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Sea-change: Transforming the ‘crisis’ in film theory

by Robert Sinnerbrink



‘One consistent lesson from the history of film theory is that there has never been a general consensus concerning the answer to the question “What is cinema?” And for this reason the evolving thought on cinema in the twentieth century has persisted in a continual state of identity crisis.’¹ – D. N. Rodowick

When written in Chinese, the word “crisis” is composed of two characters. One represents danger and the other represents opportunity. In a crisis, be aware of the danger – but recognise the opportunity.² – John F. Kennedy

Crisis? What crisis?

For some years now the academic study of film, particularly in the English-speaking world, has been marked by a sense of crisis; a period of rumination, self-examination, and speculation over the nature of its object, its cultural relevance, and its disciplinary future. Although it is difficult to generalise across varying cultural and institutional contexts, the discipline of film studies, whatever forms it currently takes, is not alone in this regard.³ Many other humanities disciplines have been undergoing similar anxieties and insecurities, both in respect of their institutional status and their broader cultural relevance in a technological and economically rationalist age.⁴

Film studies, however, is distinguished by the scope of its disciplinary self-reflection concerning this sense of crisis. Indeed, it is not simply an ‘internal’ issue but also reflects profound cultural and technological changes occurring with the ‘medium’ of film (its shift from celluloid to video, from analog to digital image forms, from mechanical editing to digital software, from live action to CGI animation and post-production image composition, etc.).⁵ The dramatic shift from analogue to digital media raises anew the kinds of questions that inaugurated the study of film almost a century ago: what is cinema? How do we define its medium (or media)? What is the relation between ontological and aesthetic aspects of the

moving image? What is the future of film/cinema in light of the technological revolution in moving image culture? Addressing these questions takes on a new urgency and significance today, especially when combined with the ongoing disciplinary conversation concerning the current state and future directions of the humanities more generally.⁶

In what follows, I explore these questions as a way of thinking through the ‘crisis’ in film theory, situating it in relation to the internal tensions and transformations within the discipline but also contextualising it within broader cultural trends affecting the status and prospects of the humanities. For all its dramatic character, the cultural significance of this complex sense of crisis and transformation has not been given the theoretical attention that it deserves. In this light, I make some observations and remarks that might serve as a prelude to a more comprehensive critical reflection on the sources and significance of this crisis.⁷ My suggestion is that the crisis in film theory points to a more general cultural phenomenon, what we might call the ‘naturalistic turn’ affecting the humanities. This is evident in the theoretical impact of cognitive science, neuroscience, evolutionary biology, and genetics on the more traditionally hermeneutic, textual, historical, and culturally sensitive modes of humanistic inquiry.

From this point of view, the current historicist and philosophical turn in film studies appears as a semi-conscious reaction to this ‘naturalistic’ turn: an implicit theoretical challenge to the dubious assertion that film theory must now allow itself to be re-grounded theoretically in the new sciences of the mind.⁸ Expressed differently, the crisis in film theory is a distinctive feature of the more generalised crisis in the humanities that has prompted a number of serious and sustained theoretical and critical defenses; for example, by the philosopher Martha Nussbaum, who defends the cultural and philosophical value of the humanities for educating citizens in the ethos of democracy, for cultivating our moral, aesthetic, and intellectual capacities for imagination, empathy, and critical reflection.⁹ For these reasons the crisis in film theory turns out to have more far-reaching implications than might be apparent at first glance. Indeed, the historicist and philosophical strands of film studies point to ways of overcoming this apparent crisis and thus renewing the cultural significance of theoretical reflection on film as a contribution to humanistic inquiry and the cultivation of a democratic cultural ethos.

Discussions of the crisis in film theory generally look to institutional or intellectual reasons for unanticipated shifts in disciplinary practices or theoretical convictions. However, a deeper and more general question starts to loom once we begin re-thinking the history, foundations, and future of film theory: why does film matter? This is a question that haunts the discipline’s self-examination, though it is often neglected or ignored as a question in its own right. It becomes important, however, when we begin to reflect on the concept of crisis in the debates

over the history and future of the discipline. Moreover, it is worth mentioning that the notion of a crisis in film theory is nothing new; film theory has existed in various states of crisis arguably since its inception. Indeed, the very complexity and hybridity of film has meant that attempts to secure its ontological identity as a medium have always been fraught with ambiguity and doubt. Nonetheless, there do seem to be important cultural, technological, and economic factors at play in our current conjuncture that point to a genuine shift in the object of film studies; a transition in the cultural meaning and aesthetic possibilities of what we have been accustomed to calling 'film'. Talk of a distinctive crisis in film theory, reflecting a transformation in the nature and potentialities of the medium, is in any case sufficiently widespread, persistent, and pointed to warrant further critical reflection on its own account.

The first question we might ask is what is meant here by the notion of a crisis. A crisis can mean many things: a turning point, a period of upheaval, a state of instability heralding danger or destruction, a critical moment when the future of an established way of thinking or a way of life is put into question or demands a response. Although a crisis always appears to call for immediate action, it also calls for reflection, analysis, interpretation – in a word, it calls for thinking. In the bustle of scholarly activity and intellectual trend spotting we may miss what is really at stake, reacting hastily to what seem to be immediate threats or dominant views without really understanding the underlying processes at work. A crisis, moreover, need not always be negative or destructive; it can also be positive or creative, fostering transformation and renewal. Indeed, a crisis is typically Janus-faced: negative or destructive from the viewpoint of what is under threat of disappearing or becoming lost; positive or creative from the viewpoint of what is in the process of emergence, of being transformed into something new. The difficulty in thinking one's way through a crisis is to keep both of these seemingly contradictory tendencies in view, something which becomes evident in the contemporary discourse of crisis relating to film and its future.

Not surprisingly, this discourse of crisis reveals two competing strains: a pessimist strain, according to which the looming crisis points to destructive change or fatal loss (of cinema as an object, of historical memory, of the coherence and value of a discipline, and so on); an optimistic or celebratory strain, according to which such crisis talk is misguided or reactionary (denying that anything important stands to be lost or that what promises to replace it is of greater value). To be sure, both perspectives on the crisis give us insight into its nature: an acute sense of change in which the foundations or future of the discipline seem in question; and an acute sense of possibility in which new ways of thinking and writing about a mutating medium are coming into being. This paradoxical character of film theory, always reflecting on its identity and that of its object (which is itself in flux, always transforming itself into something else), is perhaps its most distinctive or

defining feature. As D.N. Rodowick remarks, despite the seeming solidity of the celluloid strip and the apparent continuity in our experience of watching projected movies, a historical glance reveals that 'cinema studies has continually evolved as a field in search of its object'.¹⁰ Indeed, the inherent tension in aspiring to become a respectable theoretical discipline that is dedicated to capturing an ill-defined, mutating object is more apparent now than ever in the digital age.

This dual character of the crisis, whatever its true dimensions, should give us pause. To endorse either pessimistic or optimistic perspectives on it without further ado would mean that we miss the opportunity to understand and appreciate what are its dangers and its opportunities. What does it mean when the paradigms defining a discipline start to change, when a discipline itself begins to mutate? Such a question might seem otiose, given that film theory was always riven by conflicting views concerning its object, methodology, and purpose. Evidence pointing to a contemporary crisis, however, is not hard to find. Rodowick, for example, points to the institutionalisation of film studies during the late 1960s and 1970s, a period when its practice came to be identified with *theory*: 'an interdisciplinary commitment to concepts and methods derived from literary semiology, Lacanian psychoanalysis, and Althusserian Marxism, echoed in the broader influence of structuralism and post-structuralism on the humanities'.¹¹

As is well known, it was this model of film theory (called 'Screen Theory' in the United Kingdom and closely associated with the journal *Screen*) that gained institutional recognition before being roundly criticised from the mid-1980s onwards. This was a period in which the evolution of cinema studies, as Rodowick points out, was defined 'both by a decentering of film with respect to media and visual studies and by a retreat from theory'¹² – to which we should also add the enormous impact of the historicist turn in film studies in the last two decades. Competing disciplines, younger and more 'contemporary' than film studies (like cultural studies, media studies, and television studies), were appearing on the intellectual scene just as film theory began questioning its disciplinary commitment to Theory and adopting a broadly historicist and culturalist orientation instead (studies of early film and of early film theory, the development of transculturalist/postcolonialist approaches to film, theoretical and historical work on a variety of non-Western or 'global' cinemas, etc.). We should add, moreover, that this critical reflection and disciplinary mutation was occurring (especially during the 1990s) against the background of the intense 'culture wars' rhetoric directed against the pervasive influence of French poststructuralist 'theory' within the (Anglophone) academy.¹³

Writing in the midst of this volatile period of intellectual self-examination, Thomas Elsaesser observed that the very future of the discipline seemed to be in question:

If I understand what is at stake, it is perhaps nothing less than whether the cinema can continue to be at the core of a coherent research project, by which is meant a distinct area of knowledge as well as an academic discipline. That the question can be asked at all is a tribute to the modest success which in the 1970s and 1980s assured film studies something of a privileged place in the universities. That it has to be asked means that past success and present disenchantment – if that is what it is – has to be seen in context.¹⁴

Two decades on from Elsaesser's observations, the question of the coherence of the discipline continues to reverberate in contemporary discussions of film theory and its future. The coincidence of the discipline's 'modest success' in establishing itself and its 'present disenchantment' with the theoretical models defining it make continued reflection on the cultural context of this crisis important and illuminating, especially if we are to understand the implications of such talk for our methods and practices of inquiry today.

What are some of these relevant elements 'in context'? Here are three related features we might identify: 1) the cultural-technological shift from analog to digital media, with a corresponding shift in models of theorisation (from film to media and cultural/historical studies); 2) the cultural and institutional anxiety over the status of film theory as a humanities discipline – is it a humanistic discipline, hermeneutic, reflective, historical, and critical in nature, or should it now be grounded in, or even subsumed by, the empirical sciences (like psychology, cognitive science, neuroscience, etc.); 3) the deeper issue of the challenge posed to humanistic inquiry by what we might call the 'naturalistic turn' in the humanities – how research into cognitive science, neuroscience, and evolutionary biology is not only being applied to diverse forms of cultural inquiry but increasingly taken up as a new theoretical foundation for the humanities. Can and should these two models of theory – hermeneutic and scientific¹⁵ – be brought together without subsuming the humanities into the sciences? What would a more pluralist, hybrid, interdisciplinary approach to film theory make possible? These are some of the questions behind the scenes animating the often confusing and sometimes fractious debates over the crisis in film theory, questions that demand further reflection if we wish to contribute to overcoming the crisis and transforming the discipline.

The anxiety of influence

Film theory has always been a discipline subject to status anxiety – anxiety over its disciplinary status, over its object (film's identity as a medium), over its cultural legitimacy, over its political significance (the 'discourse of political modernism'¹⁶), and over its attempts at 'scientific' credibility (the role of psychoanalysis, structuralism, theories of ideology, and cognitivism). Such developments can be readily

tracked within film studies as practised in the Anglophone world. With the waning of structuralism, then Marxism, followed by psychoanalysis and post-structuralist film theory, the dominance of what Bordwell and Carroll disparagingly called ‘Grand Theory’ began to wane – not only by being challenged by the emerging paradigm of analytic-cognitivist theory¹⁷ but also by an internal self-questioning from within the discipline, evident in the turn towards strongly historicist and culturalist modes of inquiry. These two competing, sometimes conflicting, tendencies nonetheless shared a frustration with theoretical models and methods that were perceived to have become institutionalised, routinised, and predictable. This disenchantment led to the eventual disintegration of the reigning paradigm in favor of a diverse range of alternative ‘post-Theory’ perspectives spanning historicist, culturalist, philosophical, and cognitivist approaches.¹⁸

After a decade and a half of contestation, even mutual incomprehension, a more promising condition of what we might call ‘post-Theory pluralism’ has begun to emerge: a diverse array of distinctive, competing, often conflicting theoretical approaches, without a unifying object or shared methodology yet pursuing overlapping inquiries into different aspects of film and media culture (historical studies, postcolonialism, reception studies, media theory, cognitivism, analytic aesthetics, film philosophy, etc.).¹⁹ Despite this welter of alternatives a few distinctive movements have emerged, notably historicism, culturalism, and philosophical film theory (including analytic, cognitivist, and Continental/post-Continental approaches). In short, reports of the death of ‘Theory’ are greatly exaggerated; the post-Theory movement, whether inspired by historicist, culturalist, or philosophical perspectives, appears alive and well.

This ambiguous development – film theory mutating into a plurality of approaches within ever ‘globalised’ cultural contexts – is difficult to map or track with any degree of precision. Nonetheless, there are some developments and implications that I should like to stress which are intellectual symptoms of a deeper set of cultural transformations currently underway. For all their intellectual intensity, the internecine disputes over the last two decades between partisans of historicism, culturalism, cognitivism, Continental theory, and so on express much more than theoretical schisms within a fractured or dispersed discipline. Rather, they reflect a more general movement away from the social-cultural constructivist assumptions of the past (concerning the dominant role of culture, history, language, social institutions, and ideology in the development of autonomous subjectivity). Humanities disciplines that rose to institutional prominence during the 1960s and 1970s (like film studies) have been sharply criticised for assuming an erroneous ‘tabula rasa’ view of human beings – biologically blank slates whose very subjectivities could be molded and manipulated by pre-existing social, cultural, and ideological codes.²⁰ Such ‘constructivist’ approaches, perhaps surprisingly, also had strong affinities with implicit (and sometimes explicit) political projects, for example in

feminist, queer, and post-colonialist film theory (surprising because of its critique of autonomous subjectivity on the one hand and its commitment to emancipatory political transformation on the other). By demonstrating the historically contingent and culturally variable nature of subjectivity, socially progressive alternatives could be suggested, theoretical critiques of the status quo could be launched, and paths for future emancipation conceived.

Much of the anti-scientism of the humanities, doubtless dogmatic at times, can be traced back to the thesis that subjectivity is both 'constructed' (whether through the operations of discourse, regimes of power, the vicissitudes of the signifier, entry into the symbolic, or machinations of the cultural industry) yet also capable of emancipatory self-transformation (whether of the alienated subject or the subjugated, marginalised other). Any hint of genetic or biological 'determinism' was critically scrutinised and emphatically rejected, largely for moral or political rather than theoretical or philosophical reasons. Film theory, with its constructivist assumptions and emancipatory intentions, thus become emblematic (for some critics) of a popular though confused theoretical discipline with an excessively critical or ideological bent.

In recent years the pendulum has swung the other way. The metaphor of the *tabula rasa* has been rejected and the role of biological, genetic, neurological, and evolutionary inheritances acknowledged as fundamental determinants of human cognition. For some theorists this has meant the discrediting of any 'social constructivist' view of human beings and an acceptance of the primacy of naturalistic accounts of subjectivity, culture, and history; a position which, some argue, suggests that the theoretical basis of disciplines such as film theory should be rethought. From this point of view, film studies should no longer be an independent theoretical discipline with a critical-emancipatory purpose but rather a more 'scientific' one with a rationally progressive trajectory; one that would, by the same token, remain largely neutral on 'value' questions concerning the cultural, ideological, economic, and political aspects of film.

One implication of this shift from hermeneutic and culturalist to cognitivist or empiricist methodologies is the tempering or demotion of the political significance of film theory, which tends to find asylum today in more historicist, transculturalist, and post-Continental approaches to film.²¹ Ideas that used to loom large in film theory (concerning the 'constructed' character of subjectivity or the role played by the unconscious and gendered forms of desire) are now rejected as speculative or 'ideological' claims having no basis in fact.²² Such a perspective concludes, *in extremis*, with a wholesale reduction of our shared cultural, historical, and social existence to a more or less idealist reflection of an evolutionary-biological base.²³ From such a viewpoint, earlier theoretical reflections on gender, race, class, ideology, and more are deemed theoretically biased, outmoded, and

irrelevant, even though the phenomena such theories used to analyse and criticise are perhaps more pervasive and pernicious than ever!

All of which leaves us with a pressing question: why theorise film independently at all, if what we are doing is better grasped as a relatively trivial aspect of generic cognitive behavior? What happens to our understanding of the cultural, social, ethical, aesthetic, or political significance of film when the study of it is construed as a novel strand of applied cognitive theory, or a miniscule episode in biocultural-technological evolution? To reiterate my earlier question, from this perspective why does film, or theoretical inquiry into it, matter? Such a discourse presupposes the cultural value of its own mode of inquiry without being able to give an adequate account of the significance of, or motivation for, its own practices. In short, the problem with overly encompassing forms of cognitivist theory is that they risk reducing culture to a bare network of brains, bodies, and technologies; a picture of human beings lacking the essential mediation of culture, history, or social meaning. What such a reductive perspective omits is any account of the meaningfulness of our shared 'being-in-the-world' – the normative cultural-historical context within which the practices of making and viewing films, as well as their theoretical study, acquire sense and purpose in the first place.

Anatomy of a crisis

How did this crisis come about? There are a number of stories one could tell here, each of which would be specific to a particular cultural and institutional situation. Nonetheless, from the perspective of the prevailing currents of Anglophone film studies, the obvious place to begin is with the rise of so-called 'Grand Theory'. With its eclectic synthesis of psychoanalytic, semiotic, structuralist, Marxist, and then poststructuralist strands, so-called 'Grand Theory' dominated film studies for nearly three decades, flourishing thanks to an unlikely combination of historical, cultural, intellectual, and ideological factors. To name a few, it reflected a convergence of historical and cultural-political currents (the new social movements emerging during the 1960s and 1970s) which had obvious affinities with Theory's critical-political stance (its critique of ideology, bourgeois subjectivity, patriarchy, capitalism, sexual and racial inequality, etc.). It consolidated itself institutionally, ironically enough, because of its oppositional stance towards received cultural and social institutions; it promised a strongly 'critical' theory that could also unify the multifarious dimensions of film, account for its role in the construction of (gendered) subjectivity, and that could offer a complex institutional discourse that befitted a discipline whose object was situated uneasily between the academy and the life-world, between the intellectually esoteric and the culturally popular. Its scepticism towards 'traditional' forms of disciplinary inquiry, coupled with a cultural

Zeitgeist that politicised the university, meant that film studies could be at once critical and innovative, a source of new ideas and a bulwark against ideology.

By the mid to late 1980s the reigning paradigm began to wane, challenged by historicist, culturalist, and cognitivist approaches. Commencing with Bordwell's pioneering use of cognitivist psychology and sharpened by Noël Carroll's polemical attacks on Continental-style film theory, a rival approach to theorising film gathered momentum – what we might call the 'analytic-cognitivist' paradigm.²⁴ Bordwell and Carroll's well-known collection of essays, *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, marked the new paradigm's arrival. Crossing between film studies and (analytic) philosophy, the new wave of 'post-theory' philosophers defined themselves against the old paradigm – the institutionalised film theory of the 1970s and 1980s inspired by psychoanalysis, structuralism, semiotics, and various strands of German critical theory and French poststructuralism. The title of Noël Carroll's 1988 book says it all: *Mystifying Movies: Fads and Fallacies in Contemporary Film Theory*.

The alternative approach that challenged the prevailing model of film theory styled itself as analytic rather than 'Continental', cognitivist rather than psychoanalytic in approach, scientific rather than hermeneutic in style and concerned with framing and testing empirical hypotheses rather than engaging in speculation or interpretation. It aimed at the rational understanding of film rather than at plumbing unconscious mechanisms of desire, being concerned to explain our enjoyment of movies and their philosophical significance in plain language and theoretical arguments rather than metaphysical jargon or ideology critique. By proposing empirically testable models of 'piecemeal' film theorisation, instead of what were taken to be top-down, all-encompassing speculative theoretical systems, analytic-cognitivist theory has succeeded in establishing itself as an important rival model of film theory alongside, but differing from, historicism and culturalism.

Reflecting a shift evident elsewhere in the humanities, the analytic cognitivist approach is a model of theorising that is naturalistic rather than humanistic, explanatory rather than hermeneutic, scientific rather than aesthetic. It combines (though not exclusively) a commitment to the methods and techniques of analytic philosophy with a reliance (not consistently) on the theoretical findings of cognitive science. In this it was motivated by an intellectual dissatisfaction with the methodological commitments of the previous paradigm, which was taken to be dogmatic and doctrinaire, valorising the work of a selected canon of 'master thinkers' yet resistant to formal argument, empirical inquiry, and critical analysis. Today, this polemically charged battle between 'postmodern' theory and the defenders of enlightenment rationality has become something of a relic, evoking memories of a rather volatile episode in recent cultural-intellectual history. Indeed, much of the politically-inspired scepticism towards traditional disciplines that fuelled the rise of 'theory' has begun to wane; empirically-grounded historical and cultural studies continue to hold sway; naturalistic-scientific discourses regarding film

have acquired greater influence; the 'politicised' context of the humanities has been in retreat for some time. This change in the cultural and institutional climate is perhaps the most tangible factor in the receding of the poststructuralist wave (with the exception of Deleuzian film theory, which continues to flourish).

In this regard, the story of film studies reflects, once again, a broader cultural-intellectual history. For the humanities today are under siege on two fronts: external pressures to become more geared to the needs of the new information economy; and internal pressures either to relativise the concept of the human or to reduce this concept to a naturalistic rump. From this point of view devotion to Deleuzian film philosophy, the commitment to historicising theory, or the championing of cinephilia can all be seen as rearguard actions signalling a discipline re-asserting its intellectual and cultural autonomy. To be sure, such forms of theoretical resistance do not constitute a failsafe bulwark against dogmatic naturalism or the neoliberal imperative to de-politicise theory in keeping with the needs of the market; but they do present some possibility of resistance, of transformative renewal, maintaining fidelity to a humanistic mode of inquiry (whether interpretative, critical, or philosophical) that is otherwise in danger of being subordinated to purely instrumental ideological and institutional ends.

In order to gain clarity and perspective on the crisis in film theory we ought to situate its debates within their broader historical and cultural setting. One issue worth stressing here is how the crisis in film theory reflects a broader 'crisis' over the value and meaning of the humanities in an increasingly instrumentalised and corporatised cultural milieu. As Rodowick puts it, '[t]he conflict over theory in Film Studies thus reproduces in microcosm a more consequential debate, one that concerns both the role of epistemology and epistemological critique in the humanities and the place of philosophy with respect to science.'²⁵ At stake is the very meaning of what has traditionally been called 'humanistic inquiry', which is being challenged intellectually by the 'naturalistic turn' (basing humanities research on the new sciences of mind) and pressured economically by the demand that teaching and research now 'pay its way' (attracting more students, bigger research grants, and delivering more economically and socially tangible 'outcomes' for its 'stakeholders', including governments). Subjected to sustained ideological attack during the 'Culture Wars' battle of the 1990s, the humanities are now struggling to defend their 'relevance' in an institutional context increasingly dominated by principles of economic neoliberalism and corporate managerialism. In the new corporatised university, humanistic disciplines find themselves under pressure to justify their institutional value in purely instrumental and pragmatic terms (such as economic benefit to graduates, to government, or conforming to market demands). More traditional defenses of the value of the humanities for educating citizens in practices of creative and critical thinking or for cultivating moral imagination and a cosmopolitan democratic ethos are viewed with scepticism or

disdain, as though what Kant described as the inestimable value of human dignity – our moral autonomy – were now reduced to sheer market economic value.

Film theory after the end of theory

Despite this broad cultural, economic, and political background for questioning the value of the humanities, much of the debate on the transition from 'Grand Theory' to post-Theory has been recast as a dispute between analytic and Continental philosophy. As Simon Critchley observes, the so-called analytic/Continental divide is a contemporary version of C.P. Snow's 'two cultures' problem: the ongoing antagonism between scientific and humanistic forms of discourse that has marked much modern thought.²⁶ Today this takes the form of a dispute between philosophical naturalisms or analytic approaches wedded to an ideal of natural scientific inquiry and more reflective, historical, hermeneutic, culturalist, or experimental models of inquiry that resist reductionism and share affinities with other humanistic disciplines.

Instead of mapping the competing approaches in contemporary film theory onto the questionable analytic/Continental divide, we might do better to re-think these as expressing the difference between what we might call *rationalist* and *modernist-romanticist* approaches to theorising film. These categories better capture the pertinent differences between analytic-cognitivist practitioners of the philosophy of film and the more 'post-Continental' advocates of what we might call *film-philosophy*, which develops philosophical and theoretical reflection from close critical and aesthetic engagement with films themselves. These two approaches are complementary rather than opposed, working with different aims and methodologies rather than promoting 'incommensurable' visions of how we might pursue theoretical inquiry into film. *Rationalist* approaches seek to provide explanatory models of various aspects of film or film experience; they aim at empirically-grounded knowledge of film, film ontology, and the psychological or empirical bases of film experience, sometimes drawing on the arguments and methods of (analytic) philosophy and at other times on the findings and insights of the new sciences of the mind. *Modernist-Romanticist* approaches, for their part, seek to reflect critically upon, interpret, and analyse or creatively extend the kind of experience that film provides, drawing actively upon the various historical, cultural, and intellectual traditions they have inherited. They seek to understand the significance of film experience and articulate this into philosophically-oriented reflection that is more concerned with meaning and understanding rather than theoretical explanation (though these approaches are intimately related and interact fruitfully in various ways).

We might think here of how this divide between these two ways of doing theoretical work on film (rationalist and modernist-romanticist) reflects a deeper de-

bate over how we conceptualise the relationship between science and art. Is art, including film, reducible to the kinds of explanatory theories provided by the best available science? Or, does the art of film express forms of meaning that resist reduction to straightforwardly naturalistic explanatory accounts? How can we bring together what both approaches have to offer in order to broaden and deepen our experience and understanding of film? The most plausible response to these questions is to emphasise the importance of interdisciplinary dialogue and exchange, not only across formal disciplines but *between* theoretical paradigms or approaches (film studies, media studies, history, psychology, philosophy; also film aesthetics, cultural history, cognitive science, phenomenology, critical theory, etc.). In this way film studies stands to benefit from both sides of the crisis: from a critical awareness and responsiveness to the dangers posed by the challenging of film theory as a humanistic discipline; and from the opportunities this same experience of crisis opens up for critical and creative invention and intellectual exchange.

Far from advocating either a pessimist's or an optimist's view of the crisis, we ought to reflect further on its meaning, context, and cultural implications. Here I would reiterate that the experience of crisis is not only negative but also offers the possibility of renewal. The challenge is to think these two aspects together, resisting the Cyclopean vision that would construe it either as a mournful expression of the death of theory or else as a nostalgic fable best left behind. This more dialectical mode of thinking requires a shift in perspective, what Slavoj Žižek calls a 'parallax view' capable of reconciling seemingly incommensurable perspectives, enabling what formerly appeared under threat of destruction to now open up new ways of thinking and acting.²⁷ Put differently, a crisis, whether in film theory or anything else, is not simply an objective fact but a complex phenomenon that reveals its sense (or multiple senses) depending on our inter-subjective stances toward it, and therefore is open to contestation, reinterpretation, and transformation depending on the way that it is understood. Indeed, there are many film theorists today engaged in precisely this kind of productive re-visioning and reinvention of the field, taking the disciplinary crisis over theoretical models, disciplinary status, technological transformation, and changing cultural values as ways of opening up productive exchanges across traditions, paradigms, and disciplinary perspectives.²⁸

So what might the putative crisis in film theory make possible? How might we acknowledge both its dangers and its opportunities? It is impossible to answer these questions in advance; however, one can speculate on what the film philosophy of the future might attempt or achieve. We could put this in the form of a series of theses, expressing not so much a set of theoretical goals as openings towards a more pluralist way of thinking moving images:

1. Post-Theory pluralism will tend to be non-reductionist, humanistic without being reactionary, and sensitive to interdisciplinary dialogue and theoretical exchange.
2. It will be attentive to historicist and culturalist dimensions of film, opening theoretical debate up to alternative historical and cultural traditions of theory and practice.
3. It will be attracted to philosophical reflection, theoretical analysis, and critical interpretation of film while also being aesthetically receptive to the nuances and complexities of cinematic experience.
4. By treating cinema as an equal partner in thinking, rather than an inert theoretical object, it will accommodate more experimental and expressive forms of theoretical and critical writing in its attempts to think with (rather than simply on) film.
5. In retrieving cinema's broader cultural, historical, and ideological dimensions, it will be motivated to find ways of acknowledging and theorising its aesthetic, ethical, and political dimensions without claiming that film is simply manipulative or corrupting.

None of these desiderata are entirely novel or unprecedented. They risk being forgotten, ignored, or marginalised, however, in the anxious rush to embrace the latest theoretical paradigm that promises disciplinary respectability and scientifically grounded 'results'. The post-Theory theorist will therefore be desirous to acknowledge, inherit, and transform what the various traditions of film theory have bequeathed us while remaining open to what is most theoretically illuminating in the interdisciplinary matrix of new perspectives (both humanistic and scientific) that make our time one of both crisis and transformation.

From this point of view, talk of the 'end of theory', or what I am calling post-Theory pluralism, does not mean lamenting a lost golden age so much as anticipating a new creative movement. As Adrian Martin exhorts, in good manifesto style:

Let us place a moratorium on all current discussions of the "crisis of film criticism" (newspaper columnists losing their jobs), the "death of film theory" (academics getting old) and the "lost continent of cinephilia" (the last of the murky 16mm prints). The forms of writing on cinema may not be exactly the same as they used to be, they may not be using the same tools and materials, but they are alive and well. Film criticism has returned, in the digital age, to its true and rightful place: the shadows, the margins. Proliferating everywhere, on

a thousand blogs and websites and magazines, but with no solid, permanent, institutional home, no centre.²⁹

Martin offers an eloquent reflection on the positive possibilities of the so-called crisis: networking, experimentation, informality, de-institutionalisation, proliferation, pluralisation, radicalism, creativity, and connection. However, his rousing call to embrace the possibilities of pluralist criticism should be tempered against the need to ensure that individuals have the opportunity to inherit, challenge, and transform the shared film cultures and knowledges that make possible just this kind of rhizomatic communication. This means defending the autonomy of the humanities – indeed of post-Theory film studies – by questioning the economic and ideological discourses that threaten to instrumentalise the discipline completely. Film theory should therefore take up the challenge of realising the opportunities that such a crisis situation affords – not only by recognising what is at stake, fighting to preserve a film culture that values our human plurality, but by experimenting with new kinds of community, new means of communication, new ways of thinking and writing.

Indeed, film theory, whether we regard it as in crisis or in transformation, has not withered or disappeared but mutated and reinvented itself. As Francesco Carsetti writes:

‘Theory has not vanished: it is in disguise. It plays hide and seek. And it might be through this game that we – we who still persist in calling ourselves theorists, knowing that we might be considered anachronistic and slightly pathetic – are invited to consider the loss of cinema and the terms of its re-articulation.’³⁰

The mutating language game of film theory is becoming other than itself, opening up a plurality of different ways in which thinking and theorising about film can be pursued. The so-called crisis in film theory is Janus-faced, marking the passing of one historical and cultural moment and the advent of something unknown and yet to come; it opens up a language game that perplexes and provokes, that illuminates and explores its shifting object, crossing boundaries and disclosing possibilities while also describing, defining, and expanding our experience of film – at least for those receptive to new ways of thinking. In this way, our attitude towards the crisis might also begin to shift, from a sense of danger to one of opportunity, from loss to invention: ‘A sea-change into something rich and strange’.³¹

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Notes

- 1 Rodowick 2007a, p. 11.
- 2 John F. Kennedy, Speech in Indianapolis, 12 April 12 1959.

- 3 My discussion is directed at developments in film theory in the Anglophone world, since that is where the discourse of a crisis in film theory, as symptomatic of a more general crisis in 'Theory', was most explicitly articulated. See, for example, Bordwell and Carroll 1996, Bové 1992, Buckland 2009, Casetti 2007, Eagleton 2003, Hunter 2006, 2007, Latour 2004, Rabaté 2002, Rodowick 1988, 2007a, 2007b, and Žižek 2001. There are important local differences pertaining to the practice of film theory in diverse cultural situations within which talk of a putative 'crisis' in film theory might seem inappropriate. See Dennison and Song Hwee Lim 2006 and Jordanova, Martin-Jones, and Vidal 2010 for helpful discussions of the challenges and possibilities for theorising film across differing cultural, historical, and political contexts.
- 4 See Russo 2005, who argues that it is the technologisation of everyday life and dominance of a technicist and quantificatory paradigm that has been responsible for the dehumanisation of the humanities. See Parker 2007 for an account of the European Commission working party on the future of humanities research.
- 5 See Casetti 2007 for an enlightening discussion of the shift from theory to post-theory and neo-theory, which also situates the 'crisis' not only within theoretical and institutional debates but as a response to the 'disappearance' of film as distinctive medium, to its inherently hybrid character and to the 'postmodern' turn away from overarching explanatory theories. Casetti's emphasis on the latter point, however, might be questioned precisely in light of the turn towards analytic-cognitivist approaches in recent years.
- 6 One of the vexing questions today, as I discuss below, is whether film studies remains a discipline in its own right or whether it should be subsumed into media/cultural/communication studies. See Cubitt 2004 for a materialist analysis of film (drawing on Deleuze and Peirce) that subsumes it within a general media system. See Kittler 1999 for a radical 'post-humanist' version of the subsumption of not only film media but human subjectivity into the integrated networks of technological recording and inscription apparatuses.
- 7 D.N. Rodowick's forthcoming book, *An Elegy for Theory*, promises to do just that. For an excerpt, see the chapter, 'A Care for the Claims of Theory', which reclaims the work of Christian Metz: <http://cjpmi.ifl.pt/storage/cinema-1/C1%20Articles%20Rodowick.pdf>
- 8 Grodal 2009 offers a good example of what this naturalistic turn looks like in contemporary film theory, which is distinguished by a tendency to subsume the 'cultural' issues of context, power, ideology, and so forth into an expanded cognitivist-bioculturalist account of film.
- 9 See Nussbaum 2010.
- 10 Rodowick 2007a, p. 13.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 91.
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 Well-known examples of this anti-Theory animus and 'culture wars' rhetoric can be found in the introductions to two major volumes that marked the advent of 'Post-Theory' film studies: Bordwell and Carroll 1996 and Allen and Smith 1997. See the witty critical rejoinder to this 'Post-theory' critique in Žižek 2001, pp. 1-30.
- 14 Elsaesser 1992: <http://home.hum.uva.nl/oz/elsaesser/essay-Filmcriticism.pdf>.
- 15 By 'scientific theories' I mean those that take the methods, authority, and insights of the natural sciences as their model, without thereby being scientific theories as such.
- 16 Rodowick 1988.

- 17 The first instances of this analytic-cognitivist turn appeared in the mid to late 1980s: see Bordwell 1985 and 1989; Carroll 1988a and 1988b; and the 'Cognitivism' Special Issue of *Iris* 9 (1989).
- 18 See also *The Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* (2003) on 'The Future of Theory'.
- 19 For examples of this kind of post-Theory pluralism see the recent volumes by Gledhill and Williams 2000, Buckland 2009, and Carel and Tuck 2011.
- 20 Grodal 2009, pp. 1-21.
- 21 See the essays in Shohat and Stam 1994 for examples of this more culturally situated, politically motivated work to decolonise film and media theory by challenging its implicit and explicit Eurocentrism. For a postcolonial critique of Deleuze's Eurocentric biases and an innovative transformation of Deleuzian film theory via philosophical engagement with a variety of world cinemas see Martin-Jones 2011.
- 22 See Bordwell and Carroll's critique of psychoanalytic film theory (1996), which has been criticised for its tendency towards outmoded straw-man caricatures of the theories in question. See Heath 1983, Buckland 1989, and Bennett 2000.
- 23 See Grodal's reductivist evolutionary biological account of women's pleasure in romance and men's desire for pornography as 'hard-wired' preferences reflecting the evolutionary sexual predisposition for men to favor promiscuity and women to seek monogamy. Grodal 2009, pp. 56-78.
- 24 Sinnerbrink 2011, pp. 13-27.
- 25 Rodowick 2007a, p. 98.
- 26 Snow 2001 (1959), pp. 48-53.
- 27 Žižek 2006, pp. 3-16.
- 28 See the essays in Gledhill and Williams 2000 and in Buckland 2009.
- 29 Martin 2011: <http://abc.net.au/unleashed/2749752.html>.
- 30 Casetti 2007, p. 44.
- 31 I would like to thank Annie van den Oever and David Martin-Jones, as well as the NEC-SUS journal editors, for their very helpful suggestions and comments on an earlier version of this essay.