

Introduction: German-Language Film Criticism—History and Practice

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For more than a century—dating as far back as 1907, when the first German-language film publications were initially established—*Filmkritik* (criticism, historiography, all manner of cultural discourse on cinema) has been a prized form of expression, a thriving intellectual, journalistic, and professional enterprise. More limited in scope at the start, it quickly blossomed during the Wilhelmine and Habsburg Empires, through the interwar and postwar periods, and into the twenty-first century. Over the years it has faced numerous challenges: the political rifts of the twentieth century (including the Third Reich and the East-West divide), the technological shifts of the medium and the modes of writing about it (from silent to sound pictures, print to digital), the exigencies of archival initiatives and film preservation. At the same time, from its beginnings *Filmkritik* has been a relentlessly international affair, traversing national borders and transcending the limits of language and origin. Moreover, *Filmkritik* has persistently crossed the Atlantic due not only to the migration of prominent critics and filmmakers themselves but to the receptive audiences and readerships on both sides.

Even today, a good century since the first pieces of film criticism appeared in German and Austrian newspapers and journals, the diverse writers and texts discussed in this dossier retain their timeliness. Having once held a

prominent place in wider debates over film theory and writing on motion pictures more generally, they now have, in their new guise and in an English-language venue, the chance to be revisited or freshly discovered by critics, scholars, and students in the twenty-first century. It is indeed an opportune moment—when film criticism and theory are facing new challenges in a rapidly evolving media landscape—to reflect on the impact and legacy of this rich and extensive history.

The dossier we have prepared includes contributions by scholars from the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, and Austria that explore the writings *by* and *about* key figures—Béla Balázs, Siegfried Kracauer, Frieda Grafe, Harun Farocki, and Michael Althen, among others. They aim to shed light on the lively and ever-changing dialogue about German-language film culture and to comment on the major historical as well as the formal and technological transformations of German-language film criticism in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, while also gesturing toward the future.

The collection opens with Erica Carter's analysis of Balázs's engaged and often quite tendentious understanding of film criticism during the interwar years. Unique to Balázs's notion of criticism was his insistence on the embodied nature of film experience, which, as Carter shows, finds resonance in contemporary theories on the haptic quality of spectators' encounters with the cinematic experience. Building on her research on the Austro-Hungarian critic, writer, and poet, Carter demonstrates the startling currency of his writings for the present moment, especially his work on physiognomy and the gestural body as ciphers of social crisis, on the historicity of the mediated mass, and on the revived role of the public film intellectual in the digital age.¹

Inspired by Grafe, an acclaimed German film journalist who perfected the art of the capsule review, Fatima Naqvi zeroes in on key moments of Austrian film criticism since the 1990s. It was in that decade that *Meteor* burst onto the scene, a film journal modeled on the legendary journal *Filmkritik* (1957–84), to which Grafe was a key contributor, and succeeded by *kolik.film*, published once a year in the first decade of the 2000s. Naqvi's argument illuminates the productive but also increasingly complex relations between Austrian critics, filmmakers, and writers whose ultimate success, she insists, comes from thinking big in a small field by preserving an independent and open-minded outlook. The critical approach that Naqvi takes, not to mention the material that she unearths, still has much to say in the debate over the place of film criticism in a changing media landscape.

1. Balázs, *Early Film Theory*.

If the Austrian editors of *Meteor* and *kolik.film* were influenced by Grafe, an heir of a different kind is Althen, the late German critic who for Eric Rentschler epitomizes the tastes and sensibilities of leading German film critics of the postwall years. Like Grafe, Althen was a longtime critic at the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* before moving to the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and was highly respected by critics and filmmakers alike. Yet as Rentschler makes clear, the parallels end there: Althen's interests, and his self-understanding as critic, differ profoundly from Grafe's and also from those of so-called critical critics like Wolfram Schütte, Karsten Witte, and Gertrud Koch, who played a prominent role in the film feuilleton of the 1970s and 1980s. These differences, Rentschler observes, speak to the dramatic changes in film production, evaluation, distribution, and consumption and to the role criticism assumes in that process. Rentschler provides a trenchant critique of Dominik Graf's posthumous portrait of Althen, *Was heißt hier Ende?* (*Then Is It the End?*, 2015), demonstrating with notable conviction that the type of criticism Althen (and Graf) stood for is hardly representative of today's decentralized and globalized critics, bloggers, and YouTubers.

In contrast to Naqvi and Rentschler, Mattias Frey, a leading authority on the history of film criticism in North America and Europe, takes a long view on the notion of crisis, which, he argues, has reverberated inside and outside the profession since its beginnings.² Like Rentschler, Frey revisits Graf's portrait of Althen, which for him mourns the tragic passing not only of a charismatic critic but of the profession as such. As Frey goes on to argue, however, Graf's nostalgic tale is exemplary of neither a certain place nor a certain time when compared with contemporaneous developments in the United States and the United Kingdom and with preceding decades. Every age, Frey contends, believed in film criticism's own tendency toward obsolescence. While Graf's film essay is based on a limited sampling of critics and filmmakers of Althen's generation and older (and mostly male), Frey's research is more comprehensive and evidence driven, mining archives, databanks, trade journals, and specially designed surveys. One conclusion, Frey asserts, is simply that a need for human cultural mediators has not decreased in the wake of the digital explosion of content and comment.

Focusing on the plight of current critics, journalists, and film writers in Germany, Claudia Lenssen offers a provocative contrast to Frey's long-take approach with a closer look at those toiling in the trenches today. While her verdict is dire, her interest is to provide a differentiated analysis of how the

2. Frey, *Permanent Crisis of Film Criticism*; Frey and Sayad, *Film Criticism in the Digital Age*.

profound changes in the public sphere over the last twenty years, due largely to the digital turn, have influenced the profession. Careful to acknowledge what has been lost, Lenssen is also aware that new challenges have created new opportunities and that by necessity critics, film professionals, and cinephiles have forged new allegiances. Among them are initiatives to resist film industry strategies that render the critic a mere *claqueur*, or one who offers an inventive blend of curation, reporting, and blogging, like some of her younger Berlin-based colleagues.

The dossier is rounded out with translations of Kracauer's Weimar-era writings and those from Farocki. Building on his own extensive work on Kracauer, which includes a companion volume of Kracauer's American writings on film, Johannes von Moltke presents heretofore untranslated key texts from the eminent critic's copious output during the Weimar years.³ Similarly, Farocki, best known in the United States for his experimental essay films and documentaries as well as his avant-garde art installations, produced a substantial body of work in the 1970s as an essayist and critic. Farocki's writings began to be published in Germany, in several carefully edited volumes in 2017, soon after his untimely death and still largely await discovery in the English-speaking world.⁴ Here Barton Byg introduces a text from a 1971 issue of *Filmkritik* that exemplifies the filmmaker's interest in didacticism and Brechtian cinema, his representation of labor and the labor of representation, and his marked openness to the German Democratic Republic that was quite rare among his contemporaries.

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3. Cf. Moltke and Rawson, *Siegfried Kracauer's American Writings*.

4. Cf. Farocki, *Meine Nächte mit den Linken*.

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