

The Art of Criticism in the Age of Interactive Technology: Critics, Participatory Culture, and the Avant-Garde

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Scholars claim that the mass-media story is being replaced by the interactive-media story. Much discussion has focused on the changing roles of artists, gatekeepers, producers, and consumers, but what role does the critic play in this story? After providing an historical analysis of the concept of the critic in critical-cultural studies, I argue for a way out of the subjugation-emancipation paradox of normative judgment using an end-relational theory of critique. Without such an approach, criticism is easily conflated with consumerism, forcing two consequences: the relegation of judgment to mere personal preference, and the potential loss of an avant-garde. Thus, I argue that we need critics more, not less, in the interactive technology, Web 2.0 world.

In a conventional usage of the term *critic*, one probably thinks of people who write for high-profile newspapers and influential periodicals. To name a few from some varied arenas, these are people like Kenneth Tynan (theater), Pauline Kael (film), and Robert Hilburn (music). These are/were authors with a relatively large platform, writing mostly for mass-produced publications, and their role was, largely, to criticize art and artifacts for the public (or at least their readers). But the influence of these figures' opinions was felt not merely by their readers; the successful critic was influential in his or her respective arena as a whole; i.e., it was not simply audiences and consumers listening to the critic, but the authors, artists, and producers as well.

This might be called the *mass-media story*. Most of the time, the mass-media story is told from the producer-consumer binary perspective, and it goes: The producers made the product, and the consumers had no choice but to consume what was put in front of them (or refuse to consume what was put in front of them). But throughout the 20th century, there were examples of critics helping to connect audiences with experimental, exciting, and generally avant-garde works, as well as helping to *create* audiences for those works—through the invention of grammars and concepts. An insightful critic can create an understanding and deeper appreciation for a work by, in short, providing the audience with,

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essentially, a new *faculty*.¹ Perhaps the clearest and best example of critics operating in this way was the duo of Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg, who, though differing on finer points,² helped both define and institutionalize post-World War II American modernist art (“abstract expressionism,” “action-painting,” “American-type painting”) exemplified by Jackson Pollack, Willem de Kooning, Mark Rothko, and Philip Guston. So, to the producer and the consumer, we ought to add the critic to the mass-media story.³

But from the social scientific, empirical analyses of Manuel Castells to the technological-digital humanities work of Henry Jenkins, scholars are consistently telling us that the *mass-media story* has ended (or is coming to an end) (e.g., Castells, 2004; Jenkins, 2008). Instead, they are telling the *interactive-media story*, in which the producer-consumer binary is blurred, bottom-up participation becomes as vital to the creation of products as top-down manufacturing, networks replace centralization, and individualized content—that is, niche and not mass content—is the name of the game. The system of collectivity and participation, from user-generated content to collective intelligence to the free and open

¹ This is meant in a metaphoric sense and not that there is literally a new human faculty. Rather, I endorse the Kantian conception that the human faculty for judging is essentially the faculty for thinking. The idea here is that cognition and concepts connect to provide the possibility of understanding, and that understanding is “represented as a faculty for judging.” The emphasis I am placing is not that critics can help us understand works, though that is true in one sense, but that they help generate *concepts*, and that “thinking is cognition through concepts.” So through imaginative conceptual work, the critic invites judgment on the object in a new way. But rather than muddling through understanding, concepts, and cognition, I think that the metaphor of a faculty, i.e., the critic creating or inviting analysis via a “new faculty of discernment,” is cleaner. See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (A69/B94): Kant, 1998, p. 205.

² The dispute was over what abstract expression was or ought to be. Greenberg favored abstraction, flatness, and scale in art, exemplified in the work of Pollack, while Rosenberg championed transgression and existentialism in art, exemplified in the work of de Kooning. Aside from the accounts of those there at the time, including the artists, the influence of Greenberg and Rosenberg is evidenced by the fact that they, both their criticism and themselves as figures, were part of a recent exhibition, *Action/Abstraction: Pollack, de Kooning, and American Art, 1940–1976*, at the Jewish Museum in New York City, May 4, 2008–September 21, 2008. They were also immortalized, with Leo Steinberg, in Tom Wolfe’s short novel *The Painted Word* as the kings of “Cultureberg.” While there is some boundary blurring with Steinberg, who was also an academic, my initial point here is focused not on academics.

³ It is worth noting that I’ve listed only individuals here. The critic, however, was oftentimes a collective. Think of the influence that *Cahiers du Cinéma* and the “invention” of auteur theory had on both European cinema and, subsequently, through either direct contact with the journal or through the films and filmmakers it celebrated, late 1960s and 1970s Hollywood. *Cahiers* is an especially interesting example given that many of those same critics (e.g., Eric Rohmer, Jean-Luc Godard, Francois Truffaut) also created some defining and seminal (French New Wave) cinema. So through the celebration of American Film Noir and the *mise en scène* of prominent directors like Alfred Hitchcock and Max Ophüls, the critics created not just an audience for a specific type of film, but a specific-type of film they themselves would go on to make!

source software (FOSS) movement, is celebrated as a victory over the dominating and hegemonic power of the producers and even equated with the seeds of democracy in the face of the formerly totalitarian media system.

The Web 2.0 world is one that, implicitly, celebrates the erasure of boundaries between producers and consumers. The critic was also a boundary, and in two senses: 1) that she was, like the media companies, a gatekeeper: Only certain things get through, are celebrated, condemned, etc., and 2) because she was, like the producer, in a very privileged position; e.g., there are only so many "film critic" jobs. Just as the producer-consumer binary is blurred in the Web 2.0 landscape, equally unclear is the role of the critic. Don't like that story in *The New York Times*? Forget writing a letter that only the newspaper staff will read and who then may or may not publish it; post your comment directly below the article for the world to see. Think *Rolling Stone* is too mainstream in its arts and entertainment focus, or that *The New Yorker* is out of touch? Start your own music (or film, or art, or television) blog. Want to know if the new Bob Dylan album is any good? Forget what the traditional media or even the blogs say and see what the die-hard fans are saying on a fan-run site. Or, jump onto Amazon.com and read the customer reviews.

But to what extent are these things *criticism*? What does it mean to evaluate, and is a review of an object the same thing as a critique of an object? Essentially, the question I'm asking in this essay is: What role does the critic play in the interactive-media story, especially as traditional mass-media outlets like magazines and newspapers are seemingly losing their widespread reach? I will argue that Web 2.0 has largely dismantled (or will eventually dismantle, at least) the mass-media story of the producer, the consumer, and the critic and that this has (at least in terms of art and entertainment) created more, not less, of a need for critics. The effort here is to help reverse what Evgeny Morozov (2011) calls the "ultimate irony," which is that "as technology becomes ever more integrated into political and social life, less and less attention is paid to the social and political dimensions of technology itself" (p. 314).

The overarching purpose of this paper is to invite more deliberation and discussion on the role of the critic in the interactive media landscape, and how a critic might play a small role in avoiding a society composed of a strong consumerist-center surrounded by a myriad of aesthetic, political, moral, and social digital enclaves (cf. Sunstein, 2001). More specifically and substantively, I will be offering some taxonomy and critical concepts through which to think about the critic in the interactive era, and: 1) trying to show that in the interactive media story, the function of "criticism" is much closer to that of consumerism in the blurring of the producer-consumer binary; 2) arguing that participation, as a political end, seems to have negative effects on cultural innovation, which has two primary consequences: a) the relegation of *judgment* to mere personal *preference*, and b) the potential loss of an avant-garde; and, 3) after having analyzed some of the philosophical and material conditions, trying to provide a way out of the subjugation-emancipation paradox of normative judgment of arts and entertainment.

In a general sense, let me clarify that the worry here is not that criticism cannot or does not exist in the globalizing online media landscape; in fact, it can and does. And furthermore, the amplification and reach of online media applies equally, at least in theory, to both reviews and criticism. Rather, the concern is that the trope of participation, when presented as an end, does not rectify the diminishment of critical influence in that it diverts attention from the actual content under analysis. In a nutshell, the argument is

that criticism might help identify, refocus, and coordinate ends of cultural innovation beyond participation, and that this is all the more important in an era in which the line between producer and consumer is continually blurred.

In the first part of this essay, I will map the interactive media landscape and this blurring of consumer-producer, and then differentiate between *feedback*, *reviews*, and *criticism*, arguing that media environs like iTunes promote review-mentalities and not critical ones and that when treated as an end, the trope of participation is ineffectual in combating this process. Then I will provide a brief historical analysis of the concept of the critic in the twentieth century and debates on how normative judgments on *what is good* operate as possibly subjugating and/or emancipating discourse. In the third section, I will argue for a conceptual way out of the subjugation-emancipation paradox of normative judgment using a contextualized theory of critical judgment, a modified version of the end-relational theory (ERT), offered less as a methodology than as a metacritical analysis. In the final section, I will discuss how a loss of the critic might mean potentially the loss of avant-garde and experimental art and entertainment and, more generally, the changing role of the critic in the world of interactive media systems.

Interactive Media: The World of Web 2.0

As alluded to above, the mass-media story is one in which top-down production was the modus operandi and consumers were forced to choose from the available options. The classic account of this story is the writings of the so-called Frankfurt School, exemplified in the touchstone Horkheimer and Adorno (2002) book, which is also discussed below. But, of course, this was not an entirely accurate story; cultural studies of audiences and fans were keen to show that consumers, “the masses,” were hardly receiving the products and artifacts passively.⁴ The need to problematize the producer-consumer binary is even clearer in the world of interactive media, where the line between the two is significantly blurred, as consumers read websites made by producers, but then interact with them by changing, altering, editing, erasing—and thus becoming producers themselves. The “prosumer” idea is one in which individuals are both consumers and producers, and the flow of information is not top-down but circles through a variety of networks.

Though traditional media systems have not collapsed or disappeared in these beginning stages of Web 2.0 and the interactive media landscape, there is a marked paradigm shift in the relationship between consumption and production in the current era. Henry Jenkins calls the new paradigm a shift from static relations to a *process*—the process of *convergence*. Convergence is the circulation of ideas and practices across multiple media systems. For Jenkins, convergence “represents a shift in the ways we think about our relations to media, that we are making that shift through our relations with popular culture,” and that convergence culture has implications beyond just play or entertainment: “The skills we acquire through play may have implications for how we learn, work, participate in the political process,

⁴ The work of scholars like David Morley, Janice Radway, Stuart Hall, and Henry Jenkins is relevant here. For an overview of audience analysis and the audiences in cultural studies, see Brooker’s (2002) edited volume, *The Audience Studies Reader*.

and connect with other people around the world" (Jenkins, 2008, pp. 22, 23). For the traditionally labeled *consumer*, this is an exciting shift, one rife with the potential of not just marginalized voices being heard, but also of a possibility of grassroots politics; collective intelligence and collaboration, exemplified in processes/entities like Wikipedia and FOSS, are not just creative ideas for the purposes of play, but are perhaps the enactment of a model *ethic* for global human relations.

But not everyone is so optimistic. Mark Andrejevic's *iSpy: Surveillance and Power in the Interactive Era* offers a restrained approach to the new media environment, alerting to what he calls "the digital enclosure," which is the environment in which all information, from addresses and birthdays to consumption habits to core beliefs and values, passes. This information moves through the digital enclosure via technologies and is amassed and collected by several massive private firms, and also globally via search engines, voluntary website associations (e.g., social networking sites) and searchable public databases. The trope of participation, Andrejevic (2007) says, often amounts to producers manipulating consumers into providing free user advice, suggesting that the Internet is turning into a massive "online focus group" (p. 245). David Sholle (2005) pushes the connection between participation and labor even further, noting that the goal in the new media landscape is to "commodify all forms of information," thereby reifying the logic of capitalism; and thus the term *informationalism*: the conflation between information and capitalism in the contemporary era (p. 139).

Along the capitalism-media labor lines, Andrejevic, previously noting that the digital enclosure is hardly one that is free and open, but rather one in which control and power are held by private firms, alerts us to the potential political consequences, which are counter to the utopian democratic vision. As he puts it, "A privatized enclosure is not a democratic one, and the political potential of the interactions that [take] place within it are shaped by that fact" (ibid., p. 265).

While these are important issues to get on the table, the utopian-dystopian themes of much writing on the new media landscape can be confusing.⁵ Interactive technologies are not somehow

⁵ Consider Andrejevic (2007), who clearly invokes the dystopian vision of the interactive media landscape:

The somewhat dystopian theme [to my argument] is that people will not only pay to participate in the spectacle of their own manipulation, but that, thanks in part to the promise of participation, they will ratify policies that benefit powerful elites and vested interests at their own expense, as if their (inter)active support might somehow make these vested interests their own. (p. 243)

Indeed. But it is important to note that Jenkins, while his tone is certainly optimistic, is hardly unaware of not only the potential consequences but also the current trends of media convergence. As he notes in the first chapter of his book (2008):

The American media environment is now being shaped by two seemingly contradictory trends: on the one hand, new media technologies have lowered production and distribution costs, expanded the range of available delivery channels, and enabled

inherently good or bad; they are *tools*. To borrow from Morozov (2011) borrowing from Cedric Price, "Technology is the answer, but what was the question?" (p. 306). The point here is simply that the question asked, and the context in which that questions arises or applies, has significant bearing on the answer given in regard to the role technology can and ought to play.

Furthermore, interactive media and its extending landscape do not necessarily lead to utopia or dystopia, and that to discuss them/it in terms of capacities as a political ethic—open and free being better than closed and private—is confusing. To think that just because people are participating in something that somehow that process is then to be valued because it is *democratic* (assuming that it is) seems like a category mistake; comparing the processes of creation to what we (or given societies) value in political processes is a seeming confusion of justifications and concepts that varies according to the context and end (is the end artistic creation, policymaking, revolution, etc.?).

In the same way that there is much confusion in our language of interactive media, there is also confusion in use of the term *critic*—especially in the world of Web 2.0. After all, "criticism" is everywhere, from the stream of comments underneath YouTube videos as well as newspapers articles, to thousands and thousands of blogs, to customer reviews on nearly every commercial retailer's website. One way to sort out some of the confusion is to distinguish between *feedback*, *reviews*, and *criticism*. Before proceeding, I would like to note that these categories are fluid and not determined by the medium or technology nor even necessarily the content; they are meant as heuristic constructs, not empirical realities.

Feedback is the process of a consumer giving his or her opinion on the art/artifact/product back to the producer of the art/artifact/product. One can think of this as enshrined in the prevalent "Like" buttons on websites, allowing users to click them and thereby signal approval (and affiliation), and in "I like it/I don't like it" sort of writings, sometimes characterized by "change this, move that" type of comments. The distinction between feedback and reviews is relatively intuitive. Feedback is generally commentary provided by the consumer for, and to, the producer.

Reviews are sometimes written by consumers and sometimes by a third party. One can think of the distinction in the phrases "consumer reviews" or "product reviews" (such as the website *cnet.com*, <http://www.cnet.com>, which is a team of writers who review products for consumers), and "customer reviews" (such as those found on *Amazon.com*, <http://www.amazon.com>, in which people who bought the product post their reviews of it). Reviews are sometimes simply about expressing one's opinion ("I like it/I

consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate and recirculate media content in powerful new ways. At the same time, there has been an alarming concentration of the ownership of mainstream commercial media, with a small handful of multinational media conglomerates dominating all sectors of the entertainment industry. (pp. 17–18)

The point here is that utopia-dystopia are abstract concepts discussed by many authors; to pin "utopia" on Jenkins—something that continually happens in cultural studies scholarship—seems mistaken.

don't like it"), but mostly doing so in conjunction with an evaluation of the art/artifact/product itself with the intention of alerting other consumers/audiences to the product's quality or shortcomings or both. Reviews, thus, are generally commentary provided by the consumer or a third party for, and to, the consumer.

Criticism is done by a third party, that is, one who is neither the consumer nor the producer of the particular object. In brief, criticism is less about alerting consumers or even audiences to a product's quality or shortcomings, but rather helping audiences see the object in a new way, using a specific vocabulary or perhaps developing new grammar or terms or even concepts (to help appreciate, understand, or even enjoy either the object itself or a trend) and oftentimes telling us something beyond merely the object itself, perhaps placing it in a larger historical context or indicating its relationship to society or even telling us something about humanity (cf. Campbell, 1974). Criticism can sometimes lead to the *creation* of a new audience for a particular object or set of objects via the furnishing of a faculty for understanding the works or practices. Criticism is provided by a third party for, and to, consumers and producers.

The distinction between reviews and criticism is not quite as intuitive as the distinction between feedback and reviews, especially in the Web 2.0 environment. To take a mundane example, consider the review of a computer printer. The review will be clearly about the product; the standards for evaluation are pretty clear—does the object do what it is supposed to do and, if so, how well? So a printer is, obviously, supposed to print whatever the user tells the computer to tell the machine to print. How reliable is this process? How clear is the printing? How fast? The standards for what makes a good printer are transparent, and the review will tell the audience how well the product performs its function. In reviews, sometimes external contextual factors are addressed (size of the printer, ink cartridge cost and availability, etc.), but they are always directly related to the product itself.

Arts and entertainment reviews tend to function in a similar way,⁶ but rather than evaluating the product according to its function and thereby its implicit standard, the evaluation often goes directly toward the feedback style of "I like it/I don't like it." This occurs, seemingly, for three reasons. One is that the oft-implied standard of all arts and entertainment is *pleasure*. Another might be that the standard is ambiguous in the reviewer's mind. The third is the possibility of utterances like "The White Stripes' new record is good" not being cognitive or even passing judgment on the record, but rather merely being *expressivist*. Expressivism holds normative language as not descriptions or analysis of artifacts or events but as expressing recommendation or endorsement.

⁶ Robert Christgau, longtime music critic for the *Village Voice*, semi-ironically calls his album reviews "Consumer Guides," distinguishing them from his larger, more reflective essays and critical pieces. Much of his writing can be found on his website: <http://www.robertchristgau.com>

So, the above utterance about the White Stripes is not describing the band/record: It is akin to saying, "The White Stripes: Hurray!"⁷ I will attempt to resolve some this ambiguity in a later section, as well as suggest why some of these assumptions are mistaken. Before that, though, I'll address the primary problem of criticism and reviews in the interactive media context: There seems to be a conflation of reviews and criticism that collapses the distinction between consumption and evaluative judgment, and *participation*, as a political end, reifies this conflation.

One reads reviews of the computer printer next to reviews of the latest mobile phone next to reviews of the latest Umberto Eco novel in virtual environments like the Amazon.com store. This encourages a mentality not of reflection or evaluation of arts and entertainment, but one of consumption, of what to consume next. The point here is *not* that the environs *necessarily* make the comments about consumption, nor is this an empirical claim that the comments are only about consumption; rather, the issue is that the *environment is structured in a way* as to discourage not just lengthy discussion but, more importantly, to not have to give adequate reasons for one's views. Even in environs strictly about arts and entertainment (and not material products like computers or batteries), like the iTunes store, the Customer Rating/Customer Review aspect features heavily in the display of the object and discourages further discussion and the giving of reasons for preferences.

For example, in the iTunes store (<http://www.itunes.com>), clicking on Radiohead's *The King of Limbs* pulls up a page for the online purchase of the record. The first item listed is the "iTunes Review," which is eight sentences. The next item on the center section is a track-by-track listing of the album, with each track available for individual purchase. The first text that appears on the left-hand column after details of the record (band name, label, etc.) and the format information (iTunes technical requirements) are two buttons, "Like" and "Post," and below those are the cumulating number of "Like" ratings (in this case, 2,300). The left-hand column then lists "Top Radiohead Songs," a biography and other things (more "essentials," top-rated customer playlists, etc.). Back to the center of the page, the next item below the track listing is a "Listeners Also Bought" (Arcade Fire, Band of Horses, etc.), and then there is a "Customer Ratings" section.

⁷ Expressivist views of normative language, most simplistically, essentially reject that there is a property of goodness at all, and rather say that statements of normative judgment (e.g., what is good) are not to be understood in terms of the conceptual meaning of *good* but rather in the illocutionary force of the utterance; that is, in the practical use of what speakers do with these words. They are performative utterances in the sense that calling the White Stripes *good* is sort of like exclaiming "ouch!" or greeting someone with a "how are you?"; the semantic content of these utterances is understood in terms of their performativity. Normative language then takes the form not of describing facts (about what is good, what we ought to do, etc.), but rather expressing attitudes, with the language having the form of recommendation, approval, etc.

The "Customer Rating" section is where the interactive part begins.⁸ The first piece of information is the "Average Rating" (four out of five stars), which, as noted directly to the right of the bubbled-in stars, is "based on 1685 ratings." To the right of that are five non-bubbled-in stars and the text, "Click to Rate," inviting you to join into the system.

The "Customer Review" section is interactive in two ways; obviously, the review itself provides information to other potential consumers, and iTunes harnesses these reviews into a one-stop review and purchase environment in the form of these open comments and the overall "Customer Rating" feature. But the reviews are also interactive in the sense that other consumers, other audience members, can comment on the reviews *themselves*. There is a "Like" button below the review and audiences can participate by clicking on it. Next to this button, in parenthesis, are the immediate results of the metareview feature—e.g., "Like" (86).

Interestingly, this feature has become *less* critically oriented. The metareview feature used to be not a simple "Like" button, but rather the phrase: "Was this review helpful to you? Yes/No." This encouraged at least a little more thought on the matter by having to answer a question and, more importantly, the consumer had the ability to *say no*, rather than just be positive or say nothing at all (short of writing his or her own review). This former metareview feature would then instantly tabulate the results and say, as was the case on the first listing for *The Resistance* by Muse, "289 out of 403 listeners found this review helpful." While this metareview feature is still not ideal, one can see that it at least asks a question point-blank, with a specific criterion ("helpful"), whereas a simple "Like" button has neither criteria nor any opportunity to give reasons for the preference.

The "Customer Reviews" are organized by iTunes in accordance with their metareview scores; the most "liked" reviews are moved to the first few pages. But that is simply the *default* setting. By using the drop-down "Sort By" menu, customers may also choose to sort three other ways: Most Favorable, Most Critical, Most Recent.

It seems the interactive, metareview element of the review process attempts to establish *trust* between the prospective consumer and the reviewer. But how do you know that "simma75" knows anything about this record, about Radiohead, or about music in general? You don't, of course. In the mass-media landscape, a reviewer at least has the backing of their publication. Book reviewers for *The Los Angeles Times* had to be hired by the newspaper and they bear that supporting endorsement; and they are recipients of (at least some of) the ethos of that publication. But online, the reviews are posted by anyone with an Internet connection and are not endorsed or backed up by the website.⁹ So the

⁸ This is with the exception of the general "Top-Rated Playlists" part, which is not specific to this particular record/listing. The "Top Songs" part could also be customer generated (in the sense of either votes or top downloaded), but this is not indicated as such.

⁹ This process is not unique to iTunes. Amazon.com has even a further metareview element, in which reviewers are ranked against one another, and can become a "Top 100 Reviewer," thereby trying to establish some element of trust between the consumer, the reviewer, and the website.

metareview feature attempts a sort of vouch-for type program; the important shift is that the site does not do the vouching—other consumers do.¹⁰

But online reviews of arts and entertainment objects and events tend to be even further from reviews in the sense I described above and closer to feedback. Consider the Most Critical sorting feature; it is apparent that *critical* in iTunes is used as a synonym for *negative*, indicated not just by the content of the pages, but by the fact that it is contrasted with Most Favorable. But neither the favorable nor negative posts regularly approach criticism in the sense that I've described, and serve seemingly at the level of review only in the "I didn't like it so don't buy it" sense. By comparison, even reviews of a document shredder come closer to critique than most of these arts and entertainment reviews. Why? Because the *function* of the document shredder is so much clearer; it is to shred documents. Does it do that? How well (how carefully, quickly, reliably, etc.)? The necessary features and tools for evaluating a document shredder (or a printer or whatever) are pretty straightforward. Arts and entertainment are not nearly as straightforward. What is the standard by which art is to be evaluated against as determined by the function? And how do you know if it did or did not achieve that function? Most importantly, arguing the right or correct end is different than arguing whether or not the artifact achieved its end.

The immediate answer—if it is music, then the implied evaluation of the music being good is that it is *good for listening to*—is not necessarily any less ambiguous. One listener might find the experimental works of John Cage good to listen to, while another listener (probably most listeners) might find them irritating or boring to listen to. The confusion here is in the *end*, not, necessarily in the judgment. Evaluating Cage's work as good for the end of *being experimental*, or good for *making listeners uncomfortable* will yield one evaluative judgment, while measuring it against the end of being good for *dancing to*, or for *delivering robust feelings of sweetness* will yield a much different analysis.¹¹ So in which end is the work evaluated in the online environment? More often than not, the end is unspecified in the review. Furthermore, what end *ought* the object or event be evaluated against? This creates a further problem, for authors, producers, artists, even very obvious and broad entertainers, do not announce their end, their purpose so explicitly; it is the audience's job to deduce, determine, (even find an unintended

¹⁰ Mark Poster (2001, esp. pp. 86–100) makes an interesting comparison of trust on the Internet to that of guilds in the early days of the printing press. Before the perfection of the press, replication was not standardized and liberties were often taken with the words. This was acceptable for a number of reasons, but mostly because an audience's trust lay in the guild and not in the author; the audience did not know this author in any face-to-face sort of way, but they certainly knew the guild members and guild master. Trust soon shifted to authors with the expectation of perfect, exact printing and a level of comfort with the abstract, mediated connection to an author. But a similar mistrust of the author as that prior to the perfection of the printing press exists today on the Internet, Poster argues, in which trust is in the firm or the collective and not the individual. This idea does pan out, it seems, when one thinks of the strong reputation some of the underground/indie-oriented type websites have garnered, such as Pitchfork.com (<http://pitchfork.com>). Pitchfork's reputation is not built on or around an individual writer, and thus the site earns a collective reputation in the same way that print periodicals do.

¹¹ It is possible that *good to listen to* is not necessarily ambiguous but rather that there are different subjective effects of the music on different listeners.

one) and evaluate the end(s) at play in the given context. A typical person might need help doing this—a critic's help.

More importantly, online participatory culture, when taken as an end, is ineffectual in changing from a review-mentality to a more critical one; participation might lead to innovation, but that holds it as a means, not an end itself. There is nothing that prevents iTunes from having more critical writers and readers; but it is *structured* in a way as to discourage this, and, more importantly, when analyzed according to the *end of participation*, it is wildly successful (*just look at all the participation!*). But as the preceding analysis has demonstrated, in terms of the end of the actual objects (of innovation, beauty, excellence, etc.), it is significantly lacking, as are reasons for the ends or preferences.

An objection here might be that expecting criticism to thrive in something like the iTunes Store might be like expecting to find a philosophical conversation in a McDonald's inside a Wal-Mart: It might happen, and probably does occasionally, but it would be weird to walk into that space and criticize the *lack* of it. But this is not the point; rather, I take it to be demonstrating that iTunes *excellently* achieves the goal of participation, and that thereby I have given some evidence for the ineffectualness of the end of participation for cultural innovation with respect to criticism.

Another objection could be raised here (if it hasn't been already) that this places some sort of special knowledge and special status on the critic and enshrines a hegemonic, elitist structure. While my categorizations can obviously be read hierarchically, that is not my intention. I believe that feedback, reviews, and criticism all serve vital functions in human and transactional relations. My concern is that criticism is being lost to the review under the ethos of participation, and that the consumption mentality of reviews encourages the treatment of art and entertainment as merely means to the ends of pleasure, thereby eliminating the appreciation and contemplation of challenging, experimental, and avant-garde works.

Even if one buys this answer, the objection of *elitism* certainly still stands. After all, are not both reviews and criticism still reducible to the evaluator's *preference*, and the problem with the critic is that she elevates her preferences (for the experimental or challenging or avant-garde) over and above the merely pleasurable or entertaining preferences of "the masses?" In other words, you might object, aren't I suggesting a return to a sort of high and low culture distinction predicated on power relations that much of post-World War II critical studies scholarship has worked so hard to eliminate? Let me briefly contextualize this objection—because it is a forceful one—before offering my analysis and then broadening back out to the overarching role of the critic in the interactive media landscape.

From Adorno & Horkheimer to Hall & Rushdie on Critics and Taste

Much of the work in the study of culture in the last century highlighted articulations of power, especially in matters in which power was masked as something else: truth, nature, objective beauty, etc. The idea of judgment as being tied to one's social status and relative power was given full expression in Bourdieu's (1987) touchstone work. But perhaps the clearest articulation of the attempt to push beyond the "high-low" divide in culture comes from Raymond Williams' (1997) "Culture Is Ordinary." In this

essay, Williams argues that “culture” is not synonymous with exclusive/elitist type situations like the teashop or the university, nor is it to be thought of as the domain of the “superior prig” (what today might be called the hipster) whose evaluations consist of highly specialized vocabularies. These are the sorts of things considered high culture, and he says that *good* has been drained of much of its meaning, in these circles, by the exclusion of [the word’s] ethical content and emphasis on a purely technical standard” (p. 8). While the ethical content of *good* is not my concern in this paper,¹² the “purely technical standard” objection suits the present discussion well, for it is this standard that is/was used to create the distinction of high and low culture, between good and bad culture, between the elites and the masses.

This distinction is discussed in Walter Benjamin’s famous “Works of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” where he calls the high/low distinction a pervasive *aura*. For him, the elitist aura of the art, due to its enshrinement in canons by art critics and the aristocracy, due to its place in the formal museum, is disappearing via the reproduction and proliferation of works of art—and that is a good thing, for the aura is tied to authenticity, authenticity to tradition, and tradition to hegemonic elitism. Thus, as Benjamin (1968) puts it, the “mechanical reproduction of art changes the reaction of the masses toward art,” (p. 234) and the removal of art from the traditional aura leads to “a tremendous shattering of tradition which is the obverse of the contemporary crisis and renewal of [human]kind” (ibid., p. 221).

As noted in that last quote, the technological changes afforded nothing short of a transformation of human relations. The political implications that mechanical reproduction models offered are clearly present in Benjamin’s analysis, noting at the outset of the essay that the “theory of art” he outlines is “different from the more familiar terms in that [these terms] are completely useless for the purposes of Fascism” (ibid., p. 218); thus, the significance of mechanical reproduction is much deeper than *mere* aesthetics, “point[ing] beyond the realm of art” (ibid., p. 221). In Benjamin’s view, the significance of mechanical reproduction is as important and as ripe with possibility as the “utopian” writers’ views of Web 2.0 and interactive media; the possibility for more equitable and just human relations stems from, or is at least modeled in, the technological processes. This is a fascinating parallel, and one that, as noted earlier, seems to be a category mistake.¹³

Perhaps the keenest critics to note the false relationship between technology as a freedom or criticism as anti-democratic were Adorno and Horkheimer. Though they certainly represent the *mass-media dystopian vision par excellence*—“the whole world is made to pass through the filter of the culture industry”—they show how the mass media story is one that also falsely celebrates *the masses*: “The deceived masses are today captivated by the myth of success even more than the successful are. Immovably, they insist on the very ideology that enslaves them” (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002, p. 134). Though the false consciousness element rings out in that sentence, the reading of it I wish to offer is the

¹² This is something to discuss on its own terms, the relationship between the moral and non-moral use of good, and whether or not such a distinction even exists.

¹³ It should be noted that the mistake seems much more understandable at the time of Benjamin’s writing, in Germany in 1935, than it does in the current era, especially given the benefit of hindsight to reflect on writers like Benjamin.

illustration of political ideals being used for manipulation. The "political language as implicit or explicit" critique is even clearer in their discussion of critics. In a sentence not unlike Williams' disdain for the superior prigs, the Frankfurt School icons write that criticism disappears in the culture industry, becoming simply "mechanical expertise," (ibid., p. 161) and that "the connoisseur and the expert are despised for their pretentious claim to know better than the others, even though culture is democratic and distributes privileges to all" (ibid., p. 134).

This results, then, in either a stigmatization of the elitist critic—calling her *undemocratic*, which is one of the worst things to be called in a liberal-democratic society—or the commodification of their criticism via the monetization of their expertise; *in both cases, the producers get what they want*: "the constant reproduction of the same thing" and the "exclusion of the new" (ibid.).

Though there are many issues to address that Horkheimer and Adorno raise in their work, the main thing to glean from the forgoing analysis is the continual challenge of the critic as one who is elitist, mechanistic, using his opinion to trump the opinions of others, and to note how the language of critiques of critics matches that of the link of technology and participation; that is, it is a politically loaded language: the critic is undemocratic.

So it seems that, in critical communication studies, we are stuck with a paradox; the critic is someone who can direct attention to the new and alert society to a politics of difference at play, and is also someone who can, by that same token, be a dominating and subjugating force in the face of contrary opinions. The critic can both subjugate and emancipate; the critic can alert audiences to the structures of replication that are Fascistic or the critic can be the one, in the nature of universal judgment and normative pronouncement on objects, to perpetuate Fascism. In this same way, one is caught between the Scylla and Charybdis of "standards" and "no standards"; without standards, all work is of seemingly equal quality (pure democracy), which clearly is not the case nor is even desirable; but with standards, criticism quickly turns to rote mechanics and specialized technical vocabularies at best, and at worst, threatens the possibility of The New as well.

One can see the navigation of this standards/no standards divide in the exchange between Stuart Hall and Salman Rushdie in *The Guardian* in the late 1980s. The gist of the debate over the quality of a then-recent crop of films centered on and around race/ethnicity, class, and sexual experience was that Rushdie did not believe that they were good films, while Hall believed that, for the sake of the exploration of identity and the politics of difference on film, they had to be considered good films. As Hall (1996) recalls it:

He seemed to me to be addressing the films as if from the stable, well-established critical criteria of a *Guardian* film reviewer. I was trying, perhaps unsuccessfully, to say that I thought this an inadequate basis for a political criticism and one which overlooked precisely the signs of innovation, and constraints, under which these film-makers were operating. It is difficult to define what an alternative mode of address would be. (p. 448)

Part of what Hall seems to be getting at in this account is the difference I discussed above between reviews and criticism, which, hopefully, my terminology helps clear up a bit. Rushdie seemed to be doing a film review; Hall wanted to do criticism. But the difference between review and critique does not settle the vexed relationship between politics and judgment at the heart of the critical enterprise—which politics? What standards? Whose judgments?

The End-Relational Theory and Metacriticism

In this section, I will sketch out how an end-relational theory of judgment aids in separating between judgments of individual preferences and a set of standards, between a politics of judgment and politics as such. This section is largely metacriticism—that is, criticism about criticism—and thus is not a presentation of a panacea methodology for criticism, but rather is a theory about how normative judgment works.

The end-relational theory (ERT) of normativity is borrowed from philosopher Stephen Finlay.¹⁴ Here's how it works: Imagine a portion of the film *Birth of a Nation* uploaded to YouTube.¹⁵ There are two user-comments, one that says, 1) "*Birth of a Nation* is such a good film," while the other says, 2) "No, *Birth of a Nation* is a very bad film." What sense can be made of these two posts? Well, first of all, the idea that the film is *simply* good, or *simply* bad, does not make much sense. One needs to know what the poster means by their declaration, which means asking, *good in what way?* This necessitates identifying an *end*; that is, what is the film good *for*? This will at least move the post from the level of feedback to the

¹⁴ It should be noted that I do not endorse ERT in its entirety, questioning the reducibility of normative terms, or at least *good* and *ought*, to a unified semantic meaning. Finlay's primary statement on his end-relational theory will be his forthcoming book (n.d.), but his theory is seen in a variety of papers (2004; 2006; 2009; 2010).

¹⁵ In the case of *Birth of a Nation*, so much ink has been spilled over this particular film and it is taught in so many classrooms across the globe that it might seem ironic to use it as an example of a situation in which criticism might help audiences understand the film. The example, however, is chosen precisely for its familiarity and simplicity; i.e., I do not take myself to be *doing* criticism of this film here but simply showing the process of moving from a generalized expressive claim to an evaluative judgment. It should also be noted the ERT is not presented as a *methodology* but rather as a semantic analysis of normative terms. My turn here is to use it to help make sense of some of the Web 2.0 environment in terms of normative content, and then make a further step of trying to use it as a way of dissolving part of the conflict in academic criticism between individual expressivism and universal standards, as a move of metacriticism. The actual criticism, of producing arguments aimed at judgment, then is relative to standards picked out by the chosen end (e.g., what is art for? What is this object for/trying to do/what should it should be doing?). For further example, I try to simply leave the Hall-Rushdie debate at this level, showing contrasting ends and thus differing standards of evaluation and hence differing judgments on the same object/artifact. But I do have some endorsed ends in this paper that largely remain unargued (e.g., that a consumerist center to society is undesirable; that the loss of an avant-garde would be disappointing, etc.). By that same token, however, to say that my ends are undesirable (or if you do not share them) is not the same thing as saying that my argument fails.

level of review. One can easily generate a series of possible positive ends: *Birth* is good to watch for entertainment (pleasure), or that it was good for film as an art-form (technical and artistic achievements) or good for the film industry (blockbuster-type success), etc. The film was, after all, a landmark film in terms of technicality (editing, camera angles, etc.), content (lengthily, sustained narrative), scope (epic), and success (widely distributed and seen).

But, in the case of our imagined second online poster, one can generate a series of ways in which *Birth* was bad, most explicitly, for the positive portrayals of the Ku Klux Klan and endorsements of racism via white supremacy. This view might be characterized as follows: Any film that promotes such values, such morally reprehensible things as slavery or the inherent supremacy of a particular race, deserves to be called a bad film, no matter what its artistic or industry benefits might be. In providing grounds for their claim, the dispute is largely addressing, at core, the question *what is a good film?* But this necessitates asking the question, then, *what is film for?* In addressing this question, one must identify a specific end and then evaluate the film in relation to its achievement of that end.

The end in question need not be a universal end—all film is for pleasure, all film is for unsettling an audience and forcing them to think about their material social relations—but can be localized and specific; what is *this* film for, or at least one thing this film tries to do? Thus, *good* functions as an incomplete predicate, where *good* in the statement is elliptical (if not made explicit in the reasoning), for some end, with then the end-relational theory of *good* judgments taking the form: *It is good for e, that p.* So, in the case of the Hall-Rushdie exchange, Hall might have fruitfully called *My Beautiful Laundrette* good for depicting the marginalization of the ethnic experience and exploring sexuality and class politics in 1980s Britain; thus, it is good for unsentimental depictions and non-essentializing understandings of ethnicity, sexuality, and class in Margaret Thatcher's Britain that we watch *Laundrette*. To this Rushdie might easily have responded with his own end—the more conventional standards of what makes good film—and shown how *Laundrette* failed to meet those standards. Who is right? In this way, both can clearly be correct, and one is not forced into the position of saying one is wrong and the other is right because there are multiple truthful answers to the question, was *Laundrette* good?, once the elliptical *good* is made semantically complete.

This also moves beyond the realm of simple agent-relativity by having some degree of standard to which to appeal, and a standard that is transparent. Hall and Rushdie might have disagreed that *Laundrette* was a good film, but I doubt they disagree as to whether the film met the specific criteria each was laying (or implicitly laying) out. The clear articulation of ends moves the act of feedback or merely expressing one's opinion ("I like it!") to a more substantial, cognitive content, observable and able to be judged as true or false by audiences and interpreters. The end-relational view avoids the charges of elitism as well as the celebratory tone of participation equals democratic equals good. ERT is a *contextualized*—but not relativized¹⁶—mechanism for analyzing, and perhaps even establishing, normative

¹⁶ Strictly speaking, it is relativized, but relativized to the *end* rather than to the *agent/assessor*. Thus, I prefer to say contextualized so as to avoid the muddled conceptual baggage of "relativism."

judgment. This gets us to at least to the level of a review. The matter is pushed to criticism by arguing for a particular end that may not be immediately apparent to the consumer or audience.

There is clearly an open-argument place here in establishing the right, or fixing the proper, *end*. And it is here that it is important to keep the discussion of particular ends *open* as opposed to closed, for ends are almost always agent-relative in a way that normative judgment is not necessarily so. That is, in trying to deduce which are the *better* ends for a film (or the best end for film in general), that preference—tied to psychological states and the agent's desires—will shine through. It is in the ranking of ends that precisely the struggle for power, authority, and control occurs, the very things that caused the Birminghamers and subsequent generations of cultural studies scholars to recoil.

I think the ERT accommodates this cleanly and clearly. As far as the ranking of ends go, criticism that runs "good for e_1 , good for e_2 , but e_1 trumps e_2 " is of the variety that attempts to subjugate (though that isn't to say that it is false *necessarily*, and it might even be impossible to avoid). Good criticism can maintain the critical faculty of judgment and evaluation without collapsing into radical agent-relativism, and argue for a particular end in a way that affords the recognition of competing and differing ends.

Furthermore, in situations in which the debate is, "*All in all, was X a good F?*", the critic is able to maintain a distinction of terms (not conflating good for e_1 with a good *F*, period) by showing that the question, the all-in-all formulation, requires, at least, two different arguments: one being that a good *F* features certain characteristics and why, and the other being that X meets those characteristics. It is precisely this confusion between, say, a novel being good for e_1 but not for e_2 and the novel being good, period, that the ERT so carefully clarifies. In other words, there is *no such thing as good, simpliciter, at least not without an additional argument* for one's preferences as superior or in accordance with the moral/divine/natural order of things. So arguments about final things (i.e., all in all) are necessarily *two-place* arguments and, most of the time, disagreements at this level have interlocutors, like Rushdie and Hall, talking past one another.

Critics in the Web 2.0 World

I have argued in this paper that the trope of participation in the interactive media landscape seems to have a negative effect on criticism, and more importantly, that criticism might help identify, refocus, and coordinate ends of cultural innovation beyond participation. But aside from an ideological shift in technology and business practices, the prevalence of reviews over criticism is also partly due to what might be called the *overgeneration problem*, which is that, given the ease and cheapness of access to artistic and entertainment technologies and tools and the possibility of a global platform, the proliferation of *stuff* is practically exponential. One cannot even keep track of all the *reviews* of the music, film, photography, comedy, etc., out there, let alone the objects or performances themselves. So reviews play a vital function, especially in a capitalist society; people only have so much money, and they want to spend it on a good product, event, or service.

But the celebration of interactivity, in which "everyone is a critic" in good democratic fashion, often conflates the notion of criticism and reviews. One consequence of this conflation is, like those

Frankfurt School critiques of mass media, the continual replication of sameness. Another consequence is that the Web 2.0 mentality of participation and all opinions as equally valid transforms criticism to simply expressivist-type feedback of “I like it/I don’t like it” judgments—that is, as a matter of *mere* taste.¹⁷ This thereby reduces the possibility for The New to be nurtured and furthered. This is necessary, for, as Anton Ego, the food critic in *Ratatouille*, so aptly put it: “The New needs friends” (Lasseter et al., 2007). And in the age of information, The New needs more help than ever before in being discovered and shared.

I have also argued in this paper for a metacritical analysis, following the ERT, of both the meaning of normative terms as present in criticism and as a clarifying framework in which to understand criticism aimed at judgment. That is, the metacritical end-relation theory of judgment is one that seems to avoid the extreme criticism of standards-based authoritarianism (or, more benignly, rote measuring-stick criticism) on the one hand, and all opinions and arguments as equally valid on the other.

As noted at the outset of this paper, I am not referring strictly to the critical task of academics or criticism in specialized places (given that criticism will probably continue to thrive in the academy no matter the changing conditions of culture, technology, and commerce, and that there will probably always be online equivalents to the *London Review of Books*), but of critics of the wider variety. The loss of the popular-press type critic with influence would be a real loss to art and entertainment, especially in the interactive media landscape in which new and exciting things are happening in all areas and avenues. The fracturing of the audience and the rise of niche markets does indeed create the possibility for the emergence and sustainment of an avant-garde (cf. Anderson, 2004; Cowan, 1998), but this only makes the role of the critic *all the more important* and valuable, not less. Indeed, in the era of informationalism, criticism, as opposed to reviews, is practically a subversive political act, challenging consumerist approaches to culture and resisting the monetizing logic of the market. In this context, times may be good for producers, consumers, and reviewers, but so far, not for critics. A contextualized theory of judgment, perhaps supplemented with a sensibility attuned to the avant-garde, might provide a useful transition from review-mentality to a more critical one in the Web 2.0 environment. That is, not just lamenting the potential demise of criticism against the celebratory trope of participation in the interactive story, one can hopefully see this essay’s emphasis on criticism as a primary player in arguing for and even coordinating certain ends, and analyzing potentially innovative practices and aesthetic creations.

In terms of this loss of the critic with a mass-media influence, this might not necessarily be a descriptive situation; that such could emerge in the Web 2.0 environment is, of course, possible. But for interactive media celebrants, such emergence does not seem desirable. Instead, the desire seems to be for an emergent collective steeped in participatory cultural practices enacting a critical democratic agenda. This is an exciting possibility, but such is not precluded by my analysis; that critics are authoritarian as a cultural institution and ought to be dismantled is an argument based on a set of standards given by the end. The semantic level of ERT simply stops there as a descriptive judgment; in order to get to the

¹⁷ Again, as discussed in the previously, it *is* taste/preference at the level of ends. Or, if it is not a matter of taste or preference, i.e., that the ranking is tied to a hierarchical order in nature or divine law or something else, the critic has a further task of arguing as to what this order is, how it is known, etc.

normative judgment of the desirability of this, or how or what it could possibly look like, further arguments are necessary, and so far I am unconvinced that such is even possible, let alone fully desirable.

However, it is my hope that, even if you do not share in this latter judgment, this essay has at least continued the discussion of how to have an engaged and robust society without having a consumerist-center and a myriad of aesthetic, political, moral, and social digital enclaves surrounding it, and how the critic might be of help. Hopefully, I have accomplished two more specific tasks: 1) drawing a distinction between the role of the critic in the mass media story and, at least so far, in the new media story (thereby leaving normative judgment on this matter still open), and 2) providing a new set of concepts in which to think about and through the role of the critic in this interactive era, specifically the taxonomy of feedback, reviews, and criticism and the beginning discussion of an end-relational theory of judgment. More collective deliberation and critical engagement is not only welcome, but necessary. That is, participation is not to be discouraged, but continually invited; but the argument is that it ought not be an end in itself, and that to treat it as such might actually threaten cultural innovation—and our ability to find it.¹⁸

¹⁸ Thank you to Stephen Finlay and Mark A.E. Williams for insightful discussion, and to Larry Gross and the two anonymous reviewers for their comments, and especially patience, with this essay.

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