

Influencer screenings aren't going away

For a few days, it seemed like Universal decided that there would be no advanced screenings of Christopher Nolan's *The Odyssey* for influencers. But on Monday, influencers sat alongside traditional critics and journalists at special showings of *The Odyssey* specifically for the associated press junket. Despite what it may have looked like, Universal was not going back on its word. The studio was simply embracing an undeniable reality of the modern entertainment press.

Much as it may pain some to admit, influencers and content creators have become a significant part of our media ecosystem – one that offers film studios an invaluable way to reach larger, more diverse, and younger audiences. Whether it's a YouTuber's video essay, a TikToker's reaction video, or a glowing review on Instagram, influencers' content can go viral if it resonates with (or enrages) a rabid fan base. And the way that some influencers build massive followings of their own highly engaged fans makes them useful for studios hoping to engineer the next Barbenheimer moment.

People's reactions to the *idea* of Universal snubbing creators ahead of *The Odyssey*'s theatrical premiere highlights another important facet of our media landscape. Influencers have become a big part of how studios promote their films. Speaking to Yahoo Entertainment, digital marketing strategist Gigi Robinson explained that influencer screenings are “one of the smartest moves in entertainment marketing right now” because of how they “create a full content arc.”

“It's not just about showing up and watching a movie,” Robinson said. “Every creator makes it their own. These

screenings make people feel like they're part of something exclusive. And that anticipation? That's what gets people into theaters."

But some people have grown weary of the (often overly enthusiastic or cartoonishly negative) energy that they bring to the table. It's clear that studios are aware of this on some level, otherwise trades wouldn't be running stories about who's getting invited to screenings.

What Universal probably meant when the no-influencers-allowed news broke was that there won't be any screenings of *The Odyssey* that are put on *solely* for content creators. Those types of screenings aren't unheard of, but it's far more common for studios to screen their unreleased projects for small audiences that consist of critics, journalists, regular theatergoers (who have usually won a contest of some sort), and a handful of people best known for their social media presences. Having that mix of people from different walks of life makes for a viewing experience that feels much more like what it might be like to see the movie opening night. And that feeling can — but doesn't always — inform a reviewer/writer/video essayist's thoughts as they work on pieces about what they've just seen.

One of the more frustrating things about these screenings is the way their scheduling tends to leave members of the press with very little to finish their work before embargos (agreements barring journalists from publishing until a certain time) are up. It can be difficult to put a piece of insightful film criticism together in just a few hours before you have to post it and hope that Google Zero won't make your work almost impossible to find (it will.) This is particularly challenging for writers who try to hit deadlines in order maximize their chances of catching readers when they're intentionally looking for news about a movie. And while some studios probably see reviewers having less time to sit with their thoughts about a movie — some of which can be negative —

as a good thing, it also creates an environment that discourages people from producing quality criticism.

These hurdles aren't always an issue for influencers whose contributions to the discourse can be as simple as a hyperbolic X post telling their followers that [insert movie] is the best or worst thing they've ever seen. The relative speed with which creators are able to broadcast their thoughts to their audiences is part of what makes them so useful to studios. And because there are quite a few movie influencers who have built brands around hyping up movies rather than discussing them thoughtfully, studios have relied on them to generate positive buzz.

Though there are plenty of creators whose work is much more than that, the algorithmically driven social media platforms we use every day often reward content that's attention-grabbing and short enough to be consumed quickly. This is why you still see a sea of soyface thumbnails whenever you search through YouTube for basically anything, and it's why so many online movie influencers only seem capable of speaking in extremes. These tactics have helped influencers build dedicated followings of people who see them as entertainers and news sources that are more trustworthy than traditional media outlets.

Influencers have given people an easy way to access content about art in a moment when newsrooms across the board are shrinking. Social media personalities might not be as well-equipped to go deep with a director about their process or influences, but that doesn't necessarily matter to a subscriber who sees them as a friend who conveniently lives in their phones. Parasocial relationships are also a key part of the creator economy that studios are now trying to capitalize on through things like influencer screenings. It takes more energy and focused attention to get through a written movie review than it does to half-watch a reactionary TikTok that pops up on a curated For You page. But making the effort to

engage with nuanced, studied criticism is really the only way we can encourage studios to help foster it.

This doesn't mean that everyone should just unfollow every creator who pops up in their feeds or that studios should only work with press from legacy media outlets. But it does mean that we should be willing to work a little harder to find and share substantive criticism that isn't just a bit of promotion meant to get us into theaters.

<https://www.theverge.com/entertainment/960260/the-odyssey-christopher-nolan-influencers-screenings>