve never smoked pot…I was drinking so much, and I was afraid that if I got into anything else, I would really be in for it.” Howard and his co-host, Robin incredulously replied, “You were an alcoholic?” and Roger responded, “Yeah.” Howard replied by stating, “You’ve never admitted that anywhere,” and Ebert stated, “I always try to save something for you, Howard.” Howard asked Roger if he went to Alcoholics Anonymous and he replied, “That’s anonymous. One would not say something like that…But, I would say, Howard, that I am staying sober one day at a time.” Robin asked Roger what his drink of choice was, and he paused before saying it was scotch and soda, specifically, Johnnie Walker Black Label. It is noteworthy that Roger Ebert would not publicly discuss his alcoholism again until almost fifteen years later—on his online blog (see Ebert, 2009).

**Beyond the Valley of the Dolls and the Saturday Night Fever Suit**

In another 1995 radio appearance, which was also televised on the *E! Entertainment* channel, Siskel and Ebert again appeared on the *Stern Show* together. Right out of the gate, Howard bragged to the critics that a prominent screenwriter, J. F. Lawton was writing the script for a movie based on his “Fartman” character at the 1992 MTV Music Video Music Awards Show. J. F. Lawton worked on the screenplay, *The Adventures of Fartman* and planned to direct Stern’s passion project for New Line Cinema. Even though it was intended to be an adult film with a lot of nudity, a lesbian love scene, and harsh language, New Line Cinema insisted on a PG-13 rating. Ultimately, this killed the deal, since neither Lawton...
Isn’t it funny, you guys are film reviewers and you’ve never heard of J. F. Lawton. J. F. Lawton is the man who wrote a small film called, Pretty Woman and another small film called, Under Siege.

In his book, Matt Singer describes how Roger Ebert took a six-week leave of absence from the Chicago Sun-Times to write the screenplay Beyond the Valley of the Dolls (1969). According to Singer, Beyond the Valley of the Dolls was quite profitable and recouped its $900,000 budget many times over. Initially, the film received a barrage of bad reviews, including one from a young Gene Siskel who in 1970 gave the film zero stars out of four and wrote in the Chicago Tribune that it “unfolds with all of the humor and excitement of a padded bra” (Siskel, 1970). In his review, Siskel also laid much of the blame for Beyond the Valley of the Dolls on a “screenwriting neophyte,” who was, of course, Roger Ebert, his rival at the Sun-Times.14

Howard Stern was acutely aware that Roger Ebert was sensitive about how Beyond the Valley of the Dolls was perceived even twenty-five years later after the film’s release. Howard asked Gene Siskel what his opinion was of the film. Initially, Gene tried to avoid responding but when pressed, he told Howard:

“I thought it was truly juvenile. Not funny. And, I would have loved to have proven my intellectual honesty by saying I liked it because people wouldn’t have expected me to. I wanted to like it. I re-reviewed it for Entertainment Weekly hoping that when I saw it again, I could put aside my petty competitiveness and like the picture. I didn’t like the picture. Roger has a good sense of humor. He didn’t show it in that screenplay.”

In this particular Stern Show episode, Ebert stated the film grossed $55,000,000 and was “one of the most profitable films of all time.” While the film did make a healthy profit, it did not make anywhere near this amount of money. Robin Quivers, Howard’s on-air sidekick challenged Roger’s assertion asking him, “Where did you get these numbers?” At this point, Siskel stated that Roger was “incapable of stating a number accurately” and always exaggerates. Roger doubled

nor Stern believed a PG-13 rating would be possible. Instead, Stern would go on to make a movie based on his bestselling book, Private Parts.

14 Initially, Beyond the Valley of the Dolls was panned by critics; however, it had a cult following, and today it periodically appears on the “best of” lists by film critics. On Rotten Tomatoes, the film holds a rating of 76% from twenty-nine reviews.
down and said the film grossed $55,000,000 in its first year and cited *Variety* as his source. Robin laughed at this assertion and told him, “You’re amazing! You’re still writing fiction.” Roger said he only made $15,000 writing the screenplay for *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls*. Still, he said that was more money than he was making elsewhere in 1969.

In this same appearance, Gene Siskel also discussed the white three-piece polyester suit John Travolta wore in the 1977 film, *Saturday Night Fever* that he bought at an auction. Matt Singer discusses this famous movie costume, writing the white bell bottom pants had a size twenty-eight waist, and the suit contained a fastener to attach the black Pascal of Spain shirt to the pants’ waistband. As Singer writes in his book, “Once buttoned, the shirt would never slip out of place, no matter how hard you danced” (35). Siskel talked to Stern about purchasing this iconic suit when he said:

“I bought the suit in 1978 that Travolta wore. I was interviewing Jane Fonda. I actually outbid her at the auction. I paid $2,000 for it…You know what actually happened? One of her friends walked in during the auction and distracted her, and I kept my hand up. I would have paid much more than $2,000 for it…I loaned it out to a lot of museums. And it was here at the opening of Planet Hollywood [in New York City]. I’ve loaned it out all over the country.”

Roger Ebert made a joke about Siskel’s suit stating, “He had to take it to the tailor shop to have the crotch taken in,” however, the joke did not seem to register with Howard or Gene. Siskel continued talking about the suit and told Stern,

“It sold at Christie’s for $145,000…A collector in Europe bought it. That’s what was so great about the white suit is that you didn’t have

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15 This is quite a departure from an article Ebert (1972) published shortly after the film’s release where he conceded it grossed between 7 and 8 million dollars (Ebert, 1972).

16 This should not take away from the fact Ebert was regarded as a brilliant and witty raconteur by many of his colleagues at the *Sun-Times*. He had a knack for storytelling and sometimes held court at his favorite restaurant—*Steak ’n Shake*—to tell dirty jokes (Singer, 2023). It is hard to find any clips where Howard Stern makes fun of Gene Siskel. There are a couple of instances where Stern refers to Gene’s “bald head,” but these references are made in passing and in Siskel’s absence when the two men were not interacting with one another on the air. On the other hand, throughout the years, Stern was relentless in joking about Ebert’s weight and later asking him jocular questions about his interracial romantic relationship and subsequent marriage with Chaz.
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to tell anyone what it was, they knew it from across the room. It was in every book about films of the seventies.”

*Saturday Night Fever* was ranked as one of Gene Siskel’s favorite films of 1977 (ranked #5 ahead of *Star Wars*). Singer points out that Siskel cashed-in on his investment with Travolta’s career resurgence shortly after the success of Quentin Tarantino’s film, *Pulp Fiction* (1984). As it states in the book, this suit had the distinction of being the highest paid movie costume until someone bought the Cowardly Lion outfit from *The Wizard of Oz* for $250,000 several years later.

In the above *Stern Show* appearance, the host did not miss an opportunity to make fun of Roger Ebert’s physique when he asked the overweight critic, “Hey, didn’t you buy the refrigerator from *Alice Doesn’t Live Here Anymore*?” Howard then talked Roger into getting on a scale to weigh himself—which is something Roger did in a previous *Stern Show* appearance. Howard even had one of his interns go to a store and buy a new scale after Roger suspected him of using a rigged one. Roger insisted that the intern buy a *Health-o-Meter* scale. After this type of scale was purchased, the Pulitzer Prize winning journalist hopped on and weighed in at 271 pounds. Howard and Roger had a bet as to whether he would weigh more than 265 pounds, and Howard won. At the end of the show, as they were walking to the elevator, Siskel was trying to console Ebert, who seemed a little deflated after being exposed to Stern’s on-air banter and losing $20 to the shock jock. Siskel said to Ebert: “You have come to New York, and you ate a rich meal the night before. That’s where the five pounds came from. I’m not joking. There’s five right there.” Ebert nodded his head and responded, “I was at *Elaine’s* last night.”

**Roger and Gene’s Reaction to *Private Parts***

In November of 1996, Roger Ebert made another solo appearance on the *Stern Show* which was also videotaped. At this point in his career, Howard Stern was busy filming reshoots with director Betty Thomas for his autobiographical movie, *Private Parts* (1997). Roger was there to

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17 *Elaine’s* was a famous restaurant on the Upper East Side of Manhattan that hosted numerous celebrity guests, such as, Woody Allen [a regular], Mario Puzo, Clint Eastwood, Don Rickles, and Mick Jagger, among others. The owner, Elaine Kauffman was known for her chain-smoking and for not mincing words. She reportedly threw two garbage can lids at the notorious paparazzo *Ron Galella* for bothering her customers (see Rees, 2010).
plug his new book, *Roger Ebert's Book of Film* (1996). Howard began the conversation by complimenting Roger and saying he looked as though he had lost weight. Roger said he had not. Stern then asked Roger, “You’re looking forward to reviewing my movie, aren’t you?” and the critic replied he was more interested in reviewing the holiday movies of 1996 than worrying about films which would not be released until the following year. Howard started to exert pressure on Roger to give his film a favorable review once it came out by stating:

“My movie will be different in the sense that, yes, my fans will go see it out of curiosity, but my fans alone cannot be the answer to this picture. That’s where you come in and the other critics…Critics, like Siskel and Ebert, can make or break a picture. If they rave enough about a picture, they can make or break a picture. There are certain reviewers who can help.”

Howard then held up a copy of Ebert’s new book and said:

“It’s nice to get good reviews when you do something, isn’t it? Imagine how good I’ll feel if I get a good review from you when my movie comes out…How would you feel towards the person who would give your book a bad review? You would hate them, right? You would feel that they didn’t know what they’re talking about. That’s how I’ll feel when my movie comes out towards anyone who gives me a bad review.”

Howard told Roger he would never be invited back to the show again if he gave *Private Parts* a bad review. Roger responded by saying, “Never again will I have to get up at 5:30 A.M. anymore to be insulted and humiliated. What a terrible punishment!”

Howard Stern welcomed Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert back to his studio shortly after the film, *Private Parts* premiered at The Theater at Madison Square Garden on February 27, 1997.18 Rather than immediately starting off by asking the critics about his film, Howard opened up the interview by stating film director Woody Allen had purportedly made disparaging comments about the two critics. He said:

“We had Mia Farrow on. Mia Farrow in her book says Woody used to...

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18 In this *Stern Show* episode, which was also videotaped, Ebert was promoting another book, *Questions for the Movie Answer Man* (1997).
call you guys…” Before Howard could finish his sentence, Siskel completed it for him saying, “…The Chicago Morons.”

Siskel was not only familiar with the above allegation, he suggested Mia Farrow’s book also claimed Woody Allen insulted Vincent Canby, the film and theatre critic who was an enthusiastic supporter of Allen’s films during his tenure at The New York Times. Siskel told Stern both he and Robert Ebert received apology letters from Woody Allen which denied calling them derogatory names and suggested it made no sense for him to disparage them. “And what do you believe?” Stern asked Ebert. Without hesitation, Ebert replied, “I don’t believe Woody Allen ever said that about me. And, if he did, I don’t care, he’s still a great filmmaker.” Siskel, however, disagreed saying, “I think it’s pretty much of a stretch to make up a quote like that in my opinion...We’ve both given negative reviews to some of his films.” Stern said the eccentric filmmaker was “completed arrogant and completely out of control” and asked both critics:

“Why does Hollywood continue to embrace Woody Allen and continue to work with him? Actors who are supposedly charitable, they worry about children and this kind of thing. Why have they not denounced him in what he did in his personal life with Mia Farrow?”

Ebert initially was a bit dismissive of Stern’s proclamation and said, “I’m not sure that I know exactly what he did?” and to that Stern responded:

“Well, what about the fact he’s dating Soon-Yi [Mia Farrow’s adoptive daughter] and has sex with her and left pornographic pictures of her around for Mia Farrow to find.”

Ebert attempted to pivot away from the seriousness of the allegation by making a bit light of it. “Howard,” he said, “The heart has its reasons.” This got a laugh from Howard, but Siskel raised his voice and pressured Ebert to condemn Woody Allen’s actions—which he quickly did. Ebert became serious and looked solemnly at Howard and said, “No, it’s not acceptable behavior.” Siskel then changed the topic to a subject he knew Stern would enjoy talking about—his movie. He told Stern:

“You haven’t asked a single Private Parts question. You’re not looking for shills for your movie. But I will tell you, I thought that was a Valentine to a wife that I hadn’t seen before in a picture. And,
that doesn’t come out of fantasy, you obviously adore your wife.
And that’s what’s up there on the screen. And that’s why I liked that
movie so much.

From watching and rewatching all the two critics’ appearances on the
*Stern Show*, Siskel seemed to genuinely like Howard Stern. On one
appearance, Siskel invited Stern to visit Chicago and dine in his home.
Siskel also gushed over *Private Parts* not only on his *Stern Show*
appearance but also on his own show when he enthusiastically stated,
“Howard Stern in Private Parts, and perhaps in real life, he’s as
American as apple pie, served by a lesbian waitress of course.” Both
critics gave *Private Parts* (1997) a thumbs up. Siskel gave the movie 3 ½
starts—which is, indeed, a compliment, since he gave one of his favorite
films, *Saturday Night Fever* (1977) the same rating. Ebert awarded
Howard Stern’s film 3 stars.

**CONCLUDING REMARKS**

As Matt Singer points out in his book, by the end of the late 1990s,
Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert had worked as film critics for three decades
and had viewed approximately 250 films per year—which translates to
about 7,500 movies. It would be a conservative estimate to say the two
critics had easily spent more than 13,000 hours of their lives sitting in
theatres and screening rooms. Singer reminds his readers that a single
year contains 8,760 hours—therefore, “they had logged far more than a
full calendar year of their lives watching movies in the dark” (219).
Singer writes the longer the critics stayed on the job, the more they
lamented about all the time they wasted watching bad movies. The
author provides a memorable quote from Roger Ebert about rotten
movies where he says:

“A movie is like a crime. What it does is it robs life from people by
requiring them to spend two hours having such a terrible experience
to happen to them.”

In spite of having to watch bad movies, both men enjoyed the
accolades that came with being two of America’s most successful film
critics. In April of 1998, Chicago’s Museum of Broadcast
Communication held a special benefit dinner to honor the duo’s twenty-
three-year television collaboration. As Matt Singer writes, the critics
thanked Thea Flaum and Eliot Wald both of whom helped create the first
version of the film criticism show when it launched on Chicago’s public television station in 1975. A month after the benefit dinner, Siskel and Ebert were guests on the *Tonight Show with Jay Leno* when it came to Windy City. On the night of their appearance, Siskel suffered from a terrible headache in the limousine ride on the way to the studio. After the taping of the show, instead of going to the hospital, he went to watch the Chicago Bulls lose to the Charlotte Hornets in a professional playoff basketball game. Two days later, Gene Siskel was diagnosed with terminal brain cancer.

Throughout his illness, Gene kept the severity of his prognosis a secret from everyone in his professional life, including Roger Ebert. On the morning of Monday, February 22, 1999, ten minutes after the opening of his show, Howard Stern delivered the sad news to his listers that Gene Siskel had passed away and stated it “sucked” that a 53-year-old man died from complications of brain cancer. Siskel’s funeral occurred on the same day and was attended by 1,500 family members, friends, and colleagues—Roger Ebert served as one of the pallbearers. Ebert would continue to be a guest on the *Stern Show* and appeared with his new co-host, Richard Roper on and off for several years. However, on Monday, April 15, 2013, Howard Stern paid tribute to Roger after the critic succumbed to a long, public battle with cancer of the thyroid and salivary glands.

As of this writing, Howard Stern continues to host his morning satellite radio show on SiriusXM. Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert appeared on the *Stern Show* in the 1980s and 1990s when its host was cruder and more offensive. Today, the show has evolved, as evidenced by the fact the 70-year-old host recently interviewed President Joe Biden during an election year. If they were alive, it is likely the two liberal Chicago critics would approve of the way the show has transformed itself—though some of Stern’s hardcore fans have been critical of its progression and describe Howard as being *woke*. Stern, however, takes this as a compliment and even stated on his show:

“To me the opposite of woke, is being asleep. And if woke means I can’t get behind Trump, which is what I think it means, or that I support people who want to be transgender, or I’m for the vaccine — dude, call me woke…” (Harvey, 2023).

As Matt Singer contends in his book, even though it has been a decade since Roger Ebert’s demise and more than twenty-five years since Gene Siskel’s departure, both men are still considered to be among the most
talented (and certainly the most famous) film critics of all time. At the height of its popularity, Siskel & Ebert was watched by eight million people. The show inspired hundreds of its viewers to become professional critics (such as, Matt Singer) and thousands of others to become amateur critics (which includes me). I thoroughly enjoyed Singer’s book, Opposable Thumbs, which is truly a rare gem that provides readers with an insider’s perspective into the world of film criticism. I give the book a very enthusiastic thumbs up and have no doubt Howard Stern would agree with me! I can only hope someone from G. P. Putnam’s Sons will send Howard a copy of Opposable Thumbs, so he can peruse through the pages of Singer’s book and fondly recall two of his most memorable and entertaining guests.

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