

(DIS)AGREEMENTS

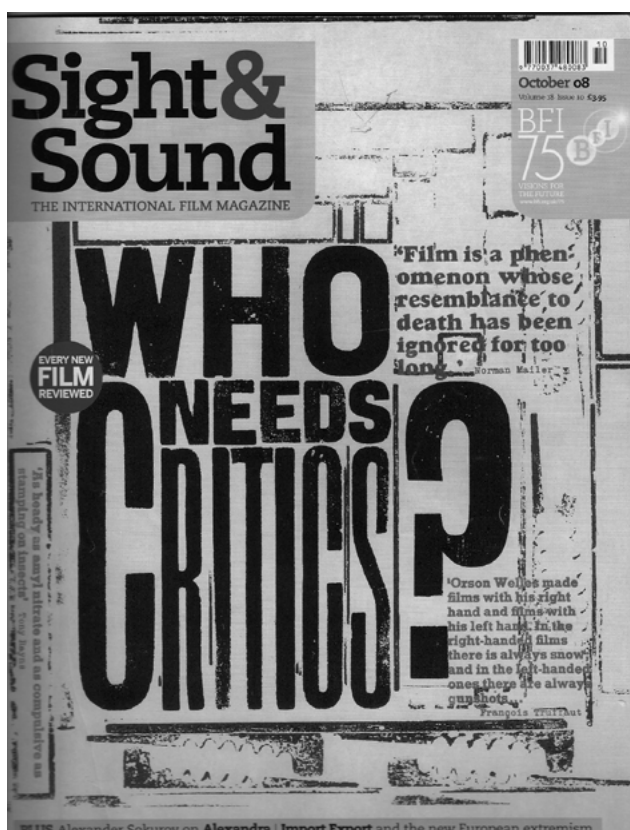
The state of criticism in Spain

Jordi Revert

_introduction

“Looked from a broader perspective, however, all writing about the movies is part of a larger discourse about modernity that dates back to the mid 19th century. It seems to me that this discourse sometimes contributes to progress (making us more aware of feminism and issues of race or social class, for example), but also that it keeps struggling with the same old problems under new forms.” (NAREMORE, 2003: 130).

Criticism is, or should be, a continuous exercise of revision, always debating its functions and boundaries with film analysis and always facing new challenges even though, as mentioned above, old debates return again and again in new forms. It has been thirteen years since Professor James Naremore shared this reflection on writing about film with some colleagues and critics in the context of *Movie Mutations*, the book which, under the coordination of Jonathan Rosenbaum and Adrian Martin, would sketch out an international picture of both the cinema and the film criticism, in constant transformation, an ever-changing scene revealing promising horizons and great challenges to confront. More than a decade later, criticism is experiencing one of its most convulsive moments. The Internet has contributed to diversification, to enrichment of the discourse and to an expansion of the spectrum, but also to a democratization of opinion that often leads to chaos and disinformation.



Cinephilia identifies itself as a school for training new critics, at the expense of an academic environment for theoretical debate over whether to move closer to or further away from journalistic criticism. The multiplication and expansion of festivals all over the world traces a stimulating map in which new trends, films and filmmakers converge; but media space for this map is constantly decreasing, resulting in a high degree of invisibility that leaves few aware of *what is happening*. The proliferation of people all over the world writing about film on websites, in blogs, fanzines and other formats should come as good news; however, *visible* criticism, the kind that should lead the currents of opinion and guide the spectator (if that is one of its functions) shies away from regeneration, often remaining subject to editorial and corporate synergies that make this changing of the guard extremely difficult. These and many other questions raise the inevitable problems in the present and immediate future of criticism. Criticism in Spain is no exception and is not immune to these issues: on the contrary, it adds to them unhealthy incestuous relations that leave little cause for optimism, but rather leave us speaking of resistance or survival within a highly unfavourable context. Fortunately, we can also speak about self-criticism. In 2006, the online film magazine *Miradas.net* started a dossier on criticism with interviews with critics, professors, theorists and writers analyzing the

question. The dominant tone was pessimistic and gave the impression that the battle was lost before it had begun, that criticism in Spain had fallen into an *irreversible coma* (CALVO, 2006). In October 2008, the same month in which the British magazine *Sight & Sound* also dedicated its issue to this topic using the provocative title *Who needs critics?*, the Spanish edition of the magazine *Cahiers du Cinéma* launched one of its series offering a consideration of the crossroads at which criticism found itself, which continued until 2010 and dealt with questions that were unavoidable in any diagnosis of the current state of critical practice: the boundaries between criticism and analysis, criticism of festivals, the critic as mediator and as programmer, the function of the critic and loaded topics related to what the critic represents, creative criticism and criticism in the digital era. All of this was underpinned by the question that opened the debate, the one which perhaps best encompasses all the others and also serves as our inspiration in this (dis)agreement: where is film criticism headed? And more specifically: where is criticism in Spain headed? In two recent articles¹ Jonathan Rosenbaum and Jean Michel-Frodon called attention to the proliferation of symposiums, publications and debates dealing with *the death or the end* of criticism. In the face of such ominous headlines, both responded with almost utopian optimism, pointing out the transformations and possibilities of the era that we are entering, the same position that professor and critic Adrian Martin expresses in his article: 'The Path of No Return: Creative Critique'. But can this faith in the future of criticism be applied to the Spanish context? Should we extend this hopefulness, or should we qualify it, taking into consideration the specific conditions and/or obstacles faced by critical practice here? This is an invitation to self-criticism and reflection, to become conscious of a future that is already being written and which, in fact, has been written before. Definitely, this is a new opportunity, which is always necessary, to take the pulse of criticism in Spain. ■

Notes

- 1 The two articles that are mentioned are: '¿El fin de la crítica de cine?' by Jonathan Rosenbaum, and 'El amor al trabajo' by Jean-Michel Frodon; both are cited in the bibliography.

_discussion

1. What perception does the public have of criticism in Spain? Does the well-worn cliché that the critic is unnecessary gain force in a context of crisis in which culture is the first victim in the press? To what extent is criticism to blame in this context?

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Daniel Gascó

It depends on what we understand by *the public*. In Spain, as in many other places, there is a negative opinion toward critics that is quite widespread, but I believe this is because the vast majority only have contact with non-specialised media. Mass media, of course, where controversial opinions are spread, with an impact that makes them easy to consume, but which unfortunately do not have serious reflection behind them. If we take only these examples, it isn't hard to come up with a mistaken idea of what is actually a complex and passionate profession.

Critics themselves, of course, must accept a lot of the blame. First of all, the profession just barely exists, or is barely visible, as there are very few physical spaces left for publication. It's a stroke of luck to be able to publish criticism regularly in major media outlets. It is an honour and a responsibility, which I do not always share with my colleagues. I read lazily written texts, evasive criticisms that do not address the films directly, that get lost in personal arguments, in their own laws, in judgments that are easily debunked. For me, there is a respect for the anonymous reader above all. In this sense, I am an optimist. I picture a reader from a certain culture, sensitive to the evocative capacity of the art of the image, willing to read between the lines, understand and not necessarily share my likings and my phobias.

Carlos Losilla

The majority of the public and the industry despise criticism to the point that serious criticism has no influence whatsoever over the success or failure of a film. For whom are we writing then? For people like us, for mirrors of ourselves who need to have their opinions endorsed with an *intellectual* varnish, the status of which I, at least, am not quite sure about, like many other things. Criticism is passion for and experience of cinema, and that is what we do not know how to convey, because we critics are still immersed in inner battles that lead nowhere, although they do provide ego boosts for many. You have to immerse yourself, get to work and shut up, impossible as that might

sound. We need to try. Only through that personal catharsis will it be possible to convey the experience of cinema. Otherwise, we are only lecturing about fashions, trends, sometimes even in universities. As a professor as well as a critic, I do not think I am fit to teach anything to anyone, but rather to engage in dialogue with them, which is similar to criticism, which should also be a dialogue with the spectator and with colleagues. But we have to keep trying to change things. And we have to be tolerant, above all.

Diego Salgado

I find it impossible to answer these kinds of questions by espousing generalisations that would be based on the assumption that I am an expert on the Public, Criticism or Culture. I will talk from my experience as an individual who, for better or worse, had already taken on cinema as a lifelong passion when he was just a child. And as such, I have not observed that criticism or culture have really been of interest to the people around me... He who writes about cinema might be a delicate being, of certain importance inside the engine of the cultural industry. But that industry only generates 3% of Gross Domestic Product in Spain... and 0.000003% of the Daily Intellectual Product of ordinary mortals.

What should be considered is whether so much institutional culture was necessary in times of plenty, so many subsidised essays, so much supplementing of current trends, so much feedback without any interest in escaping from a ghetto in which we can eventually become comfortable. If the crisis sweeps all this away, it will be because it hasn't produced any real fruit that we could cling to when we hit hard times. I have the habit of reading everything I can get my hands on that has to do with cinema, and I can state that, along with texts that have ennobled criticism and encouraged people to take part in it, I have read a lot of stuff which, simply put, will soon be studied only as the archaeological remains of a time enshrined in bubbles, including the cultural bubble; and as we all know, under the surface bubbles are filled with nothing.

2. To what extent has the Internet transformed criticism in Spain? Is the figure of the online critic gaining force compared to critic in print publications? How does the arrival of Web 2.0 and affinity systems (such as *Filmaffinity*) affect the practice of criticism?

Daniel Gascó

The Internet constitutes a huge alternative. Everyone seems to be transformed online, taking on a different identity and having a go at other professions. I find very interesting websites, but also people who write atrocious criticism; in the worst cases, high-handed opinions written in a deceptively scholarly sounding language. Obviously, everyone can express their opinions; that is the democracy offered by the Internet. But in this ocean of websites and endless references, the same old problem rises. Before giving an opinion on criticism, or exercising criticism, it is important to learn how to read it. In the case of the Internet, as well as in print media, it is important to distinguish between what is criticism and what is not, when we are being offered a critical reading of the film in question and when we are not. Online criticism has all the room in the world, but at times this is a trap, and writers simply lose the capacity for synopsis required in print media. *Filmaffinity* has become a popular although exceedingly dubious thermometer of a medium that is open to any opinion, from the most expert to the most deplorable. It has been established that websites like *IMDb* have their polls swollen and distorted by people from production companies.

Carlos Losilla

The Internet is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it provides the opportunity for collective expression, discussion and debate. On the other, this turns into a madhouse. There are some really good online magazines which provide the critic with a huge advantage: what in print media or in the specialist journal is marked by limitations of length has no such restriction on the Internet; you can write as much as you want, there is no (self-)censorship in that sense. And, curiously, they go beyond the present, allowing a wider margin for reflection. But there is also a great paradox: the medium that seems so popular and democratic, so open to the world, can also be a way of closing ourselves in. This has to be overcome as well; it can be done. The Internet would be the ideal place for the open, transverse multidisciplinary magazine we are waiting for even going beyond cinema, or inserted cinema within a wider cultural universe, to keep

us from losing perspective. That is why it is a question of economics, like everything else. Otherwise, the same brilliant or silly ideas can be expressed on paper as on a computer screen. If anything, the Internet has served to break out of isolation and make contact with critics in other countries, which has favoured friendships and collaborations. Time will tell how we make use of them.

Diego Salgado

As a critic, I am a product of the Internet; I would have never had a chance in specialist print media, which I had always viewed and which had always been described to me as a nepotistic environment where the big fish is followed blindly. Today my position in this environment is marginal, partly because I am far from being Jonathan Rosenbaum and partly because the old-boys network and the ideological serfdom I was talking about are worse than ever. Added to all this in some cases is a lack of professionalism or even of respect for the critic, which I have not seen even on the shabbiest website in the world. So how can we not conclude that the Internet and even a greater vocational awareness have revolutionised critical practice? We are going against absolute freedom when we begin to reflect and write, an unprecedented and boundless way of enjoying culture, an intoxicating freedom that makes manifest, that favours risk-taking and also crashing and burning, when we write a certain number of characters about a film that who knows who valued as worthy (or unworthy) of being written about, with an ambiguous tone if possible, *constructive* for the policy and the accounts of the publication, the editor-in-chief or coordinator, the advertisers, the niche readership that somebody has decided needs to be humoured...

The Internet is the Wild West. It is a place highly prone to the expression of ignorance, brazenness and banality, but also where the history of cinema can be rewritten, idols overthrown, canons and analytical paradigms subverted; a place where it is possible to find consecutive comments on the same post by a Belén Esteban and a Ludwig Wittgenstein. One only needs to start a blog, read *Filmaffinity* or the *IMDb* forums, where reflections abound on numerous films, reflections more insightful than those published in the most prestigious magazines in Spain.



3. To what extent is a generational handover possible? Is there any evidence of defiance, reaction and/or commitment on the part of young critics?

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Daniel Gascó

A handover is necessary; it is a fact of life. The media available to young people to produce criticism are noticeably superior and, moreover, criticism needs to be questioned and renewed. I don't know what you think, but I have the impression that the tools criticism uses have evolved much less than cinema itself. I mean, cinema evolves in such a way that it can turn out to be distressing for a critic who has realised that all of his experience and cultural baggage is not enough. You start to produce criticism when you try to argue from the perspective of that distress and discomfort, and look for another way of understanding cinema. Faced with this situation, some will shut down and simply pull apart what they cannot understand. Against this negative reaction there is a process of illumination, the attempt to bring the reader closer to those works that we ourselves found difficult.

Carlos Losilla

Of course there is a handover, and it is one with a force and radicalism that in some cases are unprecedented. The thing is that the opposite and at the same time identical situation to the current *status quo* might happen. Whereas my generation has been slow to address the complexities of contemporary cinema (some have not even tried), young critics have a serious problem with classic cinema. In this respect I am quite traditional and revolutionary at the same time. On the one hand, at university we are not finding the formula to offer the younger generation a different view of classic cinema, a view that is not a museum view, with its closed compartments and sacred little gods. This happens to me and everyone. What is the solution? This is where non-academic pedagogy comes in; cinemathèques, television, DVD editions. On the other hand, some of the younger generation never dare to go beyond Hitchcock or Ford. Godard cannot be understood without first seeing the films he references in *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, for example, just as a different view of the history of cinema is impossible without understanding Godard. Everything is interconnected, and we need a different history of cinema for the new generations to take an interest in Leo McCarey or Mario Monicelli. My fear is that the handover will take place but the situation will remain the same: on the one hand, the great talents who only devote themselves to quick criticism and have no time for reflection, for contemplating deeper texts and organising their thoughts; on the other, academics who ignore the present, buried in a historiography that is more and more decrepit. And the middle ground? That is the figure that has to be consolidated in Spain: a person who thinks, in

words, through cinema and images. A person who evolves through that thinking, who is constantly questioning and never considers anything finished. Reflection on cinema should be in perpetual motion.

Diego Salgado

In theory, in general terms, I believe we could talk about a certain generation gap between writers in their fifties or older, and those in their thirties. I think their interests as critics and writers are different. Could this force a handover? In practice, I witnessed in 2010 how a critic with little vocation, background, style or even a distinctive personality started getting published in *Dirigido Por* and *Cahiers du Cinéma España* merely because he is a close friend of board members of both publications. Could that be considered a generational handover? Can we expect defiance, reaction and/or commitment from someone entering the industry this way, on the red carpet, without having proved anything and owing everything to others, regardless of whether they are twenty or sixty years old?

I think it is more likely for this to happen on the Internet, as long as corrupt cliques like the *professional* contacts established in traditional media have not been formed (in these times of obsessive networking, cronyism is the new source of corruption), as long as there is still hope for defiance and commitment. I am not talking about a generational handover (again, generations do not differ from one another by means of age, but by a minimally ethical and aesthetic will for renewal of the familiar and assimilated that now exists or doesn't exist) but about a new mode of criticism, whose credibility and future depend solely on those of us who write about cinema giving up our need to appear in certain media at all costs, or to live on this *professionally* by making fun of colleagues and undermining the sense of vocation that should always guide our activity.

4. In a panorama where festivals are increasingly abundant, what space is left for covering them in ordinary media? What responsibility does the critic who can cover festivals assume?

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Daniel Gascó

Unfortunately, not much. With the crisis, they don't always give me space to write those kinds of articles, which for me are important, since although I find festival reporting highly fallible, they are exciting as well. In principle, it is the chance to experience and report what is screened at a festival. Surviving that marathon and being able to sum it up is an unrewarding task which nevertheless offers the possibility of getting a broader picture and offering a more global appraisal of current film production. The responsibility is still huge. The critic can also expose all the mistakes that occur in the development of the festival, a task that contributes to improvement of future editions.

Carlos Losilla

Festivals have played an extremely important role in recent years in Spain, or at least some of them: they have allowed us to see films that the distribution companies refuse to show us. However, there are some sales conventions, meetings of peddlers at some of them (not all, fortunately), which I find profoundly irritating. A festival should not be a fair, or a mere accumulation of films. Rigorous criteria are needed in order to make a festival the display window it should be, not packed with masterpieces, but a representation of the cinema that is being made. And this is what reporters and specialist magazines should uncover: not whether a certain film was good or bad or worthy of being included in the festival. That is the critic's responsibility: to uncover the hidden trends marking contemporary cinema, which a festival is obliged to provide. Otherwise, they are merely morose, sluggish witnesses to a few films they do not understand and have no desire to see. That is very common in the Spanish press.

Diego Salgado

The last festival I covered was Sitges in 2010, and I had downloaded half of the programme and taken it with me in my backpack. Another revolution brought by the Internet, which has started to bring into question the role of festivals as detectors and patrons of new film trends, a task which is, moreover, closely tied to interests and fashions: Cannes is just as predictable as the weekly *premières*. Perhaps in the not-too-distant future film festivals will take place on the Internet, with online viewings. That would be a way for national, regional, local or neighbourhood governments – all of whom organise or subsidise thousands of contests – to save money, now that *culture* and *cultural managers* are on the brink of bankruptcy.

And we would also do away with the assorted soiree lovers and intermediaries; enjoying and reflecting on the films would be the focus rather than the accessory. It is shocking to witness the hypocrisy with which Carlos Boyero (a critic who without doubt has some severe critical limitations) is attacked for his arbitrary way of covering festivals. But at least, perhaps because the newspaper pays his accommodation in the city where the festival takes place, he stays there from beginning to end and there is proof that he actually goes to watch the films, and he even confesses that sometimes he leaves in the middle or falls asleep. I am tired of seeing allegedly more prestigious critics, *committed to cinema*, squandering passes, sleeping off hangovers, doing deals, watching one or two films a day (at the most), enjoying as many perks as they can, coming to talk about their books, and then signing reports on a whole festival, taking part in votes and prize decisions, having only attended three days out of eleven, spending half of that time going out for a drink, dinner or sleeping around. The most important is not the *media routine* to cover festivals, but providing a coherent discourse beyond rhetorical devices, which are sometimes smoke curtains about films that have not been watched but heard of.



5. Is criticism in Spain turning into gutter journalism, more in tune with commercial needs than with reflection and debate? If so, is a gap opening between criticism and analysis conducted in a more academic context, thereby confirming the duality between criticism/Jekyll and analysis/Hyde alluded to by Imanol Zumalde Arregi (ZUMALDE ARREGI, 2009)?

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Daniel Gascó

I find it hard to believe that the least interesting criticism has the highest, most visible position, but that is the impression sometimes. I cannot agree with Imanol, because I do not see a line dividing criticism and analysis; I cannot understand one without the other. For questions of space and genre, a critical review might not contain an analysis as such, an explicit, developed analysis, but it is the driving force behind every idea that constitutes good criticism. I do observe a gap between opinion and criticism; I mean, some people give their opinion but never produce criticism. They take themselves seriously and situate themselves in a position above the work they are supposed to be criticising. They are critic-stars; the film is what matters least. There is another gap between information and criticism. People who are incapable of elaborating a real critical review dedicate themselves to informing, to providing data, to filling up the space that should speak of the relationship you established with the work, which is what makes your criticism genuine, what makes it yours and (almost) nobody else's.

Carlos Losilla

Good criticism is like a mini-analysis, without detailed arguments or the contribution of an appraisal, with intuition and epiphany sometimes contained in a couple of words. I could say *a film with fine abstract textures* and thereby imply that I could elaborate on this, prove my point with specific shots, or exploring different parts of the film to highlight it wherever I can, which is another way of understanding analysis. Going back to the role of critics: to construct a canon with their knowledge and experience, and based on this to allow themselves the capacity to judge, the responsibility to separate the wheat from the chaff. It isn't easy, and there's nothing wrong with dissensions, debates or different canons. The trouble is in Spain –as intolerant as it always is– this is not accepted. On the other hand, there can be as much reflection in a journalistic review as in a detailed analysis. The difference is in the way of expressing it. It is a matter of style and form. We need new ways of writing about cinema that can overcome these dichotomies and are malleable enough to be turned into criticism or analysis at any given moment. But it is true that film criticism is becoming less criticism and more information, publicity or simply insults. Both criticism and analysis should be literature and therefore autobiography, albeit covert.

Diego Salgado

The media I contribute to include *Cahiers du Cinéma España* and *FanDigital*, which are diametrically opposed in their aspirations and readership. Writing for one or the other does not oblige you to engage more or less in reflection or debate. It is up to the critic to decide whether to jump through the hoops and adapt to the expectations dictated by publisher politics, which are never inclined to much reflection or debate, but to an *impassive gesture* that provides the best profile to the boss, the advertiser, the reader or the critic's own image.

On the other hand, it is a cliché to associate gutter journalism with a commercial context and analysis with a (formally) academic environment. There is no cinema more invisible than commercial cinema, abused both by *Fotogramas* magazine through ambiguous clichés that won't upset the production giant of the moment and by *Cahiers* magazine on the basis of prejudgements. And no cinema is more profitable in certain elitist environments than *radical* and *committed* cinema, acclaimed with hackneyed phrases that fall somewhere between florid praise and propaganda that contain no criticism whatsoever, and protected by a cinematic reality stripped of both the ability and the desire to make a lasting impact because of a network of subsidies, sponsorships and ideological nepotism as perverse as the Hollywood distribution and marketing strategies.

To engage in film analysis free from commercial, editorial or academic submission, starting a blog would be enough; for better or worse, with everything you have, from your unconditional and nonnegotiable love for cinema and writing, and without worrying whether people are reading what you write, whether you're developing a career, whether you become known or not. Any debate –and most do it for reasons that are all too human– that sidesteps these obvious truths, to preach about the earthly and the divine, will be full of lies. ■

Loving criticism

Jordi Revert

We talk about criticism and we talk about film. We talk about film and we talk about love and life. So why do we not likewise associate –or not as much as we would like to– criticism with love, criticism with life, which emanates from each intimate experience of the spectator in front of the screen? Nowadays the concept of the screen is more ethereal than ever, as is the concept of the spectator, and the criticism that responds to these screens and these spectators should be adapted to the unavoidable metamorphoses of the practice of watching cinema, which is never too old or too worn out for new transformations and new ways of watching it. But these metamorphoses should always be catalysts, not obstacles or alibis, for the restoration of a certain spirit that is above fashion, trends, conveniences and laziness. It is time to acknowledge how stimulating the current scene actually is, the opportunities to overcome (once again) the endless accusations of parasitism, nepotism, editorial servility and uselessness. Criticism, subjected to continuous debates and revisionisms, has survived judgements before, at least as to its legitimacy and nature. And considering that its nature was never so changeable, nor its possibilities so promising, the logical thing to do would be to silence all questioning with lively enthusiasm, to answer with passion and to turn this into the best seed of criticism.

We have discussed criticism in Spain, we have submitted it to a new analysis and the contrast is clear: the horizon is as fertile as the terrain that we're on now is desolate. But we can't blame the spectator for ignoring the lines written



by critics in their newspaper columns, nor can we sink into resignation to justify and perpetuate the stagnation that is often so convenient for self-ratification. On the contrary, as Carlos Losilla points it out, it comes down simply to immersing ourselves, getting to work and shutting up. And, if possible, to do so bearing in mind the affirmation of Miguel Marías, who suggested that a critic is mainly a cheerleader or nothing at all. (MARÍAS, 2001: 21). That is, a critic's main goal should always be to spread the love for film to any potential reader/spectator to whom the critic's words may come. It is up to critics to repair the damage to their image, because they are the main ones responsible for the mistrust. The intonation of *mea culpa*, the fierce self-criticism that fits nicely into our three-way discussion, is the first and necessary stone on which to build and

win (back) a public perhaps eager to read reviews that share something of the essence of the experience in the darkness of the movie theatre in an (apparently) personal and non-transferable manner. It doesn't matter if the review is written from the small corners of a tabloid or in the ample spaces of a specialist magazine; it is not so important whether it aims to be concise or to expand on its explorations, or whether it is written in a private study or at an editorial desk. What matters is that its raw material is passion and affection for what is being dissected, which is the *sine qua non* condition for the reader to come back, so that the reader may discover that love for criticism that once seemed so much more probable. When cinephilia appears to be established as the new school and the Internet –with all its blessings and curses, both of which are prodigious– is the new medium for expressing it, it will then be necessary to reclaim vocational criticism, with more or fewer means, with a greater or lesser level of experience; as the path we should follow if we want to overcome the obstacles, neither few nor trivial, although often self-imposed. We have the tools to start anew on a path which, in a certain way, is already familiar, but we also know that is easier now than ever to reverse the progress made so far, to demolish instead of building, to stay in ruins instead of raising the scaffolds. This is why the pessimism about a world reluctant to love criticism should be the impulse that drives us to work on transforming this disaffection. The fact that no one loves criticism will be a gift if as a result we can make someone love cinema. And whoever loves cinema, said Truffaut, will love life. Again. ■

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