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EDITORIAL

Editorial

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In 1474, a scribe named Filippo de Strata wrote a polemic to the Doge of Venice, Nicolò Marcello, asking him to remove the newly installed printing presses in the city. He referred to print as "the plague which is doing away with the laws of all decency." Filippo attributed moral decline to the literature emerging from printing presses. He worried that printed materials might carry errors, and that they would expose children to overly sexual and impure texts. The art of the scribe, he argued, is "nobler than all goods" and must be shielded from the corrupting influence of print. He saw the total elimination of printing presses as the only remedy. More than concern for social mores, however, Filippo may have been worried about his job security, noted in a fear that the printing press would soon obviate his craft.

This month, *The New York Times*' culture desk decided to reassign chief critics Jesse Green, Margaret Lyons, Jon Pareles, and Zach Woolfe to new roles in a move to expand "beyond the traditional review." In a memo, culture editor Sia Michel stated that readers crave "new story forms, videos, and experimentation with other platforms." This was met with alarm by critics. Richard Brody, a film critic at *The New Yorker*, quickly wrote a rejoinder, "In Defense of the Traditional Review," insisting that the written critique is the progressive heart of cultural journalism.

Brody argues that a review's chief virtue is its "independence, both editorial and textual." Editorial independence, one may reply, isn't secured by medium. Critics have always worked within hierarchies of institutions, taste, and alliances. Interviews and personality-centered formats may be "short on candor," but nothing in Brody's commentary makes a convincing case for traditional reviews being immune to networks of access and professional compromise. As one of us has shown elsewhere, there is substantial evidence of bias in cultural reviews tied to reputational incentives. Brody's own critiques certainly don't lack candor (he deems it necessary to tell his readers why *Superman* is "shallow"), but they, too, may carry the whiff of a zeitgeist. In many of Brody's reviews, readers may find it hard to decipher whether the goal is to understand a work of art or to verify its compliance with the tastes of the

morally awake. E.g. the *Last Dual* is deemed a “wannabe #MeToo movie,” *Cuties* is “not enough to give a right-winger a conniption,” *Tár* is “regressive” because it “lampoons so-called identity politics,” etc.

Brody next claims that “what a review embodies, above all, is one viewer’s experience of it.” This celebration of the critic-as-auteur imagines the reviewer as the main event. Brody, who is fluent in *Cahiers*, no doubt venerates, or at least shelves alphabetically next to Bazin and Bresson, French critic Roland Barthes, who, of course, had the gall to kill the author back in 1967, and with him, the fantasy that meaning clings faithfully to its source. The critic’s intent, in this light, is not half as interesting as the position from where they speak. In other words, whoever made it through Brody’s 2,000-word paean to *Barbie* may ask themselves whether they’ve read a progressive review or watched a cis male boomer mansplain feminism to himself. Reviews as records of a man surviving his own readership.

Brody shares with scribe Filippo a penchant for mystification. He writes of “devotion” and “passion” in the same way that Filippo appeals to the “truth.” Their faith in form is touching, less so their silence on content, as neither explains why their cause carries meaning, beyond the ritual of declaring it meaningful. In the end, Brody’s insistence on the written review’s permanence betrays a desire to secure his own turf. That media outlets bend to advertisers, algorithms, and allegiances is a genuine problem, but one that affects all types of media regardless of whether the sentences sit on a page, or scroll on a phone.

Whatever ideals Brody attributes to the traditional review – intellectual integrity and independence of thought – the pages he fills leave the reader wondering whether he trusts his own prescriptions enough to follow them. If, in other words, *The New Yorker* has grown too self-conscious to be truly provocative, then what, exactly, can still be expected from *The New York Times*? Turning criticism into conversation could bring more, not less, opinion. Speaking often lowers the threshold for honesty. Anyone can say one thing today and the opposite tomorrow, and in the emotion-driven currents of social media, that isn’t treated as a contradiction. So while these formats may cater to younger audiences, they might also jolt a sleepwalking critical landscape awake. At the very least, conversational formats of criticism may leave less room for the kind of haughtiness and listen-to-my-thoughts M.O. that clings to the written critic.

Nothing wears down conviction quite like the obligation to repeat it. A critic who files four pieces a week, week after week, may call routine “devotion” and, like the monastic scribe, thus give the sacrifice a name, even as humor submits to political correctness and the art of insult to moral posturing. If there’s a plague today, it’s neither in the scroll nor the scrollbar but in the endless, pious recycling of takes too tired to bite and too polished to sting.

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In this month's issue, Travis Cooper revisits the age-old question about the moral cost of artistic integrity in relation to Andrei Tarkovsky's *Andrei Rublev*. At Karlovy Vary, Moritz Pfeifer saw *Trains*, for which Maciej Drygas went through 46 archival collections across Europe and beyond, all of which appears to take him nowhere. Jack Page reviews *My Dear Theo* by filmmaker-mother-soldier Alisa Kovalenko about war and its pedestrian hopelessness. In his review of Radu Jude and Christian Ferencz-Flatz's *Eight Postcards from Utopia*, Konstanty Kuzma wonders whether advertisements can speak to us. Finally, Isabel Jacobs interviewed Jude and Ferencz-Flatz about *Eight Postcards*' origin and main ideas.

We hope you enjoy our reads.
Konstanty Kuzma & Moritz Pfeifer
Editors

Note: Due to delays in our publication schedule, this issue was published in the month of August 2025.