

Franz Schulz, “Film Critique” (April 1929)

Abstract

This article by the writer and screenwriter Franz Schulz (1897-1971), born in Prague in what was then Austria-Hungary, was published in the magazine *Das Tage-Buch* in 1929 and questions contemporary film criticism. The weekly magazine *Das Tage-Buch* was published by the Austrian journalist and writer Stefan Großmann from 1920 onwards. As an independent magazine aimed primarily at an educated, left-wing democratic audience, it competed with the *Weltbühne* in the press landscape of the Weimar Republic. Schulz, who was already a sought-after screenwriter in the Weimar Republic at this time, complained that the film criticism of the time was arbitrary and uninformed about the complexity of film production. After the National Socialists came to power in 1933, Schulz, who was of Jewish descent, emigrated to the United States and worked in Hollywood under the name Francis George Spencer. After the Second World War had ended, he left the United States and settled in Switzerland.

Source

Film Critique

“Dear God, protect me from superlatives! This creature is the height of perfection; she turned out well for God (and for herself) and is like none of His other works in this realm. It is not for me to describe in words this perfectly beautiful eye, this perfect early springtime body, which is expression in every fiber . . . whoever has seen it, really seen it – how could he ever forget? . . .”

“. . . If the film had been showing in the usual theater for sixty Pfennigs, one could have gone to bed without saying anything. But to show it to an invited audience as a grand premiere is an incomprehensible presumption. Elisabeth Bergner, helpless and without helpers, flails her limbs like someone who is too cold to stand still; an irritating fluttering of the forearms and eyelids; the face: two dead eyes in a plaster cast. . .”

Two Berlin critics on the same film and the same actress.

The grotesque contrast of these two opinions does not argue for or against the object of criticism, not for or against one of the two critics; rather, it speaks in no uncertain terms against the institution of criticism as it is practiced today.

There are two interpretations of the meaning of art criticism: the first interpretation is based on the fiction that there is indeed a standard taste, which the critic formulates by giving the knowledgeable reader that which he is “already thinking” served up in the proper form. Since the presumption of a standard taste is wrong, this interpretation is also wrong. The second interpretation of the meaning of criticism says that it is interesting to read what certain important persons, whose opinions are especially noteworthy in certain cases, think about a play, a painting, or a film. Just as it would be interesting to find out Einstein’s opinion on a new astronomical theory, Shaw’s view of Soviet Russia, and Mussolini’s objections to Primo de Rivera. In this case, the object of criticism is secondary, the criticizing object primary. Applied to the art criticism of the guild, this would mean that – apart from their position of power as critics – it would be especially interesting to know what prominent person X thinks about this play, person Y about that film. But since there are many more critics than prominent persons in the world, this interpretation also seems illusory.

If the art criticism of the guild is thus problematic in all its branches, then film criticism is doubly problematic because film is not only a genre of art, but also an industry, because its appraisal – in contrast to the theater, for example – presupposes not only artistic understanding, but also technical and commercial knowledge. The circle of genuinely chosen judges is thus much narrower than in the case of music, theater, or painting.

[...]

Occasionally one reads in critiques that the actors were excellent, but that the director failed. That is pure nonsense. This is possible at best on the stage, where the actor can work creatively out of some sort of intuitive feel for the role, but in film – where fragments are pieced together, where the actor often doesn't know what he is laughing about, what he is crying about, but only knows who has to laugh or cry, where the manner in which he stands in front of the camera, how he is lit, how he is made up, often matters more than the acted scene, which is not cut in order, after all – this kind of judgment reveals ignorance of the subject. And if one could read in one of the biggest Berlin papers that in the first and second acts the actors had still been unsure of themselves, but that from the third act on they got into it (even though every layman knows that the scenes of a film are not shot in the order of the script, but according to the scenery); when I recently read in another big Berlin paper that the American film “Resurrection” was distinguished by beautiful landscapes (the landscapes had been painted on glass plates in an unusually primitive manner), I came to believe that this and everything I have said here has shown that if a critique of film is necessary, then a critique of film criticism is certainly just as necessary.

Source: Franz Schulz, “Die Filmkritik,” *Das Tagebuch*, Berlin, April 27, 1929, Heft 17, Jahrgang 10, pp. 696–701.

Translation: Thomas Dunlap

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