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The Ends of (German) Film Criticism

On Recurring Doomsday Scenarios and the New Algorithmic Culture

Mattias Frey

The most striking feature of Dominik Graf's *Was heißt hier Ende? (Then Is It the End?, 2015)* comes just before the dénouement. In this remarkable ten-minute chapter, titled "Newspaper Crisis, Cinema Crisis, Cultural Crisis," the proceedings suspend: no longer revolving around the putative subject, Michael Althen, the narrative descends into sorry self-commiseration. As Eric Rentschler's intervention to this dossier has anticipated, Graf trots out a procession of jaded senior critics who telegraph their doomsday assessments of the terminal illness of German film criticism. They reveal a resignation and cynicism endemic in what *Die Zeit* editor Stephan Lebert calls the "hopelessness of the current state of journalism." According to Olaf Möller, "Film criticism has become so boring; there aren't even any opposing factions, because nobody believes in anything" anymore. In the past, he recalls, communities of interest may have disagreed about the merits of individual films, but they never doubted the importance of cinema and certainly never disengaged altogether. Other parties submit their own grievances. Complaining about PR copy being thoughtlessly recycled in regional newspapers via news services and syndication, the arthouse filmmaker Romuald Karmakar intones that "to be honest I have

zero expectations of film criticism nowadays,” which, several commentators agree, has lost its passion, fire, and drive. According to the friends and colleagues of Althen, the once-proud profession is now vitiated and debilitatingly dumbed down into, the *Focus* film editor Harald Pauli laments, a “huge sector of ‘service reviews.’” The best and brightest no longer pursue journalism, let alone criticism, because no chance of upward mobility remains in a dying trade.

To be sure, there are some particularly German aspects to this story. The demise or corporatization of the traditional left-wing bastions of critical thought on film, such as the *Frankfurter Rundschau* or the program magazines *tip* and *Zitty*. The slow erosion, marginalization, or closure of once-important forums, especially *Filmkritik* and *Film-Dienst*. The casualization of the workforce into a precariat, summed up in the currency of the expressions *Minijob* and *Generation Praktikum*.¹

Nevertheless, in institutional, economic, sociological, and discursive terms, the perception of a newspaper-cinema-criticism crisis is, with few exceptions, a worldwide phenomenon. When examining (the self-understanding of) German film criticism, we need to broaden our perspectives and place local perceptions into context with supranational developments. Gerald Peary’s documentary *For the Love of Movies: The History of American Film Criticism* (2009), for example, preceded Graf’s by nearly ten years. Peary’s film essay, nominally a history but in tone more in keeping with a disaster movie, begins with the following epigraph: “Today, film criticism is a profession under siege. According to *Variety*, twenty-eight reviewers have lost their jobs in the last several years.” A whole host of publications bemoan the *Death of the Critic*, “Das Sterben der Kritik,” and otherwise decay of the activity, form, and cultural currency of film

criticism.² The narrative of decline—after a halcyon yesteryear of active audiences and feisty public debate in the 1960s and 1970s, the “golden era” in Wim Wenders’s idiom from *Was heißt hier Ende?*—is typical. The Althen documentary foregrounds and amplifies this message even in the guise of the late-born Christoph Huber, who claims that “the early ’90s was a turning point,” after which criticism became a mere vehicle of branding and marketing. Möller concurs that “in the years and decades after the ’90s . . . the notion of resistance” has been lacking. Nevertheless, such sentiments are widespread, well beyond the confines of Germany and Austria. Indeed, they are voiced regularly and loudly in every major developed nation with a strong film cultural tradition. See, for just one example, the *Sight and Sound* editor Nick James’s similar rejoinder that today’s “culture prefers, it seems, the sponsored slogan to judicious assessment.”³

To echo an idea behind Paul Brunick’s polemical essay, published already in 2010: “We need another essay”—or film, for that matter—“on the Death of Film Criticism about as much as we need another 800-word review of *Shrek 4*” (2010).⁴ The tenor and language of the discussion in *Was heißt hier Ende?* could hardly have been more direct evidence of the argument behind my recent research project on this very subject, and in particular my monograph *The Permanent Crisis of Film Criticism: The Anxiety of Authority*.⁵ This book examines the history of film criticism in Britain, France, Germany, and the United States (for most of cinema history four of the five largest markets for international film) and uncovers an enduring tradition of such pronouncements.

Consider the following 2008 assessment of contemporary criticism by Armond White: “The problem is this: So many Internetters get to express their ‘expertise,’ which

essentially is either their contempt or idiocy about films, filmmakers or professional critics.”⁶ Of course, White has a reputation as a notorious curmudgeon, if not a *Nestbeschmutzer*, in many minds a cantankerous crank and willful agent provocateur.¹ Yet, despite his reputation and the supposedly unique(ly dangerous) impact of the internet on criticism, the attitude he expresses finds strangely familiar correspondences well before the introduction of a consumer-accessible web. According to Richard Corliss back in 1990, for example, fretting about the influence of film reviewers working on television, criticism was “an endangered species. Once it flourished; soon it may perish, to be replaced by a consumer service that is no brains and all thumbs.”⁷ In the same year—a quarter century before his appearance in Graf’s film—Wenders already opined that quality film criticism “has become quite unimportant. Its sole remaining function is to deliver quotations, and people only want to read the quotes, so the critic has become an unpaid adman.”² For a very long time, in fact, commentators have announced the impending decline of the profession. “Critics today mostly gush,” Steven Aronson wrote in 1983, because “too many are too kind to the work they’re given to evaluate.”⁸ Despite Aronson’s implication of novelty (“today”), well before the 1980s and the mainstreaming of blockbusters and syndicated journalism, the identification and shaming of contemporary colleagues as fawning, sycophantic poseurs was perennial. “Typical film criticism, insofar as it is not an appendix to the advertising section or practiced by volunteers,” the editors of *Filmkritik* wrote in their very first issue in 1957, “says to the public what it already knows but can’t formulate so elegantly.”⁹ By 1927—film culture was still squarely in the silent era—Rudolf Arnheim was complaining that critics “retell the exact plot in a moody or bad-tempered tone, add a couple of names and

pronouncements, and that's it,"¹⁰ a sentiment that reiterated his British counterpart Iris Barry's 1926 lament that "what is written about films rather confines itself to fascinating but unhelpful stories about production, comment on the behaviour of film stars, and in fact, matter which is personal rather than critical."¹¹

These six quotations rehearse a common argument, even though each emanates from a unique time and wildly different (film) culture: from Germany and Britain to the United States, from the 1920s to the postwar era, the go-go 1980s, the pre-tech bubble 1990s, and into the digital age. All predict the imminent (or rue the recently transpired) dumbing down of critical conventions. All attempt to police the standards of film criticism as an activity and profession: what is a proper subject and style but especially who is deemed to have the knowledge, acumen, and right to speak about films. And all appear at times in which new media or media formats—whether the specialist cinephile magazine, syndicated and televised film criticism, or indeed blogs and social media—emerged and threatened incumbent players and institutions. The "crisis of criticism," articulated these days as a supposedly unprecedented and intractable existential dilemma, a response to the distinct *novum* of the internet and aggregators, has in fact reverberated through the profession since its very beginnings. Complaints about slipping benchmarks and declining quality, the fragmentation of the filmgoing public into niche markets, and above all the anxiety about the authority to definitively speak for and interpret culture to a receptive (if not docile) audience have animated international film criticism since its origins.

Placing *Was heißt hier Ende?* into dialogue with these other, similar statements made across different eras and cultures should not imply that these ideas are wholly

incorrect or unnecessary; repetition over time does not by itself negate an argument. The basic sentiment, however, is nothing new, nor is it entirely specific to the German case. Realizing that the perceived “crisis of criticism” has been ongoing more or less since the start should help us attenuate the force—and reduce the drama—of some of the most peevish whingeing and rose-tinted nostalgia to be found in projects like Graf’s. Critics, historical and empirical analysis reveals, in general overestimate their own importance in terms of short-term tastemaking and box-office influence, but also underestimate their resilience in long-term canon building and other social functions.¹²

Digital distribution and on-demand viewing habits have surely made these issues more pressing. Little more than seven years on, Robbie Collin’s 2013 protest that only “random” Twitter users’ (rather than professional critics’) quotations featured on posters for *The Impossible* (2012) seems almost quaint.¹³ In those days, the villains were Rotten Tomatoes and Metacritic, which supposedly transformed nuanced reviews into numerical quotients. According to many animated detractors in the industry, such aggregators failed to recognize the human labor behind the production of criticism and foreclosed the possibility of building a productive taste relationship between individual professionals and audience members. In Anne Thompson’s wistful formulation, the younger generations no longer seek out “a particular film critic they trust to steer them straight.”¹⁴

Today, in Germany and internationally, the Netflix and Amazon recommender systems pose the new challenge: made in the USA but deployed globally, they potentially bypass critics and other forms of information altogether by integrating intransparently derived, putatively personalized suggestions into the interface itself. They produce lowest-common-denominator criticism—in Noël Carroll’s dictum, “essentially evaluation

grounded in reasons”¹⁵—via the display of a percentage (“98%”) chance that the object will interest the user, and the phrase “Because you watched . . .” Both the tech world and some naive aca-fan enablers, on the one hand, and the filter-bubble fearmongers and unreconstructed Deleuzians, on the other, predict a brave new world in which pundits and their moribund “editorial content” (a veritable epithet in Silicon Valley, a scourge to be scrubbed off with the proper balance of data and algorithms) will be rendered superfluous, remembered in history books like the telegraph or the fax machine.

Of course, it is possible that *this time is different*. Perhaps Netflix and company will displace written film evaluations like the cotton gin disrupted artisanal textile production, criticism as we have known it in our lifetimes becoming the exclusive province of the wealthy and well educated. Perhaps rapid media consolidation will stifle original and oppositional voices or cordon them off behind insurmountable paywalls.

Yet the history of criticism shows us that almost every age believed in its own unique opportunity to obsolescence. Critics have feared their own demise when faced with any significant new medium or format. There were days, for instance, when Siskel and Ebert’s thumbs-up, thumbs-down television pageantry meant the end of the world.¹⁶ In a direct preview of Collin’s (and others’) noise about Twitter snippets, Patrick Goldstein pronounced his outrage in 1988 that a Hollywood film like *Nuts* (1987) “has an ad running with eight raves—all from TV film reviewers,” a situation that, he suggested, was “killing film criticism.”¹⁷ In even earlier times, postwar professionals articulated deep-seated convictions that the cinephile magazine format, and especially what they saw as freewheeling arrivistes like late 1950s *Cahiers du cinéma*, would displace quality criticism;¹⁸ already in the late 1900s and early 1910s, the first film critics (then almost

uniformly writing for the trade press) resented interloping theater reviewers' write-ups, in weeklies and dailies, of the recently more sophisticated narrative films.¹⁹ In fact, most historians agree, such developments, for all their excesses and provocations, enriched and enlivened the course of film reception and understanding. In each period the threat has led to some degree of metacritical renewal, usually on the side of both the establishment under threat and the rebellious upstarts. We can partly explain the development of whole new forms of criticism (formal analysis, ideological critique, impressionistic subjectivity, and sensibilism) as responses to these crises of authority: critics' urgency to keep one step ahead of readers as a way to demonstrate their added value and necessity to cultural consumption and understanding. In essence, the "dialectical task" that Jürgen Habermas ascribed to the Enlightenment's protopundit—"he viewed himself at the same time as the public's mandatary and as its educator"²⁰—remains, all changes in format and technology notwithstanding, the historical imperative of criticism: to simultaneously represent and develop the public's taste.

Although undisguised antipathy toward experts and gatekeepers may be *salonfähig* and even *chic* these days, my current international research suggests that the need and desire for human cultural mediators has not decreased among digital-age explosions of content and computational tools.²¹ In representative surveys of UK and US adults I commissioned in November 2018, substantial majorities said that, if forced to choose, they would be more likely to trust human critics (UK: 74%; US: 64%) over computer algorithms (UK: 7%; US: 12%) to provide a better film or series suggestion.²² In more fine-grained questions that allowed respondents to choose between a wide array of fifteen potential influences, word of mouth from family, friends, or colleagues (62%)

trumped critics (29%), advertising (24%), review aggregators like Rotten Tomatoes (13%), and video-on-demand (VOD) recommender systems (19%) as most likely to inflect preferences. When participants were asked specifically about watching films and series on VOD platforms (i.e., excluding cinema, television, DVD, and other channels of dissemination), word of mouth (51%) still far outranked genre search (24%), trailers on the platform (24%), critics' reviews (19%), on-screen personalized recommendations (13%), and prominence on the VOD homescreen (7%) as a source likely to guide choice.²³

These US and UK responses correspond closely to a similarly designed 2014 EU study of Germans' preferences. When asked about watching films on VOD services, the German participants ranked word of mouth as far more important than recommender systems (and their practical expressions and proxies, such as "prominence on platform," "tailored recommendation," "popularity," "user ratings," or "editor's choice"). Of the respondents, 59% rated prior knowledge (film that I have already heard about) as very important or important, compared with joint decision while consuming VOD in a group (58%), word of mouth from friends and family (57%), genre search (55%), film trailer (on platform) (53%), freshness (titled added most recently to catalog) (49%), tailored recommendation (based on prior viewing behavior) (44%), user ratings, votes, and comments (43%), recommendation of friends via social networks (40%), exclusivity (title available nowhere else) (38%), popularity (most watched titles) (36%), editor's choice (titles recommended by the service) (37%), and prominence on interface (31%).²⁴

Indeed, my initial data confirm scores of audience studies emerging from the fields of film and television studies, communications, marketing, social psychology, and

others—*since the 1950s*. With only a smattering of exceptions, this body of research, conducted over nearly seventy years in Europe and North America, coalesces around a general pattern. Whereas consumers who watch few films ignore or do not consult critics’ opinions—relying instead on word of mouth, primarily, and advertising, secondarily, to inform choice—heavy users have always tended to read and engage with criticism (alongside some degree of word of mouth).²⁵ In the context of this long tradition, the snapshot provided in my 2018 surveys strongly suggests that—even in the age of the digital, the internet, online streaming, review aggregators, media consolidation, video criticism, and algorithms—this basic fact obtains.

The process of triangulating my quantitative examination of the questionnaire with deep qualitative scrutiny of several dozen individual interviews with film viewers across six regions of the United Kingdom, alongside other methods and sources, remains ongoing. The portents tantalize nonetheless. Karmakar’s “zero expectations of film criticism,” the gripes of Graf’s assembled critics about “service reviews,” and James’s admonishment that today people prefer “the sponsored slogan to judicious assessment” may make for good sound bites to illustrate visions of a high film culture slouching toward Disneyland. Such sentiments, however, remain out of step with real user behaviors. The qualitative analysis of thus far thirty-four semistructured interviews provides much-needed nuance to these blithe pronouncements. The ways that real people speak about their film and series choices contradict neoclassical economic rational agent-consumer models, whereby users simply attempt to maximize utility by informing themselves about the film or series via a single source they find credible. Real users typically partake, in passive and active ways, of a portfolio of choice helpers (word of

mouth, posters, trailers, reviews, aggregators, etc.) of various forms, in a multistage fashion and sometimes over lengthy stretches of time. In each phase of this process, users often come to provisional conclusions about whether they would take active steps to actually consume the film or series, decisions that they might revise amid conflicting signals about their potential enjoyment. For instance, see the rationale that participant no. 34 articulated when asked how she chose the last film she had seen, *The Perfection* (2018):

Firstly [the film] was recommended to me [by Netflix]. I saw the trailer, it looked horrible so I decided not to watch it. But then several days after that, I think I found it from the genre [row] or something and they used a different picture. It looked a bit more interesting and so I started it. I could have stopped watching but then my friend said, "It's supposed to be quite interesting," so I just kept watching. It turned out to be very good.

Her explanation reveals several sources (recommender system/prominence on Netflix interface, trailer, genre search, image/advertising, and word of mouth). Some of the indications led the participant to avoid the film or (when she finally decided to start it) to discontinue viewing, but the friend's tip led her to keep watching, and she ended up enjoying the content. This multilayered procedure of consulting sources and weighing their information, which for some participants included reading (and watching) reviews, was a typical way that participants described how they choose films and series.

Interviewees spoke about attributing varying levels of credibility to sources, which tended to serve distinct roles in users' individualized decision-making processes. For example, advertising and publicity-like reviewing, the points of ridicule for

Karmakar, Pauli, James, Wenders, and many others over the years, yield much different uses and values than “real critics” among actual audiences: interviewees spoke of the former sources as initial “triggers” that create awareness and help initiate consumption decisions, as largely informational vehicles to determine tone, genre, star, and point of access, as parts of simple heuristics to gauge opportunity costs. In contrast, users reported consulting the latter, “real critics,” for other purposes, in other viewing situations, and at other stages in their process of experiencing film: to participate in imagined dialogues, to test their opinions and tastes, to learn more about the “true” story, to continue their engagement with the storyworld—before but just as often *during* and *after* viewing the film. The *sole* use of VOD recommender systems, in turn, typically corresponded to low-stakes viewing situations, which often included multitasking (texting, cooking, “Netflix and chill,” etc.). Pronouncements of PR machinery and algorithmic engineering steadily eclipsing human criticism and cultural evaluation caricaturize a much more subtle phenomenon.

Among receptive audiences (above all cinephiles and other frequent consumers), a thirst for finely expressed, perceptive, human-generated criticism endures. To be sure, my interviewees tended to speak about their use of criticism in abstract terms (e.g., “I just google for reviews”); anecdotally, only a handful were able to name a favorite critic. We should be under no illusion that we are experiencing a critical renaissance or “golden age” of the type that Wenders, Thompson, and many others nostalgically mourn.²⁶ Yet commentators’ apocalyptic thesis of a rosy past and barren critical-wasteland present is simply not borne out. Initial representative results indicate that insecurities such as Thompson’s (that all young people only “check out rankings at Rotten Tomatoes or

Metacritic . . . but they haven't found a particular film critic they trust to steer them straight") remain premature, at best.²⁷ In the UK poll, the 18–24 and 25–34 age groups were still slightly *more* likely to consult critics than review aggregators (21% vs. 18% and 26% vs. 25%, respectively). In the United States, the 18–34 cohort was exactly as likely as older peers to say that critics influenced their film choices (18%); younger people are simply more likely to “check out” Rotten Tomatoes or Metacritic *in addition to* critics (22%; cf. 19% of the 35–54 and 12% of the 55+ demographics). Thompson would be correct to assert that a slightly higher proportion of younger people admit that they are more receptive to and trusting of suggestions emanating from new technological forms such as review aggregators (18–34: 19%; 35–54: 16%; 55+: 9%) and algorithmic recommender systems (18–34: 14–19%; 35–54: 11–12%; 55+: 9–13%, the variances depending on how the question was asked). Nevertheless, their preferences overall constitute a gradual *diversification* of influence types, certainly not a revolution by which new technologies outright *replace* legacy modes such as human-generated notices and think pieces. In addition, it remains unclear whether this receptivity to new technology characterizes a specific “digi-native” generation that knows no world without Netflix and YouTube, or whether it represents a feature of a fledgling cohort who may adopt new habits as they age.

Yes, algorithms may put the low-level thumbs-up, thumbs-down puff piece and the human-written, summary-heavy capsule at grave risk. My advice to the threatened and wary? *Let go*. It is ironic that these primitive forms of evaluative précis—long the target of dumbing-down fuss—are now clung to like life rafts. This too represents a recurring theme in the history of critical discourse. Roger Ebert, once vilified as the

epitome of criticism's depreciation, of reductive sound-bite punditry, was later eulogized as one of the last distinguished and knowledgeable critics, his canceled television program suddenly conveyed as a lost valuable public forum for cinema culture.²⁸ Graf's documentary makes clear that, at least in this respect, German criticism is no different. Althen, an antipole to the tradition of ideological criticism and known for his mainstream palate,²⁹ is now honored as the last gasp of passion, the final idea man, the embodied end of an era and profession.

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¹ For a few exemplary empirical studies and commentaries on film critics' job losses and newly precarious working conditions (and lists of sacked critics), see Jaakkola, "Contested Autonomy of Arts and Journalism"; Means, "Departed"; and Doherty, "Death of Film Criticism."

² See, e.g., McDonald, *Death of the Critic*, and the many examples outlined in the introduction to Frey, *Permanent Crisis of Film Criticism*.

³ James, "Who Needs Critics?," 16.

⁴ Brunick, "We Have the Technology," 37.

⁵ Frey, *Permanent Crisis of Film Criticism*. See also the essays in Frey and Sayad, *Film Criticism in the Digital Age*.

⁶ White, "What We Don't Talk About When We Talk about Movies."

⁷ Corliss, "All Thumbs," 15.

⁸ Aronson, *Hype*, 211.

⁹ *Filmkritik*, "Anstelle eines Programms," n.p.

¹⁰ Arnheim, "Note," 101.

¹¹ Barry, *Let's Go to the Pictures*, 189.

¹² See esp. Eliashberg and Shugan, "Film Critics"; Wyatt and Badger, "How Reviews Affect Interest"; Reinstein and Snyder, "Influence of Expert Reviews"; and Boatwright, Basuroy, and Kamakura, "Reviewing the Reviewers."

¹³ Collin, “Who Cares What Twitter Critics Think?”

¹⁴ Thompson, “Crix’ Cachet Losing Critical Mass.”

¹⁵ Carroll, *On Criticism*, 8.

¹⁶ See, e.g., Corliss, “All Thumbs.”

¹⁷ Goldstein, “Commentary.”

¹⁸ See Frey, *Permanent Crisis of Film Criticism*, 61–99.

¹⁹ Frey, *Permanent Crisis of Film Criticism*, 25–40.

²⁰ Habermas, *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 41.

²¹ Frey, *Netflix Recommends*.

²² Survey conducted by YouGov Plc. Total sample sizes were 2,123 UK adults and 1,300 US adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between November 13–14, 2018 (UK), and November 13–15, 2018 (US). The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all UK and US adults (aged 18+). On this question, the remainder of respondents (UK: 19%; US: 24%) responded, “Don’t know.”

²³ The figures in these two sentences refer to the UK results. The US respondents rank the recommendation sources differently, but word of mouth similarly emerges far above critics, and critics are reported as more influential than the proxy answers for VOD recommender systems. That is, for Americans as well, “onscreen personalised recommendations (i.e. based on previous films/series I have watched on the platform)” and “prominence on my Video on Demand platform homescreen” similarly feature among the lowest of the fifteen choices: 14% and 9%, respectively.

²⁴ European Commission, *Profile of Current and Future Audiovisual Audience*, 58. This question, aimed only at VOD use, did not allow respondents to provide “critic’s reviews” as an influence for choice. This answer was available, however, for the study’s question about how users choose films to watch in the cinema. For the latter, 69% of the German participants said word of mouth from friends or family was important or very important to their decision (the top answer), compared with 43% for critics’ reviews and, for example, 23% for social media advertising (52).

²⁵ See, e.g., Farchy’s overview of French cinema audience questionnaires since the 1950s, “Le rôle de l’information dans la demande culturelle”; Faber, O’Guinn, and Hardy, “Art Films in the Suburbs”; Chakravarty, Liu, and Mazumdar, “Differential Effects”; and European Commission, *Profile of Current and Future Audiovisual Audience*.

²⁶ For one scholarly example of this view, see Haberski, *It’s Only a Movie!*

²⁷ Thompson, “Crix’ Cachet Losing Critical Mass,” 12.

²⁸ For a view of the former, see Corliss, “All Thumbs”; or Rosenbaum, *Movie Wars*, 59.

For a retrospective view of the latter, see Scott, “Critic’s Place.”

²⁹ See, e.g., Steinitz, *Geschichte der deutschen Filmkritik*, 274–87, esp. 280.

¹ Cf. McNeil’s excellent revisionist work on Armond White, e.g. McNeil, “Ethnicity, Ethicalness, Excellence,” and McNeil, *Thinking While Black*.

² Wim Wenders in interview with Schütte, “Zeit-Reisen.“