



FESTA
DEL CINEMA
DI ROMA
13/23 OCTOBER 2016

Critical conditions: loving cinema and writing about films in the digital age

JULIEN GESTER, LIBERATION

First, I would like to say something that may sound like praise for my own cause and newspaper, but that I see more as a definition of where I will be speaking from today and of the reality I know. I feel very lucky, as a journalist and one of the editors of the Culture section of *Libération*, to inherit a tradition of multiple kinds of freedoms. A freedom to put the focus on what seems important to us rather than to the market, in a time when market strategies win almost every time and everywhere. A freedom to build our own hierarchies between works of art, and in our case, works of cinema, based only on our feelings and our experiences as spectators, the way we expect each piece of cinema to create its own forms and language to express something of the world we live in. A freedom, finally, to write it exactly as we want, with no restrictions - except, maybe, legal ones.

Throughout time, the use and abuse of such freedom has on many occasions led critics from *Libération* to be regarded as irresponsible punks. But I think quite the opposite: today more than ever, it involves enormous responsibilities which would consist, first of all, in preserving that kind of challenge and requirement of freedom; keeping it alive, moving and unpredictable, while it is becoming more and more rare and difficult to find it around us; and standing up for the kind of view of criticism we try to defend and preserve. I am saying "view", but we could also see it as an endangered tradition, that too many people in the press and the film industry consider to be old fashioned or even obsolete. What is the point of good old criticism, when films are much more available to the masses than they have ever been, when everyone can express and elaborate a point of view on blogs, social media and online stores' comments sections, and while the notion of expertise is facing great discredit ?

Whether it is happening in a scholarly review, a magazine or a newspaper, on the radio or on television, on a blog or a vlog, in an overjoyed tweet or a pissed off Amazon comment - and I say that because I do not think you need to be a paid professional of opinion with thousands of readers to practice criticism, and I would rather state that it is the criticism that makes the critic, whether you are a complete amateur or an extremely well paid journalist (I have to confess I have heard of some but never met one) - I believe that the purposes, the specificity and the merits of criticism as an ally of cinema and creation have never changed, they are just more critical, and crucial, than ever. Especially because its main enemies have always been the same, they have just grown and inflated in massive proportions over the past two decades or so.

The title of this panel mentions the "critical conditions" of "the digital age", but I believe these enemies are definitely not the internet, or the social medias, because these are only new resources for us, and my only frustration towards them is that there has not been enough creativity yet to renew the lexicon of criticism, for example through the online possibilities of mixed medias. I strongly believe these enemies are certainly not the online published opinions of so-called "non-experts" since, for me, rather than with judgements or opinions, the value of film criticism has substantially more to do with sailing through a film's flesh and brain in order to create, through style and ideas, the most precise, accurate and sensitive definition possible of what can be the experience of a given film, its worldview and its specific means of expression. If a critic does not have more than an opinion or an evaluation of data to offer, just like if you were reviewing a color shade or a hi-fi system, then I guess



FESTA
DEL CINEMA
DI ROMA
13/23 OCTOBER 2016

there is no point to it. Because an opinion about a film is like a sexual problem: everyone has one but no one really needs to hear about yours. I must say, I am extremely pleased when a movie that I love finds its audience, but I have never felt like what I write was meant to convince people of anything. I am happy when it happens, but I am much happier when a review can enrich a reader's vision of a movie I love and he/she hates, or the opposite, and provide him/her with a feeling that we have actually seen the same film.

That is why I cannot consider new voices and transmitters of speech on cinema opponents to film criticism - at most they are a new kind of competitor. This may sound a bit silly or naive, but I definitely think the "enemies" I was talking about are those who actually do the exact opposite to our mission to make ideas and feelings surface from the film's bone, to extract hints of what makes any film a unique piece of craft and vision. These enemies are those whose debatable job actually involves wrapping the film with artificial narratives in order to hide it from our eyes. Those whose growing power in our society builds hierarchies between films and filmmakers that are mainly based on money - to put it bluntly, I am talking about communication and marketing. Each time we try to look a film in the eyes and to dig up something true and complex from the kind of stuff its experience is made of, what we are facing very directly, and have to struggle with, as critics as well as regular spectators, are these obstacles, and the way they try to sell us something different or more simple than the actual construction that is there to look at. I believe there is something deeply political at the heart of the freedom and creativity involved in the heat of a job whose mere function is to find, and even invent sometimes, the most accurate words and images to describe what a film is actually doing to our brains and senses, and what kind of understanding it offers to us of our experiences of the world. Digital or not, what criticism is all about today is to be able to remain free to state a film is not great just because it is made by a big name with big money, because it is screened at a big festival or because it won an Oscar, but because of its guts, and to remain free to say it in a way that would, in an ideal world, be each time as singular as every movie would be, in an ideal world as well.

To finish, there is this famous quote about music criticism, that has frequently been misattributed to Frank Zappa, or Steve Martin, or Laurie Anderson. As far as my Internet knows, it actually seems to have been coined by Martin Mull, and it says : "*Writing about music is like dancing about architecture*". My profound belief is that film criticism, whatever the form or the path it takes, should remain very much like singing about ceramics, playing football about sculpture or painting about opera. At least rather than translating statements of intent, or writing about press-kits.

Many thanks to Cédric Succivalli.

Rome, October 18, 2016