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**CHRIS DAVIS:** Hi, everyone. Welcome to the *Career and Academic Resource Center Podcast*, the *CARC Podcast*. I'm Chris Davis, the associate director of the Career and Academic Resource Center.

Today, it's my great, great pleasure to be speaking to Stephanie Zacharek, who is the film critic at *TIME*. She previously wrote film criticism for *The Village Voice*, *Movieline*, and *Salon*. She is the recipient of a Newswomen's Club of New York award. She's a member of the National Society of Film Critics and the New York Film Critics Circle. She served on the jury of the 68th Berlin Film Festival and was a 2015 Pulitzer Prize finalist. Stephanie, it's so wonderful to be speaking to you today.

**STEPHANIE** My pleasure, Chris. Thanks for having me.

**ZACHAREK:**

**CHRIS DAVIS:** So I wanted to talk to you about -- this is a wonderful, unique opportunity we have. We have courses on reviewing for the performing arts. And one of the things that I think is probably less discussed when people are having conversations with professional film reviewers or critics is the writing part of reviewing. And I wanted to ask you what your writing process is for when you're reviewing a film, what that's like. And has it evolved or changed over the years?

**STEPHANIE** I would say, for writing about film specifically, writing a review, let's say, I don't think the process has changed  
**ZACHAREK:** much, even though, of course, the film reviewing landscape has changed a lot. And we can talk about that a little bit more later. But basically, what I'm doing is, every week, usually two or three times a week for the past, I guess, almost 30 years now, I'm basically just writing an essay.

So what I do for film reviews specifically, I generally take notes. They're quite messy because I'm jotting things down in the dark and also not looking at the paper because if you look away from the screen for even just a second, you could miss something. So very rarely do I look at the paper, which means that what I end up with usually is a notebook full of scribbles that I can barely read.

But I do find note-taking as I'm watching a film very helpful, just to jot down bits of dialogue or certain plot points. Then, when I sit down to write, I look at the notes, just try to meditate, think about the film, what really struck me about it, something that struck me visually or something about a performance, and try to come up with something to say.

And I have to say that in some ways, it does get easier. You get a little bit more relaxed and more confident, obviously. And that always helps. You say to yourself, OK, I did this last week and the week before, so I can do it again. I'm sure I can do it again.

But in the end, you're still left with a blank page or a screen, blank screen. That's something that just never ever changes. And in some ways it gets harder because the longer you go, the more conscious you are of repeating yourself, like returning to certain motifs that are always going to strike you, motifs or ideas or themes, because we're human beings.

We all gravitate toward the same ideas over and over again and re-embroider them a little bit and also rethink them and recontextualize them in that sense. So you start second-guessing yourself a lot. And sometimes, that can slow you down after doing it this long.

Maybe some other people who have been doing the same kind of writing for a long time might sound more confident than I do. But I like to think that at least a little bit of humility probably helps you when you sit down to write. But also, I think just the common fear of that blank screen, which is something that, honestly, I think all writers share it. And I think the ones who say that they aren't terrified of that blank screen, I think they're lying [LAUGHS] or perhaps varnishing their true feelings a little bit.

**CHRIS DAVIS:** Presenting a portrait with the rough edges sanded off. Yeah. That leads me to what I wanted to ask you next, which is such a fascinating subject for me, I think. I hope it's fair to say that film criticism, film reviewing is an art. It's not a science.

One of the things that is so indefinable but yet so important is the voice of the critic who's writing, the language that they're using. Their style, their own perspective, and their worldview comes through in their writing. As you said, you're writing essays in some fashion.

Can you talk a bit about how-- obviously, we all have our own natural voices. But as a professional writer, I'm not naive enough to think that that just comes easily, right onto the paper, that there isn't a learning process to that or how someone chooses to -- the style that they adopt as a writer. Can you talk a bit about the voice of the critic, what it means to you? Have you consciously honed elements of it? Or how does that work for you as a professional reviewer?

**STEPHANIE ZACHAREK:** That's a good question. And I'm not sure I have a good answer because I have often been told that people kind of know what my writing voice is or something familiar to them. And I have no idea how -- I mean, to me, I'm just being myself.

But also, when you're writing, it is a little bit of a performance just because you want to engage people. I mean, that's the goal, is to not bore people. And so I would say that in my writing, it's not -- sometimes, I'll go back, and I'll reread something that I wrote a couple years ago. And I'll be like, oh, wow, that's better than I thought it was or better than I remembered it.

But I think in terms of developing a voice to the degree that you really can, I think what it comes from is it comes from how you look at the world around you and all of the influences that you take in, all of the people that you read, that you grew up reading, and not necessarily even other critics, other people who are doing the same types of writing that you're doing, but fiction and poetry, and also listening to music or looking at art.

All of these things that make up your life as a human being and as a person who loves all types of art, film, music, whatever, and is open to the world, all of that stuff is going to inform your voice. So I mean, I'm afraid that's not really a very clear map. I always like to tell people that that openness is key, I think, to being any kind of a decent writer, and as a writer, as an essayist, as a critic, a kind of guide.

One thing I do notice among my film critic colleagues -- sometimes, some of them seem to be all movies all the time. I mean, I think it's really easy to fall into that. But sometimes, I'm like, do you guys ever read a book or sit down and listen to a piece of music or go out for a walk? And I find the critics that I enjoy reading the most also just have kind of a more well-rounded view of the world.

I'm thinking of someone like Glenn Kenny, who used to write for *Premiere* and now writes freelance for *The New York Times*. And whenever I see him, I'm always like, Glenn, what book are you reading? What music are you listening? And it's always some out-there thing that I've never heard of. And I feel like I really need those people in my orbit to remind me, like, don't always be looking at the screen.

**CHRIS DAVIS:** That's so interesting that you said that because it prompted something which I hadn't even thought to ask you before, but it's certainly relevant. Kind of circling back and including a little Boston landmark in here, I attended a live discussion that you had done for the Coolidge Corner Theater, a Boston institution, about the documentary that was made about Pauline Kael a couple of years ago.

And you said something in that conversation that really resonated with me. And now that you said that, I wanted to follow up with you because, yeah, I'm sure this varies from critic to critic. But compared to 10 or 15 or 20 years ago, the landscape of what is available -- I'm going to use the dreaded word "content," which is -- I hate to describe films like that.

But the sheer volume of stuff that's out there with all the streaming companies that we have available now, the sheer number of releases, the sheer number of TV series, is that something that you, as a critic, you feel-- is that something that is challenging because of just the overwhelming volume of material that's available now?

**STEPHANIE ZACHAREK:** It's extremely challenging. And what's hard about it is that there are -- let's not even talk about TV. I mean, let's just put that aside because luckily I don't have to cover TV.

And I mean my, colleagues who do so, I really admire them because TV just never stops. And at least movies still, to a degree, have a-- there's a little bit of a season. Like now, we're entering the fall movie season, which is pre-Oscars. And so there are a lot of big releases coming through, or summer blockbusters during the summer or whatever.

But yeah, the issue now is with streaming, there are so many things every week. And on the one hand, it's good. Whenever I talk to filmmakers, if I meet somebody who's just gotten a small movie made, I say, good for you. That is fantastic because no matter how many movies seem to be coming at us all the time, it's still really hard to make a movie.

So I mean, when I'm actually talking to someone who's made one, I always want to say that because it still does matter. However, as a critic, there's so much stuff coming out. And it's hard to really decide what's consequential, what's, I'm going to say, worth your time.

I think that's an amorphous idea because in theory, you should be checking out all kinds of stuff. But first of all, I find watching movies at home, even on my television or sometimes on my laptop, I find it soul killing. I mean, I think I was just made to be a big-screen person.

And a lot of what I'm reviewing now, I have to watch on a streaming link. And there are lots of reasons for that. First of all, a lot of the screening rooms in New York have closed. The remaining screening rooms are very expensive to rent. So for smaller films, they often can't do it, which I understand completely.

But at the same time, it is still my great joy to go to a screening room or to go to one of the multiplexes if they have an advance screening of something and just to sit down in that seat in front of the big screen and just wait for it to show up. It's kind of like, give me what you got. And I just love that. And I really love that feeling, even if the movie ends up being bad or terrible. And I slink out of the room, like, oh my God, disappointed again.

But the thing is I showed up for the event of the moment. And that still has so much meaning for me. Yeah, the way the movie industry, I will say, has changed and is changing and is evolving has been really challenging in terms of how to cover it and how to guide people toward things that I think are important.

And also, at the magazine, at *TIME*, I mean, we still publish a print magazine every two weeks. So the types of reviews, the types of essays that go in there are different from what we'll put on -- I mean, we share content, obviously, between what goes online and what's in the print magazine. But a lot of times, for the web, we'll just want an essay that's going to attract people's attention and get the clicks. Everybody is searching for the clicks.

So sometimes, if I want to write about a smaller movie that I really love, I have to fight for it a little bit. And I also have to find the time to do it because it's usually an extra thing in addition to whatever else I might be doing. And then also, I have to be conscious of the person power that is needed to get that piece up on the site. Somebody has to edit it and add the links and all that.

So yeah, the landscape is making the critic's job more and more complicated if you're writing for a mainstream publication, as I am. And again, I mean those jobs are so few and far between now anyway that it -- let's say it's a problem that not many people have.

**CHRIS DAVIS:** Well, the landscape of the business of your work, I definitely want to get into. But before I do, there are so many questions I could ask you. But one thing which I was curious about also, talking about this, how you feel the role of social media has played in the life of a film critic.

I mean, presumably, in the day, there were people who wrote angry letters to the Pauline Kael and the Andrew Sarris in response to their reviews. But now, if people do not like what you've written about a film, do they find you on social media, leave nasty comments? Is that climate something -- I'm sure that's new and an extra bonus of being any kind of public figure or journalist. But what's that like from your perspective?

**STEPHANIE ZACHAREK:** Oh my gosh. Well, I have to say I've seen it change so much because one of the things that I absolutely loved about writing for *Salon* in the early days -- *Salon* was one of the first publications on the internet along with *Slate*. And there were a few others that haven't survived.

But one of the things that I loved about it was that people could send me an email. People could write to me and say-- I mean, I had people writing to me to argue with me sometimes. And sometimes, they'd be really, like, a little nasty or just a little-- and I would write back.

And then the response that I got from that would be so tempered. They would be, like, oh my gosh. I realized that I have written to a real person. And now she's writing back to me.

And I actually made friends that way. I mean, good, lifelong friends, which is amazing to me. But that did start to change with the advent of Twitter and also Instagram.

And one thing that did happen -- it used to be harder for people to find you. I mean, I remember when I wrote a negative review of *The Dark Knight*. I remember just a lot of pushback, people who were really angry. A lot of it was extremely misogynist. There's no way around it. That's just what it was.

But that was a while ago now. And more recently, when *Joker* played the Venice Film Festival-- and I really hated *Joker*. And I just, I went after the film. I mean, I just, I hated it so much. I hated it. And even Joaquin Phoenix, who I love -- I mean, I think he's a wonderful actor. I just didn't like that performance.

And I just, I said what I thought. And people were so angry about that. Listen, if I post a piece on Twitter, and then people find it and write negative things, I'm like, OK. Well, this is Twitter. You sort of expect that from social media.

But what happened was people were coming to my Instagram account, which, at that point, was mostly pictures of my cat. If I went to a museum and saw a statue, I would put a picture of that. My Instagram was and is just a little bit more personal.

And people were coming on and saying, your cat is ugly. You're hideous. I mean, people actually wrote some really, really horrific things that I won't even repeat.

But the reality is, if I write something, it's out there in the public sphere. Listen. I mean, people can like it, not like it. They can like me. They can hate me. And if I promote something on Twitter, like, by putting up the link, people are going to comment.

And you have to develop a little bit of a thick skin, which doesn't justify the horrible things that people say. But it's like, you have to learn that it really is not about you as a person, as a human being. It's something else that is playing out in the culture.

**CHRIS DAVIS:** And I'm guessing it also must fluctuate based on the audience for whatever film it is. I mean, I would presume that-- I don't know if you would characterize your review of *Barbie* as negative. I don't think you were the biggest fan of it. But I would hope that the fans of that film didn't aggressively spam you with hateful comments. Does it vary?

**STEPHANIE** No.

**ZACHAREK:**

**CHRIS DAVIS:** And based on what?

**STEPHANIE** No. Absolutely not. It's almost always a certain kind of film.

**ZACHAREK:**

**CHRIS DAVIS:** Certain kind of film. Yes. So in closing, I do have to ask you -- and it's a subject that is one that has come up for years. I remember reading articles or listening to panel discussions of critics back in the -- 10, 15 years ago, where there were conversations about the challenges that faced folks in your profession.

And now, I mean, I feel like there's a zillion different -- it's far beyond just the world of film critics. But the world of journalism feels like it's being uprooted every five minutes with the online publications, which seemed to be so profitable a few years ago and now have gone through huge management upheavals and other changes.

So it's a big subject. But what I would ask you is from your perspective, for an emerging film critic or someone who's interested in entering that field, what is your prognosis for the future? Is it even more difficult than ever? Is it something that will --

It feels like there are also editors out there who are trying to outsource things to AI every which way they can-- obituary, whatever. I would hope, I would presume that the art of reviewing would be exempt from that. But what is the landscape? And what advice would you give to budding film critics?

**STEPHANIE ZACHAREK:** Well, sadly, the landscape is dismal in terms of actually making a living at it. I mean, sometimes you can make a little money if you're doing it on the side, a little extra money. But the reality is that full-time jobs are -- since newspapers started to die 10 and 20 years ago, those jobs -- every paper had its own film critic. And you had really good critics in Cleveland and Miami or whatever, and now that is no longer the case. So those jobs are gone.

And there are various online publications that pay to some degree. But doing it full-time and getting benefits -- I mean, those jobs, my job, it really is a dinosaur job. And I wish that were not the case for young people coming up.

But what I would say -- I mean, one of the problems now is that-- yeah, then there was that piece in *The New York Times* a few weeks ago about the TikTok -- the critics. I don't even want to use the word. They didn't want to use the word "critics." And I don't want to use the word "critics" because I don't think that what they do is criticism.

**CHRIS DAVIS:** Well, influencers, essentially, right? That's what that -- yeah.

**STEPHANIE ZACHAREK:** Yeah. Exactly. And they're also taking money from studios. So I mean, that's like, no, you can't do it. You need to have that solid boundary.

But what I'm going to say next -- I know this term sounds highfalutin, but I still believe in film criticism as something that falls under the umbrella of arts and letters. And if you care about the craft of essay writing, whether you're writing about film or music, literature, art, doesn't matter, then what you are going to do is you're going to do everything to keep that alive.

And it might mean doing -- I know people don't really do blogs anymore. But they do Substacks. It might mean starting a Substack and just working at your craft and reading also. Always be reading other people.

And I think what's really dangerous is people saying, oh, well. We can't make a living at this, so let's just let it die. Let's let the tradition of film criticism die because you can't make a living at it.

Well, to me, that would be the worst thing that could happen. Yeah, I mean, in terms of making a good living or a viable living, yes, it's hard to almost impossible. But I would still say don't let that stop you in terms of learning the craft.

It's like anything else. It's like learning to play music. I mean, my God, you can really -- most people can not make a career out of playing music. But a lot of people still love to do it. And I think it's the same with writing.

And of course, you want to reach people. And you want to find an audience. So I understand that is part of the challenge. But I just feel really strongly. And this is why I've started teaching myself because I just, I don't want the craft to die with older people like me. I want it to stay alive. So I want young people to care about it.

**CHRIS DAVIS:** I hear you. I couldn't agree more. And yeah, with so much in flux everywhere, it's important to be realistic about it. But it is an art form. And yeah, it's an important one. OK, Stephanie, thank you so much and--

**STEPHANIE** Yeah, my pleasure. Thank you.

**ZACHAREK:**

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**CHRIS DAVIS:** You have listened to the *CARC Podcast*. This is the podcast for the Career and Academic Research Center here at Harvard Extension School. And I hope you will join us again.