THE ORIGIN, PURPOSE AND FUTURE OF FILM CRITICISM

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CineMuseFilms

Table of Contents:

Abstract

Film criticism has its historical roots in cultural criticism and shares its core discourse about objectivity, aesthetics, and polemics. Regularly seen as 'in crisis', film criticism has evolved to be a diverse genre of writing that uses different frames of reference and explanatory paradigms to meet a variety of readership needs. The so-called crises reside in the ambivalent relationships between industry, the critic profession, and technological change that has resulted in the erosion of the critic's authority in modern times. Far from facing existential crisis, film criticism continues to evolve as a vibrant contributor to film literacy and engagement.

Introduction

The word 'crisis' has been applied to film criticism throughout its entire history. In 1909, film critics were ridiculed in USA magazine *Moving Picture World* for their "downright stupidity" and lack of film knowledge, and in 1919 there were calls in Europe for legislation to stop the publication of film reviews entirely (Frey 2015, 37). The Hollywood magazine *Variety* has regularly thrown barbs like "are film critics really needed anymore or is it a washed-up profession?" (2007). In a media-obsessed global environment film criticism "is besieged on all sides…by job layoffs in newspapers, by the collapse of the market for specialised print magazines, by the proliferation of amateur sites online" (Martin 2016). Many commentators bemoan the "glut of film-critical writing" that has transformed criticism into a form of online fast food (Tompkins 2016) while others urge that "it is time to stop whining about the death of film journalism and start considering ways to resurrect it" (White 2014). The popularity of film writing across all media formats highlight the ambivalence and paradox of criticism. How can consumers of film criticism make sense of these viewpoints?

The literature on film criticism is only partially helpful in clarifying these issues. There are many books with titles like "The Permanent Crisis of Film Criticism" (Frey 2015), articles with names such as "The Rise and Fall of Film Criticism" (Nowell-Smith 2008), and an abundance of online commentary with headings describing "The war against movie critics" (Taylor 2003). This amorphous field of writing offers little clarity or common discourse on film criticism, reflecting the fact that there are widely different viewpoints and vested interests within institutions and industry, as well as amongst film writers and readerships. All mass media platforms are experiencing the crisis of modernisation as the technological advance of the capitalist economy marches relentlessly forward without regard for how artforms like film will fit into the new online world. Given its long and contentious history and the continuing cries of imminent collapse, some may find it surprising that film criticism has survived at all.

It is in this context that film criticism could be described as in perpetual existential crisis. It has always had an ambivalent role with many inherent contradictions: widely exploited but not always respected; without universal guiding principles; eminently corruptible in its relationships; and never in its

history acknowledged as an essential contributor to the cultural life of which it is a part. At the same time, film criticism is consumed widely. It was the midwife at the birth of cinema; it has been a handmaiden of the film industry; it has helped to make the film art-form intelligible and accessible to countless audiences; and it is now witness to the democratisation of its life's work as film literacy spreads through ubiquitous connectivity. Film writing in all its variety continues to exist because while most people can describe what they see and hear in a movie many are unsure of what it means (Corrigan 2004, 1). Readers look to film criticism for interpretation and engagement, and film criticism offers to meet these needs.

The signs of crisis continue. However, the nature and scale of the crisis, whether it is terminal or cyclical, and what are its causes and effects are all open to debate with different stakeholders offering different diagnoses and prognoses. There are multiple factors at play in this debate: the role of evaluation in criticism; the tension between aesthetics and polemics; the possibility of objectivity within an essentially subjective process; and the merging of cultural producers and cultural consumers in the online world of 'produsage' (Bruns 2007). While some predict (and even hope for) its complete demise, others declare it only temporarily incapacitated but redeemable. Still others view the crisis simply as the constantly changing intersection between the old and the new, and signs of crises as evidence of healthy evolution and a promising future.

In attempting to reconcile this montage of views, this essay traces the broad history of film criticism and its key discourses. It outlines the most common paradigms of criticism and identifies some of the historical and contemporary 'battle lines' between academic, industry and popular media approaches to film criticism. It is argued that these lines reflect entrenched professional and ideological positions about the authority of film critics to shape public opinion about film as art and as a commercial product. The debate has significant contemporary impact because it affects filmmaker reputations, box-office potential, and the position of film within the cultural sphere of society. The discussion will focus on film criticism as an activity separate from film theory, while recognising the close nexus between both. The overarching objective is to test the assertion that "film criticism is in crisis".

Cultural Criticism and Film History

The history of film criticism runs parallel to that of cinema. Film criticism did not just appear concurrently or in a causal relationship with cinema, rather it derived from a pre-existing philosophy of cultural criticism. It is important to acknowledge the fundamental anti-authoritarianism of critical thought. As Eagleton put it, "Modern European criticism was born of a struggle against the absolutist state" and grew in response to repressive regimes in an era when the "bourgeoisie begins to carve out for itself a distinctive discursive space" (Eagleton 1985, 9). Thus film criticism has become a conflicted discourse between critics, culture and society in an ongoing struggle to determine "what counts in the sea of what we see" (Corrigan 2016).

In the Age of Enlightenment, literary criticism evolved from "a form of legitimation of court society in the aristocratic salons" to what Habermas called the 'public sphere' of collective thought where individuals could exchange ideas about the existing social and political order (in Eagleton 1985, 9). Criticism thus became a vehicle for interrogating realities and "separating the genuine from the fake, or the creative from the compliantly conventional" (Clayton and Klevan 2011, 5). At its extreme, cultural criticism functions as social satire that has the "feeling of a safety valve where one is relieved to read someone speaking against ruling assumptions. It has a scurrilous, rebellious, blasphemous air, terrorising sacred texts" (10). In this way, cultural criticism is a dialectic between old and new that carries potential for social change.

The century of Enlightenment saw rapid developments in the technology of literary production and dissemination, together with the emerging authority of the 'man of letters'. This label signified a "bearer and dispenser of a generalised ideological wisdom…able to survey the whole cultural and intellectual landscape of his age" (Eagleton 1985, 45). Cultural criticism was core business for the 'man of letters', a role that gradually became professionalised to be distinguishable from the "disreputably amateur literary academy" and to establish criticism as a "rigorously analytical discourse beyond the reach of both common reader and common-room wit" (Eagleton 74). The critic label has thus always been inherently separatist and assertive of the authority to criticise culture at arms-length. Such authority has come to include responsibility to "enquire particularly into what modern literature reflects of

contemporary social experience and into the way in which social life influences the subject, form and language of literature" (Williams 1993, quoted in Cole 2008).

Power struggles between critics and creators have been a constant in the history of cultural criticism. Nineteenth century poet and critic Matthew Arnold, regarded by some as the first modern literary critic, declared that "it is undeniable that the exercise of a creative power…is the highest function of man" (Arnold 1864). He observed that as not all men are possessed of creative genius, they should strive to acquire the lower level function of critical power, the purpose of which is "in all branches of knowledge, theology, philosophy, history, art, science, to see the object as in itself it really is" (Arnold). The critic's task therefore is "simply to know the best that is known and thought in the world, and by in its turn making this known, to create a current of true and fresh ideas" guided principally by the rule of disinterestedness (Arnold). This tension between critic and creator, and the parameters of comparison, evaluation and arms-length objectivity, have always been the bedrock of the critic's task.

Not all accepted the neat separation of criticism and creativity. Writer T. S. Eliot said that "the critic and the creative artist should frequently be the same person" because the "two directions of sensibility are complementary" (Eliot 1921). Eliot derided "bad criticism…which is nothing but the expression of emotion" while true critical sensibility is "an arid cleverness building theoretical scaffolds upon one's own perceptions or those of others" (Eliot 1921). The tension between subjectivity and objectivity in cultural criticism was part of the context into which the film critic first appeared and it continues in contemporary discourse.

The Evolution of Film Criticism
Arnold lived at a time when the available range of arts technology expanded dramatically through the invention of photography in 1839 (Daniel 2004). The ability to freeze time into a representation of reality opened new creative vistas and occupations. The new invention made it possible to record images of history and people, thus allowing "thousands of ordinary people to achieve the kind of immortality that had hitherto been reserved to an elite" (Monaco and Lindroth 2013). The technology of the new art-form progressed from still life to

moving images, then to public viewings in cinemas, evolving incrementally in a way so that "no single event…can be held to separate a nebulous pre-cinema from cinema proper" (Usai, in Nowell-Smith 2008, 20). Within its first two decades, commercial film production had expanded so fast that "what in 1895 had been a mere novelty had by 1913 become an established industry" (Pearson, in Nowell-Smith 32). Within its first century, cinema was already being described as producing "works of art worthy to stand comparison with the masterworks of painting, music, and literature" (Nowell-Smith 14).

The early aspirations of the new cinema industry were about amusement and entertainment rather than art. The physicality of responses from audiences as they ducked an approaching train in the 1895 Lumiere Brothers film demonstrated how convincingly reality could be captured on a screen. As early silent film moved from novelty to serious depictions of life, it was no longer a question of whether film could be considered art but "to what heights would the new art eventually develop?" (Arnheim 1935, 91). Some even asked "is it possible that we are standing on the threshold of a new visual culture?" (Balazs 1922, 56). Social reformers, literary critics and educators of the day recognised the power of the new visual medium to educate the masses in the same way that the advent of the printing press had accelerated the "formation of opinion, the training of manners, (and) the dissemination of ideas" (Williams 1961, 175, quoted in Cole). As film transitioned from the silent era, many believed that the new medium of sound was such a powerful communicator that the film critic's commentary, interpretation, and evaluation would soon be redundant.

During these formative years, every new major film represented a stage of technical development for the emergent art-form. These milestones signalled a new cinematic technique or some "artistic means to make the plot, the characters, and the background visually comprehensible", and communicating the historical significance of such of developments "should have been the task of the film critic of the day" (Arhheim 1935, 91). The critic was thus envisaged as a practical observer of innovation in film, and the task was conceived as a public reporter of newsworthy changes such as the appearance of new theatres and films that were shown (Bywater and Sobchack 1989, 5).

Even in the early era, critics were targets for criticism, often from within their own ranks. In 1935, a prominent film critic described his role as no more than a "second-rate job for local reporters" whose task was to copy other critics of books, paintings, novels and theatre (Arnheim 1935, 90). To move beyond such idle aesthetics to matters of substance, the critic must take "consideration of film as an economic product, and as an expression of political and moral viewpoints", (Arnheim 93). Rather than treat cinema as a "little luxury theatre in which a few independent artists act for a few art lovers" the future critic must recognise film's potential for social transformation (Arnheim 95). Thus the task of future critics should be "to rid the world of the comic figure the average film critic and film theorist of today represents" and analyse film in its wider cultural context (Arnheim, quoted in Singer 2012).

The subjectivity and objectivity debate has appeared regularly in film criticism discourse, with some early commentators rejecting the possibility of objectivity in film criticism entirely. For example, in the mid-1930s prominent BBC critic Alistair Cooke asserted that as a critic his role was to write "without politics and without class" and that however much he might want to "rage or protest or moralise", his main role was to "decide whether Miss Harlow's smiles and pouts were performed expertly enough to entice Mr. Gable away" (quoted in Frey 2015, 64). Others took the opposite view, arguing that criticism could not exist in a values vacuum and that critics who claimed that their functions were divorced from polemic were "merely indulging in a voluntary self-emasculation" as there was no such thing as value-free criticism (Frey 65). Three decades later, during what many describe as the heyday of cinema, the debate was re-opened in the respected journal *Film Quarterly* in the essay "Towards an Objective Film Criticism" (Jarvie 1961). It argued that while the search for objective principles may be contentious it does not mean that such principles do not exist and "there is no harm in film criticism copying science to the extent of making clear-cut statements about the way the film works" (Jarvie 22). Critical objectivity represents a dividing line between professional and amateur film criticism as readers are generally "suspicious of personal involvement with films and apprehensive of value judgements" (Clayton and Klevan 2011, 2).

Cinema experienced rapid growth over the 20th century, with larger audiences viewing longer films with increasing complexity of content. More substantial

films invited more substantial and elaborate criticism, leading to extended articles appearing in newly established film journals. The appearance of 'serious' film art magazines and journals gave film cultural respectability and a public sphere for discourse. In addition to critiquing films, critics of the early era were lobbyists for the medium, the industry and their role (Bywater and Sobchack 1989, 7). They argued that criticism was essential for the future of film and asserted their critical authority as arbiters of film culture (Frey 2015, 30). The growing acceptance of film as art was due in no small measure to the critic's role in "calling for more refined productions and cinematic techniques and pointing out the need for individual creativity to enable the cinema to achieve the established arts' level of sophistication" (Frey 31). Cinema's gradual adaptation of well-known literary works further encouraged the influx of cast and crew from the theatre world into film and the "proliferation of artistic films based on high-cultural aspirations" (Frey 33). The gradual introduction of film studies at university level in the latter part of the last century also brought film criticism into closer contact with traditional literary disciplines and academic traditions that enhanced its standing as a discipline in its own right.

The early era also saw the emergence of celebrity critics with a variety of entertaining writing styles that broadened readerships and raised the critic's public profile. In the heyday of the movie era, some celebrity critics were said to have the "oral swagger of gunslingers" who were "quick on the draw and easy to rile, they had the power to kill individual films and kneecap entire careers" (Wolcott, in Hoberman 1998, 531). They even attracted admiration from high-culture literati. For example, W. H. Auden described the work of one such critic as being:

> …of such profound interest, expressed with such extraordinary wit and felicity, and so transcends its ostensible…subject, that his articles belong in that very select class…of newspaper work which has permanent literary value (in Bywater and Sobchack 10).

By the end of the century film criticism had come full circle. From humble origins it grew to celebrity prominence, only to face the next wave of technological innovation and social transformation. The decline of print-based media and the retrenchment of prominent celebrity critics in the early 2000s triggered a wave of pronouncements that criticism was dead. Reports of its

demise, however, were clearly premature as the writing genre continues to evolve. On the centennial anniversary of film itself, eminent film critic Susan Sontag declared that "cinema's 100 years seem to have the shape of a life cycle: an inevitable birth, the steady accumulation of glories and the onset in the last decade of an ignominious, irreversible decline…(into)…astonishingly witless…bloated, derivative film-making" (Sontag 1995). Instead of declining, however, film continues to evolve "from the collective gatherings in public spaces to the intimacy and isolation of one's own cell-phone screen, from celluloid to pixels, and from palpable supports to intangible streaming" (Sayad 2016). In the world of ubiquitous connectivity, there is a greater diversity of film criticism than ever before that is meeting a wider variety of needs. This overview of the evolution of film criticism provides a context in which to consider the typologies of film criticism in contemporary society.

Approaches to Film Criticism

Discussion of film criticism pre-supposes that the term has an agreed and singular meaning. However, in common usage the terms film reviewer, film critic, and film writer or film journalist are conflated and used interchangeably. This obscures significant definitional differences. Film reviews emerged in the early days of cinema tasked with reporting the release of new films and describing their contents in the popular media. The review still tends to be a description of a film's storyline that includes subjective and evaluative opinion, often with a numerical rating.

The term film criticism, however, tends to refer to a broader consideration of film as a cultural artefact. It is often associated with academic protocols that "investigate the medium as an aesthetic, social and historical phenomenon", usually with the intent to publish in peer-reviewed and similar media (Bywater and Sobchack, 1989 xii). While a reviewer and a critic may at times be the same person, historically they have different backgrounds and different purposes. In practical terms, the range and styles of contemporary film writing more closely resemble a continuum of hybrids rather than a dichotomy because of the variety of purpose, format and relationships with stakeholders. Along this continuum it is possible to identify different frames of reference and analytical paradigms.

If film was reducible to a single explanation, interpretation, or description there would be little variety or controversy in film writing. However, readership needs vary widely in terms of education, age, gender and other socio-political demographics. They are also dependent on whether a review is read before, after, or instead of viewing a film. Pre-film readers tend to seek general information about genre label, plot description, casting and sometimes production details (like directing and filming) in order to make a decision about which film to see. Post-film readers are more likely to be seeking engagement with a film in order to test or expand their interpretation. There are also readers who do not see a film for a variety of reasons but who vicariously experience the movie by reading film criticism. The variety of film writing and film readership is compounded by the existence of different frames of reference and paradigms for explaining film.

Frames of Reference

Film writing occurs within one of two broad frames of reference in relation to the object being written about: the textual and contextual. Textual criticism emphasises the seen or about to be seen film because typically, "it is the text of the particular film – its plot, characters, themes, performers, and technical competence – that first arouses (reader) curiosity" (Bywater and Sobchack 1). Textual criticism focuses on a specific film and is the predominant writing mode for the descriptive reviews found in newspapers and other mass media.

The contextual frame of reference goes beyond a particular film to include analysis of extra-textual criteria. For example, such a review might incorporate social, political or cultural themes, or include reference to other films by the same director. In practice, film criticism often incorporates several extra-textual elements in the process of contexualising a particular film. The key difference is that in the contextual frame "the individual film has little critical importance by itself" (Bywater and Sobchack 50). As the frame of reference broadens beyond analysis of the particular film, several explanatory models may be mobilised simultaneously that "revolve around the interplay between the experience of individual (the text) and the cumulative experience of many films" (Bywater and Sobchack 50).

Explanatory Models

In practice, the analysis of film draws from a variety of explanatory models, the most common being the humanist, auteurist, social scientific, historical, ideological and genre paradigms. Collectively, they offer rich and varied insights into film, while at the same time, they reflect the diversity of purpose and approach in contemporary film criticism.

The humanist paradigm is invoked when criticism focuses on a particular film in the context of other films and its relationship to social, political, and philosophic considerations (Bywater and Sobchack 2). A guiding question within this paradigm is "what is there in this film or in my experience of it that will help me understand the variety and complexity of the human heart and mind?" (27). Such questions go beyond descriptive information to a deeper consideration of the film's cinematic contributions and often incorporate an element of comparative evaluation. Like other cultural products, film is evaluated by asking, as Arnold did in 1864, whether its aesthetic and symbolic qualities are recognisably superior to others and how these qualities produce meaning through the deployment of visual and aural devices in dialogue and action (Bywater and Sobchack 35).

The auteur paradigm has a focus on films made by or featuring a single auteur. Auteur analysis often draws comparisons with previous films by the same director or actor in order to identify critical differences that can aid the interpretation of a film or group of films. While it is a useful taxonomic device, it has limitations as an explanatory paradigm because it assumes the film is driven by personal creative talent. In reality, the capitalist imperatives that underlie filmmaking often render auteur assumptions unsustainable. Auteurs historically enjoyed high levels of influence over a film as producer, director, writer or actor. However, contemporary films are elaborate corporate enterprises that involve large numbers of people, and crediting an auteur with the outcome does not reflect the film's diversity of inputs, compromises and constraints. Auteurism is also vulnerable to the halo-effect that praises a particular film because of its oeuvre, lineage or heritage. Films by distinguished auteurs are no less vulnerable at the box-office as "hundreds of films are spoiled each year because directors are permitted without restraint to make a picture precisely as they please" (Kaufman, in Bywater and Sobchack 56). Apart from its analytical value and limitations, the auteurist critical paradigm has contributed to the evolution of film criticism because "an art form, and the

critic who examines that art form, needs an artist, and auteur theory supplied the artists" (Bywater and Sobchack 78).

The social science paradigm considers film in terms of its psychological or sociological impact. The film critic writing in this paradigm "sees films as the artefacts or manifestations of a particular culture at a particular time" and seeks to identify causal links between film and human behaviour (Bywater and Sobchack 113). As early as 1911, for example, the portrayal of violence in 'cowboy and Indian' films and the use of film in political propaganda and religious indoctrination were raised as concerns for public policy (Bywater and Sobchack 111). Film can also be discussed in terms its impact on personal and national identity and how it draws on the many "disguised and unconscious dramas of fear and wish fulfilment" that underpin social and cultural mythology (121-127). For example, the term 'Hollywood dream factory' represents the aspirational lure of the values and goals embedded in filmmaking and its place as a commodity production within the capitalist system. The social scientific view draws on empirical methodologies that foreground the behaviour of audiences, filmmakers and other parts of the film industry, rather than the aesthetics or intent of film as cultural text.

Film criticism within the historical paradigm interrogates the veracity and authenticity of a film's depiction of earlier times. The history of cinema is relatively short and samples of films have survived for all the years from 1895 (Bywater and Sobchack 138) thus making it possible to examine films as historical records of their eras. In this context, film has recorded a significant part of world history since the early 20th century and thus it could be said that "Hollywood is the main repository of cultural memory" (Hoberman 1998, 533). While the historical paradigm is often invoked in critiques of film genres such as historical drama and biography, it has a limited capacity to empirically verify history. It is also limited by the ethno-centricism and patriarchal nature of history in which narratives of "its heroes and heroines, its fools and villains" have been recorded overwhelmingly from the male perspective (Bywater and Sobchack 143). Despite such limitations, the historical paradigm draws insights from a wide range of spatial and temporal contexts and is a significant addition to the film critic's explanatory repertoire.

Criticism within the ideological paradigm is the analysis of film in terms of social and political values. For example, several recent films that depict the consequences of the 2008 Global Financial Crisis implicitly or explicitly invoke a political critique of American capitalism. Many films that depict the social institutions of marriage and family implicitly invoke ideologies surrounding norms of romantic heterosexuality, domestic patriarchal domination and issues relating to same-sex marriage, as well as the role of women in society and the political aesthetics of phallocentric visual pleasure in narrative cinema (Mulvey 1999). Film criticism within this paradigm explores dimensions of the essentially contested fabric of society and analysis of any specific film is relevant only in the wider context of ideological values.

By far the most common critical paradigm is the analysis of films based on genre. Hollywood-produced genre films are universally recognisable through a coda of labels and motifs that communicate their narratives symbolically. Genre labels inform audiences what to expect in a movie and how to interpret what is seen. Audiences generally prefer to know what a film is about before deciding whether to see it because, as Hoberman put it, "familiarity may breed contempt but commercial cinema trades on prior acquaintance…genres rule." (1998, 529). As the studio system of the early 20th Century became the most cost-efficient means of production, films with easily recognised narrative structure, motifs and cinematic styles became the standard product under common labels such as western, horror, drama, comedy, thriller, musical and romance. Early critics showed widespread disdain for genre films and saw audiences as "the great unwashed who were in need of large doses of cultural training" (Bywater and Sobchack 82). Criticism within the genre paradigm focuses on narrative structure and content in relation to the film's social and political contexts (Bywater and Sobchack 82). Genre analysis is both popular and analytically significant as it shows how film can be understood as a reflection or meditation on society.

Critical Tensions: Film Industry, the Profession and Technology
The diversity of explanatory models has made film criticism accessible and relevant to everyone, and in that sense, it contributes to the culture of democracy. Film has long been described as the most democratic of art-forms, one that has "practically abolished the numerous and envious distinctions of price and class in all the playhouses where it holds exclusive sway" (Frey 2015,

53). Given the scale of film consumption in the modern era and its function as a repository of contemporary culture it can be argued that this description is more true today than ever before. It is ironic therefore that film criticism is perceived to be in crisis simply because the power and authority to speak about film has become further democratised in the contemporary online environment. Much of this so-called crisis in film criticism originates in shifting power relations, it is useful to identify some of the key tensions between industry, the critic profession and technological change.

Relations with Industry

Film criticism was born as a creature of the film industry and there has always been a 'love-hate' relationship between the two. Criticism in the 1920s was "defined within an institutional framework that represented economic rather than aesthetic concerns" (Hake, in Frey 43). The critic's role to inform the public about movies, "herald and agitate for better films", and to a lesser extent, "guiding the cinema's aesthetic progress" (43). The early critic's role was thus to mediate between industry and audience, an inherently unstable and vulnerable role. For example, where the critic is too closely linked to industry they are seen as a mouthpiece for filmmakers and as adopting industry discourse as news (Frey, 42). For its part, the film industry routinely dismisses negative criticism when it suits their commercial interests, reflecting the "uneasy balance that early film writers struck between catering to the industry, their ultimate paymasters, and pampering the delicate, infant art" (Frey 45).

This symbiotic relationship between critics and industry is potentially compromising for both. Sympathetic links with industry result in critics receiving benefits such as privileged press screenings and being granted a "discrete space and advanced knowledge… to reinforce their authority and distinguish them from mere viewers" (Frey 38). This often includes privileged access to directors and cast, and information for media gossip circuits. Movies entail massive investment hence it is natural that marketing executives seek to control the public message about their product and unsympathetic film critics impede their control of information. This delicately balanced industrial-commercial nexus between studios and critics has led to accusations that "to be a movie reviewer is to strike a Faustian bargain with the industry" which

makes the critic "part of a vast machine devoted to inculcating the mass urge-to-see" (Hoberman 1998, 530).

On the other hand, professional film critics need to maintain some level of engagement with industry to have authority in their profession. Critics who willingly distanced themselves from industry, it is argued, "only forfeited their influence on improving productions and actually precipitated perceptions of a crisis of criticism" (Frey 44). Film writers without insider contacts have less contextual information for critiquing new films and can be criticised for lack of technical knowledge. One industry-oriented view argues that film critics need to appreciate that a film is "the end result of a complex problem-solving activity" and critics are encouraged to regard "mediocre films as those made by novices who possess insufficient know-how to solve filmmaking problems" (Buckland 2016). This debate about the role of critics in relation to creators, first articulated by Arnold in 1864, remains relevant in contemporary film criticism discourse.

The Critic Profession

Film historian Nowell-Smith observes that by the mid 20th century, film criticism was not a well-regarded writing genre and many media publishers believed that "reviewers could pontificate, safe in the knowledge that however little they knew of what they were talking about, their readers knew even less" (Nowell-Smith 2008). Over the following decades there was an "opening up of a space for a film-critical practice" that, Nowell-Smith argues, did little to advance the professionalisation of film criticism which had wallowed in "bourgeois subjectivism" (2008). The rapid expansion of cultural studies in higher educational institutions in the latter 20th century consolidated film studies as an academic discipline. The strengthened link between criticism and academia was seen by some as a mixed blessing because the academic emphasis on the "verifiable and generalizable…had squeezed out more adventurous forms of writing" (Nowell-Smith). The establishment of *The Journal of Popular Film* in 1972 was one of many milestones for the new interdisciplinary field that has integrated perspectives and practices from literary criticism, psychology, sociology, journalism, history, political science, and mass communications (Frey 93). These disciplinary strands now underpin the analytical paradigms of contemporary film criticism discussed earlier.

The closer links between professional critics and higher education brought new tensions into film writing that revived historical debates concerning the aesthetic versus the polemic in film criticism. As film studies consolidated its status as an academic discipline it drew on the traditions of literary studies that emphasised close readings of 'the text'. Some critics argue that "film criticism at its strongest remains focused on the specific instance" (Gunning 2016) and that "as a special, visceral, and emotional form, film demands a close, rather than distanced form of criticism, performed by those with practical experience" (Frey 47). Others argue that the film critic has a broader social purpose than 'the text' and that "criticism must be embedded in an understanding of social and political culture" (Rushton 2016). This debate echoes Arnheim's 1935 advocacy for the social and political relevance of film criticism. Neither the specificity of aesthetic detail or its extrapolation into socio-political contexts can alone fulfil the purpose of cultural criticism. While the conflicting viewpoints are seen by some as evidence of crisis and a "lingering, cultural snobbishness" towards traditional literary-based critical expression (Martin 2016), others dismiss the debate as being "divorced from the realities of the industry" (Frey 46). This ongoing discourse about the core function of a discipline or profession is normal and constructive and does not of itself constitute an existential crisis.

Technological Change

The advent of the internet has fundamentally restructured the relationship between cultural producers and cultural consumers. Where knowledge was once concentrated within the boundaries of academic disciplines or professions, the internet has made knowledge almost universally accessible. This reality causes tension within film criticism because on the one hand "internet utopians" celebrate the new democracy in film criticism, and on the other, professional critics bemoan their loss of "traditional authority to speak and be heard by the public: the critic, several prominent commentators have concluded, is dead" (Frey 2015, 12).

The advent of ubiquitous computing has atomised the traditional authority of film critics to the point that the "film critic's labour was no longer a privilege of the few" (Klein, 2016). The proliferation of online criticism is not confined to "just the fanboys and your recluse aunt" but includes vast numbers of single-authored professional blogs encouraged by the ease of publication without

peer review or strict publishing criteria (Klein 2016). In this way, the blogosphere offered a "space of democratic exchange where rank disappeared" and where film enthusiasts could engage in conversations about film ideas (Klein). Many critics have adjusted to technological change, saying that "it really does not matter where the criticism is (in a book or a blog) or how long (140 characters or encyclopaedic) or what form (prose or a cartoon or parody film)" (Staiger 2016). What does matter, it is argued, is the critic's ability to engage with film in ways ranging from "historical, theoretical, stylistic and social considerations to anecdotes, gossip, and interventions as minimalist as the clicking on a "Like" icon" (Sayad 2016).

The online proliferation of alternative sources of information represents new opportunities for cultural engagement, as well as challenges to the boundaries of traditional repositories of knowledge. It is arguable that professional critics who publicly protest their loss of authority as cultural critics are reflecting "nostalgia for an age in which criticism could change why, how, and even whether one saw a film" (Flaxman 2016). Early adaptors of new technology have embraced new opportunities to contribute to film literacy and enjoyment while others continue to argue for the restoration of traditional critical authority. As print-media transitions towards the online environment that is already populated by vast numbers of aspiring or accomplished authors, the voice of the 'man of letters' still echoes the elitism of a former era. While many still insist that "as film scholars, critics, and historians...we have an obligation, more so than ever perhaps, to decide what matters and why it matters" (Corrigan 2016), the new generation of cinephiles are deciding for themselves.

Conclusion

This research set out to test the assertion that film criticism is in crisis. It surveys the history of film criticism, examines various types of film criticism, and discusses issues relating to the film industry, the critic profession, and technological change. From this survey, it can be said that film criticism is far from existential crisis. Despite natural tensions with industry, academe and technology, film criticism today is as vibrant, relevant and widely consumed as film itself.

The artform of film pervades every aspect of our cultural life and, as one critic put it, "prophesying the imminent death of the medium is a tad parochial"

because "most of the world's citizens still watch movies whether at home or in theatres" (Ganguly 2016). Traditional film is transitioning to its next stage of evolution, beyond the audio-visual to what is being called the "New Cinephilia" (Shambu 2014). The new film is a multi-media artform that is "essentially digital, interactive, networked, ludic, miniaturized, mobile, social, processual, algorithmic, aggregative, environmental, or convergent, among other things" (Denson and Leyda 2016, 1). Like much of social change, the future of film cannot be mapped with precision. The emerging 'post-cinema' era is being described by some as a "transitional movement taking place along an uncertain timeline, following an indeterminate trajectory, and characterized by juxtapositions and overlaps between the techniques, technologies, and aesthetic conventions of 'old' and 'new' moving image media" (Denson and Leyda 6). In this environment, nothing can be certain except accelerated change and society's continuing fascination for cultural storytelling in whatever media connects with people.

Just as celluloid has transitioned to digital formats, the new film criticism is moving to new media, a change that requires cultural adjustment by all institutional guardians. The next generation of film criticism is emerging "at the very moment when so many digital practices, amateur and sophisticated, are blasting open new paths and forms, from the humble, jokey, YouTube mashup to the most elaborate audio-visual essay" (Martin 2016). Print and online discourse reveal there is both resistance and enthusiasm for change. Cultural transformation occurs at the intersection of the old and the new and "snobbery today is the symptom of a criticism that has refused to work through the schism between a fading film culture and an ascendant fan culture" (Flaxman 2016). The task of film criticism is "precisely to bridge the divide between film culture and fan culture" (Flaxman 2016) so that criticism can continue what is has always done and that is to help readers "steer through texts" (Staiger 2016).

Vigorous debate does not constitute crisis. Historical links and ground rules between film criticism and its institutional frameworks are making way for new practices. Old battles are becoming out-of-date and making way for new ones. As one writer put it "although the institutions and profession of criticism have undergone profound transformations, their impact on criticism's aims do not run as deep. Its role remains one and the same: to inform filmic tastes…"

(Sayad 2016). The film criticism of the future is secure while ever it contributes to a "continuing conversation about a work" (Klevan 2016) and a deeper understanding of the artform of film.

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