Critical thinking and the humanities: A case study of conceptualizations and teaching practices at the Section for Cinema Studies at Stockholm University

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Abstract
The raison d’être of the humanities is widely held to reside in its unique ability to generate critical thinking and critical thinkers. But what is “critical thinking”? Is it a generalized mode of reasoning or a form of political critique? How does it relate to discipline-specific practices of scholarly pursuit? How does it relate to discourses of “post-truth” and “alternative facts”? How is it best taught? This essay explores these issues via a case study of conceptualizations of critical thinking among cinema scholars at Stockholm University, whose views are interpreted against the backdrop of (a) debates about the value of the humanities; (b) higher education scholarship on critical thinking; and (c) the legacy of certain disciplinary traditions within cinema studies, especially the paradigms of “post-theory” and “political modernism.” The interviews attest to the persistence of critical thinking as a fundamental, yet highly elusive, concept to higher education in the arts and humanities.

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Introduction
When the current website of the Section for Cinema Studies at Stockholm University was conceived, someone was given the task of providing a two-sentence reply to the question “What is cinema studies?” He or she decided to lead with this: “The discipline of cinema studies offers tools for the critical analysis of moving images in historical as well as contemporary contexts” (Institutionen för mediestudier, Stockholms universitet, 2017). Elsewhere on the site, visitors will find an interview with a recent graduate from the Master’s Program. How had a cinema studies education proved useful in this alumnus’s career? “The education has given me a kind of critical and reflexive perspective on more or less everything I do” (Institutionen för mediestudier, Stockholms universitet, 2016).

These examples suggest that cinema studies scholars put a high premium on what is colloquially and otherwise often referred to as “critical thinking.” Alternatively, that is the impression they want to give people outside of their field, including prospective students. Cinema studies departments rarely teach technical or practical skills, and the knowledge they produce is not self-evidently translatable into specified career paths outside of academia. But perhaps they can cultivate students’ critical faculties in ways that will make them employable in a wide range of contexts—and upright citizens to boot.

The last point brings to mind debates over the societal role and general value of the humanities. Consider, for example, Martha Nussbaum’s (2016: xvii) case for why “the humanities and arts provide skills that are essential to keep democracy healthy.” Her focus is on citizenship and democracy, but Nussbaum (2016: xvi-xvii) notes that another argument for keeping the humanities strong is that “critical thinking” is crucial to creating healthy and profitable business cultures. Presumably, the humanities can provide corporations with ready-made critical thinkers/problem-solvers who can contribute immediately to productivity and then master career-specific skills along the way.

The Section for Cinema Studies in Stockholm, then, is hardly the first or only academic institution to suggest that the cultivation of critical thinking is its main mission, or to assume that this has substantial spillover effects outside of academia. But how exactly do cinema scholars conceptualize the notion of critical thinking? And how do they teach their subject in ways that help students excel in critical thinking? This article provides tentative answers to these questions from the horizon of one particular institutional context: The Section for Cinema Studies at the Department of Media Studies at Stockholm University. While some of the results are specific to this particular environment and the discipline of cinema studies, the
work should resonate with readers across the humanities (and perhaps beyond). Many will recognize how a universal, seemingly instinctive embrace of critical thinking is accompanied by difficulties to articulate a clear and collegially shared idea of what the term means and how it should best be taught. Many may also experience a sense of familiarity with the ways in which cinema scholars tend to argue that critical thinking is a general skillset, yet typical of the humanities, yet even more typical of their own discipline. In any case, the study is presented with the hope of inspiring similar research and pedagogical discussions in other institutional contexts, however adapted to local conditions.

**Background**

*A science like any other?*

Before we launch into the case study proper, some additional background is called for. Let us first return to the discussion about the value of the humanities but add a few things about the Swedish context. While I have been unable to establish whether the aforementioned arguments in defense of the humanities resonate with Swedes, I have come across evidence that suggests that the Swedish public lacks confidence in this particular branch of academia. The University of Gothenburg’s SOM Institute’s survey of Swedish citizens’ attitudes toward science and research, carried out yearly since 2002 in cooperation with the non-profit association Vetenskap och Allmänhet (VA), shows that while Swedes have high confidence in science and research generally, this is not the case with the humanities specifically. In 2018, only 43% of the survey’s participants stated that they had high or very high confidence in the humanities, compared to 77% for medicine, 73% for technology, and 65% for the natural sciences (VA, 2019: 12). Another VA report (2018: 8) studied the potential reasons for these variations, and suggested that a key problem was that people tended to think about the humanities as “more subjective, less scientific, and yielding less societal use-value,” and as a “vague research field in which there is no way of telling what is true and what is false.”

We could think of such attitudes as a negative argument for the specificity of the humanities—“it is not a real science.” Some counter-arguments, including ideas about a unique capacity to produce critical thinking, take the analogous form of a positive appeal to specificity. Can such arguments help boost the public confidence in the humanities? Not everyone is convinced. In a recent essay (see Larsson, 2019 for a condensed version) published by the Swedish “free market think tank” Timbro, Göran Larsson, a Professor of Religious Studies at The University of Gothenburg, suggested that humanities scholars were likely to garner more trust if they made an effort to emphasize that their field is (usually) just as committed to a “scientific approach”—characterized by things such as open debate, methodological transparency, and critical scrutiny of the empirical and logical support of the research—as any other branch of academia. In other words, why not try to convince the public that the humanities is basically a science like any other?
Two models of critical thinking excavated from cinema studies’ past

In cinema studies, attempts to define the discipline as a “science like any other” have usually been beset by controversy. A well-known example would be the initiatives in the 1980s and 1990s to wipe the slate clean with the “Grand Theory” that had allegedly dominated since the 1970s, in order to advance a version of cinema studies that rested on more solid scientific ground. Although they have a longer history, many of the ideas that were part and parcel of this project—not least as connected to the effort to replace theories of cinematic spectatorship predicated on psychoanalysis with theories based on cognitive science—crystalized with the publication of *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, edited by David Bordwell and Noël Carroll (1996). Here Bordwell and Carroll made the case for application of conventional scientific rigor to the ways in which cinema studies produces knowledge and theorizes its objects of study, suggesting (Bordwell and Carroll, 1996: xiv) that cinema studies could move forward through “dialectical criticism,” according to which rival theories were measured against each other with regard to their empirical and logical solidity. They were careful to emphasize (see especially Carroll, 1996: 52–61) that this did not mean that cinema studies would or could be turned into a natural science, or that they had bought into an idea of science as infallible, or truth as absolute, only that there was reason to believe that some theories and ideas did a better job at approximating the truth about the phenomena under study and producing plausible answers to the various research questions at hand—until new and improved theories and ideas came along.

*Post-Theory* was presented (Bordwell and Carroll, 1996: xvii) as a book that would help renew “the spirit of critical thinking” in cinema studies. Although the term was not specified further, it seems clear that what Bordwell and Carroll had in mind was closely linked to the application of scientific rigor, and to the notion of “dialectical criticism.” From another point of view, however, the “Grand Theory” (or “SLAB Theory,” as Bordwell called it elsewhere, referring to its mixture of Saussurian semiotics, Lacanian psychoanalysis, Althusserian Marxism, and Barthesian textual theory—see Bordwell, 1989a: 385–392) that *Post-Theory* set out to dethrone by means of critical thinking was seen as the very source of the critical force of the field. One significant account of the history of cinema studies—film theory specifically—along such lines was David Rodowick’s (1988) *The Crisis of Political Modernism*. In the preface to the second edition, Rodowick (1994: ix–xiv) suggested that critical practices within cinema studies in the period 1968–1984 had been defined by one, overarching concern: the relationship between film and ideology—especially the ways in which cinematic signifying, or film form writ large, carved out ideologically charged spectatorial positions, or subjectivities. The exploration of such issues—via film theorizing, aesthetic practice (e.g. avant-garde filmmaking), and other means—made up the discursive practice, or “enunciative modality,” that Rodowick (1994: xi–xiii) labeled “political modernism” and that took ideological critique as its fundamental goal.
Rodowick’s (1994) book also touched on another question of relevance for this article: Is there a mode of critical thinking that is unique to cinema studies? Rodowick’s (1994: viii–x; xiii–xvi) account implied that this might be the case, partly because institutional and historical factors had made cinema studies an exceptionally fertile field for the cultivation of critical theory—epitomized by 1970s film theory—but also because it was widely assumed that films (of a certain modernist form) had the capacity to create critical awareness and demystify ideology. In fact, according to Rodowick (1994: xxvi–xxviii), this idea became so central to political modernism that the theoretical contributions to the discourse were overshadowed, which prompted Rodowick to make a renewed case for the critical force of theory. Eventually, Rodowick and others would forge a somewhat different intellectual context for ideas about the critical potential of film, not so much defined by “political modernism” as by a version of film-philosophy inspired Gilles Deleuze, especially his two cinema books (1986, 1989), which had managed to convince some film scholars that cinema could be considered a “thinking” machine with the capacity to generate philosophical concepts.

The ways in which Rodowick’s views concerning cinema studies developed in dynamic opposition to the ideas forwarded by Bordwell and Carroll in *Post-Theory* and elsewhere were made more explicit in a later article by Rodowick (2007). Here he argued (2007: 97–98) that if cinema studies were to develop along the path staked out by Bordwell and Carroll (aided, Rodowick suggested, by a group of scholars who challenged film theory from the perspective of analytical philosophy), philosophy would “disappear into science,” stripping away an “ethical” dimension that Rodowick identified as indispensable to film theory, philosophy, and the humanities writ large. He also argued (2007: 99) that the external criteria of empirical and logical testing that Bordwell and Carroll wanted to subject cinema scholarship to was simply not needed, proposing that the criteria associated with “basic empirical research” was “irrelevant for cultural investigation.” For Rodowick (2007: 100), “cultural theories” required no “empirical research or experimentation” as their “power and plausibility is based on the extent to which they seem to clarify for us what we already know and do on a daily basis.” Rodowick (2007: 101) wanted to put cinema studies not on the path of science, but of philosophy, a practice he described as the examination of “what human beings already know and do” and a mode of inquiry that “does not require finding new information, but rather only clarifying and evaluating what we already know and do...and understanding why it is of value to us.”

The “metacritical” (Rodowick, 2007: 93) excavation of cinema studies’ past, present, and possible futures continues into this day, with much fervor, but less polemics. Recent interventions largely focus on how the objects of study as well as the approaches available for cinema scholars have shapeshifted and multiplied, and whether these developments attest to the productive diversity of the field or the loss of a shared research agenda and scholarly identity (for a few takes, see Fairfax, 2017; Grieveson and Wasson, 2008; Hilderbrand, 2018). People have moved on,
in other words. Nevertheless, a selective flashback to the “post-theory” debates constitutes an important background to the case study, since it allows us to carve out from the history of the discipline two competing models of cinema studies as a terrain for critical thinking—one that appeals to criteria of scholarly reasoning that are external to the theories themselves, and one that emphasizes the potential of film theories (and certain kinds of films) to foster critical awareness; one that makes a claim for cinema studies as a science much like any other, and one that suggests that cinema studies, or the humanities more broadly, harbors a unique critical potential. Much nuance obviously slips between the cracks of my overly binary (and highly Anglophone-centric) account, but its merits in helping us unpack how present-day film scholars think about critical thinking, cinema studies, and the role of the humanities will become clear in the case study that we now turn to.

**Research design**

The research presented here should be considered a *case study* that sets out to collect empirical data in order to exemplify and explore a certain concept (“critical thinking”) in a specific and clearly demarcated context (the Section for Cinema Studies at Stockholm University), that involves explorative as well as descriptive and explanatory dimensions, and that is based on the assumption that the specific context is unique, but that a degree of analytical generalizability, and applicability to other similar environments, phenomena, and situations, is nevertheless possible (see Cohen et al., 2007: 253–263). This design clearly places the study in a hermeneutical and qualitative research tradition rather than a quantitative or hypothetical-deductive paradigm, with all of what that entails in terms of ontological and epistemological assumptions (for an extremely condensed summary, see Wright et al., 2016).

The bulk of the empirical material consists of interviews with the teaching staff active at the Section for Cinema Studies at Stockholm University, which, when the study was conducted, included nine tenured Professors (Assistant, Associate, and Full), four Postdocs, and nine PhD candidates. One person from each category was unavailable for an in-person interview—all three submitted written responses instead. The remaining nineteen subjects kindly agreed to be interviewed.

The interviews took place between April 24 and May 16, 2018. Eighteen were carried out face-to-face and documented by audio recording (with the subjects’ consent). The nineteenth was done over phone and could not be recorded, so written notes are the only extant documentation. The interviews were semi-structured—all interviewees were asked the same three, relatively open, questions:

1. In your view, what is “critical thinking”? 4
2. In your view, what constitutes “critical thinking” in the field of *cinema studies* specifically?
3. Is the notion of “critical thinking” relevant to you in your role as a teacher?

All nineteen interviews also featured a variety of follow-up questions, depending on what lines of inquiry opened up. All nineteen interviews also featured a variety of follow-up questions, depending on what lines of inquiry opened up.5

I wrote down a brief summary of the response to each of the three questions immediately after each interview. The next step involved the identification of keywords and phrases that were clustered around categories and themes. Some of these were relatively openly induced from the material, but with respect to first two interview questions, I took explicit cues from educational/higher education scholarship on the notion of critical thinking. Davies’s (2015) six-dimensional model of critical thinking in terms of skills, judgments, dispositions, actions, social relations, and critical being was particularly helpful, also because Davies contrasts his model to previous definitions of critical thinking, and because he offers comparisons between the respective paradigms of critical thinking, critical pedagogy, and criticality. The debates concerning “generalist” vs. “specificist” ideas about what constitutes critical thinking, i.e. whether critical thinking is a set of general thinking skills or something that is specific and varied across subjects, disciplines, and objects of study (see Davies, 2013; Moore, 2011), offered another useful interpretative frame, especially with regard to the second interview question. The same can be said about the ideas, concepts, and issues raised in the highly abridged intellectual history of cinema studies outlined in the background section, but these did not feature explicitly into the initial identification of categories and themes (which does not mean that my close familiarity with and ongoing participation within the field cinema studies did not color the entire process of collection as well as interpretation of data).

I also analyzed course plans and exam criteria with the purpose of (a) identifying instances in these policy documents that indicate ways in which a notion of critical thinking is formalized by way of course planning and design; and (b) comparing any instances of a formalized notion of critical thinking to the teachers’ conceptualizations of the same term.

An early write-up of my main findings was circulated to the teaching staff at the Section for Cinema Studies for the dual purpose of discussing local pedagogical practices and generating feedback on the research. This secured a degree of respondent validation (no one called attention to misuse or misrepresentation of the interview material).

The results of the study are presented below in the order of the interview questions, followed by a brief analysis of regulatory documents and a concluding discussion. The relatively thick descriptions should help the reader see how keywords relate to larger categories, themes, and contexts. Hopefully, the account is also nuanced enough to allow the reader to turn out alternative interpretations of the data, which might alleviate some of the potential bias baked into the research design.
Analysis

What is “critical thinking”? 

For some teachers interviewed, critical thinking was about waking students up from their ideological slumber in order to reveal to them how the world really works. For others, it had more to do with equipping students with tools necessary to handle sources with good judgment when they write essays and theses. For still others, it boiled down to the use of a combination of skepticism and rational deliberation for the purpose of establishing an increasingly solid basis for knowledge about their objects of study.

In spite of a general pluralism of viewpoints, there were two activities that virtually all respondents mentioned as key to critical thinking: (a) asking questions; and (b) challenging things, as in not accepting things at face value. It is not self-evident what distinguishes critical questions from other kinds of questions, although the interviews indicate that (a) and (b) are interrelated, so that critical questions are the ones that take aim at challenging things, e.g. “Is this really so?” or “Can we really know this?” The “this” here would be something like “truths that are usually taken for granted,” or “received wisdom.”

None of the teachers made the case that asking questions for the purpose of challenging things is all that is involved in critical thinking, and probably for good reason, since this would stop at an understanding of critical thinking as “question more”—as in the slogan of RT (formerly Russia Today). The analogy to what many people would characterize as a propagandist, conspiracy-mongering, fake news-disseminating media outlet hints at the absurdity of an entirely negative conceptualization of critical thinking as skepticism at all times, at all costs, and in the face of all and any statement about the world.

Ideas about how to construe critical thinking in positive terms varied. One interviewee put forth the term “healthy skepticism,” which for him/her indicated that the goal of challenging received wisdom was to arrive at an improved understanding of how the object of study works—a characterization of scholarly investigation not too far removed from the notion of “dialectical criticism” promoted by Bordwell and Carroll (1996) (see the background section). The same respondent noted that skepticism may also include elements of critical self-reflection. Similar sentiments about being open to the ideas and viewpoints of others, willing to admit fault, or capable of challenging one’s own beliefs, were raised in several other interviews, with reference to terms such as “openness,” “inquisitiveness,” and “intellectual vigor.” Another related phrase that came up was “methodological self-reflection,” and one subject talked about an ongoing interrogation of “why [cinema scholars] are asking the questions we are asking” and of “where we come from” (a continuous historicizing of the theory and practice of cinema studies, in other words).

For the aforementioned advocate of “healthy skepticism,” the point of critical self-reflection was not to linger in a state of perpetual doubt, but to continuously
find better reasons to hold certain views, or to change one’s mind in light of new knowledge. Similarly, several other respondents made a connection between critical thinking and curiosity—three of them mentioned the proverbial “aha” or “Eureka” moment as a desirable outcome of critical thinking.

The examples cited so far reveal a tendency to conceive of critical thinking in terms of certain attitudes or dispositions, including skepticism, inquisitiveness, openness, and curiosity. Many definitions of critical thinking (for overview and problematization, see Davies, 2015: 47–49) give priority to skills, but many also mention dispositions similar to the ones brought up in the interviews. Davies’s (2015: 56) list of dispositions that “researchers have identified […] as most important for critical thinking” includes skepticism, inquisitiveness, and openness (but not curiosity). It also contains additional qualities that many interviewees alluded to, such as “respect for alternative viewpoints,” as well as dispositions that came up less frequently in the interviews, such as “willingness to seek or be guided by reason” (Davies, 2015: 56).

If some of the teachers saw the production of new knowledge as the positive end-goal of critical thinking, others emphasized an explicitly political dimension (whether these two views complement or contradict each other is an issue that we will come back to). For this group, critical thinking takes aim at the social and political order, just as much as (or more than) the demarcated epistemic space of cinema studies. Or, more accurately, critical thinking within the disciplinary context of cinema studies is seen as a tool to discover ways to “disrupt the status quo,” reveal power structures in society, or criticize various forms of injustice. Here we sense the legacy of the discourse of “political modernism” (see the background section) and the sway of the modes of cultural studies (e.g. postcolonial theory, queer studies, critical race studies, etc.) that Rodowick (1994: xx; xxv) suggested functioned simultaneously as correctives to and continuations of that tradition. Alternatively, taking our cue from higher education scholarship rather than the history of cinema studies, we could say that these teachers expressed an interest in cultivating a dimension of critical thinking that is sometimes referred to as “criticality,” a term that captures a way of being in the world that involves thinking and reflecting but also—and most importantly—taking action. In Davies’s six-dimensional model, “criticality” corresponds to the fourth dimension: critical thinking as action.

We have already touched on the same model’s third dimension: dispositions. The first two—critical thinking as skills and judgments—were also clearly relevant to the teachers’ understanding of the term. Here are typical suggestions of activities, operations, or skills involved in critical thinking according to the interviewees: “assessing the reliability and validity of sources”; “evaluating arguments”; “forming an independent viewpoint on a particular issue”; “applying different perspectives on the same object/problem”; “interpreting [academic and other texts]”; “negotiating the meaning of texts”; “reading against the grain”; “distancing oneself from the material [to evaluate, assess, and argue]”; “weighing your own thoughts and ideas against those of others”; and “making connections.”
Even if the study yielded many ideas about critical thinking skills, there was limited consistency and coherency within and across interviews. No single interviewee set forth what s/he claimed to be an exhaustive list of skills involved in the practice of critical thinking, and neither can such a list be easily compiled from the material in its entirety. This stands out more clearly via comparison to Davies’s model. The composite list of critical thinking skills (based on previous research) that Davies provides includes: analyzing arguments, claims or evidence; judging or evaluating arguments; making decisions or problem-solving; inference-making; predicting; reasoning verbally; interpreting and explaining; identifying assumptions; defining terms; and asking questions for clarification (Davies, 2015: 53). These are skills in argumentation, but, in Davies’s view, also in making reasoned judgments, so he prefers to talk about this as the skills plus judgments view of critical thinking, as slightly different from the more strictly “skills-based views” that focus almost exclusively on “logicality.” Either way, rational argumentation and sound judgment-making are both predicated on certain cognitive skills, summarized in general terms by Davies (2015: 54) as: interpretation, analysis, inference, explanation, and evaluation. He adds to this a metacognitive level, i.e. some element of awareness of one’s own thinking. (This matches the teachers’ frequent mentioning of self-reflection as an aspect of critical thinking.) Finally, Davies (2015: 54–55) organizes the suggested critical thinking skills taxonomically according to their complexity, identifying them as either “lower-level thinking skills” (e.g. identifying assumptions), “higher-level thinking skills” (e.g. synthesizing claims), “complex thinking skills” (e.g. evaluating arguments), or “thinking about thinking.”

Many of the skills mentioned in the interviews overlap with components of this part of Davies’s model, which indicates that a majority of the respondents adhere to some broad notion of critical thinking as general skills in reasoning. But the teachers did not always reach the same level of specificity as Davies; nor would they arrange the skills taxonomically or according to a hierarchy. Then again, they were not asked to spend several months working out a systematic model of critical thinking, they were asked to discuss the term more or less off the cuff. It is nevertheless worth pondering whether the teaching of critical thinking would benefit from increased specification and systematization of the skills involved.

Is there a mode of “critical thinking” specific to cinema studies?

Some interviewees appeared to reject the premise of this question, and argued that critical thinking in the discipline of cinema studies is essentially an application of the general skills and dispositions they had mentioned in response to the first interview question. But many of the same respondents nonetheless strongly associated critical thinking with the humanities, in line with the widely shared view discussed in the introduction.

Others spontaneously replied that there certainly is a specific mode of critical thinking in cinema studies, but when asked to elaborate usually located the
specificity to the discipline’s objects of study and dominant discourses rather than to the mode of thinking, and accordingly revised or retracted their initial answer. Arguably, these respondents gravitated toward an “infusionist” model of critical thinking that posit generic skills as foundational to critical thinking but that also accommodates for a discipline-specific critical discourse that is relatively but not completely independent (see Davies, 2013: 534–535).

Some subjects took the question as an opportunity to consider the critical potential of moving images themselves, and whether this could provide a basis for a cinema studies-specific mode of critical thinking. There were echoes here both of the idea that films that display certain formal properties can create critical awareness—a key tenet of “political modernism”—and the Deleuzian notion that we think “with” rather than “about” cinema. But we can also consider those lines of reasoning a special case of a recurring theme in the teachers’ discourse, namely the inclination to afford a special status to moving images, film culture, audio-visual media, or whatever term best captures the primary objects of study of the discipline. Even if no one seemed to be fully convinced that there is a mode critical thinking that is unique to cinema studies, many suggested that its objects of study are particularly ripe for critical thinking. One teacher mentioned the ubiquity of media in society, and the tendency to naturalize media uses that are in fact socially and historically contingent, which for him/her not only made some sort of critical thinking part and parcel of what cinema scholars do, but also established the indispensability of the discipline for an adequate understanding of the world. Another teacher talked along similar lines about the fundamental mediation of the world. It should be noted that these interviewees seemed entirely aware of the sociological/institutional factors involved, e.g. how objects of study are framed (sometimes in almost fetishistic terms) in ways that are meant to legitimize academic disciplines. But they still made the argument.

The fact that they did may connect at least indirectly to the generalist/specifist debate. Moore’s (2011) ethnographic study of conceptualizations of critical thinking by scholars in the fields of philosophy, history, and literary studies suggests that scholars tend to associate critical thinking with practices that happen to be typical of their own discipline. Philosophers seem to believe that critical thinking is about the logical analysis of arguments; historians seem to believe that critical thinking is about providing interpretations and explanations of past events through diligent source-work; and literary scholars seem to believe that critical thinking is about generating informed interpretations of literary texts. Moore (2011) suggests that this means that critical thinking must be discipline-specific, but Davies (2013) points out—correctly, I think—that it only means that the scholars Moore surveyed may believe that this is the case, which does not necessarily make it so.

When it comes to the cinema scholars I interviewed, they were not really adopting a “specifist” attitude, but rather anchoring their general views on critical thinking in a material intellectual context. This tendency was encouraged by the design of the interview, but hypothetically also supports the theory that critical thinking is
not a skillset that can be “acquired and deployed regardless of context,” as one psychologist puts it (Willingham, 2008: 26), but is better thought of as a cognitive operation that is predicated on domain knowledge (Willingham, 2008: 21–23). Simply put: you can only think critically about things that you know something about.

Regardless of the generalist/specialist debate, the second interview question clearly unleashed introspection and analysis of the disciplinary history, status and identity of cinema studies, as gleaned from personal as well as institutional horizons. Some of the topics that came up stretch well beyond the limits of cinema studies. Most notably, some interview subjects raised concerns over trends within the discipline (or in academia more broadly) they feared were detrimental to the cultivation of critical thinking. For example, a few of the teachers noted that whereas practitioners within the field of cinema studies regularly apply theories and concepts that purport to promote a critical agenda (usually some form of critique of political or social injustice), these applications, and the theories that they draw on, are not necessarily themselves subject to critical scrutiny. Differently put, they detected the apparent paradox of uncritical applications of critical theory. In doing so, they implicitly acknowledged the possibility that the two traditions of critical thinking within cinema studies described in the background section are potentially at odds with each other. This slightly complicates the analysis of the teachers’ explicit discourse, as their replies otherwise gave the impression that they embraced both traditions simultaneously, without much discord or discomfort (even though some were leaning slightly more toward critical thinking as a mode of reasoning and others as a mode of political critique).

A related problem brought up in one of the interviews had to do with an increasing tendency to consider any presentation of a “counter narrative” a valid form of critical thinking. The same respondent reflected on the role of various transmutations of poststructuralist theory in the field of cinema studies, and cautioned against the risk that these paradigms’ knack for infinite deconstruction and relativism might lure students to uncritically sign up for anything that is dressed up as an “alternative” narrative or viewpoint. A recent book by Professor of Film Studies David Martin-Jones (2019: 7) highlights the political stakes of the dilemma that this interviewee brought up, namely that the deconstruction of knowledge by means of critical theory can readily be used to the opposite political ends that they were originally designed for. Martin-Jones (2019: 7) notes that even if the problem appears to take on new urgency in the era of “alternative facts” and “fake news,” writers such as Bruno Latour addressed “the political right’s capacity to hijack critical theory’s tendency to debunk, deconstruct, unmask, and otherwise falsify accepted facts with alternative views of reality” already several years ago. For Martin-Jones (2019), however, there is still hope in the critical powers of film itself, especially what he refers to as a “hesitant cinematic ethics” that can help destabilize official, totalitarian history. The interviews did not allow for quite as elaborate reconstructions of Deleuzian film-philosophy or the like, but as we have
seen, some of the teachers entertained similar ideas about (certain types of) film being endowed with a special power for critical thinking.

Other respondents expressed doubts about identity politics (or some versions of it), arguing that the sometimes single-minded emphasis on the identity of the speaker in effect makes it impossible for a group of people from a variety of backgrounds to talk to each other in a sensible way, which would ultimately make critical thinking a non-starter, and potentially render the whole idea of the university obsolete. One teacher who associated the practice of critical thinking with the weighing of different, often conflicting, ideas against each other was discombobulated by the fact that students would show up to university classes only to actively try to shut down voices, ideas, and opinions with which they disagreed or felt uncomfortable. In this case, then, the conception of critical thinking is linked to the notion of open debate, often held to be a hallmark of higher education and an indispensable element of all scholarly investigation. Film scholars may also hear a slight echo of Bordwell and Carroll’s (1996) “dialectical criticism,” or perhaps faintly recall Bordwell’s (1989b: 263) invitation to his colleagues to “quarrel more”: “Dialogue and debate hone arguments, turn attention to fine points, and invite the reader to be skeptical,” he insisted.

The concerns listed here are real, but not necessarily over-represented in the particular context of cinema studies. There will probably always be instances of uncritical adoption of theoretical and political dogma and doctrines without much to show for in terms of empirical evidence or critical analysis to support the research, and there will probably always be students who cannot handle academic debate. Still we must note the potential conundrum that emerges when certain forms of disciplinary thinking or behavior calls into question the categories of human reason that the interviewed teachers apparently—either by conviction, convention, or convenience—held to be foundational to critical thinking.

*Is the notion of critical thinking relevant to teaching practices and the teacher’s role?*

The subjects unanimously testified to how engaging students in critical thinking is central to their pedagogical mission. Of course, many of the respondents had already argued that critical thinking is a core element of higher education, especially within the humanities, so it would have been surprising if they had not made a case for the relevance of critical thinking in teaching, too. But “relevant” in what ways, exactly?

Many respondents first brought up aspects that had to do with the classroom environment and general ways of interacting with students. Things such as “keeping an open mind,” “taking a step back,” and “letting go of prestige” were mentioned occasionally, whereas versions of “providing room for discussion and dialog and for students to ask questions” came up in virtually all interviews. There were also some specific suggestions of how to do this—preparing discussion questions and organizing group discussions were the two practices most frequently mentioned.
Other teaching practices that were set forth as conducive to critical thinking included: having the students provide different interpretations/analyses of a specific film excerpt (e.g. from competing theoretical points of view); selecting course literature that represents different camps in a scholarly debate; organizing classroom activity around the students’ close readings of the literature (in order to engage with it deeply and critically); designing exam assignments that encourage independent critical activity among students (e.g. that require them to find sources about a certain topic; to identify and fill gaps in the textbooks; or to solve actual, complex problems, e.g. to identify and provide meta-data for hitherto unidentified film fragments).

Activities designed to make students do things with the course material represent one, but not the only way of teaching critical thinking that was suggested in the interviews. Some respondents described how critical thinking can also be taught by example, i.e. by the students witnessing the teacher perform an act of critical thinking, which may then be followed by discussion, dialog, and—hopefully—imitation by the students via independent application to other cases (e.g. in exam assignments).

A majority of the teachers brought up the different possibilities afforded by different pedagogical settings. Some teachers argued that a long-term, one-on-one supervision situation is ideal for cultivating critical thinking. Many respondents stated that seminars allow for more critical engagement and pedagogical leeway than lectures. The smaller the setting, the more critical thinking will emerge, the assumption goes. As one teacher declared: “It’s all about time and resources in the long run.”

Finally, many of the interviewees emphasized the importance of critical thinking “from day one” of the undergraduate program, as one respondent put it, but there were also voices that suggested that critical thinking is a gradually acquired skill-set, so expectations on first-level students should perhaps not be too high. One teacher also mentioned that teaching students critical thinking did not only boil down to those discrete, precious moments in the classroom, but also to sensible planning of the entire program and all of its courses, from basic to advanced level.

All in all, this part of the interview provided evidence of pedagogical inventiveness and commitment, but it did not generate a systematic view of how a set of specific teaching practices concretely relates to the cultivation of various aspects of critical thinking. Many of the practices mentioned, it seems, are designed to promote “active learning,” and possibly critical thinking, too. Indeed, the boundaries between the two are not clear when it comes down to pedagogical practice, judging by the responses provided in these interviews.

What do course plans and exam criteria say about critical thinking?

How do the skills, dispositions and actions that the interviewed teachers identified as typical of critical thinking relate to the local regulation of pedagogical practices? Course plans and exam criteria should give an idea.
The term “critical thinking” appears once—in the description of course contents that jointly apply to two mandatory introductory master’s level courses: “By developing analytical skills and research proficiency the courses develop the students’ critical thinking and provides a solid foundation for the individual degree project [i.e. the Master’s Degree Thesis].”

Even though the exact term does not appear elsewhere, other course plans include content descriptions and learning outcomes that clearly connect to critical thinking—but not in those for the first semester courses, where a majority of the learning outcomes talk about “giving” students things such as “basic knowledge,” “basic understanding,” or “basic insight.” A few learning outcomes are formulated with reference to skills, including “to describe/account for,” “to identify,” and “to exemplify”—hardly characteristic of critical thinking, at least not of a higher order.

Course plans for the second semester stipulate learning outcomes that are exclusively formulated in terms of skills (no more “give” and “have” outcomes), and the skills mentioned are more advanced. Students are still expected to “account for” and “provide an overview,” but also “to compare,” “to apply [theoretical concepts in their own analysis],” and even “independently reflect on the perspectives and concepts discussed during the course.” By the third semester, during which the students write their BA theses, the learning outcomes include skills on a slightly higher level, e.g. “to reflect on key concepts,” “to independently identify, formulate and solve problems,” and “to locate, collect, and critically interpret relevant information.”

Students are then expected to come into full critical bloom in the master’s program, as seen in the previously referenced master’s level course plans and in course plan for the Master’s Degree Thesis, which expects students to be able “to critically and systematically integrate knowledge and analyze, assess and handle complex phenomena and problems within the disciplinary field of cinema studies” and “to critically and creatively identify and formulate [research] questions.”

With respect to exam criteria, an area of assessment labeled “theoretical and methodological awareness (independence, relevance, and reflexivity)” applies to grading at the BA and MA level, but not the basic level. And it is only for the higher grades that skills that clearly relate to this area of assessment—e.g. the provision of an “in-depth theoretical discussion,” a reflection on the “choice of approach” and the “theory’s and method’s usability and limitations,” and “competent problematization” of the course material—are required.

In sum, then, the regulatory documents give only minor importance to critical thinking in the early stages of the education. It gains more prominence at BA level, so that the cultivation of at least some critical thinking skills are part and parcel of acquiring a degree in cinema studies. On the other hand, exam criteria are designed in a way that appear to make it possible to acquire this degree without having much to show for in terms of critical thinking. At MA level, there is quite a strong emphasis on critical thinking skills, especially as deployed in research practice,
which reflects the program’s function of preparing students for a research career in the humanities.

**Conclusion**

The study shows that there is a strong consensus at the Section for Cinema Studies at Stockholm University concerning the importance of critical thinking, both as a core value of the university (the humanities in particular), and as a cornerstone of good teaching.

There is less agreement about what is contained in the term. No single teacher presented a coherent and comprehensive definition or model of critical thinking (although it must be noted that the study was not designed in a way that would have made this a realistic expectation), and one would be hard-pressed to identify a meaningful minimal definition of the term based on common denominators across the interviews. But if we approach the interview material as a totality of fragments, agglomerate a conception of critical thinking based on this material, and relate it to six-dimensional model suggested by Davies, we see that this imaginary collective conception includes a set of skills and judgments (most notably to ask questions and to question things, but also to assess the usability of sources, evaluate arguments, weigh one perspective against another, and so on), and a set of dispositions, or attitudes (most notably skepticism, but also openness and inquisitiveness). Fewer teachers, but not an insignificant number, touched upon aspects of critical thinking that also conceive of it in terms of action, i.e. in terms of “criticality” that extends into wider social and political realms. With respect to the disciplinary traditions of cinema studies, the teachers’ conceptualization of critical thinking in terms of skills and dispositions can be related to the notion of “dialectical criticism” that Bordwell and Carroll (1996) advocated for back in the day, whereas their ideas about critical thinking as action, or “criticality,” seems to belong more in the tradition that Rodowick (1988, 1994) labelled “political modernism.” In many cases, both traditions—seemingly in some state of peaceful coexistence— informed the teachers’ understanding of what critical thinking is, but some interviews raised the suspicion that under certain circumstances, they might in fact be antithetical to each other.

Some of the interviewees talked vividly about critical thinking as a set of dispositions, but elaborated less on the exact skills involved in its execution. Others reversed the emphasis, especially those who steered the discussion toward the ways in which critical thinking features into the concrete labor of writing—and training students to write—academic texts. Either way, the level of specificity was not maximal—especially when it came to identifying cognitive critical thinking skills. Perhaps some of the relatively basic cognitive operations that nevertheless play an important part in the complex and higher-order cognitive process labelled critical thinking are naturalized to the point where the subjects fail to notice, or mention, their relevance in this context.
Aside from the occasional suggestion that moving images may have a special capacity to “think” critically, the interviews yielded little support for the presence of a strong “specifist” view of critical thinking. Nevertheless, and in spite of indications that the tasks, practices, and cognitive operations associated with “conventional” scientific investigation are, in fact, almost second nature to most of the respondents, chances that the Stockholm-based community of cinema scholars will start thinking about their branch of academia as a “science like any other” look slim. The main reason is the tendency to regard critical thinking as, if not unique, then highly characteristic of the humanities in general and their own discipline in particular. While the introspection into disciplinary histories, traditions, identities, discourses, and objects of study that these interviews triggered does not prove that teachers tried to equate critical thinking with disciplinary discourse, it indicates that critical thinking—and thinking about critical thinking—are not easily abstracted from the particular institutional and disciplinary context in which they take place.

There was wide agreement that critical thinking does, or should, inform all pedagogical practice at all levels, but a few of the teacher dissented slightly, emphasizing the progressive development of students’ critical thinking skills through the program. Interestingly, the dissenting view aligns better with the course plans and exam criteria, which clearly take a “progressivist” rather than a “pervasivist” approach to the teaching of critical thinking. The mismatch between the majority viewpoint among the teachers and the regulatory documents may or may not be problematic in the local case. Either way, it makes clear that the great value that is habitually ascribed to critical thinking in higher education—by academics and others—entails a pedagogical challenge and a series of questions that resonate well beyond a small group of cinema scholars in Stockholm: What exact skills are required for critical thinking? How and when should those be taught? When can we expect what from students? Should the term “critical thinking” inform regulatory documents? Does the course structure make sense with respect to the teaching of critical thinking?

This case study offers no conclusive answers to these questions, neither with respect to local practices nor in more general terms. But there was a tendency—especially in the regulatory documents—to forge a pedagogical link between critical thinking and the task of educating the students in how to write academic texts, especially relatively large-scale degree projects such as a BA or MA thesis. Again, it is unlikely that the cinema scholars in Stockholm are the only ones who continuously need to—or should—figure out how various exercises in academic writing might best contribute to the development of the students’ critical thinking skills, and, vice versa, how the cultivation of critical thinking skills by other means than writing essays might be mobilized to help students improve the quality of their academic writing.

Let us end by returning to a finding that is perhaps expected, but nevertheless striking. On the one hand, virtually everyone stated that critical thinking is crucial to their everyday work as scholars and teachers. On the other hand, there was no
clear agreement on what the term might actually mean. What is going on here? The obvious answer is that surely there must be something wrong with the term itself—too elusive, too elastic, too readily available to fill with whatever virtues we associate with high-quality academic work. Alternatively, or related, the embrace of the notion of critical thinking happens more or less instinctively, because the term has come to represent a set of internalized norms of how things should be done in the academy, which, ironically, may let the term itself evade critical interrogation. Or perhaps the fault was in the focus and design of a study that possibly gives undue prominence to a term that was not necessarily relevant for the participants before they were faced with the interview questions. Then again, no one was particularly surprised or upset by the topic. And the questions obviously activated something in the participants—hence the rich catalog of thoughts and ideas about critical thinking, cinema studies, and beyond that I have mined for the purposes of this article. Hopefully, the ideas generated in return can provide a source of inspiration for scholars of all stripes who consider critical thinking indispensable to research and teaching, but who might want to think in greater depth about what this actually means—not least with respect to classroom practices and the design of individual courses as well as entire educational programs.

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**Notes**

1. The summary also contains keywords such as “the humanities,” “cultural theory,” “interdisciplinary,” “intermediality,” and “pluralism.” All translations in the article by the author.
2. Nussbaum’s book epitomizes what Helen Small (2013), in another book that deals with similar topics, labels the “Democracy Needs Us” claim for the value of the humanities.

3. These views were formulated in opposition not only to the “post-theorists,” but also to a camp working in the vein of analytical philosophy. From this direction, Rodowick was roundly but respectfully criticized, both for having misrepresented and/or misunderstood Bordwell’s position and for having failed to provide a plausible defense of his own version of film-philosophy—see Turvey (2007).

4. The Swedish term is “kritiskt tänkande,” which I treat as equivalent to the English term “critical thinking”; there is no significant difference in meaning or nuance that has bearing on the study, or that requires that the article distinguishes between the five interviews that were conducted in English and the fourteen that were conducted in Swedish.

5. The teachers who submitted written responses did not receive follow-up questions. They also had the opportunity to think the three questions through in a way that was not possible for the teachers who were interviewed—the latter knew about the general topic and the intended use of the material for a course paper at Stockholm University’s Centre for the Advancement of University Teaching, but they did not receive the exact questions until meeting in person. As one could expect, the three written responses are more succinct compared to the interviews, all of which could be characterized as sustained, exploratory conversations.

6. A cognitive science notion of critical thinking (the particular article I am citing in this section defines it as a subset of three general types of thinking: reasoning, making judgments and decisions, and problem-solving) is not necessarily fully commensurate with how the term has been conceptualized in higher education scholarship, even if scholars from both fields seem to agree that an understanding of critical thinking as a “pure” logical skillset is too limited. Another caveat is that Willingham draws on studies that do not target “critical thinking” per se—regardless of how the studies in question might have defined it—but things such as “problem-solving” or “scientific thinking,” i.e. operations that include elements of what is commonly understood as critical thinking or special cases thereof, but that do not amount to an exhaustive definition of the term itself. Accordingly, while Willingham’s point about domain knowledge helps interpret the interviews, I would advice the reader against drawing additional, more far-reaching conclusions about cognitive science and critical thinking on the basis of the sources discussed in this article.

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