

Title	Opposable Thumbs: How Siskel & Ebert Changed Movies Forever, by Matt Singer
Authors	Passas, Dimitris
Publication date	2023-11-01
Original Citation	Passas, D. (2024) 'Opposable Thumbs: How Siskel & Ebert Changed Movies Forever, by Matt Singer', Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media, 26, pp. 209-213. https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.26.17
Type of publication	Article (not peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	10.33178/alpha.26.17
Rights	© 2024, the Author(s). This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. - https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/
Download date	2026-08-29 00:51:09
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/15528

***Opposable Thumbs: How Siskel & Ebert Changed Movies Forever*, by Matt Singer. G. P. Putnam's Sons, 2023, 352 pp.**

Dimitris Passas

In today's ever-expanding landscape of online cultural criticism, the aphorism "Everybody is a critic now" is a timely and succinct description of our era. Matt Singer, editor of *ScreenCrush* and current chair of the New York Film Critics Circle, offers his historically aware perspective on the contemporary boom of film reviewing in *Opposable Thumbs: How Siskel & Ebert Changed Movies Forever*, recounting the life and career of Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert. Their onscreen collaboration, which lasted for nearly twenty-five years (1975–99), dictated the future developments in the field of film criticism while setting the standards and assessment criteria for the subsequent wave of television film reviewers. Siskel and Ebert, who worked as film critics in two of the most prominent Chicago newspapers at the time they began their collaboration (the *Tribune* and *Sun-Times*, respectively), locked horns in countless heated debates while deliberating the latest box office releases in their immensely popular television show, originally dubbed *Opening Soon... at a Theater Near You*. The production promptly won over the American audience due to the volatility of the presenters' temperaments and the in-depth analysis of film as the par excellence form of visual arts. While the secret behind their unique appeal and magnetism remains a mystery, Singer provides some valid explanations for the phenomenon, all strategically dispersed throughout the text. As an introductory note, the author writes that the duo "had chemistry—the kind that causes glycerol to explode when it's mixed with nitric and sulfuric acid" (2). What is most striking, though, is the well-documented fact that the two Chicago critics shared an exceptionally competitive relationship during their tenure in the newspaper industry. They were both contending for the crown of the most popular movie critic in town, and they tended to turn their faces away whenever they happened to meet in public spaces. Singer cites a ream of events and anecdotes germane to the notorious animosity between Siskel and Ebert, sometimes at the expense of the book's overarching theme concerning the legacy of Siskel and Ebert's joint broadcast and the influence it exerted over the average American's perception of the cinematic experience.

In his comprehensive study of the show that became a national sensation in the US, Singer consistently highlights the thinly veiled hostility between Siskel and Ebert, blending historical facts with puns and quips that keep the reader entertained. The author swiftly convinces the reader that there was not a single subject that could make the odd duo toe the same line, while their on-screen verbal sparring constituted the show's foremost appeal. Singer claims that the reason for their compatibility was that, even though the two critics didn't particularly like each other, they

© Dimitris Passas

This article is published as Open Access under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial Licence (creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0) which permits non-commercial use, distribution and reproduction provided the original work is cited

did understand each other. An entire generation of Americans enjoyed witnessing Siskel and Ebert's eternal tug-of-war, which, nevertheless, most often resulted in the formulation of insightful arguments that enlightened cinema aficionados regarding film history and theory, thus educating Americans who used to perceive the concept of cinema exclusively as another form of escapist entertainment. Both the show's presenters identified cinema as a profound artistic experience engaging all the human senses and managed to effectively communicate that axiom to the audience during the course of nearly twenty-five years dominating the nation's small screen.

1975 was Ebert's banner year for two reasons: to start with, he became the first film critic ever to win the Pulitzer Prize, a milestone achievement given that since then only four of his colleagues (Stephen Hunter, Joe Morgenstern, Mark Finney, and Wesley Morris), have managed to join the elite group of movie experts receiving the prestigious award; secondly, it was the year when a new television show aired its pilot, titled *Opening Soon ... at a Theater Near You*, featuring a groundbreaking format that employed two critics-presenters (namely, Siskel and Ebert) instead of one, discussing and arguing in favour of or against new films opening in the cinemas each week. Even though the Siskel and Ebert show would adopt various appellations during the following years (*Sneak Previews*, *At the Movies with Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert*, and, finally, simply *Siskel & Ebert*), the core recipe of the show remained intact as it was founded upon the contradicting personalities of the two hosts. Besides, conflict lies at the heart of any drama and audiences internationally are addicted to antipathy and discord as they provide the impetus for all forms of action. The idiosyncratic relationship between the two Chicago film critics earned them the collective nickname "Siskbert" and "placed them in the tradition of classic mismatched Hollywood duos like Laurel and Hardy" (10). That was a little step on the celebrity ladder that boosted both critics' status and finally led to Siskel and Ebert becoming pop culture icons.

The much-discussed airing of the ill-fated pilot at WTTW, Chicago's PBS affiliate, in 1975, coincided with a major development in American cinema: during the 1970s, an array of new creators introduced their work to the masses through a "slew of films [that] pushed the boundaries of mainstream cinema with stories full of mature themes, shocking sexuality, and frank depictions of violence and drug use" (4). It was the age in which the blockbuster was born and the thirst for further analysis of the films that rocked international audiences had reached its peak. The American film critic and academic Judith Crist, perhaps the most significant predecessor of Siskel and Ebert as a television film critic, appearing on the *Today* show (1964–73), concisely summarised that era as "the Age of the Critic", "when cities across the nation were busily building more stately mansions known as cultural centers and Americans were responding with, 'You've given me my culture, now tell me what to think of it'" (60). More than simply hunting for simplistic ratings deprived of intellectual gravitas, the American public relished the breakdown of notable films through which each separate aspect of the production found its way into the larger jigsaw puzzle that included themes, style, atmosphere/mood, performances, etc. The title "Opposable Thumbs" may refer to the legendary thumbs up or down system that Siskel and Ebert embraced for the first time in the mid-1980s, however this savvy showbiz ploy was of minor importance as the emphasis remained on their spirited dialogue that bore fruit each passing week, astutely instructing and initiating Americans into the secrets of filmmaking and the magic of make-believe business.

The book covers the entirety of the show's runtime, its long journey from PBS to the profitable pastures of syndication and from there to Disney (1986–99), documenting step-by-step the challenges and hardships that the infamous duo had to face, underscoring those concerning their capricious rapport and the tough first few years of the show's airing. Singer dwells, perhaps a little too long, on the workings and machinations of the people behind the scenes, the production team of the show, and there are chapters dedicated to pinpointing the identity of the man (or woman) who should be credited as the mastermind of the concept. As the show gradually found its footing, things began to roll and at the time Siskel and Ebert had reached the pinnacle of their careers, they were reaching an audience of several million viewers and earning an annual salary of approximately one million dollars. And if cancer hadn't taken its deathly toll in the cases of both Siskel, who died in 1999 of brain cancer, and Ebert, who followed in 2013 after the malignancy robbed him of his voice, perhaps we would still tune in to watch the odd pair dispute and analyse the newest cinematic releases.

A multitude of eminent filmmakers owe their popularity to the *Siskel and Ebert* show. The ultimate proof of the duo's immense clout in the world of cinema is the single book that they wrote together, which was published in 1991. *The Future of the Movies* contains the transcripts of interviews with Martin Scorsese, Steven Spielberg, and George Lucas, with the three great directors musing on the shifting landscape of filmmaking while probing deep into the ramifications of the latest cinematic styles and techniques. The reputation of the interviewees is testament to Siskel and Ebert's reach in the upper echelons of the movie industry, and evidence of their standing as the two most influential American film critics at the time.

Matt Singer's *Opposable Thumbs* is mostly concerned with the question of Siskel and Ebert's inheritance as clearly demonstrated in the book's brazen subtitle (*How Siskel & Ebert Changed Movies Forever*). To further support his main argument, Singer gallantly exclaims that the two renowned figures were "inarguably the two most powerful film critics in the world." (202) The impact that *Siskel & Ebert* had on the subsequent generation of film critics and future developments in the field of television film criticism should not be overlooked. The on-screen collaboration between the two sworn enemies proved that the rivalry between two journalists working together could result in their improvement as individuals. As Ebert explicitly stated: "[o]ur success is the fact that we are two individuals. If we were a team, the show wouldn't be any good and we wouldn't be very good as critics" (271). Their constant bickering instantly hooked the audience's attention, but this was only a veneer intended to lure the masses in and then introduce them to the distinctive aesthetics of a world of wonders. Even if Siskel and Ebert turned criticism into mass entertainment, this doesn't in the slightest diminish the value and quality of their work. Perhaps Siskel and Ebert's most notable achievement is what Singer calls the "democratization of criticism" (269), with its repercussions still in play today. The transformation of film reviewing from a closed-type vocation destined for the privileged few into a form of public debating that is open to anyone paved the way for the present-day flourishing of online criticism and the creation of a teeming army of amateur critics crawling the internet today.

Singer delivers his most subjective flourish in the form of an Appendix with twenty-five lesser-known films that Siskel and Ebert recommended. Singer approaches this part of the book with due diligence, based on his own film predilections: "I watched each of them myself to ensure they had my stamp of approval as well. If people tell me that they sought out a film that they read

about in the Appendix, that would be one of the best compliments that I could possibly get about the book” (Fagerholm). In the Appendix, readers learn more about underrated little gems that are worthy of both their time and attention with Nancy Savoca’s *Household Saints* (1993) and Michael Roemer’s *The Plot Against Harry* (1989) being two prominent examples.

Opposable Thumbs: How Siskel and Ebert Changed Movies Forever, leaves the reader with an awareness of the distilled heritage of the historical fraternisation between the two Chicago-based film-lovers, which can be encapsulated in the author’s words: “they taught viewers that the movies, like all great art, is subjective. Beautiful and transformative though films might be, they are nothing without the discussions they inspire” (265). Both the show’s hosts’ devotion to the art of filmmaking added to the encompassing sense of authenticity that the show exuded and cemented their perception in the eyes of the public as two sui generis film critics. Moreover, they interspersed the show with various gimmicks (“Dog of the Week”) to entertain and enhance the comic element while also featuring special segments (“Buried Treasures”) through which they encouraged audiences to scrutinise undervalued older films, whether they were international or American, such as Patrice Leconte’s *Monsieur Hire* (1989) and Guy Hamilton’s *Evil Under the Sun* (1982). In this way, they reconciled genuine spiritual nourishment with playful fun without ever betraying their mission. That is the essence of their work as a team but also as individuals and that’s the lesson that all aspirant film critics should keep close to their hearts.

Singer had to rewatch two decades of the *Siskel & Ebert* show to complete this thorough study on how televised film criticism has become an inextricable part of the international media scene. Even though *Opposable Thumbs: How Siskel & Ebert Changed Movies Forever* is not a flawless examination of its subject matter and loses critical points by succumbing to verbosity at parts, it remains a highly topical text in an era when “Everyone is a critic”, as it traces the roots of on-screen movie reviewing by drawing a laudatory portrait of the field’s pioneers while interpreting and assessing the extent of their imprint on contemporary culture. It should be mentioned that there is hardly a more fitting author to write a book on Siskel and Ebert than Matt Singer who was even involved for a brief period in the final version of *At the Movies* at the end of the 2000s. Moreover, the editor of *ScreenCrush* has repeatedly proclaimed his unwavering affection for Siskel and Ebert’s work, and for the latter, he reserves the highest of praises:

He had this wonderful ability to write eloquently and beautifully about sometimes very esoteric movies in a way that was so approachable. Nothing seemed obtuse in his hands. When it filtered through his mind and came out his fingers when he wrote, he made every movie sound interesting. (Fagerholm)

However, one shouldn’t expect Singer to prioritise Ebert’s body of work over Siskel’s. The author is determined to treat his two subjects with equal respect and retains that equilibrium from start to finish. Even if sometimes Singer’s admiration for Ebert and Siskel comes across as hyperbolic, *Opposable Thumbs* is still worthy of your time and will captivate readers who enjoy erudite biographies combined with film history.

References

- Ebert, Roger. *The Future of the Movies*. Andrews McMeel Publishing, 1991.
- Ebert, Roger, and Gene Siskel, presenters. *At the Movies with Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert*. Tribune Entertainment, 1982–86.
- , presenters. *Opening Soon ... at a Theater near You*. PBS, 1975–77.
- , presenters. *Siskel & Ebert*. Buena Vista Television, 1986–99.
- , presenters. *Sneak Previews*. PBS, 1977–82.
- Fagerholm, Matt. “Their Show Was the Getaway: Matt Singer on His New Book, *Opposable Thumbs*: How Siskel & Ebert Changed Movies Forever.” *RogerEbert.com*, 19 Oct. 2023, www.rogerebert.com/interviews/their-show-was-the-gateway-matt-singer-on-his-new-book-opposable-thumbs-how-siskel-and-ebert-changed-movies-forever.
- Hamilton, Guy, director. *Evil Under the Sun*. EMI Films, 1982.
- Leconte, Patrice, director. *Monsieur Hire*. Sofica Creations, 1989.
- Roemer, Michael, director. *The Plot Against Harry*. King Screen Productions, 1989.
- Savoca, Nancy, director. *Household Saints*. Peter Newman Productions, 1993.

Suggested Citation

Passas, Dimitris. “*Opposable Thumbs: How Siskel & Ebert Changed Movies Forever*, by Matt Singer.” *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media*, no. 26, 2023, pp. 209–213. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.26.17>.

Dimitris Passas is the editor of the online magazine *Tap the Line* in which he reviews books, movies and TV series while also featuring articles, news, and Q+As with authors and artists. His academic background includes Bachelor studies in Sociology, and he also holds a master’s degree (MA) in Philosophy. Recently, he began writing his own fictional stories and is in the process of publishing his first short story. His work can also be found in *The Big Thrill* and various online platforms such as *DMovies*, *PopMatters*, *Off-Chance* and others.