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Netflix Crit in the Twenty-First Century

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To dispel any confusion: film criticism is in rude health. Never before has there been a time with more exciting moving-image analyses, histories, or theories. Scholars have never had easier access to find, retrieve, cite, and build on this work, and lay critics have never been more actively involved. The study of film has never been more interdisciplinary, never broached more important questions than in the present moment.

Despite all the nostalgia from the generation of 1968 and those who identify with its concerns, there is no dumbing-down, no frightening fragmentation, de-politicization, or atomization of film discourse in the age of Facebook, Twitter, IMDb, Rotten Tomatoes, and Metacritic. Indeed, as I argue in my book on the subject, such ventures actually contribute to the veneration of film criticism and help it compete with word of mouth, advertisements, trailers, and other modes of information that consumers use to understand cultural products. [1] [#N1] Despite the exhaustion of interpretation in some corners of our modest intellectual universe, fresh hunger for film criticism arises among young cinephiles, new students, and fans wishing to (re)watch the classics and rework the canon. They will produce novel ways of seeing that will unseat the cynical and complacent.

This said, it does not necessarily follow that questioning the present or future of our profession is idle navel-gazing or moot. But we must scrutinize film criticism's constituent elements, retool and reframe its changing meanings and emphases: any inquiry immediately demands probing the contested categories of both *film* and *criticism* in the current time.

To be sure, defining film is no longer part of that late 1990s, early 2000s soul-search about the death of cinema, an exhausted discussion that now confines itself to sentimental page-fillers in shrinking print outlets, in the same way that analog cameras have become antiques. These days there are more pressing problems than mourning after celluloid prints: the urgency around film has to do with its transforming relationship to serial moving-image storytelling, i.e., what we still call television, even if these productions are consumed more and more via streaming. The rise of the series as the dominant—and aesthetically and popularly successful—narrative form and production model has gone hand-in-hand with (and would have been unthinkable without) the revolution in digital

distribution. [2] [#N2]

Indeed, perhaps more so than Rotten Tomatoes or Twitter, Netflix (and to a lesser extent its direct and niche competitors such as Amazon and MUBI) provides a triple-dose of anxiety to hitherto prevailing ideas about both *film* and *criticism*.

First, it has become a key (and will soon be the chief) gatekeeper for distribution. In the post-video store age, Netflix and other services effectively regulate what, when, and how we (at least those of us residing on this side of legality) see films. Through its production model it also more or less predetermines the supremacy of series over feature-length films: two-thirds of Netflix streaming hours are devoted to the former, only a third to the latter. Chief Content Officer Ted Sarandos read European film producers and funders the riot act at the 2015 Cannes International Film Festival, admonishing defenders of film *art pour l'art* to submit to day-and-date distribution or wither away. [3][#N3]

Second, it has, if we believe some important recent research, redefined or at least attempted to redefine what we even mean by *culture*. [4] [#N4] No longer are we at the mercy of Arnoldian critics and scholars and their visions of the best which has been thought, said, and recorded: an empire of "likes" and constellations of little stars now rule the production and consumption of moving images. Netflix does not try to tell you what are the best works; it tells you what best works for you.

Third, Netflix and company have let big data penetrate the cultural realm, dividing and conquering by quantitative algorithm, which replaces the finely tuned qualitative impression. Although the surface-cinephile rhetoric is about the goal to "connect people to the movies they love," Netflix readily admits that their fervor "is not all altruistic. When people love the movies they watch they become more passionate about movies, and that helps our business." [5][#N5] In this passage, "movies" should be understood as "series" and "connect[ion]" as an algorithm that engineers and encroaches into viewing habits and preferences.

Some will argue that this discussion has nothing to do with criticism. After all, pundits (of both the academic and journalistic variety) have long claimed that their work pertains only secondarily to evaluation and primarily to description, categorization, demystification, contextualization, or interpretation. [6] [#N6] I (and others, for different reasons) would disagree with this reasoning. Whether we recognize and admit it or not, criticism has always had an evaluative function, from the stars in a fan rag to the sophisticated designs of *Artforum* or scholarly, peer-reviewed journals. When I read the sacred texts of film theory, such as André Bazin's *What is Cinema?* or Siegfried Kracauer's *Theory of Film* I see honest attempts to grapple with the ontology of the medium. But even more so, I see cinephiles, fans of Roberto Rossellini or Fred Astaire, who use the films they love and like to ground their analyses and justify their scholarly reckonings.

In that way, what films we see and how we see them (word of mouth, what's playing at the local cinema, a graceful review, what Netflix tells us we will like) determine not only which

productions return a profit, feature on the "year's best" lists, and enter into canons or the consciousness of the public and elite taste-makers. They will also define what film theories, histories, and interpretations will be written in the future, what the next generation thinks about, and how they write.

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Notes

1. Mattias Frey, The Permanent Crisis of Film Criticism: The Anxiety of Authority (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015). [#N1-ptr1]

2. See Michael Curtin, Jennifer Holt, and Kevin Sanson, eds., Distribution Revolution: Conversations About the Digital Future of Film and Television (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014). [#N2-ptr1]

3. David Steinitz, "Imperialismus auf die Netflix-Art," Süddeutsche Zeitung, May 19, 2015, accessed November 23, 2015, http://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/filmfestspiele-in-cannes-die-neue-weltmacht-1.2481796 [http://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/filmfestspiele-in-cannes-die-neue-weltmacht-1.2481796] . [#N3-ptr1]

4. Blake Hallinan and Ted Striphas, "Recommended for You: The Netflix Prize and the Production of Algorithmic Culture," New Media & Society, published electronically June 23, 2014, doi:10.1177/1461444814538646. [#N4-ptr1]

5. Quoted in Hallinan and Striphas, "Recommended for You," 6. [#N5-ptr1]

6. Noël Carroll, On Criticism (London: Routledge, 2009), 5, 8. [#N6-ptr1]