

Fringe of Colour Films 2023: Critiquing Critique - Whose Writing Matters?

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With Tomiwa Folorunso Naomi Gessesse, Xuanlin Tham and Noah Isa Berhиту

Tomiwa Folorunso: Hi. And welcome to Fringe of Color Films 2023. I'm Tomiwa Folorunso. I'm just going to do a visual description. So I'm a youngish Black woman with golden sorry, it's very... the fan [laughter] with gold coloured braids in a ponytail on top of my head. I'm wearing a beige T shirt, black shorts, and white and black trainers. I'm Tomiwa Folorunso. Okay, so we're here for a panel discussion. It's called Critiquing Critique. Whose writing matters? I'm here with Noah, Xuanlin, and Naomi. I'm the editorial director at Fringe of Colour Films. And so I manage our responses project. So we have a cohort of writers that respond to all of the films in our program and, kind of doing the planning programming stage of the festival, thinking about responses, thinking about events. The idea of this panel came to mind to really just think about arts journalism in Scotland but also further afield to think about the position of writers or critics or responders and how that can work with film and be in dialogue with film and arts rather than sometimes being quite maybe quite like a negative relationship. So, yeah, I'm joined by this fantastic panel who I'm going to let introduce themselves.

Noah Isa Berhиту: Thank you. I'm Noah. I am also a youngish woman of colour. I'm wearing a green suit with a bi-colour jacket. And I got some compliments on the jacket today, so I'm very happy about that. Oh, yeah, my film. Yeah. I'm here because I made a short film with my friends Alejandra called Violetta and Sophia. And it was screened yesterday, which was very lovely. Yes.

Tomiwa Folorunso: And you can still watch it online.

Xuanlin Tham: Hi, I'm Xuanlin, and I'm an East Asian person with red hair, and I'm wearing a blue jacket. I've not gotten compliments on my jacket yet, and a black dress. And I am a writer and curator. I programme at Take One Action Film Festival, and then I'm a freelance film critic on the other side.

Tomiwa Folorunso: Okay.

Naomi Gessesse: Hi, I'm Naomi. I'm a 26 year old mixed race person with short black hair and, wearing a shakira top with green trousers. And, yeah, I do some writing, and I do a little bit of curating and film festival work. And I've recently done a bit of, like, did a short film education course. Kind of all over the place in that regard. Yeah. Excited to be here.

Tomiwa Folorunso: I suppose, to get straight into it. Yes, Critiquing Critique, I'd love to know kind of what are your thoughts and feelings towards traditional arts critique as we know it,

and, like, the kind of star system, the star rating system. And I suppose arts critique having the potential to maybe make or break a film.

Naomi Gessesse: For example, when I think of traditional arts critique, I think of something, that is maybe trying to facilitate a relationship between a mass audience and an art form. So I guess when I think of early film criticism, a lot of it was maybe more of a kind of almost like commentary on the industry and almost like trade writing. And I feel like now it's really, yeah, it's obviously like an art form. It is like a record and a document of something, but I think it's also like an expression in itself and I think that's something that's still being negotiated. I don't know if you want to yeah, maybe you want to jump into one.

Xuanlin Tham: Yeah, I mean, I think it's important to remember, like you said, that I think this started out as being kind of like a trades job. And the things that we expected from criticism back when people were more actively reading film reviews and book reviews and things like that in the paper is very different from the current landscape of criticism. And I think something that's been great is the increased, um, democracy of, I think, who gets to become a film critic? And I think there's still a long way to go in terms of achieving true accessibility. And I think most people still feel like the world of journalism and arts critique is one that's quite locked away to some upper echelon of people who have the credentials to be able to comment on art. But I think increasingly with the Internet and with things that have sprouted from grassroots art initiatives that have encouraged writers who don't necessarily feel like they've come from a background where they were either academically or employment-wise were led to believe that their opinions hold water in the same kind of traditional arts critique that we, uh, were talking about earlier. That's in many ways, why I was able to start I didn't go to school for any of this. I'm not trained. My degree is wildly unrelated to the work that I do. But because of things like the responsive platform of fringe of color, things like girls on tops who do an editorial platform where anyone can pitch and anyone can write it's really opened up lots of opportunities for people like me, I think, to explore writing professionally. And criticism isn't something now that is locked away to just a few people because of the landscape of, I think, the internet and everyone can kind of participate in that much more democratically than before, I think.

Noah Isa Berhиту: Yeah, no, I totally agree. I also think as, yeah, maybe a filmmaker's perspective, that's actually what I maybe care about most. I don't know if you're all familiar with letter books, but, it's this film platform and, um, everyone can write a review. And I like them because they're so accessible and, no fancy language. You don't have to be a real critic or you don't have to have studied film or art or no fancy words needed to describe what you thought of a film.

Tomiwa Folorunso: Yeah. Thank you. It's interesting because I feel like in kind of all of your answers, there seems to be not that there should be, but no shame or discomfort around the word criticism or critique. And I think I and this is very personal, perhaps have a very I think my connotations with the word is that almost it can be very negative. Like, if something is criticism or critique, it's negative rather than positive. And I'm interested as to what are each of your connotations with the word in more detail. Yeah.

Naomi Gessesse: It's funny there is such a repetitive kind of conversation. I don't know if it was, like, a musician or someone who is just, like I think it's just, like a trend recently of maybe quite big artists being, like, these critics, what are they?

Xuanlin Tham: Charli XCX?

Naomi Gessesse: Yeah. Maybe it was Charli XCX. But, yeah, I guess I think it's interesting as well, because I feel like at Fringe of Colour. It just got into the core of the issue, which is, like, it's not criticism and isn't, like you're being criticised, but it's like a response is being considered, and, like, everything is, like, part of a conversation. I think my the way I see it is, like, it's very, like, you know, a piece of art is just like a part of a conversation, and people can respond to it. And I think that's what makes m something robust and rich, maybe. I don't know if it's a bit wishy washy. Yeah. I think personally, I do feel like, obviously, I'm sensitive to criticism on a personal level, sure, maybe a little sensitive to rejection and all that sort of stuff. But I think when it feels like a really safe and, um, important, I think in an art context, I feel, like, very, like, yeah, this is worth doing, and it's worth negotiating, all that sort of stuff.

Xuanlin Tham: Yeah. I think in a similar way, my relationship to the word criticism is very tied to feminist and queer notions of critique as care and critical theory and queer theory. They exist to interrogate structures of power. And I think when we talk about art, that's what I'm drawn to as well. And I think kind of linking to the first question you asked. I think some of my discomfort with traditional arts critique is because it originates out of this quite, I guess, quite Western desire to classify and to break things down like a film, for example, into categories of, like, let's talk about cinematography, let's talk about acting, and all of these things. And it's quite a restrictive tendency, and it's trying to approach critique as if it could ever come from an objective point of view. And that's what I think a lot of feminist and queer interrogations of art and arts critique try to make visible is that these objective statuses, like, they don't exist. People only presuppose that there's an objective point of view. And that objective point of view is the white, straight, CIS man that's been writing this critique, that's been linked to these industries, that has been kind of touted as, like, the paragon of understanding art. And for some reason, when they write in a voice, it's objective, and then as soon as someone else writes in a voice that doesn't comply with those notions, then it's subjective. Then it's like, you're not being a good critic, you're not being objective. So I think my relationship with criticism is to really fight against this assumption of objectivity and to always remember that critique comes from a very embedded place. And that's why I seek out criticism by people who don't fit in with this paragon. And in that way, critique to me, seems like care because we're caring for this space of art. We're kind of making space for these subversive understandings of who gets to hold knowledge and power in terms of what we deem good art and bad art.

Naomi Gessesse: In these conversations, I really just wanted to affirm what you said about the kind of maybe, like, paternalistic, authoritative voice. I just wanted to shout out one of your articles, actually, that I feel like really kind of, um, I really appreciate, because I feel like it was really playful. And it's the one about Wes Anderson, like most insufferable Wes Anderson movies.

Tomiwa Folorunso: Yeah, it's very interesting, actually, because as you were talking then I'm thinking about the responses and how that immediately, by calling them responses, as supposedly as an editor, as a reader, as a writer, you're doing something different. But also how different is it to what you would do if you were writing something that was more critique or criticism and more just about how it is received as well? And I suppose there's something in a response that makes you feel more just or able to fully say what you want to say if you

are not a white CIS hair man. For you, Noah, uh, talking about criticism and critique, I'm interested as to how or if criticism, um, what's its role within your practice, if any.

Noah Isa Berhiti: And does it? That's a good question. I think it also definitely evolves around care. I think when I make a film, I want to be aware of every person that is involved in that. Even though I make it by myself or like we are a two person crew, there's always someone who, I don't know, has come to a location to open up a door for us in order to film, uh, there. Yeah, just that I think awareness of people's well being involved or yeah. You're maybe also wondering about film criticism?

Tomiwa Folorunso: Yeah. No, but that kind of answer no. Not kind of. That did answer my question and also made me think as well, because I think when we made Mod, our short film, I think we worked over a long period of time and so we got really close as a team, which also made us open to and receptive to and like this space to critique each other and how we were working and the work we were making. And it was coming from a place of care that ultimately led us to make a good film, I think. So it's like, important within your practice, right?

Noah Isa Berhiti: Yeah, totally.

Tomiwa Folorunso: I know you both work, uh, as curators and programmers a little bit. Or if criticism, like, what the role of critique quints in that?

Xuanlin Tham: I think of criticism as a form of curation as well. And I think something that, Hannah Strong at Little White Lies said to me that I really has stuck with me to this day is that she kind of talks about how she opens up her email every day, and there's hundreds of people just, like, sending her press releases, wanting their films to be in Little White Lies. And faced with that, as a small independent print publication, every single choice you make about what film to review and how you review it and what judgment or critique you pass on it, that is a form of curation in and of itself. And that's no small responsibility. And I think one good example of, I think we were talking originally about the star rating system and how that's quite problematic in some ways, but it can be used for good, I think. There was a Haitian experimental documentary called Set Maison which was distributed by Tape Collective in the UK. Yeah, Carmen's clapping in the back. It was really meaningful for Set Maison to get five stars reviews from, Little White Lies because that kind of brought it onto the radar of so many people who wouldn't have seen it otherwise. And I think that's where we can kind of use the tools of the system to kind of change where attention lies a bit. And yeah, I'm going to keep talking about Little White Lies because I do think they have the best star system out of most publications because they've divided it into three categories, basically. So they rate films based on anticipation, enjoyment, and then in retrospective, and you get a one to five rating on each of those categories. And I just think even though it's still shorthand and it's still just more of a summation of a film than a full engagement with it, if you were to just look at those numbers, I think it kind of shows how we can still be a bit more playful and nuanced and also recognise that films exist over time. Right. I think when we have a star rating it's very like, this is an immediate reaction to this film at this moment in time. But I like what Little White Lies does because it's about everything that's leading up to the film. The time that you spend sitting in the cinema with the film and actually what the film leaves you with after. And I think that's kind of more the model of criticism that I enjoy reading. Not something that's so eager to kind of pass off one objective judgment that's then

locked away and deemed as truth, but something that you can come back to and engage with over time. I don't think I've answered the question.

Tomiwa Folorunso: Yeah, but what you said was good.

Naomi Gessesse: I guess I'll talk a bit about my experience with curating. Maybe like film festival. Yeah. I'll just say a bit more about. I think for me being in having an opportunity to kind of sit with a film for an extended period of time and also have quite a really safe but also very interrogative discussion space with other kind of curators. I think that really helped me kind of figure a lot of stuff out in terms of, um, what I was responding to times where I would be like, oh, I'm disgusted at this, or I'm like, I'm inspired by this. And then people just being like, why kind of say more about that? And I'm like, because it's inspiring. I think just, like, adding a bit more of a need to kind of really justify things and really put them in a context of what they're doing ideologically as well. I feel like having Curation, for me, is really poured water over my little criticism garden. I don't know what that meant for is, but, yeah, just like, that sort of thing. I think it's really just like, because writing can be so sort of not lonely, but kind of like a solitary venture sometimes. I think, like, yeah. So I'm really grateful for having some quite nice film festival experiences as well.

Tomiwa Folorunso: For us, because I curate our programme a lot with someone else. Natasha Rawana it's really nice to bring films together or bring work together and sit with them and sit with them over time. Like, I really hear that that there's a difference to, you know, we've sometimes watched a film that we love and want to programme in October, and then it comes round to January and actually we're just like, okay, great film, but doesn't work doesn't sit with this theme or the rest of the films in the same way. And so that time and being able to spend time with work and asking those questions about what you like about it, what's good about it, what don't you like about it, why do you feel this way, but also doing that with somebody else? Because then, like you said, you just have to justify it. Sometimes we go into a meeting and we have to fight for our film to be like, I want this in this program, or I want to curate this. And this is why. And that can also be really exciting as well, because it gets you more into it. Noah to go back to Violet and Sofia, what was the process of making that film in terms of time? And was there a process of sitting with it, coming back to it? Or was it no, that's okay.

Noah Isa Berhutu: No, so Alejanda and me, we're in film school. And we made the film about two years ago. It was in the middle of our Bachelor's. And it's a very dense programme. I don't know why they do it like that. But it's really we have to make three to four films a year. And, um, this was the very last one of the semester. And well, actually, we decided to make this film together out of care for ourselves and each other. Because at that time, I think we were both not doing too well. We were really, I think, almost burnt out. And yeah, we thought, okay, what if we defied tasks and really do it together? And I think that that really helped us both. So, yeah, like, time span, I think a month, maybe less than a month.

Tomiwa Folorunso: But still, there's still like, as soon as you work with someone else closely, you have this relationship that changes than if it's just like, you on your own, right, that you can feed in and have those discussions and think about how do we make this better? What do we like about it? What don't we like about it? Let's try this. I'm going to ask a big question because I like big questions. And I'm sorry. What do you think needs to and I know we

maybe touched on it a little bit, but what do you think needs to change about how we write about film? Yeah, I'm going to be a little specific. Or does it not need to change?

Naomi Gessesse: I think there's just maybe, like, quite a monopoly and quite like a loud, specific voice that I think really influences, I think, how we talk about all sorts of art forms. I don't know if, yeah, it's a weird one. I don't know if people are, like, free to hate things all the time as much as they should be. Uh, but also, it's all just very weird. It's like a weird moment of, like I'm not sure. I feel like I might need to let this cook in my head a little bit. I don't know if you want to.

Xuanlin Tham: I think when you say we, I think there's a lot of different people in the we. And personally, I mean, I just have a very simple answer to this. I think some people are just really bad writers and they need to get better. That needs to change.

Tomiwa Folorunso: People need to read more.

Xuanlin Tham: Yeah, I think some of the most, like well, the critics that are most read and some of the publications with the most followers on Twitter are some of the sources of the worst film writing. And I think maybe we need to also ask, like, what kind of criticism do people seek out, and who, what, what writing? I mean, that's like the question, right? Whose writing is platformed and deemed quality, deemed more valid as a judgment of whether art is good or not than others? And some of the best writing I've read has been from self published publications or people who didn't have access to film festival screeners or whatever, but then were given the opportunity to write criticism because of all of these great new schemes that are allowing people to write film criticism for the first time. And I think what needs to change yeah, aside from that, like, is the way we engage with like, value judgments, I think. And that I think people need to step out of their comfort zones and actually seek out writing by people who they wouldn't organically come into contact with. Yeah. And I also personally, just have a very strong distaste for reading criticism that's like, this was how the acting was, this is how the cinematography was director did so and so, whatever. And it's just no. Why do I want to read that? I think I'm much more interested in people already recognising that you can't have an objective understanding of art. And so I'm much more interested to know about you and about how you got to how you got here. Why I'm reading you talking about this film, and instead of trying to hide behind this pretense of like, actually, I'm just some um, anonymous, faceless, objective person with a very crystal clear understanding of what makes good art. I think that kind of tone really pisses me off. And I think being able to recognise that we are all positioned somewhere that already just makes for much more interesting writing.

Naomi Gessesse: Yeah, I think as well. I don't know if it's the same for you guys. I feel like I really struggle to discern sometimes the amount of when you think of a broadsheet film criticism or stuff like that, the extent of the amount of it that is like PR for the film. They're in the pocket of the distributors. I feel like there's a lot of kind of weird, sort of like, I don't know, neoliberal trappings of kind of mainstream film criticism a lot of the time. And it's really hard to find your footing outside of that, uh, without kind of self publishing, as you say, self publishing, like finding these opportunities that are sometimes not that common or wherever.

Naomi Gessesse: Also just affirming what Xuanlin said.

Tomiwa Folorunso: And it's also like what you said about it's. The PR thing. It's being bigger than the film itself, almost, in a sense. And, it's a time thing that we have with criticism. I feel like a lot of it is just it's coming out the day before, the day of the days after a release. It's just pushing you to go see that film. And I can't remember who said it, but almost, I think it was you, Neil, about not being afraid to hate something. But in those mainstream obviously, you get that in mainstream criticism and traditional criticism, people hating stuff. But, it's never hating with care either. It's kind of just mean.

Naomi Gessesse: No. Yeah, exactly. It's like the things that there's a specific demographic of work that is, like, they don't understand and they hate, and they're like, oh, the woke agenda, all that sort of stuff. Then there's like, what a tour de force action romp. It's also like this weird notion of people I don't know, it's just so hard to know if there's no transparency. There's not necessarily a code of conduct required all the time, I think, for mainstream film criticism. I think with something like the responses in this context where the writers are like, we're all kind of sharing a similar space with the makers. And I think there's maybe like a responsibility there. And also, just like a desire to do a good job and really excavate the whole shape of the context of the films. So there's good stuff happening.

Xuanlin Tham: I think that that reminds me, actually, because I mean, I think the role of criticism in a mainstream sense is to kind of build a relationship between the film and the audience. And the critic is supposed to be kind of the middleman to tell you how to feel about something. And I read I don't remember the writer of this. I'll just have to quote without attribution. Sorry. But, you know how when you read a review and says, one can't help but feel something, something dot dot, dot. That word, one is supposed to suture you and the writer. And you become this subject and you don't question it? You don't question it. You just are made to assume that now with that use of one, your opinion has to align with the critics. I'm butchering the explanation of what this is supposed to be. Sorry, but, I think that's really interesting because we engage with criticism already under the assumptions that we have to kind of absorb this almost sublimation of your personal your perspective for a moment when you're engaging with this piece of writing becomes sutured to the person who's writing it. And I think that is about power. And if we talk about, again, all of the traditional broadsheet criticism, um, that just assumes, basically, that when you engage with these kinds of things that you don't question who's writing it, because your opinion is supposed to be tied to the person who's been given this laurel of I get to tell you how to feel about the film. And I think it's much more interesting when we think about criticism as the bridge between art and its audience, about how can I make myself as the critic, kind of to question that relationship instead of assuming or, like, taking that for granted as, like, an objective middleman and maybe consider what audience I am speaking to. What audience is the film speaking to? And I think those are a lot more thorny questions than I'm just like this straightforward path of information. You were saying something about how sometimes people are like, oh, people just wouldn't get this film. And I think that kind of dismissive air really homogenises an audience. And I think sometimes this idea of, like, oh, this film is inaccessible because it's too experimental, or it's so far beyond the pale of what we would consider mainstream forms of art. You tend to condescend to your audience by saying that they wouldn't understand it, or this isn't worthy of a mainstream, um, release, but that takes a lot of assumptions for granted about your audience. And I think we're just kind of shepherding people into smaller and smaller imaginations of what art they should be able to engage with. And I think that's actually quite terrible.

Noah Isa Berhиту: Yeah. No, I think for me, I would also say it's important to mention the relationship of the writer to the film and what is the film actually about and I think on a personal note, I have a lot of because I'm at school and of course, we always have juries of the films we make and then the films are discussed. And, unfortunately, those juries are very often white, and they come with criticism that is just to be honest, I don't really care that much than what they say.

Tomiwa Folorunso: How do you navigate that being at the start of your career in this, like, learning, developing environment, making films that, ah, are important to you and about you or a part of your identity or culture, and then being faced with a jury or a group of people who do not get it, who probably don't want to get it and are being very critical, but also have their thought and their opinion has an influence on you, even in the sense of you getting this degree.

Noah Isa Berhиту: Yeah, I'm trying to not let it get to me as much, but yeah, I think I much more prefer to listen to my peers. And, it's actually also just our classmates or, um yeah. I ask my friends or my family to have a look at the films, and I really value their opinion relating to the degree they will let me pass, surely. No, I mean, that sounded a bit.

Tomiwa Folorunso: I could ask more questions, but we also have an audience, so would anybody in our audience like to ask a question?

Audience Question: Going off what you were just saying. How do you kind of thank you. How do you navigate the difference between taking on valid criticism versus something that's just critical, mean, or, like, you don't take it seriously? How do you tell the difference? Is it a feeling you have? Is it the person who's saying it?

Noah Isa Berhиту: Yeah. Very good question. Yeah, it's definitely gut feeling. And whether I like the person or not, and whether I appreciate their work. Yeah. And of course, I also really value critique that is not maybe negative critique in the sense that or I don't know if there's a proper word for it, but they don't have to say that my film was good or anything. It's just yeah, I do value a well, kind of, um explained justified. Justified. Yeah. Justified critique.

Audience Question: This is more of a it is a comment. It is a comment, actually, and an observation which struck with me and which I really admire. I think I heard it more from Xuanlin, probably across all of you. And it's this idea that critiquing can be objective. What I feel I'm getting from you is that you can't just say I'm an objective, because part of being creative is bringing part of you into it as well. So how can it possibly be objective? And I just find that really refreshing. I welcome, if you want to say more about it, other people, but that idea, I think, is something that feel needs to be amplified. That this almost academic notion that we have to be objective, I really, really against it, and I just find it really validating, in a way, to hear you reflecting that as well.

Xuanlin Tham: Thank you so much. I mean, that's something that I also feel very passionately about. And since you brought up this notion of it kind of existing in an academic sphere, I mean, that's where it exists in its most egregious form, I think, is that the assumptions that academia makes about objectivity. And I think once we kind of engage with the idea that objectivity is a myth, then it kind of really illuminates whose subjective opinions and perspectives and situated everyone is situated differently in terms of where you are in the world, where you are in relationship to power. But some people get to exist in that

subjective position, then have it pass as objective. And that's why I have so many problems with I mean, not even just, like, star rating critiques or, like, film critics or anything. But if you're at Uni and you're writing an essay, why is that scored out of 100? Who gets to make those decisions? Um, can there ever be really this arbiter that passes judgment? And it's like 100%, you can't contest it. And I think that exists so much in all kind of schools of thought that originate from a very western and colonial desire to classify things and to rank things. And, um, that's an artificial creation. And we've kind of made it seem like it's been naturally divined and that there's no way to contest all of these very scientific set in stone notions of what classifies something being, like, right and true and wrong. And I think especially with art, that is something that we really need to contest. So, yeah, thank you for bringing that up, because I think it really does illuminate a lot of assumptions we take for granted, not just within art, but in academia and in all areas of life, actually, about whose opinions get to pass as truth. Like, objective truth.

Audience Question (Jess Brough): Thank you. Um, totally agree with that, by the way. Even in academia, it's just not objective. People write about what they think is interesting or what they think is right based on the research that they've done. But I'm really interested to know, and maybe this question differs depending on who you are, but that concept of who is actually writing about your work from an identity perspective. So, Noah, you kind of spoke a little bit about this in terms of really appreciating and trusting hearing from your peers and your friends and family. But I'm interested to hear how you feel about it. Maybe your work being written about by people who maybe share factors of identity with you versus somebody who comes from a totally different place in terms of identity. And then, equally, the idea, if you are the ones writing about work, do you ever question, should I be the one who's writing about this? Or, if so, do you think that the work that you put into that, if maybe you don't personally have a connection to the work, is research, and that's a way that anybody can really write about anything if you put the work in. And maybe the reason why we're seeing the terrible writing that you've talked about coming about is that people don't bother to do that research, and they just think they can write about anything from that position that they're currently at. So, yeah, just interested to know from each of you, how important shared identity is to this question. Yeah, thank you.

Naomi Gessesse: I think for me, it's maybe something I kind of sometimes struggle to discern is kind of like how you measure the level of personal connection to something. Certainly there's times where I think maybe I've written about something and I've been very emotionally invested in it and quite desperate to bring it close and apply my meaning to it very quickly. I think sometimes an area that I'm interested in is, like, documentary and nonfiction and stuff. I feel like that's quite a good place to kind of suss a lot of that stuff out because it's often about, it's like a theatre of objectivity sometimes. I don't know if that's really answering your question, though, but I'd be happy for someone else to jump in.

Xuanlin Tham: I like the phrase theatre of objectivity. That's a really great question, and I think it is so dependent on case to case. And I don't know why this made me think of when Matrix Four came out. Do you guys like Matrix Four? Good. Great. If not, get out. When it came out, it was quite panned by a lot of your traditional blockbuster film bros who were just like, where are the car chases? This isn't cool. They made it cheesy. And then Lillian Crawford, who is a trans film critic who's writing I really, really love, she gave the Matrix Four five stars. Five stars. Five stars on Little White Lies. And I saw people on Twitter were, quote, retaining it and being like, oh, of course Lillian Crawford liked Matrix Four. That was

supposed to be some kind of dunk on her. In some way. I think that's kind of in relation to this idea about this relationship we have with oh. So if I enjoyed something that was made by people who share facets of identity with me, suddenly my opinion doesn't matter? I think there's people just bend truth to what they want to take from it, because it'll be like if I'm commenting on something and they're like, what do you know? I don't even have an example of this because this hasn't happened to me yet, personally. But I think people really just take that argument about how much of your identity you need to share with the person who makes the film, and they just bend it according to their agenda. Because as we see, why shouldn't everyone and a trans woman celebrate this amazing piece of work by two incredible trailblazing trans female filmmakers? That's some sort of thing to be like, oh, of course you liked it because it was made by people like you. Like what? I don't really understand that line of thinking. But personally, I think one of your questions was about whether I question whether I'm the right person to be writing about things sometimes. And I do that all the time. Because I know I get very pissed off when I see someone and I'm like, you shouldn't be writing about this. So I have that fear about myself a lot, too. But I do think it is about care. And it's much more about that than, like, a checklist of, like, oh, how many intersections of oppression do I share with this artist whose work I'm about to comment on? I think as long as we're kind of coming at it from this very clear understanding, this clarity already, that even if I was to engage with work with someone who's of very similar background to me, that their experience is still going to be vastly different from mine. And that we don't kind of like, sublimate identity into one thing, where it's like, oh, you're also Asian, you're also nonbinary, things like that. And it's like, now we're already on this same level of understanding that couldn't possibly be misconstrued. I think that makes it very uninteresting as well. And I think I like to think of criticism as a way of approaching difference. And in order to do that, you need to humble yourself about how little you know. So that's why when people I don't know, like Robbie Colin, why did I bring him up? I'm sorry. Does anyone know the film *Lingua Franca*? Isabelle Sandova. She's like a trans Filipino filmmaker. Uh, she's amazing. She's an icon. Robbie Collin, I think he wrote something about *Lingua Franca* that really pissed me off. And he liked the film, but he was just liking it in the wrong way for me. And then you go on to who he follows on Twitter, and he follows transphobic alliances, like LGB Alliance and stuff. And it was just like, why are you as a man, engaging with a trans woman's work and celebrating it, ostensibly, and still kind of feel like it's okay to be like, oh, actually, no, I need to know all sides of the debate. And that's what he said before, when he's been confronted about it. I don't want to kind of be in an echo chamber and things like that. And I just think you're just quite insulated from the material harm that saying that does, um and yeah, so I think that's a very long way to say that when I do it, it's okay. When Robie Colin does it? It's not.

Naomi Gessesse: Sorry, I just I just remembered something that I did want to say. Some one thing that I kind of find, like, quite like a like a bam sometimes to that sort of conversation is so, uh, yeah, I guess there's a book called, like, *The Making of Daughters of the Dust*, which is just like a collection of it's like the script. And then a collection of essays by different writers like Greg Tate and stuff. And an interview with Julie Dash and Bill Hooks. And I think they disagree so much. Bell Hooks, basically. There's so much of it where, um, Bell Hooks is kind of coming at it from this is what I got from the film. Is this what you're trying to say? And do that? No, but I love that that's what you got from it. And that in the context of just how a film like *Daughters of the Dust* was kind of critically received at the time, where people didn't guess, and it was kind of, like, considered, like, ahistorical, because of the real magical

qualities to, yeah, something m like that. I'd really recommend reading it if people are interested.

Noah Isa Berhutu: Yeah, I agree with everything, actually. I think it's just also always a matter of, it's very anthropological, actually. Of course, also, when I make a film, I have the same questions. Am I in the position to make a film about this topic, about this person? And I think yeah, when you do it with care, with kind of continuous exchange like agency it's really fine. Because that's also, I think, when we go back, it's the very principle of telling a story. It's also being able to step into another identity, actually. With care.

Tomiwa Folorunso: With care. Always with care. Thank you. Any more questions?

Audience Question: Ah, this is a very personal question, then, for the three makers. Which position do you give? Your own practice or cinema? Is it research of your own creative process? Is it entertainment? Is it representation of your own identity, of your people? You're surrounded. Maybe I'm trying to label it, but because I'm very interested now in your relationship with the medium, or why you are choosing specifically this medium to work on.

Naomi Gessesse: I feel like there's been a little bit of chat about academic film in an academic context. I did a Film studies degree. I'm ashamed to say it. No, I'm joking, but I think that obviously the pursuit of legitimizing film as, like, an academic discipline, like a science, a sociological thing, I think was very attractive to me, potentially. I was like, yes. It's purely for research, but obviously, it's obviously very effective. I feel very moved. I feel, like, very, like, yeah, I'm always, like, surprised kind of by Phil. I think sometimes I I maybe for a while, thought I was, like, um, maybe, like, at a distance from it, and, like, that was the goal, to be, like, kind of like, above Phil and looking down and being like, I'm the boss of Phil, I know what's going on. But, I feel like as an ecosystem, it's really inspiring in some ways. As much as we've kind of talked about some not very nice aspects of it, I think, for the most part, but I don't know if it was it might have been Pauline Kale who said this, but kind of film is something that's, like, antidisciplinary and not necessarily interdisciplinary all the time. I think that has kind of added maybe, like, a little bit of expansion to how I was looking at it, but certainly it's also entertaining as well. Uh, I don't know if you guys want to jump in.

Xuanlin Tham: That was a very sexy answer. I think if I'm being honest with myself, the reason why I write film criticism is because I don't have the imagination to make films myself.

Naomi Gessesse: No, sure.

Xuanlin Tham: And I'm just a big fan. I just love movies. So to be able to yeah, I think in a similar way to what you said, it's very attractive to I think it started out purely in a very self indulgent, almost, like, narcissistic way. To kind of just engage in dialogue with stuff that I really admire. And then later on came like, oh, and then people also are interested in engaging with what I write. And I think you form this, like you said, ecosystem. And I think that's what art needs to survive. It needs to be talked about, needs to be engaged with needs to be debated. And I really just enjoy criticism as an art form. I get so much more from watching a film and reading some of my favorite writing or favourite writers in conversation with that film than if I had just engaged with the film just independently. And there's so many times where I've completely done a 180 on how I felt about a film or how I've approached it because I've read a piece of writing that just unequivocally changed the way that I saw something. And I think I kind of live in pursuit of those moments, and that's what I love about

the medium. So that's kind of, like, why I've always wanted to write about films. And then I think curation kind of and programming is also a very similar desire, in a way, to construct or to kind of bring things in juxtaposition, I guess. I think that's what building a program is, is about building juxtaposition and also challenging audiences. And I'd like to think of my criticism, hopefully, as doing that as well. Um, is to kind of maybe make you feel uncomfortable, almost in a way, or to put two things on the same page or in the same program that you wouldn't have occurred naturally before. Um, and I think, like I said, absent of, um, the skills and imagination to be the person doing the thing, this is the next best thing I get.

Noah Isa Berhutu: I don't believe that that way. Yeah, I think film film is just wonderful medium. I think, for me, because it's time based and because it's very close to how we perceive reality. Um, and then again, that's also why it's also very tricky, because, of course, it's not real, real what we see, but when it's well done, it comes to us as real. And I think that I find very powerful, and I think hopefully, I think definitely in the recent years, months, I also see filmmaking as a way of critiquing, yeah, society or the way we live. So it's also my personal method to deal with things.

Tomiwa Folorunso: Thank you.

Xuanlin Tham: That's really interesting.

Tomiwa Folorunso: Your last point about film is your way of critiquing society, and I wish I'd asked you about that more. But it's fine. It's fine. We'll talk later. None of you will get to hear that. That's us. Thank you so much for joining us and asking questions. And thank you so much to Noah and Xuanlin and Naomi.