The Permanent Crisis of Film Criticism
Film Theory in Media History explores the epistemological and theoretical foundations of the study of film through texts by classical authors as well as anthologies and monographs on key issues and developments in film theory. Adopting a historical perspective, but with a firm eye to the further development of the field, the series provides a platform for ground-breaking new research into film theory and media history and features high-profile editorial projects that offer resources for teaching and scholarship. Combining the book form with open access online publishing the series reaches the broadest possible audience of scholars, students, and other readers with a passion for film and theory.

Series editors: Prof. dr. Vinzenz Hediger (Goethe Universität, Frankfurt am Main), dr. Trond Lundemo (Stockholm University), and prof. dr. Weihong Bao (Berkeley, University of California)

Advisory board: Prof. dr. Dudley Andrew (Yale University), prof. dr. Ray Raymond (CNRS Paris), prof. dr. Chris Berry (Goldsmiths, University of London), prof. dr. Francesco Casetti (Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milano, Yale University), prof. dr. Thomas Elsaesser (Universiteit van Amsterdam), prof. dr. Jane Gaines (Columbia University and Duke University), prof. dr. André Gaudreault (University of Montréal), prof. dr. Gertrud Koch (Free University of Berlin), prof. dr. John Mac (Yale University), prof. dr. Markus Nornes (University of Michigan), prof. dr. Patricia Pisters (Universiteit van Amsterdam), prof. dr. Leonardo Quaresima (University of Udine), prof. dr. David Rodowick (Harvard University), prof. dr. Philip Rosen (Brown University), prof. dr. Petr Szczepanik (Masaryk University, Brno), prof. dr. Brian Winston (Lincoln University)

Film Theory in Media History is published in cooperation with the Permanent Seminar for the History of Film Theories.
The Permanent Crisis of Film Criticism

The Anxiety of Authority

Mattias Frey

Amsterdam University Press
This book is published in print and online through the online OAPEN library (www.oapen.org).

OAPEN (Open Access Publishing in European Networks) is a collaborative initiative to develop and implement a sustainable Open Access publication model for academic books in the Humanities and Social Sciences. The OAPEN Library aims to improve the visibility and usability of high quality academic research by aggregating peer reviewed Open Access publications from across Europe.

Cover illustration: From Speak Easily (1932), courtesy of Everett Collection / Rex Features.

Cover design: Suzan Beijer, Amersfoort
Lay-out: JAPES, Amsterdam

Amsterdam University Press English-language titles are distributed in the US and Canada by the University of Chicago Press.

ISBN 978 90 8964 717 7
e-ISBN 978 90 4852 447 1
NUR 670

Creative Commons License CC BY NC
(http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0)

© M. Frey / Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 2015

Some rights reserved. Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, any part of this book may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise).
# Table of Contents

Acknowledgements .................................................. 9

Introduction .......................................................... 11

1. The Birthing Pains of the First Professionals: Promotion and Distinction .......................... 25

2. Second-Wave Crises of Proximity and Distance: Relating to the Industry and the Audience ........................................ 41

3. The Institutional Assertion of Authority: *Sight and Sound* and the Postwar Cinephile Challenge ........................................ 61

4. From “I” to “We”: *Filmkritik* and the Limits of Kracauerism in Postwar German Film Criticism ........................................ 81

5. The Anxiety of Influence: The “Golden Age” of Criticism, the Rise of the TV Pundit, and the Memory of Pauline Kael .... 101

6. The Spectre of “Democratization” in the Digital Age .......................... 125

Conclusion. What is the Good of Authoritative Critics? .......................... 141

Notes .................................................................. 147

Bibliography .......................................................... 171

Index .................................................................. 187
Introduction

The aims and status of arts and culture criticism are currently up for revision and under attack, according to a whole host of indicators. Numerous articles and academic monographs offer jeremiads on *The Crisis of Criticism* or mourn *The Death of the Critic*.\(^1\) Regular symposia and conferences dwell on the many, sometimes prominent film journalists made redundant at newspapers, magazines, and other "old media" in past years;\(^2\) Sean P. Means lists 55 American movie critics who lost their jobs between 2006 and 2009 as pithy obituaries of the profession.\(^3\) The reasons provided to explain the current situation include the worldwide recession and, more fundamentally, reluctant and increasingly apathetic consumers of print media. These developments have brought forth serious questions about the purpose and worth of criticism in the age of WordPress blogospheres and a perceived democratization of criticism.

Gerald Peary’s 2009 documentary *For the Love of Movies: The History of American Film Criticism* is a disaster movie; it begins with the following epigraph over a black screen: "Today, film criticism is a profession under siege. According to VARIETY, 28 reviewers have lost their jobs in the last several years." Peary is referring to the trade paper’s contemporaneous article, which asked, “Are Film Critics Really Needed Anymore ... Or Is It a Washed-Up Profession?”\(^4\) But it is not only industry insiders—long antagonistic or sceptical towards criticism in the mainstream press—who are posing earnest questions.\(^5\) All critics today, according to historian Raymond J. Haberski, “believe that the movies are in a state of crisis”; this is because “a public debate over art no longer exists.”\(^6\) In October 2008, *Sight and Sound* devoted its title article to the necessity and use of critics.\(^7\) Although criticism has from time to time “enjoyed its teeth-baring and wound-licking moments of ‘crisis,’” editor-in-chief Nick James writes, “this time there is real pain.”\(^8\) Among the many, perhaps insurmountable and irreversible challenges James lists include the free access to reviews from established sources on the internet, the “army of [unpaid] opinionated bloggers,” the falls in print advertising and readership, and distributors’ willingness to bypass reviewers altogether.\(^9\) Worst of all, James concludes, is the new generation’s attitude towards analysis and, even, the truth: “The culture prefers, it seems, the sponsored slogan to judicious assessment.”\(^10\)

More or less simultaneously, the American *Cineaste* magazine published a dossier on “Film Criticism in the Age of the Internet,” which covered similar ground.\(^11\) Although attempting to provide a “neutral” dialogue between print and internet critics and “put to rest some of the hoarier accusations [...] that Internet criticism is...
riddled with amateurs who are diluting once-vibrant standards," the editors admit that the changes to criticism are irrevocable: "We are now – unavoidably – part of a hybrid landscape and can only hope that good criticism will prevail over bad in both magazines and the Internet."12

Elsewhere, I argue that the debates around film criticism in the digital age revolve around the following questions:13 How have the new media altered the purpose of criticism? Should evaluation be a function of criticism, or even its principle aim? What should be the nature of the relationship between the critic and his or her audience? How have the new media changed film criticism as an activity and form? How have new media transformed film criticism as a profession and institution? Has criticism become more "democratic"?

Nevertheless, all of these overlapping and interlocking questions – which pertain to economic, institutional, professional, aesthetic, cultural, and other concerns – can be more or less reduced to the one that has been asked and answered most widely and heatedly. It regards the role of the critic in the public sphere (the authoritative critic vs. a democratic plurality of voices) and can be encapsulated in the demand: Today, who is entitled to speak about film and in what way? Although some internet utopians have responded to this question with a celebration of the new democracy to compose criticism and universal access to consume it, among professional critics and academics the overwhelming and most vocal stance – as the initial quotations above have demonstrated – has been to argue that in the digital age critics have lost their traditional authority to speak and be heard by the public: the critic, several prominent commentators have concluded, is dead.

Despite the existential urgency and brave-new-world rhetoric underpinning the debate, these “new media” problems are hardly without precedent. The history of film criticism and moments of self-reflection and crisis in the face of perceived threats to the profession reveal the roots to these problems and also serve as productive examples to contextualize and confront what initially appears to be a new challenge. Specifically, this project examines historical discourses of crisis in film criticism in order to understand the current crisis and intervene in the contemporary debate over the role of the critic in the digital age. This book reveals how the discourse of crisis is hardly new; indeed, it has been endemic in criticism since the earliest professional film critics. The need to assert critical authority, and the anxieties over challenges to that authority, are longstanding tropes; they have, I argue, animated and choreographed the trajectory of international film criticism since its origins.

The Death of the Critic?

Before defining critical authority and proposing my own approach and contribution to this debate, I first need to outline the major works that I set out to contest. To understand how professional critics have responded to the question of the new role
of the critic in the public sphere, let us examine a 2007 Film Ireland article entitled "The Critic is Dead ...," one that has been cited by other critics as an instrumental programmatic piece. Jasmina Kallay argues that, in the age of the digital, film critics no longer have the ability to decisively shape taste and have also lost their traditional power to "make or break" a film. "Printed opinion has lost its hold," Kallay claims, "and the plethora of individuals proffering their two-pence worth in blogs means we are no longer governed by a hierarchy within which a select few opinion-makers shape views and attitudes." Indeed, Kallay writes, referring to Mark Dery's book on cyberculture discourses, we now live in a world unmediated by respected authorities and trusted experts: "In this climate of co-creation," in which the roles of critic and audience are reversible and interchangeable, "the average internet user is more likely to post his/her opinion before seeking out a more qualified criticism." Citing special "press" screenings for bloggers and the frequent lists of the Top 1000 movies or "films to see before you die," Kallay argues that such phenomena are, in the first instance, evidence of the print critic's growing irrelevance to the industry and audiences and, in the second instance, "a last ditch attempt to exert some ever-diminishing authority." Seen symptomatically, these examples show that the critic – if not dead – is critically ill: "The simple lesson to be gleaned from this case in point is that the film reviewer's influence is firmly on the wane and powerless."

The rhetoric of crisis and death in Kallay's journalistic squib is similar to that employed in the academic discourse and indeed in the most comprehensive recent scholarly work addressing this debate. In The Death of the Critic, Rónán McDonald proposes a historical process by which criticism has come to be devalued as a social good and the critic's status in the public sphere has diminished. He mourns the end of a particular kind of criticism and how the role of the critic has shifted from mediator, "a figure to whom a wide audience might look as a judge of quality or a guide to meaning," to a marionette who "confirms and assuages their prejudices and inclinations rather than challenging them." Specifically, he defends the need for "public critics" along the lines of Lionel Trilling, Pauline Kael, or Susan Sontag, who, McDonald posits, no longer have a place in contemporary media and society. In this regard, McDonald echoes earlier commentators. Already in 1984, Terry Eagleton diagnosed a "crisis of criticism" and argued that, "in a period in which, with the decline of the public sphere, the traditional authority of criticism has been called into serious question, a reaffirmation of that authority is urgently needed." McDonald's assessment also resounds with Maurice Berger's collection of prominent critics' essays on The Crisis of Criticism from 1998: "now the critic is often expendable in the process of determining what is good art and what is bad art"; Berger is quite clear that "the critic has lost his or her aura of respect."

Unlike Berger, however, McDonald pinpoints what he believes to be the origins and historical caesura of the "crisis" in criticism. Although he sketches a history of arts criticism from the earliest articulations of modern aesthetics with Baumgarten, Hume, and Kant through Coleridge, Hazlitt, and Arnold, the major focus lies on what
McDonald (quoting Martin Amis) refers to as the “age of criticism” (1948 to the early 1970s) and on the prominent, neo-Arnoldian figures such as F.R. Leavis and Lionel Trilling. Nostalgic for this period, in which critical writing was more or less indistinguishable between learned journals and broadsheets, McDonald maintains that the end of the era also signalled the end of an authoritative, public criticism: in other words, the “death of the critic.” From this point on – and paradoxically at a time when student numbers were surging and pop culture was becoming a more acceptable object of inquiry at universities – scholarly and journalistic criticism began to diverge and the public imagination became “immune to issues and debates” in academia. Rather than more bloggers and a further atomization or “democratization” of critical writing, McDonald asserts, the public wants recognized, erudite, authoritative critics in an Arnoldian vein who are able to challenge prevailing tastes and communicate to a wide audience.

Raymond J. Haberski’s narrative of American film criticism strikingly resembles McDonald’s death of the critic. It’s Only a Movie! Films and Critics in American Culture presents a sprawling survey of American film culture and a synopsis of the country’s film critics. His appraisal introduces “a series of case studies of the gradual inclusion of movies as art and what that development did to the cultural authority of critics.” He chronicles debates about the aesthetic value of cinema; Cahiers du cinéma and the American “auteur theory”; the establishment of the New York Film Festival and the American Film Institute; New Hollywood and the rise of film-school directors. In so doing he charts a familiar rise of film as art, a brief “golden age of criticism” and “heroic age of moviegoing” until the early 1970s, and then a subsequent fall of criticism that Haberski blames for the loss of authority once held by prominent critics such as Pauline Kael and Andrew Sarris. Leading a charge against film scholars, who “attempt to fit commonplace occurrences into large methodological schemes,” and “champions of populist criticism” alike, Haberski claims that this decline of authority has meant that the role of the critic has become “polarized into the twin camps of academia and irrelevance.” The “democratization of criticism” associated with blogs, Twitter, and the current crisis, Haberski claims, have “undermined the national conversation over the meaning of culture.” Today we live in a world experiencing “a general waning of interest among the most recent generation of moviegoers who replaced the faith of their parents with a sense of apathy.” Because of the decline of critical authority, the “meaning of culture has fractured into parts that no longer need to be defined with a common culture.” Like McDonald, Haberski advocates a return of “influential” public critics such as Kael and Sarris: “Without something to fight against – such as the cultural authority of critics – there remains little reason to get excited.”

In sum, Kallay, McDonald, and Haberski represent variations on the most vocal theme in recent theoretical questions about arts criticism: the internet’s plurality of interchangeable opinions must be combated with authoritative critics committed to artistic evaluation and (more or less Arnoldian) public engagement. A remarkable
aspect of their responses is the extent to which they echo traditional discourses about the state of the public sphere. Indeed, the commentators nearly always service what scholar Alan McKee calls the “five major themes” common to concerns about the public sphere: that it is too trivialized, commercialized, spectacular, and fragmented, and that it has caused citizens to become too apathetic. In particular and above all, discussions of the “death of the critic” rehearse cultural anxieties over “trivialization/dumbing down” and the “fragmentation/atomization” of culture. Before moving to my own approach to the question of film critics’ perceived loss of critical authority, I need to examine more closely how this rhetoric informs the debate.

According to sociologist Herbert J. Gans, the “dumbing-down” thesis “can suggest that the culture being supplied is less sophisticated or complicated, or tasteful, or thoughtful, or statusful than a past one,” although sometimes it is also employed to describe the audiences being addressed, “who are thought to have declined in taste, intelligence, and status.” The “dumbing-down” thesis is frequently employed to express disapproval of “blockbuster” exhibitions by venerable museums or when public television channels replace documentaries and foreign films with popular music programmes. Its basic patterns, occasionally conflated with the “commercialization” argument, inform much of the “crisis of criticism” debate. Examples abound, from Terry Eagleton’s remarks that criticism is today a corporate “part of the public relations branch,” to Nick James’s assertion that “the sponsored slogan” has replaced considered assessment, to Armond White’s polemics about “Internetters” who “express their expertise,” which essentially is either their contempt or idiocy about films, filmmakers, or professional critics. Indeed, following White, a major iteration of this critique suggests that today’s “critics” are not educated professionals at all, but rather prejudiced self-promoters parachuted in from other walks of life, comparable to reality TV stars and more versed in the teachings of Kim Kardashian than interested in the artistic value of Jean Renoir or Michelangelo Antonioni. McDonald, in a more elegant articulation of this sentiment, places the shibboleth between the public “critic” (who represents an endangered, if not extinct breed today), and the mere “reviewer,” of which there is no dearth.

The second common anxiety about the public sphere, the “atomization/fragmentation” argument, follows from the first. It causes Eagleton to claim that “criticism today lacks all substantive social function” because of a “disintegration of the classical public sphere” and an “increasingly fragmented and uneven” audience; McDonald argues for the return of authoritative, public intellectuals whose pronouncements will guide the reader and find a common artistic heritage of quality. One key to understanding McDonald’s arguments for an authoritative critic (and which also accounts for White’s outburst above) has to do specifically with unease about the position of intellectuals vis-à-vis popular culture and the public sphere. Andrew Ross has investigated this rhetoric in his book No Respect and showed, via historical analysis, the shifting and often awkward constellations by which this relationship has been negotiated. Nevertheless, the second half of McDonald’s argument, about the role
of uniting the public behind a tradition of quality arts and letters, is perhaps more
telling. Indeed, Alan McKee has shown how common this language is. “Too much
choice” and the “increasing numbers of niche audiences, more television channels,
radio channels, magazines and Internet sites mean,” in the eyes of these commenta-
tors, “that the public is no longer coherent.”\textsuperscript{38} Such journalists and scholars worry
that abandoning the idea of a single public sphere means losing “the idea of a com-
mon interest in all people,” which would entail an “irretrievable loss.”\textsuperscript{39} These
thoughts also echo the opponents of cultural studies, who mourn the loss of canons,
which they see as cohesive forces that unite the humanities behind common objects
of appreciation.\textsuperscript{40} As McKee argues, however, “the public sphere has \textit{always} been
fragmented.”\textsuperscript{41} Even Jürgen Habermas, whose pronouncements on the subject are still
considered definitive, notes “the coexistence of competing public spheres [...] from
the very beginning.”\textsuperscript{42} Niche public spheres inflected by different classes, ethnicities,
genders, political beliefs, geographical locations, and leisure activities have existed
for at least two hundred years; broadcast media have simply made these distinct
spheres accessible to others.\textsuperscript{43}

\textbf{From Monocultural Downfall to International Crisis History}

The previous section telegraphed and dissected the current conventional views on
the role of the critic and his or her supposed loss of authority, but also anticipated
my own position within these debates. This book challenges Haberski’s and McDo-
nald’s findings and scrutinizes their nostalgic tone by arguing that the narrative of
“past authority” and “present democratization/anarchy of criticism” is a fallacy. My
research demonstrates that, much in the way that current commentators avail them-
\textsuperscript{selves of persistent tropes about the dumbing-down or fragmentation of the public
sphere, the current “crisis” and perception of lost authority picks up on traditional
themes. Focused in scope to examine the domain of film criticism, it shows that this
``crisis is in fact not new, but rather an iteration (this time precipitated by a certain
development in technology) of an old motif: critics’ longstanding desire for cultural
recognition and the fear over the loss, dumbing-down, or democratic liberation of
authority.

While endless meta-journalistic squibs have touched on the issue and some recent
studies have attempted to bring film criticism back onto the agenda of academic film
studies,\textsuperscript{44} the debates around the current crisis of critical authority have not been
thoroughly contextualized with and interrogated by examples from the history of
international film culture. How has the status of the critic and the relationship be-
tween the critic and the audience been at stake, in crisis, and subject to revision in
the past? How can prior perceived crises of authority and “democratic” developments
in film culture illuminate the current one and help us solve or at least resolve it?

This book addresses these questions by examining how critics have conceptualized
and understood their purpose and role in film culture. Specifically, it explores the
ways in which they have – at crucial junctures in the history of film culture – directly or indirectly responded to perceived crises of authority, whether these crises ostensibly came in the form of, for example, an impasse in terms of how: to justify the cultural respectability of the profession and its object (i.e. film); to form an authoritative relationship with readers and the industry; to deal with the perceived diversification or fragmentation of their audience; to meet the challenges of rival critics and of recalcitrant readers; to exert influence; and to master media and technological changes.

These historical examples serve to show that the perception of a crisis of authority in film criticism is not a unique phenomenon. Indeed, this book demonstrates that such rhetoric has long been and remains the *sine qua non* of this mode of writing. Anxieties about the status of critical authority have come to the fore in response to various triggers – be they new developments in filmmaking and film culture (such as the *nouvelle vague* or the “blockbuster”), renegotiated relationships with readers (e.g. sophisticated cinephile audiences), or new channels of dissemination (institutional magazines, television, Twitter). At the same time, the rhetoric of crisis and its resolutions have also had larger effects or served grander agendas. These include: the search for radical or new purposes for critical writing; partisan taste-making and self-promotion or the erection of a canon; or a positioning vis-à-vis national institutions, culture, and the domestic cinema. Nevertheless, it has been present throughout. This fact – and thereby this book – is a challenge to nostalgic periodizations of criticism in the vein of Haberski, McDonald, Eagleton, or Berger, who seek to posit a healthy past and an ailing present of criticism and the role of the critic in society.

This project understands criticism as an act of communication and a potential critic-audience dialogue that takes place as part of the wider public sphere(s). In this, my methodology engages criticism via critics’ writings and self-reflexive utterances, as well as with the understanding of members of the public who receive and respond to criticism. This method uses critical writing as a major primary source. This entails the careful consideration of historical examples of criticism (i.e. film periodicals, film magazines, trade papers, and the arts sections of mainstream daily and “quality” newspapers) and especially writings in which critics reflect on the (changing) purpose(s) of criticism, the role of the critic, and the relationship between critic and reader. In sum, this study endeavours to gain insights via an analysis of public and above all metacritical discourse. It covers some instructive, yet widely unknown episodes of international film criticism and scrutinizes other more familiar episodes in a new light.

The case studies focus on the leading film cultures of France, Germany, the United States, and Britain. These countries set the pace in reflecting on criticism and from the beginning sought to establish authority over its development; to this day these territories constitute four of the five largest markets for film. Although it is clear that at some junctures certain other national cinemas or critics maintained influence, the ways in which these other film cultures were received, popularized, and
transposed by the hegemonic four (e.g. the French celebration of Italian neo-realism or the British and American reception of Soviet cinema and theory) should not be underestimated. To be sure, case studies charting developments in Japan, Sweden, Brazil, or other nations could also illuminate some of the issues under consideration here. Nevertheless, for the sake of coherence there are limits that need to be placed on any attempt to write history; there is a balance that must be struck along axes of breadth and depth. It is vital to pursue research that is international in scope and a major part of the present book pays attention to a variety of film cultures for this very reason: too many previous studies narrowly focus on discrete regards of a phenomenon that was from its very beginnings making transnational and often universalist claims and which has time and again been self-aware of international debates (see, for example, Chapters 3 and 4). This comparative project thus seeks a broader, stronger claim than single-nation studies. It challenges, too, the assertions of the “death of the critic” advocates, who base their claims on one linguistic tradition (in the case of McDonald: English) or one national film culture (e.g. Haberski).

Before previewing in depth the case studies that will follow this Introduction, it is essential to engage with two key concepts: to explain what I mean by “authority” and to outline how a “crisis history” may better explain – rather than the downfall narratives provided by McDonald or Haberski – the history of film criticism and put the current crisis into a more productive context.

Authority

The question of authority is vital for the critic: through its possession he or she is granted the legitimacy to describe, explain, elucidate, contextualize, and/or evaluate a certain cultural object or topic to a certain audience. It implies the quasi-contractual obligation for this audience to listen to, engage with, and ultimately respect the critic’s pronouncements – not necessarily to agree with them, but to grant the critic the right to make them. For the purposes of this book, critical authority is a textual position that assumes the privilege to speak on a certain matter; the authority is asserted by critics and tacitly granted by their readers.

In this study we will see various interpretations of what authority might ultimately mean for critics in practice: an irreproachable, pedagogical distance or objectivity; the ability to influence filmmakers or the industry; the capacity to affect attendance numbers, box-office returns, or “make or break” a film (“short-term authority”); the power to define a film’s cultural value and place in a canon (“long-term authority”). Nevertheless, according to Daniel G. Williams, questions “of position, of insiderness and outsiderness,” are “central” to the study of critical authority (in his idiom “cultural authority”). Indeed, one of the primary factors of authority – again, based on a tacit contract between speaker and listener, writer and reader – is critics’ relationship to their object, but above all to their audience.
How do critics come to possess authority? Many of these positionings are purely textual: that is, performed in words in a variety of ways, including exalting the object of critique, comparisons (or contrasts) to other arts, canon-building, references to legitimate critics from the past, and by many other means. We will also see examples about how this is achieved in the type, size, and look of a published printed page or in the format of magazines; in banding together in unions or associations; in representing a national-cultural institution or a publication of historical merit; and so on. Demonstrating these various assertions of authority will be an important part of this book.

The negotiation of a proper tone towards and relationship with the audience is a key matter in creating authority. In the next chapters we will see how some critics – such as Louis Delluc, Gilbert Seldes, some Filmkritik authors, and Pauline Kael – established legitimacy by reminding the reader of their shared experiences or worldview or by creating the appearance of their conspiracy against elites’ tastes. Nevertheless, we will also see how film criticism began by assuming a tone and relationship reminiscent of the Enlightenment, Lessing, and Arnold; often challenged and out of style, this disinterested, pedagogical, “objective” means of establishing authority has nonetheless never truly disappeared. For this reason and as a means to preview the underlying issues of the crises of criticism in this book, let us very briefly outline Matthew Arnold’s writings about the functions of culture and the critic in society. Although it is clear that Arnold was and is read more often in some national contexts (above all Britain, the United States, and the Anglophone world), whereas the traditions of Lessing and the Enlightenment are more specifically at the root of other cultures’ understandings of “objective” didacticism, it is equally certain that Arnold remains perhaps the most influential and most alluded to in metacritical discussions and even in the latter cultures his ideas have consciously or unconsciously inflected basic understandings of criticism’s purposes.

Writing at a time of perceived moral and social crisis (the waning of religious and aristocratic influence), Arnold proposed in Culture and Anarchy a way to counteract the malaise befalling the nation in the 1860s. Arnold noted that authority resides not in the halls of Parliament; rather it exists in the “fermenting mind of the nation; and his is for the next twenty years the real influence who can address himself to this.”\(^47\) In culture, Arnold argued, “we have got a much wanted principle, a principle of authority, to counteract the tendency to anarchy which seems to be threatening us.”\(^48\)

The whole scope of the essay is to recommend culture as the great help out of our present difficulties; culture being a pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know, on all the matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world; and through this knowledge, turning a stream of fresh and free thought upon our stock notions and habits, which we now follow staunchly but mechanically, vainly imagining that there is a virtue in following...
them staunchly which makes up for the mischief of following them mecha-

nically.49

Critics, in turn, had a vital role to play in this effort to bind society together with
culture. It was their task to form the tastes that would determine which works would function as general culture: that is, what was “the best which has been thought and said in the world.” For Arnold, the decisive question was therefore “how to organise this authority, or to what hands to entrust the wielding of it?”50 This question would not only vex Arnold in the 1860s; indeed, it is the argument of my book that it has motivated film critical discourse since its origins.

Crisis History

I am not the first scholar to note the discourse of crisis surrounding criticism, nor am I the first to link crisis and criticism, as concepts, to one another. Crisis and criticism have been connected literally since ancient times: both derive etymologically from the Greek root word krino, which means to separate, select, decide, judge, size up, clash, or fight.51 Over the years, many scholars (albeit chiefly in the field of literature) have deliberated in one way or another about the conjuncture of criticism and crisis or, in the manner of today’s film critics, proclaimed criticism to be in crisis. Exemplary works range from Alick West’s Crisis and Criticism (1937) and Irshad-ul-Hasan’s Criticism in Crisis (1992), to Paul Crosthwaite’s recent collection on Criticism, Crisis, and Contemporary Narrative: Textual Horizons in an Age of Risk, among many other contributions.52 In the early 1930s, Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht – together with prominent film critics such as Herbert Ihering and Siegfried Kracauer – envisioned a journal entitled Krise und Kritik, whose topics would include the role of the critic and intellectual in a time of crisis in art, theory, and society.53 This Weimar-era experiment speaks to a point in Paul de Man’s 1967 essay on “Criticism and Crisis,” which claims that “the notion of crisis and that of criticism are very closely linked, so much so that one could state that all true criticism occurs in a mode of crisis”; in periods where there is no crisis, “there can be no criticism.”54 These essential associations lead Paul Crosthwaite to conclude that the “history of modern thought might, then, be best narrated as a history of attempts to register and amplify conditions of crisis in the pursuit of a radical renewal of the intellectual and social order.”55 In fact, historians such as Pitirim A. Sorokin, who conceive of the past as a chronicle of crises, have organized the history of ideas in such a way.56

Reinhart Koselleck is perhaps the most prominent historian to have posited a historical concept of crisis. In his monograph Critique and Crisis and other writings, moreover, he has linked crisis to criticism.57 Koselleck describes how the Hippocratic School used krino to refer to “the critical stage of an illness in which the struggle between life and death was played out, where a verdict was pending but had not yet arrived.”58 By the eighteenth century, the word was being used in a metaphorical
sense – for example, by Rousseau – to describe the state of a nation. Today, crisis "indicates uncertainty, suffering, an ordeal, and suggests an unknown future"; its use has become inflated and "anyone who opens a newspaper" can find references to it. Despite – or perhaps precisely because of – its widespread currency, crisis, for Koselleck, has become a powerful and fundamental historiographical paradigm that:

ushered in the claim to interpret the entire course of history from a particular point in time. Since then it has always been one's point in time that is experienced as critical. And reflection of one's temporal circumstances not only arrays the entire past for judgement, but displays the future for prognosis as well.

Koselleck outlines three semantic models for how crisis functions as a way to interpret history. First, "history can be interpreted as a continual crisis." In this mode, Koselleck explains, citing Schiller and alluding to Hegel, "world history is world judgement [...] every situation is stamped with the same decisive earnestness [...] everyone faces the consequences of his actions." This semantic model is also the one that Zygmunt Bauman uses to claim that "crisis, in as far as the notion refers to the invalidation of customary ways and means and the resulting lack of certainty as to how to go on, is the normal state of human society.

Second, crisis "can designate another singular accelerating type of process, in which conflicts burst open an existing system; following the crisis the system reconstitutes itself in a new set of circumstances." This is a notion of crisis as "historical watershed," the passing of an epoch, a process that repeats again and again. The modern notion of economic crisis is an example:

crisis appears when the equilibrium between supply and demand, between production and consumption, between the circulation of money and the circulation of goods, is disturbed; when this happens recession and the slide down the economic scale are said to become visible everywhere. Yet it is held as a law of experience that a general rise in productivity follows a recession induced by a crisis.

Third, according to Koselleck, crisis "can suggest the last crisis within a prevailing historical moment." This model of crisis is future-oriented, utopian, and gestures towards a final resolution of conflict. One example of this concept of history is the biblical idea of the Last Judgement. The Marxist notion of a final crisis of capitalism leading to the end of class differences and a utopian future represents another iteration of this historiography.

These three notions of crisis can be isolated theoretically but, in the practice of historical discourse, Koselleck maintains, are never pure and often come in tangled, bundled, or overlapping forms. Indeed, in describing the crisis of film criticism – and clarifying which conceptual notions of "crisis" it may underlie – we must be care-
ful about defining it while at the same time acknowledging how these meanings slide and shift over time and even within individual episodes. For example, in the present crisis, evidently triggered by technologies such as blogs and Twitter, the “death of the critic” commentators would view the situation as in Koselleck’s second model – that of a historical watershed, an end of an era by which a rose-tinted past (“golden age of criticism”) is contrasted with the present calamity and uncertain future. Other, more utopian commentators (internet democrats/anarchists) might interpret it as an instance of the third model: new social media and online criticism function as a final crisis and resolution of authority (because of its eradication) in an epoch where “everyone can be a critic.” For these commentators, crisis is eschatological.

The crises under scrutiny in this book may subscribe, depending on perspective, to all three models in an interconnected fashion. It is true that in every case under discussion, some commentators saw the challenges to their authority as an existential dilemma that needed to be identified and resolved. Crises, as Crosthwaite reminds us,

are discursive phenomena, and there is invariably a strategic element to invocations of the language of crisis, whether this be as a means of engendering fear, stifling dissent, and consolidating hegemonic power structures, or, conversely, of mobilizing disaffection, laying bare societal divisions, and agitating for radical change. 68

Nevertheless, my examination of film critical discourse argues that, as a historical narrative, it exemplifies the first concept of a crisis history: a “continual,” permanent crisis. Nina Witoszek and Lars Trägårdh have written that crisis “is always a déjà vu experience; it invokes the memory of past imbroglios, solutions, and failures and exhumes authoritative narratives that prompt a community what to feel and how to respond to new challenges.” 69 I would submit, however, that in the case of film critical discourse precisely this sort of retrospection has not occurred; the “death of the critic” commentators, even when they employ historical approaches, have failed to invoke the memory of prior crises in order to understand the present anxieties. Koselleck notes that in every instance where “crisis is expected to utterly change the world, the expectation is easily exposed as an illusion of perspective.” 70 This, indeed, is my view towards both the “death of the critic” commentators and the internet democrats: “It is characteristic of the finitude of all human beings,” Koselleck elaborates, “to regard their own situation as more important and more serious than all of the crises that have actually taken place.” 71 An approach that sees film critical discourse as an episodic history of permanent crisis – rather than as a unique contemporary event that marks a singular, “final crisis” or as a steady downfall – is therefore the most appropriate historiographical model.
The Permanent Crisis of Film Criticism: Chapter Summaries

The remainder of this book is arranged as a chronological series of historical case studies and a final chapter and conclusion that deal directly with the contemporary scene. Dealing with both individual critics and critical institutions, these historical episodes unearth the key moments in the course of film criticism where authority was especially at stake, under duress, and in a perceived crisis; these specific pressure points, I submit, best illuminate and contextualize the current impasse and debate.

Chapters 1 and 2 examine the crisis of early film criticism and illustrate how the concerns and anxieties about critical authority preview to a large extent all subsequent crises, including today’s “death of the critic” discourse. In order to establish film criticism as a legitimate activity, writers needed to advocate the cultural respectability of film as a medium, gain access to mainstream periodicals, and create their own outlets. Rather than a consensual procession towards a definition of film as an art and easy attainment of authority, critics engaged in a messy dispute, Chapter 1 reveals, with complex and shifting fronts that included the need to both compare and contrast the medium to other arts, erect standards and police bad practice, and develop unique methods. Even after these initial goals were more or less achieved and film criticism began appearing regularly in mainstream dailies and weeklies and in arts and culture periodicals in the 1920s, Chapter 2 demonstrates, critics were tasked with maintaining influence with but also asserting their authority over the industry and negotiating complex regimes of proximity and distance to readers – an especial challenge because of film’s diverse audiences and unique status as a “democratic art.” Examining French, German, British, and US critics, these chapters show that a crisis of authority was a professional concern internationally from the beginning. This complicates McDonald’s and Haberski’s histories of criticism.

Once film critics had established their right to exist on arts pages and postwar film culture began to flourish, practitioners were faced with a renewed challenge to their authority: sophisticated arthouse audiences. Chapters 3 and 4 chronicle the crises of authority that followed the successful institutionalization of criticism in the form of cinéphile magazines and the “democratic” challenge posed by a reinvigorated French film culture and Cahiers du cinéma’s breezy styles and brash assertions. The two chapters examine the unique responses of the leading film journals in Britain (Sight and Sound, the most important Anglophone specialist film magazine) and the Federal Republic of Germany (Filmkritik, which, at the time, was the Western world’s second-most subscribed to cinema periodical). These comparative, institution-based accounts examine how each journal respectively perceived and resolved the postwar crisis of authority and furthermore used the challenge of French film culture to renegotiate their own relationship to developments in their countries. In Britain, Sight and Sound’s institutional remit and imperatives led, Chapter 3 demonstrates, to an appeal to “English” traditions and to a broad-church, liberal repositioning of the magazine. In this way, the British Film Institute organ sought to accommodate young
dissenting voices and yet still assert a long-term authority to define canons, foregoing a subjective, political, or aesthetic criticism in favour of a light-touch pedagogy that could service the associated arms (National Film Theatre, National Film Archive, London Film Festival) and larger aims of the organization. In turn, Chapter 4 shows how the dark German history inflected Filmkritik’s response to the French and the domestic cinephile challenge. Initially using Siegfried Kracauer and his brand of ideological-symptomatic criticism as a legitimate model for their authority, Filmkritik transformed within a decade into a forum for subjective auteurism. Cahiers du cinéma provided some approaches, vocabularies, and inspiration for a transition in the magazine’s style, perspective, and mediating role. In addition, however, the development allowed the German writers to conceive of and position their own national cinema and to form a more personal relationship with – but nonetheless stay ahead of – readers, who had largely internalized the Kracaueran methods and no longer needed critics’ guidance.

Chapters 5 and 6 re-approach the current crisis of criticism. The many “death of the critic” commentators often describe an authoritative “golden age of criticism” in the 1960s and 1970s and a subsequent fall in the aftermath of this period, which witnessed the birth of the modern blockbuster and the rise of syndicated print and television criticism. In retrospective assessments – not only of film criticism, but also larger histories of criticism such as McDonald’s Death of the Critic – this transition is seen as the demise of the public critic and the beginning of an anarchic, populist, and ultimately useless explosion of opinion. Chapter 5 challenges this view as a fallacy. Dissecting today’s rosy memories of the “golden age” of US film criticism and in particular of the supposedly most influential critic ever, Pauline Kael, it contests the idea of critical influence – Kael’s and otherwise – and deliberates on what today’s myth-making about authority reveals. Chapter 6 picks up on these themes by surveying the current state of play and in particular critics’ fears about democratic, dumbed-down online criticism. Using Rotten Tomatoes – the most popular “aggregate” film review site – as a case study, I show that, far from being radically democratic, such new media developments actually serve to reinforce traditional notions of authority. The Conclusion then returns to the notion of crisis and critical authority and asks: What is so good about authority and what do fears of its loss tell us about our cultural commentators?
Film Theory in Media History

Sarah Keller and Jason N. Paul (eds.)
ISBN 9789089642929

Mattias Frey
The Permanent Crisis of Film Criticism: The Anxiety of Authority, 2015
ISBN 9789089647177

Daniel Fairfax (trans. and ed.)
ISBN 9789089645548

Naum Kleiman and Antonio Somani (eds.)
Sergei M. Eisenstein: Notes for a General History of Cinema, Forthcoming 2015
ISBN 9789089648440
Film criticism is in crisis. Dwelling on the many film journalists made redundant at newspapers, magazines, and other “old media” in past years, commentators have voiced existential questions about the purpose and worth of the profession in the age of WordPress blogospheres and proclaimed the “death of the critic.” Bemoaning the current anarchy of internet amateurs and the lack of authoritative critics, many journalists and academics claim that in the digital age, cultural commentary has become dumbed down and fragmented into niche markets. Arguing against these claims, this book examines the history of film critical discourse in France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States to demonstrate that film criticism has, since its origins, always found itself in crisis. The need to assert critical authority and anxieties over challenges to that authority are longstanding concerns; indeed, these issues have animated and choreographed the trajectory of international film criticism since its origins.

Mattias Frey is Senior Lecturer in Film at the University of Kent, author of Postwall German Cinema: History, Film History, and Cinephilia, co-editor of Cine-Ethics: Ethical Dimensions of Film Theory, Practice, and Spectatorship, and editor of the journal Film Studies.