

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### The aesthetic public sphere and the transformation of criticism

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This article argues that criticism is fundamental for understanding how culture and politics shape the ambiguous self interpretation of society. An initial exploration of Habermas's theory of the public sphere reveals that it is inadequately cultural. An alternative is thus offered by discussing the work of Jacobs, and especially his concept of an "aesthetic public sphere". His insight that nothing is too trivial when it comes to broadening the limits of the public sphere prompts scholars to take into consideration the positive as well as negative aspects of criticism. As a cultural mediation, criticism is shaped by a struggle for recognition that gives rise to the interpretation of its own crisis. The purpose of the article, however, is to propose a more balance account of such predicament. By discussing online criticism, the rise of the "prosumer" and user generated content, it is argued that there is now a new battle for authority and legitimacy undergoing. This creates the potential for the democratization of criticism, even though this potential has great chance to remain within an inescapable democratic tension.

**Keywords:** political culture; aesthetic public sphere; institution of criticism; crisis of criticism; Internet; user generated content; film and television criticism

#### Introduction

The concepts of culture and politics, and even more so the relation between the two, are so central that they never cease to be a source of questioning for sociologists. Fortunately, what recent years have witnessed is a better clarification of the ideas at hand, and a growing interest in linking them, both in Europe and in North America (see Berezin 1997; Somers 1995; Cefaï 2001; Lichterman and Cefaï 2006; Reed and Alexander, 2007). What could lie behind such terms as "cultural politics" and "political culture"? One thing is certain, culture and politics represent a capacity to "talk back" to society; they are an ongoing discussion and an eternal process of self-interpretation. In a nutshell, culture and politics deal with meanings. They are both engaged in "reflexivity", but in a sense that is not purely linguistic, as they also relate to the meanings applied by everyday actors in their everyday operations. Culture and politics are real and concrete, in that regard; they guide possible courses of actions and generate the conditions required for memory of the past and projection into the future. One could thus imagine a complex mediation inside which the terms of culture and politics are not reducible to one another, and where the way they are intertwined is at once particular and unique. In few words, their specific relation

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informs an autonomous constellation, with its own prerequisites and logic.<sup>1</sup> Admittedly, then, it is the task of sociology, in general – and cultural sociology, in particular – to further explore this constellation and what it shows in terms of new trends toward more complexity and ambiguity in social life.

In such a theoretical context, the concept of the public sphere is particularly important. In what is certainly its most influential form (i.e. Habermasian), it continues to refer to a realm where informed citizens could discuss matters of general interest with no direct regards to their status. The idea of a public sphere, in other words, is to be based on rational–critical discourse and debate, the public use of reason, and what Habermas calls a “principle of publicity”. At the same time, it is important to remember that Habermas’s (1962/1989) *The structural transformation of the public sphere* claims to be a historical account of the emergence of modern democratic deliberation in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as much as its erosion, mostly after 1870. Many things has been said about Habermas’s thesis, of course – including how this rise and fall of the bourgeois public sphere is somehow too simplistic – and this paper will have no choice but to built on these, in due time. In particular, it will be crucial to develop what could be conceived as the cultural critique of the Habermasian project and how it has lead, in recent years, to promising alternatives suggestive of an “aesthetic public sphere” (Jacobs 2007; see also Allard 1992; P. Jones 2007) or a “cultural public sphere” (McGuigan 1996, 2005) where nothing would be too trivial or mundane. However, this is only one part of the goal here, while the other will have to do with an effort to propose ideas for a more complex, nuanced and balanced model, which would include the positive as well as the negative aspects of the cultural–political constellation, its objective as well as subjective sides, and so forth. This requires one to pay close attention to how criticism operates in today’s world. Criticism is not just one activity among many; it is rather a complete mediation whose role and influence are central or pivotal to the reproduction of the social whole.

My central claim is this: the distinctive way that politics and culture interact is deeply affected by the current forms of criticism as these forms make sense of the eternal ambiguity of society’s self-interpretation. It is as though the contemporary transformation of criticism – mostly due to technology, but it will be shown that the full story is far more complex – fuels the transformation of social life while also exhibiting its always imprecise essence, its contradictory or, at least, incongruous tendencies. In order to support this claim, I propose to divide the article into three sections. In the first, I will rapidly present Habermas’s definition of the public sphere, how it has been criticized and why the idea of an “aesthetic public sphere” is its most convincing variation today. In the second, I will build on, and depart from Jacob’s concept to analyze the centrality of criticism as an institution, how this institution views itself in constant crisis and this, despite a very important challenge by the emergence of the Internet, potentially leading toward a greater democratization of criticism or, at least, a renegotiation of its structure of authority. In the third and final section, I will provide examples related to television and film criticism in order to demonstrate how real this challenge is, how critical discourses could in effect find new audiences, and thus open the door for either a brighter or darker future.

### The conceptual road toward an aesthetic public sphere

Habermas's *The structural transformation of the public sphere* is without a doubt a landmark in how scholars have understood the relationship between culture and politics. As Calhoun points out, the book's "subject is the historically specific phenomenon of the bourgeois public sphere created out of the relation between capitalism and the state in the 17th and 18th centuries" (1992, 5; see also Hohendahl 1982). New developments in politics and the economy made possible, in turn, the institutionalization of new forms of sociality and public discourse. For instance, the family was to be conceived as a realm of intimacy and no longer as an economical activity; it was then fueled by the ideal of human autonomy, and open to new subjective experiences. Soon enough, for example, the new activity of intimate letter writing transforms into the literary genre of the novel, driven in part by the growing appetites of new reading publics, gathering and discussing in *salons* or in coffee houses. In particular, newspapers became fundamental institutions in which criticism rapidly found its own niche (see Bera 2003; Crow 1985; Wrigley 1993). So there is a clear path, according to Habermas, from this emerging literary public sphere to a more political one. Citizens were more and more involved in discussing state matters, and problems related to the general interest. And they were doing it by putting greater value in the arguments themselves rather than their proponents, by the problematization of new areas of social life, and by viewing this public sphere in the making as inclusive. That is most certainly the normative climax of Habermas' thesis: forums for discussions were established at that particular time for people to use their reason through informed and critical discourse.<sup>2</sup>

But that is only half of the story and half of the book. The rest has to do with the tragic tale leading to the undermining and degeneration of the public sphere. Habermas talks fervently about the "regressive" nature of politics and culture going into the twentieth century; and, of course, by doing so he draws close to the bleakest diagnoses of the Frankfurt School (see Calhoun 1992, 23; Hohendahl 1982, 246, for instance). The main problem lies in that "rational-critical debate had a tendency to be replaced by consumption, and the web of public communication unraveled into acts of individuated reception, however uniform in mode" (Habermas 1962/1989, 161). On the side of politics, active citizens are substituted by a mass of apathetic individuals no longer intellectually invested in the general interest. The state could then operate as a solely technical apparatus, whereas the deliberative aspect of democracy is replaced by the acclamation of politicians. On the side of culture, now, Habermas argues that the concept itself has fully disappeared in a sea of mere entertainment. The mass culture is a manipulated culture where the economical logic has taken over – through the magic of advertisement, for instance. And the consequences of all that are somehow fatal: efforts, discussions and criticism vanish while autonomy and emancipation for individuals seem out of sight.

Among the critiques raised against *The structural transformation*, the best known could be said to be political. The contention is that the universalistic claim of the bourgeois public sphere was fundamentally misleading as participation and inclusion were both disjuncted and partial (Fraser 1992; see also Lyotard 1984; Ryan 1992). Women were excluded. People from lower social class, immigrants and the like were excluded. For Fraser, in particular, the problem is to account for how such exclusion fashion "subaltern counterpublics", and how these are transforming, in turn, the

public sphere. With that in mind, however, the real question is to what extent this could be directly held against Habermas. If the claim regarding exclusion is relatively easy to make, and fundamentally easy to agree with, it is nonetheless difficult to say that Habermas is *in favor of* any form of segregation. The historical and normative argument should not be conflated, and when Habermas is dealing with the latter he mostly talks of the “potential” for inclusion.

A more historical critique relates to the “overestimation of the degeneration of the public sphere” (Calhoun 1992, 33). In fact, two problems are overlapping here. On an epistemological ground, it is worth nothing that the book’s second half presents arguments on a lower level of intensity and seriousness. As P. Jones puts it, “Habermas’ account of the decline of the literary public sphere plainly lacks the sophistication of that of its development” (2007, 78). And that is also having an effect on an historical ground. Habermas assumes the complete passivity of audiences, the unidimensional aspect of mass media, and the fact that the bourgeois public sphere was devoid of any malpractice in the first place, but is it the case? If things have changed, this most definitely does not allow one to speak of “degeneration”. The real question, however, is again to ask whether this should be directly held against Habermas. *The structural transformation* originates from the early 1960s, and since then Habermas has acknowledged that his thesis was “too simplistic”.<sup>3</sup> Over the years, he has revised it in several fashions, including the move towards *Legitimation crisis* (Habermas 1973/1975), or the “colonization” of the lifeworld by the mediums of power and money, mostly in *Theory of communicative action* (Habermas 1981/1984–1987). So, in the end, it appears important to take this degeneration of the public sphere *con grano salis*, with a grain of salt.

If there seems to be at least partial ways to elude the two above critiques, it is not the case for the following one. Although less well known, I would argue that this critique, which is cultural by nature, is nevertheless more fundamental. The problem is that Habermas’s argument in that particular book follows a causal chain that ultimately leads towards the reduction of culture – and politics to a lesser extent – to the economy (see Calhoun 1992; Jacobs 2007; Hohendahl 1982; Somers 1995). Culture is what has to be explained; that is, it does not have an internal structure to make sense of itself, and is certainly unable to explain politics and the economy. A case in point is the private sphere and how it relates to family and citizenry. The “intimate” sphere is bourgeois by definition, namely that it emerges following changes in labor and in commodity exchange. Somers is right when she notes that “the public sphere is represented as a transmutation of personal and market privacy into the domain of ‘public’ issues regarding the management of socioeconomic life” (1995, 126). For its part, Hohendahl broadens the scope of the problem when he says that Habermas’s “concern is to explain the transformation of cultural institutions through change in the political system, whose development in turn is conceived through change in the economic system” (1982, 243). While culture seems everywhere at first, it is actually the poor parent in *The structural transformation*. There also appears to be no remedies for, or revisions of this situation later in Habermas’s work.<sup>4</sup> What one is left with is therefore this idea that Habermas has simultaneously the merit of having raised the issue of how culture, politics and the economy interacted, and that his model is in the end “insufficiently cultural in its orientation” (Jacobs 2007, 114). The door is thus open for new conceptualizations.

As previously stated, there are many interesting ideas within the conceptual cluster of an “aesthetic public sphere” (Jacobs 2007; see also Allard 1992; P. Jones 2007) or a “cultural public sphere” (McGuigan 1996, 2005), and this article wants to build on these as well as offer possibilities for certain implementations. The first idea deserving attention is that culture is not just another dimension of the public sphere, and moreover a transitional dimension; culture is there to stay, it has always been there and always will be. Culture, in other words, is part of the public sphere, and constantly interacts with its other dimensions in a meaningful, rich and broad way. McGuigan’s definition is unambiguous in that regard:

[...] the cultural public sphere is not confined to a republic of letters – the 18th century’s literary public sphere – and ‘serious’ art, classical, modern or, for that matter postmodern. It includes the various channels and circuits of mass popular culture and entertainment, the routinely mediated aesthetic and emotional reflections on how we live and imagine the good life. The concept of a cultural public sphere refers to the articulation of politics, public and personal, as a contested terrain through affective (aesthetic and emotional) modes of communication. (2005, 435)

A second important idea deals with the capacity of culture to move individuals on a deeper experiential level, which includes their sensibility and their sociability (i.e. the way they interact with others). *Nothing is too trivial* here, from soap opera to foreign movies, from pleasure practices to more complex ones. For instance, Jacobs talks about the “cultural industry as an agent of mass sociability”, whereas McGuigan discusses how “affective communications help people to think reflexively about their lifeworld situations”. The simple fact is that people talk about what they have heard, seen, and so forth, and that such discussions orient their actions. From that, it is also possible to reach this other – third – idea where cultural products could be understood for their critical charge. Cultural productions are windows, so to speak, through which critical views can penetrate the routine of everyday life. Satires, intellectuals in media, and so on, offer different points of view, alternatives, disagreements, suggestions and the like (on intellectuals, see Eyerman 1994; Fleck and Hess 2009). As P. Jones puts it, “an aesthetic public sphere would include all forms of aesthetico-cultural production – and their critical discussion – whose conditions of composition are sufficient to permit articulated dissent and advocacy” (2007, 88). Of course, all this at least tacitly include criticism *per se*; namely that “thing” which analyzes, judges and evaluates cultural productions, whether they be critical themselves or not. But what if it appears to be fundamental to explicitly thematize criticism, and to understand it as a full institution? What about its role, function, and capacity? It is by trying to answer these questions that this article could offer a contribution.

### **The always fragile institution of criticism**

Introducing the question of criticism in the debate over the cultural nature of the public sphere should allow for a more complex, and hopefully more balanced, theoretical model. Criticism has this rather strange merit of exhibiting positivity *and* negativity, proximity *and* distance, objectivity *and* subjectivity, which is also to say that it often falls in between these poles.<sup>5</sup> Following that trend, it is worth noting that criticism neither finds itself on the side of the production of culture (Crane 1992;

Peterson 1976) nor on the side of its reception (Jauss 1972/1982, for instance); criticism is, *de facto* and *de jure*, a cultural mediation – that is, a composite network of detours and indirect routes (see Becker 1973/2008; Cornejo 2008; Janssen 1997; Glynn and Lounsbury 2005; Shrum 1991; Zolberg 1990). What criticism does, in other words, is to link or to bridge creator and artists to individuals and collective audiences. And it has done so for a very long time; to the point, in fact, that it is possible to say that it became nothing less than an institution in itself – a “mediating institution” of the aesthetic public sphere (see Cornejo 2008, 209).<sup>6</sup> This could be said to be the more “structural” dimension of criticism; namely that it operates within boundaries, thus forging its own space with its own rules even if, oftentimes, it is easier to see its own ways of disputing these rules. To borrow from the language of the latest French sociology, one would speak of cultural criticism as an “*arène*”, an arena for dialogues and debates (see Cefaï 1996).<sup>7</sup> The structural aspect of criticism does not vanish in that sense, but it does not appear to be that rigid either.

As a matter of fact, the “agency” dimension of criticism is just as fundamental and has generated many commentaries over the years. For the most part, the discussion revolves around the complex, if not impossible, right of the critic to do what he or she does and to be whom he or she is. In very few words, it is all about a substantial *struggle for recognition* (see Becker 1973/2008; Bourdieu 1977/1980, 1983; and more generally speaking Honneth 1992/1995; Ricœur 2004/2005). The medium or the format is not exactly relevant here, it could be criticism on the radio, television; it could also be in a book or in a more specialized journal. By the same token, the topic or the subject is irrelevant; be it music, gadgets, literature, architecture, and so on. In all circumstances, critics are necessarily engaged in a series of justifications about their legitimacy to discuss the justifications of others.<sup>8</sup> Offence and defense are part of the same game, as justifications exist only in so far as one is being under fire, and only in light of real and enduring challenges. So, there is a clear *modus operandi* guiding this social actor called a critic; one that links the questions of *who?* – who is recognized as such? – to the question of *how* criticism is done, *what* constitutes a critical stance, and ultimately to this deeper question of *why* – why is it that criticism has to exist?<sup>9</sup> In the remainder of this section, I will argue that the uncertainty and the ambiguity regarding the right of criticism simply to exist is rooted in its discursive and public nature.

To further establish criticism as a fundamental cultural mediation of the aesthetic public sphere – having the form of an arena, and moved by an enduring struggle for recognition – one could refer to the idea of a “communicative institution” in the broad sense given by Alexander (see 2006). Criticism is “out there”, on the air, in the street, and so forth. It circulates in the public sphere as it tries to address a multitude of people. Its task is not only to inform, but to convince, and because of that criticism finds itself highly dependent on the resources of language. The problem, of course, is that language tends to be ambiguous: written and spoken words often allow for double or more meanings and interpretations. Although many observations could be made here, I would limit myself to three remarks that are the most important to my contention. First, this arbitrariness of language forces what Bakhtin (1930s/1981) calls a “heteroglossia”; that is, the polyphonic, if not cacophonous stage of public discussion that, when applied to criticism, can be translated into its necessary characteristic of being plural. Second, it is important to note that criticism is a reconstruction or a commentary of a different order; that is,

“something else” other than reality. By definition, criticism is an interpretation (see, for instance, Barthes 1966; Walzer 1987; for a synthetic commentary, see Reed 2007). Third, by connecting the previous ideas of heteroglossia and interpretation, it becomes easy to understand that criticism is torn by a multitude of competing narratives, tropes or rhetorical maneuvers, each of them trying to make sense of an already meaningful artifact. Simply put, what appears to be the essence of such a communicative institution as criticism relies on what Ricœur calls an endless “conflict of interpretations” (see mostly Ricœur 1969/1974).

What is it, then, that all these competing interpretations have in common? They are part of public discourse, that is obvious, but they also represent, each and every one of them, something like an *ethos*. There is no purely neutral critic; which is to say, at the same time, that the institution of criticism is fundamentally a normative one. Speaking of the media in civil society, Alexander and Jacobs develop the idea – to be extrapolated here – of a “subjunctive mode of culture; that is [...] reality as it ought to be” (1998, 28). What is beautiful, ugly, has succeeded, has failed, is meaningful, meaningless, good or bad? What should be done, constructed, said, played, and so forth? This type of questioning is shared by all forms of criticism as their purpose, once again, is not only to inform, but to convince. Old values are mobilized, new values are created, and, more often than not, these are colliding, thus forming a pluralistic and antagonistic universe (see, for instance, Ricœur 1973; Heinich 1996). It is the Big Bang theory of the cultural and moral values “out there”. However, it seems equally important to see that these moral views somehow remain attached to their more practical and concrete roots. People engaged in critical activity are often doing it with no extraordinary efforts. In that sense, the ethics of criticism is properly immanent, and more or less parallels the ethical activity of everyday life. The case in point is the idea of justice and how individuals use it daily. In their work, which I follow here, Boltanski and Thevenot nicely demonstrate that individuals rely on their own “ordinary” sense of justice to orient themselves and to resolve disputes, disagreements, and so on (see mostly Boltanski and Thevenot 1981/2006, 1999).<sup>10</sup> The acceptable and the unacceptable are negotiated by social actors who are essentially realists. In the case of cultural criticism, more precisely, and to build on Boltanski and Thevenot’s thesis, what is interesting is that the pressure to do justice to this or that artifact is doubled by a demand for fairness directed towards the critic himself as a person. He should be sincere, careful, and courageous; his texts or public interventions should have both authenticity and integrity (in the case of theater, see Barthes 1966; Cloutier 2005; as for music, see Klein 2005). Of course, if all agree on the necessity of such “fairness”, its proper content, on the other hand, tells an entirely different story. Because this content is the object of conflict, because it is vague and unsettled, it indicates that the *ethos* of criticism remains an empty shell in the end: all agree on their disagreements.

As it appears clearer from what precedes – that is, the ideas of arena, struggle for recognition, conflict of interpretations, and pluralistic *ethos* – the institution of criticism lacks the unity and strength that other institutions enjoy. It would almost be possible to say that criticism lives in perpetual puberty. And with that, obviously, come troubling questions, doubts, and tortuous self-perceptions. When looked at closely, the way criticism makes sense of itself revolves, for the most part, around the image of its own crisis (see Berger 1998; Culler 1987; Hohendahl 1982; McDonald 2007; among others). In particular, Culler has this powerful way of expressing the

problem: “Criticism goes with crisis, itself generates a rhetoric of crisis, insofar as it calls one to rethink the canon and to reflect on the order of a culture’s discourses and the relations among them” (1987, 32).<sup>11</sup> There are always, here and there, episodes of turmoil, if not of drama and trauma. Naturally, when Benjamin and Brecht planned a magazine to address the social and economical horizon of their contemporary literature, they wanted to call it *Krisis und Kritik* (see Hohendahl 1982, 25). Closer to America, now, the idea behind a collection of essays entitled *The crisis of criticism* was spurred by a 1995 *New Yorker* article in which dance critic Arlene Croce controversially explained why she had no plan to see, yet alone review, *Still/Here*, a play by Bill T. Jones that included video-recordings and audio-recordings of actual HIV-positive peoples. According to her, the play was a prime example of “victim art” designed to manipulate and to intimidate the audience (see Croce 1998). And this list of periodical crises would certainly be longer if it was not a matter of space constraints: from Quebec’s 1984 petition signed by 156 theater practitioners to express their “malaise” *vis-à-vis* the critique carried in the prestigious newspaper *Le Devoir* (see Roberge 2009), to the latest book of Irish author Ronan McDonald (2007) entitled *The death of the critic*.

That said, however, it is even more important to understand the deeper causes of such critical condition, and I would argue that they are twofold. On the one side, there is what Hohendahl calls the “legitimation crisis of criticism” (1982, 41). The authority of the institution is presumed, alleged, believed, and so forth. Its autonomy is never assured, and its role never quite finds guaranties as to whether it is necessary. In other words, the crisis is perpetual because the institution of criticism is unable to find an answer to the questions stated above regarding *who?*, *how?*, *why?*, and *with what right?*. On the other side, it is essential to realize that the history of modern criticism is the story of a division of labor between those increasingly in charge of the artistic and intellectual dimension of culture versus those increasingly interested by entertainment and the taste of larger publics. Hohendahl is once again helpful here: “The most obvious symptom of this crisis [. . . is] the separation of elite and mass culture, a split that has had great consequences for the institutions of [. . .] criticism” (1982, 73). From that angle, modernity itself is shaped by a complex and growing tension for which both sides are equally robust. In turn, it is the creation of this divide that is to be explained, also because it makes it extremely difficult to foreseen the unity of criticism.

The first part of the divide, or the first movement in this crisis of criticism, relates to the emergence of the intelligentsia from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to the present. For this broad category of people, *l’art pour l’art* and the *avant-garde* meant something precisely because it is inside of a special, if not exactly private, language; namely the language of expertise. There is a clear link between the *avant-garde* and academia, for instance, as much as there is a clear path towards the isolation of that special tie and the denunciation of its elitist provincialism. It is the syndrome of the ivory tower, where intellectuals seem more and more disconnected and their discourse increasingly obscure. Facts are just as important as their interpretation in that regard, and three rapid examples would demonstrate this. First, the appearance of New Criticism in 1960s France made such a splash that people like Picard had to call the new literary movement a “dangerous imposture” – thus also forcing Barthes to answer the provocation, which he did in *Critique et vérité* (Barthes 1966).<sup>12</sup> As a second example, in a *Harvard Magazine* article of 1982 entitled “The

crisis in English studies”, Bate attributed today’s loss of common culture to the propagation of too many canons and theories; that is, feminism, post-structuralism, deconstructivism, and so forth (see Bate 1982; Culler 1987 for the commentary). The third example, then, occupied by *The death of the critic*, McDonald blames mostly on the new dominance of England’s Cultural Studies and their appetite for anything culturally blurred, hybrid, and theoretically fuzzy or uncertain (see 2007, ch. 4, 134–188).<sup>13</sup> The point is that one could always find critics of criticism, and especially of its tendency to lock itself behind the closed doors of academia and special jargon. Because it is, on all accounts, a dangerous move; one that not only precludes criticism from more direct social relevance, but one that also leaves more open space for the commercialization of criticism.

This tendency toward commercialization represents the second movement in the crisis of criticism. The fact is that from the *feuilleton* to newspapers and today’s mass media, the trend is toward the consecration of a media industry that not only occupied more and more space in the public sphere, but which also mimics the evolution of the cultural industry. The consequences of this evolution are certainly important, and have attracted numerous condemnations in modern times. Brecht, for instance, was highly critical of what he called “bourgeois criticism”, saying that its “social role is that of announcing entertainment” (quoted in Hohendahl 1982, 26). In more recent years, Hausman’s idea that “journalism and art criticism [. . .] have been caught up in the larger forces of commercialism and superficiality that so dominate our time” (1966, 18) found an important echo, including this statement by Hoberman, for example, where he notes that “to be a movie reviewer is to strike a Faustian bargain with the industry” (1998, 75). The fear, in other words, is that the critics’ role is turning out to be one of advertiser, spin-doctor or even cheerleader, with all that entails in terms of milder, softer, more self-satisfied, and more flattering style of criticism. The “thumbs up, thumbs down” mentality is indeed very present in today’s mass media, and finds, moreover, a natural ally in a public relations industry eager to take advantage of criticism (see Klein 2005, 13–16, for instance) – the use of a critic’s quotations in publicity is emblematic in that regard (see Bauman 2002; Cameron 1995). The problem, however, is that it is rather uneasy to decorticate everything that is entangled in this “thumbs up, thumbs down” mentality, or yet the narrative of decline and decadence accompanying it. The idea of a commercialization of criticism is thus, for the most part, an emotional and catchall category.<sup>14</sup> What it lacks is a bit of analytical distance, one that offers a more nuanced judgment.

Essentially, the question is this: what if one was to challenge this self-perception of criticism as inevitably in a stage of profound crisis? What if, to put it differently, one was to challenge the idea of a split between the intellectual and elitist aspect of criticism, on the one side, and its commercialization, on the other? The problem with the kind “negative” interpretation of the crisis as stated above – that is, the idea that in the end it leads to a degeneration of criticism somehow paralleling Habermas’s thesis – relates to the fact that it is unable to see that the idea of crisis is so old that it has become a permanent feature of criticism. As Hohendahl puts it, “we should not be too hasty in filling the death certificate” (1982, 79), which is also to say that it would be fruitful to develop a more “positive” interpretation of the crisis. Paradoxically, the idea of its permanent character is the only one able to make sense of the many changes, turns, and evolutions of criticism. It is because criticism never exactly finds a solution to its numerous problems that it is in constant search of

a solution. And this explains why the interpretation of a split between elite and commercial criticism also have to be challenged by both facts and theory. In the remainder of this article, I will argue that there is now a third way for criticism as a mediating institution of the aesthetic public sphere. This third way is the Internet's way, and how it has created the new reality of online criticism. In a recent paper, for instance, Verboord (2009) argued that the Internet has only a "limited effect" on the perception of criticism, but it is my contention that he arrives at such result only because he conceives the Internet as a technological device outside of culture. To the contrary, if Web 2.0 is understood as a fully cultural and meaningful environment (see, for example, Hand and Sandywell 2002), then it becomes possible to think criticism anew and to realize that this rise of the Internet – for better or worse – changes almost everything: new venues, new access, new networking, new forms of dialogue and interaction, and so forth.<sup>15</sup> In particular, the next section of the article will have to explore the significance of the so-called user-generated content and what it means in terms of renegotiation of authority and legitimacy. This is an important question as it could fundamentally alter the structure and agency of the institution of criticism, and thus potentially lead to its better democratization.

### **Internet and criticism: a discussion with two examples**

For reasons related to its quick emergence and great magnitude, Web 2.0 was destined to attract many interpretations, the majority of which are often unsettled, unclear or in competition with one another. At least in its "effervescence" phase, two major discourses or narratives thus collided: one overtly optimistic and enthusiastic, the other not so much. The idea itself of a 2.0 version of the Web carries a sense of progress and improvement that remain, paradoxically, both mythical and teleological. According to the partisans of this vision, the Internet is not only a technology, but a deep meaning that comes to be associated with empowerment, sharing, liberation, and so on. For them, the web culture has to be understood as a "free culture" (Lessig 2004) or a "gift economy for information exchange" (Barbrook 2002) – on this utopian interpretation, see also Jenkins (2006), Deuze (2007) and S.G. Jones (1997). Obviously, this narrative rapidly found opponents; that is, people eager to stress the illusion of openness and the false promises of the Internet. Among them, the best known is probably Keen. In his book *The cult of the amateur*, he vehemently denounces the massification of knowledge and culture produced by the user-generated content, basically arguing that Web 2.0 is where "ignorance meets egoism meets bad taste meets mob rules [...] on steroids" (Keen 2007, 1) – other critics of the Internet include Beniger (1996) and Leadbeater (2008), for instance. That said, however, the most pressing question is not to find out who is right between the optimistic and the pessimistic, but how to gain a better analytical distance, one that could properly encompass both positions. Following Papacharissi, one could say that "ultimately, it is the balance between utopian and dystopian visions that unveils the true nature of the internet" (2002, 21). What is important, in other words, is to propose a nuanced account that acknowledges the inescapability of the Internet today, the fact that it produce discourses and conflicts of interpretations *about it* as much as *inside of it*, and that it is, again, for better or worse.

With more specific regards to criticism, the rise of the Internet inevitably means a multiplication, if not an explosion of possibilities. It is as if online criticism had

invented a new motto for itself according to which everything is good enough to be criticized or even to deserve to be criticized. From *foodcritic.com*, *music-critic.com*, or *cruisecritic.com* to *perfumecritic.com*, and *candycritique.com*, they are all out there. The point, then, is that nothing is too trivial or mundane when it comes to the new forms of criticism, which is also to say that these new forms transform and expend the aesthetic public sphere. The changes are about the quantity of reviews and critics available, of course, but equally important are the qualitative aspects of it all: the fact that online criticism changes the way people make sense of social, political and cultural realities as much as it changes the way they act upon them. Despite the necessary intellectual cautions, it remains true that there is a movement towards a broader “participatory culture” (see Jenkins 2006; Beer 2009) signaled, among other things, by the rise of the “prosumer” (see Van Dijck 2009 for instance). This latest hybrid term refers to at least the capability of people to intervene and interact, to be producer as well as consumer, in what could therefore be called a *critical relation*. Online criticism allows for people to “talk back”, to comment and disagree on everything, including other people’s critiques. And this, in turn, fundamentally alters the nature of the institution of criticism. Before, criticism was indeed a mediation between the production of cultural artifacts and their reception by audiences, but the internal logic of this exact mediation was one of a direct liaison from the producer of a particular critic to its own audience. Now, what online criticism has introduced or drastically ameliorated is this possibility of a *mediation within the mediation*; that is, an indirect and bilateral relation that obviously is far more complex and raises much more questions.

The first of these deeply intertwined questions deals with the deliberative force of online criticism. Is this helping to forge a more reflexive and engaged public? The problem here is that participation does not mean rationality *per se* and, for that matter, does not correspond with the Habermasian project of consensus reaching through the “force of the better argument”. As Papacharissi points out, “access to more information does not necessarily create more informed citizens” (2002, 15; see also Gimmler 2001). In that sense, what Web 2.0 initiates is not pure deliberation, but a new form of “mediated deliberation” (see Jacobs and Townsley 2011); one that repeatedly relies on opinions to the point, in fact, where it becomes difficult to distinguish what is a serious discussion and what is not. Related to this question, also, is one regarding the many ways by which today’s cultural criticism witnesses the blurring of highbrow and lowbrow tastes. Nowadays, the hero of cultural consumption is Peterson’s omnivore (see Peterson 1992, 1997; Peterson and Kern 1996), and I would argue that this effectively challenges the aforementioned idea of a crisis of criticism in terms of a single split between elitism and commercialism. The actual problem is something else: the blurring of tastes and the creation of a somehow common cultural space leads, paradoxically, to the creation or the re-creation of a fragmented public sphere organized by different niches, clusters, and so forth.<sup>16</sup> Old vertical logics are reorganized on a more horizontal plan. There are people who meet online to discuss such iconic television series as *Lost*, such problems as the future of the European Union, and so on. To be part of these so-called “communities”, one only needs to be interested and to contribute to its internal reproduction. And this, in turn, touches upon the other question regarding the division of labor and the structure of authority within the institution of criticism. As stated above, the main contribution of the Internet, the user-generated content, and

now the prosumers is that they force a reshuffling of pretty much everything having to do with the notion of connoisseurship and expertise. The critics of the *New York Times*, for instance, still enjoy the power and the legitimacy associated with their institution, but they nevertheless have lost part of the aura and the prestige connected to what was once an exclusive practice – something like their *chasse-gardée*. Unpaid or little paid critics pressure them, challenge them, and sometimes find themselves to be more influential. A new struggle for recognition is thus on. In this evolving environment, critics are not purely equals, although they must live side by side, which is the more propitious for conflicts and tensions.

Among many promising examples, television and television criticism has to be discussed for it represents the most popular, and yet the most attacked, cultural mediation there is. From left and right, past and present, the ubiquitous character of television always has found opponents – be it Minow, the US Chairman of the Federal Communication Commission, who declared in the 1960s that television was a “vast-wasteland” (quoted in Vande Berg, Weener, and Gronbeck 2004, 220) or the more recent attacks by Postman (1985) and Gitlin (2001). What these unilateral condemnations have missed, however, is that television *also* has a creative side coupled with positive effects. Such a nuanced account will say, for instance, that television could elevate itself to the status of an “aesthetic medium” (Thorburn 1987) or a “cultural forum” (Newcomb and Hirsch 1983) where different viewpoints on collective issues meet, overlap and contradict each other while offering to the audience the possibility to interpret their contents and meanings – *M\*A\*S\*H*, *All in the Family* or *The Wire* are good examples here. Because the audience is not passive but is active in watching this or that show, they talk about it with friends and family, and they make what they see resonates with broader cultural patterns, as the important analysis of *Dallas* by Liebes and Katz (1990) has established. Today’s context, especially, is marked by a rapid increase in both the quantity and the quality of television’s offer and, mostly because of that, by a growing segmentation of the audience. People have to navigate in a richer, denser and more complex environment to the point, in fact, where they must become their own critics. And Web 2.0 fully reflects this; that is, the aforementioned idea of different clusters, of participation through or for pleasure and the ideas of a new division of labor. Of course, professional critics are not absent from the Internet, but they are not alone either, which indicates that if television criticism is nowhere near vanishing, it is nevertheless heading toward a different use of criticism.

In a recent article, Lotz (2008) took a close look at the history of television criticism while mostly focusing on the relation between critics and the industry. She identifies four phases: the 1950s and 1960s, where criticism was mostly about the evaluation of the previous night’s shows; the 1970s, where critics gain access to the programming ahead via cassettes, the post-Watergate era marked by the generalization of VCR and the multiplication of channels; and, finally, a very possible fourth phase in which the Internet would have fully deconstructed the networks’ quasi-monopoly. That said, however, it is above all important to understand that the main feature or the key tension organizing this development is between the “junkets”, on the one side, and the creation of the Television Critics Association in 1977, on the other. The industry had used and still uses today these so-called “junkets” – that is, the free and all-encompassing trips to Los Angeles and other locations for special screenings – as a way to control or, at least, to influence

the content of reviews. The business model applied by the industry, in other words, is one of “spoon-fed news”. The creation of the Television Critics Association, for its part, is largely a reaction to that, and represents an effort to obtain some independence. For instance, the Television Critics Association now organizes two press tours each year where journalists pay for the majority of their travel expenses (see also Lotz 2005). What there is between the industry and the critics is thus a perpetual negotiation of who is in charge, who is recognized, and so forth, as much as a perpetual conflict regarding the future of television. This future is open and unknown, but, if one thing is sure, it will create new needs for criticism: from the industry who will need new and different relays, and from audiences who will request different recommendations and some *re*-discovery of meanings.<sup>17</sup>

The case of film criticism parallels that of television while exhibiting some interesting variations. More than any other cultural forms, films are caught in the opposition between art and entertainment (see, among others, Bauman 2002; Holbrook 1999; Allen and Lincoln 2004). Simply put, there is a constant worry that one side of the divide will somehow prevail over the other, and thus compromise the delicate balance of the medium. And this is particularly obvious when one looks at the entertainment side, as there is a growing concern, for example, about the generalization of ratings: three stars for this movie, five stars for this other one, and so on until this method colonized other mediums like magazines, games, and so on. It is as if the “thump up, thump down” mentality had found a new way of expressing itself by adding just a bit of nuance. The problem with this understanding of today’s trends, however, is that it reproduces *prima facie* the narrative of crisis due to the commercialization of criticism. As previously discussed, this narrative is too narrow and one-sided. Trying to build a more balanced account, I would argue that if this generalization of ratings indeed exists, it is also the manifestation of something else, something deeper; namely that the mixing of tastes and the superposition of different forms of legitimacy evolve in a new and more complex environment.

Two examples can help illustrate the situation. First, Web 2.0 allows for such popular site as metacritic.com where multiple critiques are assemble through a secret algorithm and transform into a “metascore” ranging from 0 to 100. The site claims that it is able to forecast a “critical consensus” regarding movies as well as other cultural products. What it does, in fact, is to arrive at a thick middle in which the subjectivity of critics is suspended, put aside and delegitimized in inverse proportion to the legitimatization of the so-called “scientific” character of the site. The second example relates to an even more popular site named rottentomatoes.com. Of course, the site has its own “tomatometer” and accommodates many publicity and trailers – thus echoing the influence of the economy in the aesthetic public sphere – but it is nevertheless an important and diversified source of criticism. The visitor, for instance, can choose between the categories of “Top Critics” (i.e. people working for recognized publications), different “Rotten Tomatoes Community” with persona like Froggy, the Bishop or Scopus, and all the way to the category of “Friends”. Not only do these categories cohabit, but they compete for people’s time and attention in such a fashion that, in the end, this struggle is a sort of technological destiny for film criticism and criticism at large. It also, or even more so, indicates the current stage of what could be said the democratic tension within criticism itself: the tension between what people do think, should think or are told to think; the tension between expertise and familiarity, authority and equality; and so forth.

## Conclusion

Throughout its many arguments, small or big, this article has tried to defend one essential claim; namely that criticism is key to understand how culture and politics converge in the process of creating society's interpretation of itself. Criticism is always normative and interrogative, always tries to define culture through a political lens and, conversely, politics through a cultural lens. In the first section, Habermas's ideas regarding the public sphere were discussed, mostly to show that his thesis is "insufficiently cultural in its orientation" (Jacobs 2007, 114). Society is neither rational nor irrational; that is, degenerating in a sea of mere amusement. On the contrary, it is ambiguous and complex in its meaningful orientations, and this explains why such a concept as the aesthetic public sphere is certainly appropriate in today's discussions of social scientific nature. As stated on different occasions, nothing is too trivial when it comes to expanding the limits of the public sphere; there could be positive as well as negative accounts, such as in the countless situations where people complain about cultural artifacts or are challenged by them to think differently. In the second section of the article, the point was made that criticism emerges from culture to become one of its fundamental mediations and that this occurs at the same moment that it becomes an institution in itself. While discussing the ideas of arena, struggle for recognition, conflict of interpretations and pluralistic *ethos*, it appears that this institution views itself as in a profound crisis. Caught between its intellectualization and its commercialization, criticism is perceived as being unable to fulfill its role and change society. But is this really the goal? In the third section, this question was raised using the argument that the idea of a crisis is not analytically accurate. Because of technology, and particularly Web 2.0, new venues, access, and so forth, are available for criticism to reflect the interpretative nature of society. In particular, user-generated content – regarding television, films, and so on – have exploded, thus forcing a new division of labor coupled with changes in terms of authority and legitimacy.

Now, the remaining question we should ask has to do with determining what belongs to a properly democratic tension and what belongs to a democratic potential in this entire story. Certainly, some critics will remain more equal than others in the future, and because of that their struggle for recognition as much as the ambiguity of the institution has good chances to be reproduced. As for possible improvements *within* this inescapable tension, it might be safer to say that the democratic potential of today's criticism is, by its very nature, something fully virtual. Criticism could either transform for the better or for the worse, and there seems to be no better option but to follow its evolution.

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## Notes

1. Such idea of an "autonomous constellation" finds inspiration in Alexander's concept of the autonomy of culture and how this autonomy organizes the many relations between its

- structural and agentic dimensions (see, for instance, Alexander 1990, 1992; Alexander and Smith 2002; for the commentary, see mostly Somers 1995).
2. This kind of idealization of the “Enlightened” component of the public sphere could easily be found in the following sentence, for instance: “The bourgeois public sphere may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people come together as a public; they soon claimed the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves, to engage them in a debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labor. The medium of this political confrontation was peculiar and without historical precedent: people’s public use of their reason” (Habermas 1962/1989, 27).
  3. Like here, for example: “In fine, my diagnosis of a unilinear development from a politically active public sphere to one withdrawn into a bad privacy, from a ‘cultural debating to a culture consuming public,’ is too simplistic. At that time, I was too pessimistic about the resisting power and above all the critical potential of a pluralistic, internally much differentiated mass public whose cultural usages have begun to shake off the constraints of class” (Habermas 1992, 438).
  4. To the contrary, Habermas has, for the most part, furthered his abstract theory of communication going in the 1980s (see 1981/1984–1987).
  5. In terms of classical sociological theory, a good example of such tortured and ambiguous model is most certainly Georg Simmel’s work, in general – and his understanding of the tragedy of culture, in particular. See Simmel (1997); for commentaries, see Levine (1988).
  6. This is most probably where Habermas’ shortcomings in *The structural transformation* are the hardest felt. As much as he has an account of the emergence of modern criticism, he is unable to follow up on it, which, in turn, leads him to see nothing stopping the degeneration into mass culture.
  7. Despite all its many merits, the new pragmatic French sociology, with its concepts of “*épreuve*” (ordeal), “*arène*”, (arena) or “*cité*” (city), has not yet been able to develop a full account of cultural criticism. This is rather obvious in Boltanski and Thevenot’s work, for instance (see Boltanski 1990, 2009; Boltanski and Thevenot 1991/2006, 1999; for commentaries, see Betanoui 1999; Celikates 2006; Wagner 1999).
  8. “Every critical affirmation contains, on the one hand, a recognition of the value of the work which occasions it, which is thus designated as a worthy object of legitimate discourse [...], and, on the other hand, an affirmation of its own legitimacy. Every critic declares not only his judgment of the work, but also his claim to the right to talk about it and judge it” (Bourdieu 1983, 317).
  9. Duncan has its own version of these questions: “[...] it is very important to discover who is assigned the right to criticize; what institutions assume the guardianship of criticism; how these institutions defend their guardianship in competition with other institutions; how those who are to criticize are selected, trained, and supported; to whom the criticism may be communicated; and on what occasions criticism is required” (quoted in Hohendahl 1982, 235–236).
  10. “Moral judgments formulated by actors in their everyday life are often shaped as critiques. The moral activity is first and foremost a critical activity” (Boltanski 2009, 245, trad. J.R.).
  11. Talking more precisely of literature criticism, Hohendahl makes a similar remark, noting that it is a “discipline which, only with slight exaggeration, could be described as being in a state of permanent crisis” (1982, 44).
  12. From a theoretical standpoint, the dispute between Barthes and Picard revolved around the role of the author versus the internal logic of the text. As the main representative of “*l’histoire littéraire*”, Picard had a more conservative view on what should constitute the “biographical” context of a given piece, whereas Barthes and New Criticism demanded more of the reader, who was to become an active participant in decoding the meaningful structure of the text.
  13. The list could obviously be longer and include this penetrating remark by Berger: “The academisation of criticism – the growing inclination of many critics over the past thirty years to base their arguments on abstruse theoretical models – has [...] contributed to the marginalization of serious criticism. It is not theory per se that is the problem; rather, it is

- the tendency of even the most experienced critics to slip into the jargon and mimic the style of the awkwardly written or translated treatises that influenced them” (1998, 9).
14. A perfect example of this is the following quote by Berger: “Criticism, like art in general, is becoming more and more decentralized. The rising significance of community based cultures, the increased targeting of niche markets, the dissolution of the boundaries between high and low culture, and the concomitant ethnic and geographic diversity of audiences for culture have lessened and even delegitimized the need for dominant, centralized critical voices” (1998, 6). It is not my intention here to contest the reality behind these observations. However, what I am about to do in the remaining of this section, and in the following one, is to argue for a more constructive interpretation according to which these possibilities allow criticism, at least in part, to reinvent itself.
  15. Lotz, for instance, defends the same line of argumentation when she notes that “Just as the internet has fundamentally changed the television and newspaper industries, it has also adjusted the activity of criticism by creating new venues for publication and opportunities to interact with readers” (2008, 32).
  16. In one of the very few arguments, if not the only argument, dedicated to the Internet by Habermas, it is this dimension that he stresses: “in the context of liberal regimes, the rise of millions of fragmented chat rooms across the world tend instead to the fragmentation of large but politically focused mass audiences into a huge number of isolated issue publics” (2006, 423).
  17. This phrasing is intended to recall Habermas’s thesis regarding the bourgeois public sphere: where in the nineteenth century the critics promoted some discovery of meanings, today’s critics could propose some re-discovery.

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