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FILM CRITICISM AND DIGITAL CULTURES

JOURNALISM, SOCIAL
MEDIA AND THE
DEMOCRATISATION
OF OPINION

ANDREW McWHIRTER

Andrew McWhirter is Programme Leader in Media and Communication at Glasgow Caledonian University. He has also worked as an arts journalist for a number of years with DC Publishing, *Tribune Magazine* and the Glasgow Film Theatre among other outlets. He is currently researching audiovisual pedagogy and social media critiques.

‘[This] rigorous study goes beyond the clichés bemoaning the “death of criticism” and examines the specific challenges facing film critics in the digital era. At a time when print journalism is under siege, McWhirter emphasises that a public sphere that defies corporate interests and encourages critical thinking is of the utmost importance.’

Richard Porton, *Cineaste*

‘Andrew McWhirter has provided a great service to those interested in the state of both written and audiovisual film criticism. Through rich and detailed analyses, written in lucid prose and enriched by in-depth interviews with prominent film critics on the international film festival circuit, he provides an essential point of reference for understanding film criticism today.’

David Archibald, University of Glasgow

‘Film critics and scholars of film criticism alike will welcome this book. Andrew McWhirter brings critical calmness and consideration to the widespread notion of a crisis, to provide a historically informed but contemporarily aware account of what Anglophone film criticism has been, is, and might be in the future...’

Jonny Murray, University of Edinburgh

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Abbreviations

AICN	<i>Ain't It Cool News</i>
BAFTA	British Academy of Film and Television Arts
BAFTSS	British Association of Film, Television and Screen Studies
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BFI	British Film Institute
CSM	Centre for Social Media
EIFF	Edinburgh International Film Festival
FDA	Film Distributors' Association
FFRN	Film Festival Research Network
GCHQ	UK Government Communications Headquarters
GFT	Glasgow Film Theatre
IMDb	Internet Movie Database
KDM	Key Delivery Message
NPS	National Press Shows, London
NRS PADD	National Readership Survey Print and Digital Data Survey
NSA	National Security Agency
NUJ	National Union of Journalists
NYT	<i>New York Times</i>
P:NC	Project: New Cinephilia
SCMS	Society for Cinema and Media Studies
TIFF	Toronto International Film Festival
VOD	Video On Demand

Introduction

Preamble

If one opening sentence might summarise film criticism at the beginning of the twenty-first century it could ape that Dickens classic: 'It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.' Recent discourses of expectation and demise upon this phenomenon, which is a method of writing that has historically been a nominal function to the wider production, perception and consumption of movies, have been disproportionate: if film criticism was not dead then it was hanging on in the OT; if it was indeed alive and kicking then it was proclaimed to herald in a new golden age. Of course such concerns and hopes are part of a much larger narrative of disruptive digital transformations impinging on daily routines in our professional and personal lives – the rapid infusion of Web 2.0's social media platforms and media connectivity serve as just one example. Still, I like to consider that even within these new developments our tastes are, to borrow from Pierre Bourdieu, still symbolically shaped by a variety of mediators. If we like a particular art form or medium and are actively involved in pursuing it for pleasure or cultural capital, then more often than not, critics are never far away. With a keen interest in video games since my parents gifted me a second-hand Atari 2600 in the mid-1980s,

I find myself often fully converged in allowing my consumption of that art form to be shaped by the old world and the new. I follow a critic called David Jenkins, writing for GameCentral in the UK newspaper *Metro* and have done since his views and those of others under that banner were broadcast on Teletext from 2003–2009. While I regard Jenkins' ratings as the benchmark for any video game scores out of ten, because he appears fair and as disinterested from industry influence as is possible to be, I also rely on the voice of the multitudes and the collective critical community (professional and amateur) by visiting Metacritic. In this way, for me, the traditional gatekeeping world still exists simultaneously with that of aggregates, a precursor to the world of the current academic buzz words Big Data. Having researched within this media landscape the subject of film criticism for a number of years, and although the overall inflection of this book will argue that many habits, norms and continuities permeate its current narrative, I have to declare my own view that there has never been a better time for English-language film criticism. I choose the term film criticism here rather than film critics because I cannot speak for all those practitioners who have experienced some of the most dramatic media changes in recent years. However, the purpose of this book is to give voice to some of those film critics in one collective yet diverse space with views from Glasgow and Birmingham to Salt Lake City and New York, California and Arkansas to London and Edinburgh.

Beginning two years after Rónán McDonald published *The Death of the Critic* (2007), and taking place against broader digital disruptions in culture, media and journalism, and also coinciding with a period which saw job losses for a number of film critics in the UK and North America, my early research for this book set out to uncover what was happening to film criticism in the contemporary digital age. This top-level investigative question was broken down into sub-questions and categories exploring the relationship between crises and practitioners; asking what film criticism is in order to reveal its inherent functions and associations to other arts criticism; querying the ways technologies are affecting the field of film criticism; analysing the tensions between art/industry and the pressures of commercialisation; and also investigating the role of the expert in digitised culture. To achieve answers to

these questions and gather empirically-grounded evidence to set against increasing hyperbole, such as crisis and death or radical transformations and a new golden age, this book interviews some of the key film critics currently writing in the English language, subjecting their narratives and institutional affiliations to comprehensive analyses. Some of these agents and organisations are as follows, but are not limited to: Jonathan Rosenbaum, Nick James, Mark Cousins, Xan Brooks, Richard Porton, Girish Shambu, Kevin B. Lee, Eric Kohn, Adam Nayman and Robert Koehler, writing for such diverse outlets as, *Film Comment*, *Sight & Sound*, *The Times*, the *Guardian*, *Cineaste*, *LOLA*, *Fandor*, *IndieWIRE*, *CinemaScope* and *Variety*.

Research into contemporary film criticism in the UK is a small area. There are academics performing historical enquiries (Bell 2010, 2011, 2011b; Selfe 2012) as well as encouraging signs of growth through the work of Mattias Frey and Cecilia Sayad at the University of Kent, among other edited collections (Clayton and Klevan 2011). It is therefore not quite a neglected field of audiovisual criticism, as Paul Rixon (2011) remarks of UK non-academic television criticism in *TV Critics and Popular Culture: A History of British Television Criticism*, but it is a scholarly field which looks set to pique more interests in the coming years. There is no doubt that, compared to the study of literary criticism or journalism studies, the latter of which is dominated by a focus on news and politics, film criticism from the professional journalistic and amateur realms certainly appears more under-researched. As such, this book utilises an interdisciplinary approach which brings in topics from literary and arts criticism, journalism studies and the most recent scholarly developments on digitally networked media cultures.

While it goes without saying that this positioning book is not a final word, given the nature of the topic it is prudent to highlight the continuation of media utterances on the changing nature of film criticism: pondering its future (Avrich 2014); reflecting on the collision of online and offline worlds in positive ways (Kustanczy 2014) and making arguments for the upkeep of traditional standards in others (Semonson 2014); and continued questioning over how much authority film critics have (Kaplan 2014). All of which fit into broader discussions of criticism and

critics in general, still topical across media from Mark Lawson (2013) on BBC Radio 4's *Front Row* to an *IndieWIRE* composite of 17 critics on the state of film criticism in April 2016. This book does not, therefore, provide a definitive answer but seeks to offer one sophisticated reading of film criticism in a landscape often characterised by digital idealism which praises and indeed foregrounds change.

It would be naive to assume that technology is the main or only driving force for change but equally so to take the view that nothing is ever truly new and, thus, avoid the transformative powers of technology altogether (Meikle & Young 2012). While it is important to note a paradigm shift in the consumption and production of media and its journalism, it is equally helpful to consider these transformations as less of a revolution than a continual, slow evolution. One interpretation of Raymond Williams' 1961 book *The Long Revolution*, and his discussions of media and cultural trajectories into the twentieth century, is that the perception of new and transformative acts as uniquely current or revolutionary may be the result of an inability to commentate whilst still inhabiting our respective contemporary cultural spheres. It is the purpose of this work to at least attempt to provide a significant commentary on film criticism during such a period, and to posit a thesis which places film criticism within this fluctuating continuum of change and continuity in order to discover if one digital trend is more dominant than the other. While outlining the subsequent chapters I will also, so to speak, show the workings behind their creation.

Approaching Film Criticism behind the Desk

With so many utterances on film criticism during the first decade of the twenty-first century focusing on crisis, there is value in allowing film critics themselves to create their own narratives about what may be happening to contemporary film criticism. This also became a necessity because, unlike topics in which the field is rich with literature, it was apparent from the outset that it would be difficult to ascertain which knowledge gaps this monograph could fill because of the newness of the subject matter. Having reviewed what little scholarly literature existed on the subject of

film criticism in the digital age and indeed on the topic of non-academic film criticism in general, it became necessary to improvise, to manoeuvre towards other fields of enquiry (discursive and tangential) to establish a grounded theoretical framework from which to build. This is in line with the arguments and subsequent interdisciplinary methodological frameworks applied by Rixon (2011; 2012) in his study of the under-researched area of television criticism. Therefore I chose a multi-method approach combining desk research, including textual analysis and archival work, with qualitative research methods, such as participant observation and elite interviews, all with their respective strengths and weaknesses. The fundamental concerns which shape my methodology pertain to the newness of the subject under scrutiny – film criticism in a digital age – and, thus, the desirability for film critics to shape their own narrative without imposition.

The implementation of these methods helps me answer the research question in two ways. Firstly, as there is minimal literature on the specific subject matter, it is appropriate to employ desk research into other related disciplines of enquiry such as digital media, journalism and arts and literary criticism. The second phase of researching this book involved fieldwork: semi-structured interviews, with open-ended questions, were implemented so that practitioners could convey their own ideas about what may be transpiring in contemporary film criticism. This process involved interviewing some of the world's most acclaimed film critics at the Edinburgh International Film Festival (EIFF) 2011 and The Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) 2011, with supplementary email and telephone interviews also carried out. A full list of the publications observed and the film critics interviewed can be found in the appendix. As a result of both these tasks, desk research and the subsequent analysis of the narratives which critics themselves have created from interviews, I am able to uncover whether or not film criticism in the digital age is characterised by more dominant processes of continuity rather than change. Both of these methodological approaches are also established methods, which is a central concern in the research practice's ability to present 'certifiably objective and reliable knowledge' (Brewer 2000:2), but they are particularly appropriate here when exploring a newer field of

enquiry. I offer this approach rather than methodology as epistemology – as offered within the work of many textbooks on the subject (Bryman 1988; Seale 1999). As C. Wright Mills writes of a scholar made weary and impatient by elaborate discussions of method and theory, ‘It is much better, he believes, to have one account by a working student of how he is going about his work than a dozen “codifications of procedure” by specialists’ (Mills 1959).

Plentiful media commentaries on the crisis in criticism and more scholarly literature on digital media and journalism, areas logically and symbolically linked to film criticism outside of academia, allowed me to posit that key themes affecting these areas would equally, *vis-à-vis*, provide a requisite framework from which to analyse contemporary film criticism. To this end, Chapter One begins a contextualisation of the contemporary landscape of film criticism and examines a number of reasons which may be contributing to a particularly intensive period of crisis in both criticism and media culture. Extending this crisis narrative into the proposed disruptive changes in journalism, this chapter then goes on to detail key technologies and conceptualisations of the digital age, such as the web, participation and commercialisation. Representative of the importance of deploying an interdisciplinary approach to the study of film criticism in the digital age is a key interpretative framework which emerges out of the literature review which I term Respected Space. In discussing wider cultural concepts, the notion of a certain dominant legacy through branded media will be introduced. Respected Space is not exclusively an online space or offline space in print or broadcasting, but it is representative of the converged connection and transition of certain print outlets into web-based environments. Here they continue to command gatekeeping dominance as before; and in some cases their original significations as trusted news and content producers is magnified as a result of increased digital audiences. If potent trusted barometers for disseminating news and cultural information, once available only at an expense to the consumer, are then distributed freely, they become even more popular but still maintain a level of respectability. This may indicate a phenomenon where quality newspapers become popular newspapers in digital form but still perpetuate the historical link of gravitas even with

increased numbers. The bridge between older institution and its newer digital access platforms is the Respected Space which ensures both popularity and at least a certain level of trust. Additionally, commercialisation and participation are key threads which become useful frameworks for analysing the empirical data in subsequent chapters.

My arguments in [Chapter Two](#), that film criticism is inextricably linked to the functions of aesthetics and politics found in the ancient and modern origins of criticism, are a product of uncovering some of the earliest work of film criticism written some months after the inception of cinema. This initial archival search and subsequent textual analysis of the documents then lent itself to further searches for similar themes throughout film history in newspapers, magazines and film journals. Being immersed in a variety of types of film criticism, both historical and contemporary all of which can be viewed in the appendix, allowed me to propose the Six Schools model which aids categorisation in such a broad field under consideration. The main arguments of [Chapter Two](#) are thus: Firstly, film criticism is distinct from journalism because it shares a visible continuity from ancient and modern origins of the critical act and secondly, it is important to provide a model for the entire field of film criticism and therefore show which areas are the central focus of this book. From this taxonomy it will be possible for the reader to discern what film criticism is for the purposes of this book. The first argument continues the research context by examining scholarly engagement with the history of criticism from its ancient and modern roots and conveys two key functions of the critical act arguably present in all arts criticism: aesthetic judgement of the object and socio-political comment on the context of that object and its creator(s). Aware of film criticism as more than perhaps only an intellectual analysis, I then detail the disparate communities of film criticism in a Six Schools of Contemporary Film Criticism model, which acknowledges the agency of individual critics to belong to more than one mode of film criticism, but also the dominant ideologies of each school. Such classifications of film criticism (Bordwell 1989) and television criticism (Rixon 2011) have been performed before by scholars. The Six Schools model, or ‘hive’ of film criticism and its interpretative frameworks, is justified against these previous frameworks

but also provides a visible map of the entire heterogeneous field of film criticism and as such will benefit the analyses of interviews and observations because it reveals which positions individuals are contributing ideas from. Although this book recognises a spectrum of amateur and professional writing as forms of criticism, the majority of those interviewed can be classified as professional critics working at the level of popular journalism or more cinephilic writing. Additionally, even though this chapter also details the differences between the terms, this book echoes the work of Rixon (2011), and before him Mike Poole (1984), in collapsing the descriptors ‘reviewing’ and ‘criticism’ together for the purposes of broad analysis – terms which are also picked up briefly by some critics and documented in [Chapter Three](#). Before moving to discuss the first of these empirical chapters it is worth reflecting on the processes which comprise the opening chapters.

These conceptualisations are based on multidisciplinary research which is in turn analysed and presented in such a way as to create the foundations of a relatively new area. Of course there are countless examples of film criticism in practice and even examples which examine individual bodies of works by single critics but rarely is film criticism looked at as an entire entity. Melanie Bell (2011:191) has argued that the critic has been more readily connected to histories of journalism and broadcasting and that, ‘Film criticism occupies a liminal space in film history. As a practice and a body of work, it is secondary to the film itself; an ancillary form that is entirely dependent on the continued release of films.’ It is perhaps for this reason that there exists little in the way of substantial scholarly literature on the role of film critics and film criticism in general other than looking at the work of ‘star performers’ of film criticism (Bell 2011:192), such as famous names like Iris Barry in the work of Haidee Wasson (2006). Historical investigations into film criticism have also been carried out through specific thematic prisms, such as feminist studies and women film critics, prevalent in the work of Bell (2010; 2011; 2011b) and Wasson (2006), and also via examining gendered spaces in different film industry sectors, visible in the work of Melanie Selfe (2012). Criticism more broadly, however, is also distinct from conceptualised ideas of journalism as news reporting and politics. Gemma Harries and

Karin Wahl-Jørgensen (2007:624) recognise that arts journalists ‘do not fit comfortably into the professional category of the journalist,’ where the job involves reportorial duties as well as criticism. Rixon (2011:231) says of television criticism that it ‘is a complex and disputed activity [with] little agreement on who is a critic, where they operate [and] in whose interest.’ As Maarit Jaakkola (2012:487) makes clear with her two paradigms of cultural journalism as the journalistic and the aesthetic, critics are not *just* reporters. Rixon (2011:2) also argues that critics are not ‘straight-forward’ journalists, and therefore are not the sole responsibility of an academic field of inquiry like Journalism Studies but occupy the focus of other fields such as literary and cultural studies.

Deploying an initial existing literature investigation in 2010 – with the pertinent databases (Ethos; Expanded Academic, JSTOR; MLA Bibliography; Newsbank; Proquest; Web of Knowledge; World Cat; ZETOC), publisher-specific websites and journals (Cambridge University Press; Oxford University Press; Taylor & Francis; Verso; Wileyonline), Open Access e-journal portals (Directory of Open Access Journals; Open J-Gate; JURN; Intute), existing PhD work (Ethos; ProQuest), and using relevant search parameters and combinations (film criticism and internet, film criticism and digital age, criticism online, digital-age criticism, film criticism online, web criticism, movie criticism and the internet, film reviewing online, film journalism online etcetera) – there was minimal evidence of research into the field of film criticism in the digital age. Debates were taking place but not from any substantial body of academic work and were often dominated by talk of crises. Commentary was mainly from film publications themselves and newspaper coverage, with an article by Nick James (2009) in *Film Quarterly* on the potential for a revitalised criticism and a *Cineaste* symposium in 2008, ‘Film Criticism in the Age of the Internet’, filtering to the top of most searches. This certainly highlights the fact that the topic is more relevant in the journalistic domain where talk of crisis and death are often directed – albeit *Film Quarterly* and *Cineaste* do have more gravitas. Academia, as Jonathan Rosenbaum remarked to me, often lives in geological time rather than the immediacy of journalism – which is often reported as close to real time as possible (details of all interviews can be found in

the appendix). Rosenbaum's statement seems particularly apt given that some years after this flurry of media attention dedicated to film criticism, scholars are now turning their interest to the subject.

While there were always many discussion panels at international film festivals debating the state of film criticism where scholars have also participated, now there are proposed manuscripts and conferences dedicated to the subject specifically. Frey and Sayad expect to publish an edited collection under the title 'Film Criticism in the Digital Age' in 2015; they also organised a conference into the current state of criticism at the University of Kent in 2012; and in 2013, the first annual BAFTSS Conference was themed around critics and writing criticism. Apart from the addition of one pseudo-academic work gleaned from internet material titled *Film Criticism Online* (2010) with no recognised author and an edited monograph on film criticism in academia (Clayton & Klevan 2011), the topic of criticism – not always exclusively film criticism – has been written about more in open-access journals. In retrospect, the interdisciplinary nature of open-access journals is perhaps best served to provide broad discussions of culture and criticism rather than the specialisation often required of peer-reviewed equivalents. Further archives on the subject of film criticism since emerged online. Film critics Kate Taylor and Damon Smith curated a workshop called Project: New Cinephilia (P:NC) in association with MUBI and the EIFF 2011, with a dedicated web presence which collated many articles on the subject of film criticism past and present and moves tangentially towards discussions of criticism in general <<http://projectcinephilia.mubi.com>>. This highlights the dynamism with which writing about new subjects can find their space online, unafraid of large and amorphous zeitgeist issues, as opposed to theses, academic journals and monographs. Yet, the disparity between the volume of material on the subject of film criticism's crisis, death or new golden age that exists in the media or is provided by critics themselves, and that which can be considered scholarly research, will not close substantially anytime soon. Throughout the course of researching this book computerised alerts from Google have consistently outperformed any results from academic alert systems, such as ZETOC. From late 2012, the frequency from the former dropped dramatically, which may indicate that the topic is no longer a zeitgeist issue for journalists. Although in summer

2013 after the death of Roger Ebert, and again in 2014 with the release of an autobiographical movie based on him, there was a renewed interest in discussing film criticism once more. Google Alerts continue to offer evidence of regular discussions around the topic of film criticism into 2016.

Approaching Film Criticism in the Field

In conducting qualitative research at the EIFF and the TIFF, my choice of utilising participant observation was aided by the fact that I was a fully accredited member of the press writing for *Tribune Magazine*. I attempted to detach myself from my own experiences as a film journalist in shaping the conceptual chapters, to attempt to remain objective and not impose themes that emanate solely from personal experience. However, that role was of subsequent use in gaining access to research areas otherwise off-limits, such as screenings, press events and film festival delegate centres. In discussing the popularity of her co-authored film blog with David Bordwell, and how it has since benefited the forging of links with industry, Kristin Thompson (2012) acknowledges that festival passes and other access benefits can aid research. In some ways I sought to maintain objectivity in that I specifically chose not to interview any film critics that I knew personally. In others I embraced the positives of being a film critic (at a festival at least). I was working alongside critics while interviewing and observing them, which allowed me to forge connections and build more of a rapport – even by being around the same locations – than I could have as a researcher coming to the topic cold. This debate between emic and etic or insider and outsider (Headland *et al.*, 1990) is one which originated in anthropology in the 1950s and has permeated some of the literature on qualitative methodologies. As I am an occasional critic, I would argue that while I may have been somewhat of an insider researcher at festivals and press events I still maintained an outsider approach to the work as a whole. Press accreditation on the basis of academic research alone was not forthcoming from a large event such as the TIFF (I met fellow researchers, from the University of Chicago, who worked as volunteers and had been refused full access for research purposes). Without this access it would be difficult to

triangulate material – whereby information found in one place is related to another and measured in terms of significance – such as off-the-record comments, hearsay, consensuses, discontents, and many other general observations alongside formal interviews and existing literature.

I draw association with my work and ethnography as explained by John D. Brewer (2000), as it is closely related to my own research process. For instance, Brewer (2000:6) defines ethnography as: ‘The study of people in naturally occurring settings or ‘fields’ by methods of data collection which capture their social meanings and ordinary activities, involving the researcher participating directly in the setting, if not also the activities, in order to collect data in a systematic manner but without meaning being imposed on them externally’. Such an approach is often deployed anthropologically or sociologically but is not infrequent to screen studies or cultural policy. As what I required was an appraisal of the culture of film criticism rather than an economic or market analysis common in the work of Basuroy *et al.* (2003); Boatwright *et al.* (2007); Eliashberg and Shugan (1997); Ravid *et al.* (2006); Terry *et al.* (2005), or specific quantitative appraisals from Simonton (2004), elite interviews and participant observation exercises were deemed most appropriate.

The options open to survey and observe a number of critics dictated the best possible locations as international film festivals. Moreover, most critics who expressed an interest also preferred to be interviewed face-to-face after initial contact was made via email or over the telephone. A total of 94 critics were contacted with a view to participating, from which I conducted 30 interviews – the majority of which took place at both film festivals. The location of the film festival as an area for research also has a prehistory (Archibald 2012; Bart 1997; Beauchamp & Béhar 1992; Craig 2006; Mazdon 2006; Coreless & Drake 2007) and my work follows these previous models in so far as some of these scholars also worked as film critics. Film festivals have also grown in importance both in Europe (Aas 1997) and worldwide (Iordanova & Rhyne 2009; Iordanova & Cheung 2010; 2011) and have become a respected field of enquiry over the last 20 years, with work coming out of St Andrews University and the ever-growing Film Festival Research Network (FFRN) organised by Skadi Loist and Marijke de Valck which publishes information at

<http://www.filmfestivalresearch.org>>. Internationally labelled festivals are also concentrated locations where film journalists from a variety of backgrounds congregate to not only work but meet one another and discuss their own practice. The latter is especially true at the EIFF 2011: the event's curatorial statement claimed to offer a fresh appraisal of cinéphilie. It is for this reason alongside its historic respectability as being a festival of film culture (Auty & Hartnoll 1981), occupying 'the high ground when it comes to credibility' (Bolton, 2005), as well as its geographical proximity to my base location, that the EIFF was chosen. There also exist precedents for studying criticism in festival environments in Edinburgh. Wesley Jr. Shrum's (1996) analysis of high- and low-brow art at the Fringe supports his argument that the critic is essential to understanding cultural hierarchies, and Mathew Lloyd (2011) analyses the impact of cinéphilie on the EIFF from 1968–1980.

I understood from the outset that I would require a larger festival than the EIFF in order to harness non-UK critical voices and broaden my reach, as some of the elite participants contacted would not attend the EIFF. Considering that my focus was on English-language criticism, it was logical to find a location in North America to supplement the work at the EIFF, predominantly due to the large market of English-language film criticism in existence there. As the continent's premier international film festival and one of the world's most important, the TIFF presented itself as the coherent choice, with much US media such as *Variety* and *Time* magazine claiming that it was either second only to 'Cannes' or even more influential (Shoard 2012). While these two distinct festival locales formed the basis of my participant observations, they also provided the opportunities for me to conduct in-depth interviews with elite participants.

I specifically requested interviews with critics who have a profile in film culture. Nigel King (2004:11) acknowledges that qualitative research is about the researcher's ability to shape the interview because they are part of that process, and David Deacon *et al.* (1999) understand qualitative interviews to be more suited towards non-structured than structured approaches. Having variable time windows for each interview required both preparation and improvisation. The time pressures upon critics at festivals meant that implementing a structured interview was

impractical, as most critics could not say in advance when and for how long they could speak; often this was negotiated on a day-to-day basis. A more active qualitative interview process was therefore necessary, not entirely unstructured, whereby I could produce open-ended questions that also observed some protocols. A spine of basic questions allowed for flexibility in each interview, which was particularly useful when questioning Kevin B. Lee on his video essay work or editors from *Cineaste* and *CinemaScope* on the machinations of publishing.

Being an accredited member of the press led to having a rapport with the film critics, but it was unclear whether this role minimised any reluctance they may have had about being open and honest in their responses. This trust was achieved mainly due to my status as a researcher which allowed participants to feel more comfortable about a variety of possibilities: how they might be used in the project, the understanding of the ethical responsibilities the researcher places upon themselves in a position of power to shape and lead interviews and, more importantly, to frame and edit their responses prior to publication.

Making critics aware of these factors led to frank and candid disclosures about colleagues and industry, of which some have been omitted from this publication at their request. This dual role of being in a sympathetic position as a critic yet also being a researcher whom they could depend upon not to make public certain concerns certainly benefited a relationship of trust – only one critic asked to see a proof of quotes prior to publication. One recognisable trend was that, although happy to talk about industry, publications or other critics, interviewees were hyper-aware of their surroundings and potential eavesdropping. This was particularly visible when conducting interviews in or around press centres where industry ears may be listening. When given the choice of venue most critics opted for *off-site* options such as coffee shops or bars. Those interviews that were conducted in official delegate areas (Figures 1.1 and 1.2) often resulted in lowered tones and looks over their shoulders when speaking about potentially sensitive issues. While this is perhaps not applicably labelled ‘sensitive research’ entirely, that particular term is applicable to a huge variety of research types and almost all social research can be described in this way (Dickson-Swift *et al.* 2008).



Figure 1.1: Teviot Row House, the press centre and delegate hub at the EIFF 2011.

Certainly I possess sensitive information which I have been trusted to anonymise accordingly where I deem its use appropriate.

Contacting critics prior to the festivals was something that had its strengths in that I could build a relationship with them, negotiating times and places via emails and in some cases they would put me in touch with colleagues by helpfully telling me the best times to contact them. It also confirmed that they were interested in the work and had something to say rather than being approached on the spot at the festivals. As was shown from my canvassing of critics by putting flyers on the press tables in the Tiff. Bell Lightbox in Toronto, this was an ineffective way of having people participate. On the both occasions that I checked back, all the cards had been taken, or perhaps disposed of.

The film festival environment makes it difficult to conduct large-scale research with many critics because it is an extremely busy period for most involved. This not only limited participation but the length of time for interviews. This was a more noticeable factor at the larger event in



Figure 1.2: Venues and Delegate Centres at the TIFF 2011, The Hyatt Hotel, the Tiff. Bell Lightbox and the Scotiabank Theatre.