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Whose Cinema: The video-essay on the big screen of the International Film Festival Rotterdam

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For its 2016 edition the Critics' Choice program at the International Film Festival Rotterdam once again presented a wide array of video-essays on the big screen. The selection of films and video-essayists was inspired by the question 'Whose Cinema' and gave way for discussions about intellectual property rights, image appropriation, and how these matters influence and determine the professional practice of the critic.

In 2015 the International Film Festival Rotterdam (IFFR) saw the reappearance of a programme section that had existed from 1991 until 2003. A wide range of international critics selected and introduced a film that they felt should not be absent from the festival line-up. Critics' Choice could be compared to *Semaine de la critique* in Cannes and similar critic-curated programs that continue to exist at other international film festivals. '(The Return of the) Critics' Choice', as the 2015 program was called, was not only a return but also a reinvention and a rethinking of the former Critics' Choice. Once again a selection of international critics was asked to present a film, but their introduction would now take the form of a video-essay – an example of the sort of audiovisual criticism in the tradition of the essay film and the found footage film. My colleague and co-curator Jan Pieter Ekker and I not only intended to give the video-essay a bigger stage at an international film festival but also wanted to evaluate and reclaim the space and the role of the film critic in the festival context.

By the time the first iteration of Critics' Choice in Rotterdam came to an end the world of film criticism had significantly changed. Our professional lives as critics have more or less coincided with a continuing crisis in film criticism that had both financial and more fundamental origins and causes. That probably first became apparent with Bruce Willis' infamous statement at the 1997 Cannes Film Festival press conference for *The Fifth Element* (Luc Besson, 1997) where he declared that 'nobody here pays attention to reviews ... most of the written word has gone the way of the dinosaur'. It was on the eve of the internet boom of the late 1990s that new forms of fan-based and user-generated criticism started to appear online. In retrospect it was not so much the written word that may have seemed outdated but rather its printed counterpart. The dot-com bubble saw a shift of advertising revenues from traditional print outlets to web platforms; when the internet hype collapsed in 2000 and led to a bigger financial crisis, these incomes were lost for the newspaper business. Cost reductions led to less publishing space for critics; the traditional analysis and essayistic forms of writing were replaced by forms of writing that focused more on consumer information and marketing-induced formulas of entertainment journalism. At the same time the emergence of (amateur) blogs and web magazines necessitated the discussion about the legitimisation of film criticism. In short: did critics still matter? These issues had to do with the professional standard of the critic. Without a financial basis matters of continuity, expertise, and authority appeared to be under attack. Would the critic of the 21st century still be a full-time employee, occupied with watching and writing about cinema? If not, how would the profession transform?

The latter inspired more important and existential questions. Many books have since been published that tried to understand and defend the role of the (cultural) critic, most notably: *Death of the Critic* (Ronan McDonald, 2009); *The Permanent Crisis of Film Criticism: The Anxiety of Authority* (Mattias Frey, 2015); and *Better Living through Criticism* (A.O. Scott, 2016). As critics we summarised these questions in their most practical form: how did the criticism as we knew it have a future in a world where not only the newspaper business was changing because of the rise of digital platforms, but the film industry itself was transforming because of the digitisation of production and distribution? When I was asked to select a film for the 2002 edition of Critics' Choice and Ekker contributed to the last version in its old form in 2003, the festival programmers already observed that not only fewer critics than before were able to travel and attend international festivals due to decreased

financial means, but also that a film that premiered in May in Cannes was often already distributed theatrically before IFFR in January of the next year. In order to assess a festival program a critic had to become more of a curator – not only up to date with the films that were already in circulation (whether it be at festivals, cinemas, or home entertainment formats and platforms) but also informed about the films that were upcoming and in production.

Re-evaluation of the relation between critic and film

As indicated above, when Ekker and I proposed a return of the Critics' Choice to the festival in 2014 we had several objectives. The festival itself had become criticised for losing touch with critical discourse. A return of Critics' Choice was thought of as a way to reconstitute that bond. The presentation and commissioning of video-essays could challenge critics, programmers, and audiences to re-evaluate the role of film criticism with regard to festival programming, auteur and world cinema, and other cinemas that have a hard time in regular cinema programming. Our main focus was the question how criticism could reinvent itself in order to regain relevance, credibility, and allure and become less dependent on the agenda set by marketing, press agents, and release schedules.

The video-essay was a perfect instrument. As an analytical tool and a form of 'material (or materially thinking' (analysing and evoking a film in and through its own means), as Catherine Grant, one of the most prominent scholarly practitioners of the genre, has called it, it enjoys a growing interest in film studies, specialised film criticism, and also in cinephile communities around the web. The two editions of the new Critics' Choice have proven to be a way to open up discussions about film, appreciation, interpretation, and spectatorship. When the video-essay is projected alongside the film, and the critic is present, it is a way to bring criticism into the screening room and (re)establish a link between film, critic, and spectator. The screenings became forms of 'live criticism', where there was no longer an anonymous distance (or a hierarchical imbalance) between film and critic, critic and reader, or audience and film. On some occasions the filmmakers were even present. In 2015, German film director Christoph Hochhäusler attended the screenings of his film *The Lies of the Victors* and was open to debate the flaws of his work with critic Rüdiger Suchsland – an exceptional example of a post-screening

question and answer session. The live and interactive element of the screenings turned out to be a vital component of Critics' Choice. Unlike many writers that argued that the 'authority' and the 'expertise' of the critic is waning in the democratised spaces of the internet, it turned out that these Critics' Choice events reinterpreted authority and expertise not in a hierarchical way but as an 'encounter' between the film (and sometimes the director), the point-of-view of the video-essay, an actively engaged audience, and an informed critic.

Who "owns" a film?

The 2015 edition of Critics' Choice saw a wide variety of films and participants; veterans of the video-essay like Kevin B. Lee and Cristina Alvarez Lopez and Adrian Martin selected and introduced films alongside critics that produced their first works. If there was one question that arose from all discussions it was the issue of rights. In a written format a critic can more or less write and describe whatever they want (leaving aside the embargo's that many critics working as journalists seem to encounter more and more). A video-essay entails all kinds of material appropriation, from ripping a DVD, downloading a film, and re-using and re-structuring material that may or may not induce copyright infringements and transgressions of other forms of intellectual property rights. Practical, legal, ethical, and aesthetic questions already made us ask 'Whose Cinema?' during the 2015 edition.

As a working hypothesis for the 2016 program we articulated a wide array of answers to this question. A film could belong to its makers, its financiers, its audience, to film history, to the characters portrayed in the film, and more. The participating critics selected their films in consultation with the curators and in accordance with this working hypothesis. Their video-essays offered more questions and some answers, proposing several viewpoints. Other critics, filmmakers, and scholars were asked to participate in written form and discuss the question 'Whose Cinema?' in relation to their own professional practice (the catalog appeared in both a print and digital edition).

Among the films that were selected were Simon Pummel's *Brand New-U* (later re-titled *Identicals*, a science fiction film that questions matters of authenticity and identity); the adaptation of Harmony Korine's novel *A Crack-Up at the Race Riots* by the Belgian artist collective Leo Gabin, which consists entirely of YouTube videos; the documentary *The Dying of the Light* in which

Peter Flynn maps the dying art of film projection in the digital age; *Helmut Berger, Actor* (a transgressive portrait that challenges the subject-object relation between the protagonist and the director of the film, Andreas Horvath); the documentary *Raiders!: The Story of the Greatest Fan Film Ever Made* by Jeremy Coon and Tim Skousen (provoking questions about fandom, remakes, and the power of Hollywood); Hong Sang-soo's *Right Now, Wrong Then* (that tells the same love story twice, with small differences, thus raising questions about looking and memory among other things); and the first two episodes of the Russian television series *The Thaw* by Valery Todorowsky, advertised as 'the Russian *Mad Men*' (and thus giving rise to questions about remakes and cultural identity). Mark Cousins (*The Story of Film*) contributed with a feature-length audiovisual essay titled *Bigger than The Shining*, which contemplates one film as a premonition of another. After its presentation at IFFR it was screened at the Edinburgh Film Festival, and it will be 'destroyed' at the IFFR 2017 edition of Critics' Choice (with the working title 'The Return of the Critic').

As the opening film we picked Aleksandr Sokurov's *Francoфония*, a fiction-documentary hybrid about the history of the Louvre, the plot between museum director Jacques Jaujard and German Wehrmacht officer Count Wolff Metternich to save the museum's artworks during the Second World War, and a meditation about the relation between art, museology, and political power. In our video-essay *Elegy for a Lost Film*, Jan Pieter Ekker, editor Menno Kooistra, and I chose to zoom in on the related concept of archive fever. In our research for the program we observed that for a video-essayist there are several ways to obtain their material. The 'official' way is to take footage from teasers, trailers, and so-called electronic press-kits that can be used out of copyright in the context of a film's release (and are thus considered a form of free publicity by the film companies). Material taken from DVDs can be used within the framework of fair use, citation rights, and educational purposes (that differ from country to country). However, film clips that come from other sources (informal data exchange, downloaded from online sources, pirated copies) mostly cannot be used legally. That creates a whole reservoir of sources that are and are not available at the same time. Matters are complicated when films are not even available at all.

The starting point for *Elegy for a Lost Film* was the quest for Sokurov's 2001 travelogue *Elegy of a Voyage*, in which he travels from Russia to Rotterdam, ending in front of Bruegel's *Tower of Babel* in the Boymans Museum.

With *Elegy* being one of Sokurov's 'museum films' (others include *Stone* [1992], *Russian Ark* [2002], and of course *Francofonia*) we considered it essential viewing. However, the film was not available except for a washed-out VHS transmission on YouTube. I spoke earlier about the effects of the digitalisation of the film industry on film criticism. This is one of the bitterest consequences of that revolution. Just like the internet in its early days held the promise of access for all, the digitalisation of home entertainment and distribution assumed that films would remain present in the public domain (just like libraries preserve books that are out of print, and in the early days of video and DVD they also lent out films to their subscribers). This dream of an Alexandrian library of cinema was never fulfilled due to rights issues. The internet, with its informal data exchanges, and open source platforms and publications such as NECSUS, became the keeper of that utopia and the preserver of film history.

The three video-essays selected for their online premiere in NECSUS investigate and challenge the internet as a free haven and discussion platform for the sorts of rights issues and questions that arise from the (re-)appropriation of audiovisual footage. As Hugo Emmerzael explains, his study of Helmut Berger could not have been executed without the usage of informal file exchange of films. Paula Albuquerque's work focuses on the role of webcam videos in our understanding of public space and how matters of privacy are questioned. Peruvian director Juan Daniel Molero already made two feature films in which he uses the internet as archive, as source, but also as medium. In his work the gleaning of existing material becomes the manner in which he paints, discovers, and unfolds his post-cinematic universe.

Whose Cinema video-essays online:

- Kevin B. Lee: *Right Now, Then Wrong* (*Right Now, Wrong Then*) will be published in Summer 2016 on fandor.com)
- Joost Broeren: *Whose Cinema?* (*Brand New-U*; the film has been released in the United States with the new title *Identicals*)
- Jan Pieter Ekker, Menno Kooistra, Dana Linssen: *Elegy for a Lost Film* (*Francofonia*)
- Mariska Graveland: *Do Pay Attention to that Man behind the Curtain* (*The Dying of the Light*)

– Matt Zoller Seitz: *The Thaw* (idem)

Author

Dana Linssen is a critic and freelance curator from the Netherlands. She is Editor-in-Chief of the independent film magazine *de Filmkrant* and publishes regularly on cinema in NRC Handelsblad and NRC.NEXT. Linssen also teaches film history at ArtEZ Theatre Academy in Arnhem. With Jan Pieter Ekker, in addition to the 2015 and 2016 Critics' Choice at International Film Festival Rotterdam, she curated the 2015 and 2016 Director's Forum at the Netherlands Film Festival. She is the founder of The Slow Criticism Project, an ongoing series of publications, discussions, conferences, and interventions as a counterbalance against the commodification of film criticism. In 2007 Linssen received the Louis Hartlooper Prize for Film Journalism. She is currently a graduate student in Film Studies at the University of Amsterdam.