Chapter 14

Critics as Cultural Intermediaries

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Introduction

We social scientists are still strangers to this digital age. Nowhere is this more evident than in our confusion and hesitancy concerning the impact of new media technology on public deliberation. Our professional standards and routines were fashioned in the age of print. We deliberate among ourselves through the formalized language and specialist techniques of the article, presentation and monograph. This aids us in ensuring a continuity and cumulative progression in our intellectual labor, but comes with a cost. We become less connected to the lay public to the point that we risk becoming culturally and politically irrelevant.

This rather uncomfortable position can be recognized from the impulse behind *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville's most brilliant and important text (2000 [1835]). For better or worse, we are in yet another Tocquevillian moment. When he set out on his travels more than 150 years ago, he took on the role of a social scientist who would pass impartial judgment on the relative merits of two deliberative traditions. The first is implicit: the deliberative culture and structures of revolutionary France, still characterized by the specialist and formalist logics of the displaced aristocracy. The second is the new American model of a broad, heterogeneous polity. De Tocqueville's main concern was that "half-baked ideas" (*notions imparfaites*) would cheapen the deliberative process, posing structural and political threats (for example the election of a tyrant) as well as cultural threats (a coarsening in the quality of debate) (de Tocqueville 2000, 709). Albeit not identical or as subtle, it is this same concern that animates much of today's discussion regarding the demise of the public intellectual. What is offered is an often predictable narrative of decline that both idealizes the past – the time of Geniuses, Great Works and Grand Narratives – and is highly pessimistic for the future. People like Russell Jacoby, Éric Lott or Richard Posner, for instance, made names for themselves advancing such arguments (Jacoby 1987; Lott 2009; Posner 2004). In a similar fashion, many have predicted the "crisis of criticism", if not more simply its death (Berger 1998; Culler 1987; McDonald 2007). It is time to follow de Tocqueville's lead and consider whether these crises and supposed death knells are instead new and equally valid deliberative arrangements. Although definitely discomforting and unfamiliar to us, these arrangements may carry their own enriching and democratizing potential.

Indeed, our research indicates that something quite different from a decline is occurring, something far more complex and puzzling. We view this as the rise of a new model of intellectuals, one based on the traditional roles critic and cultural intermediary. There is currently a shift, in other words, from intellectuals who were generalist experts and authority figures to critics who engage at smaller scales a vastly broader public that deliberates at ever finer-grained levels. Today, the field of public reasoning – so to speak – is being shaped and reshaped by the increasing balkanization of deliberative forums.

Across these fields, we repeatedly see the common trait of individuals adopting the role of critic. Like the older model of the authoritative, generalist intellectual, these critics endlessly make pronouncements, discuss and interpret possibilities, and propose alternatives related to the issues at hand. In short, they are producers of meaning.[1] However, unlike the older model, these critics get their hands dirty, occupying prominent roles within the inner communication of the given issue. They thus take part in the constant evolution of their particular sphere. As the grain becomes finer, the subject position of the commentator frequently switches from outside to inside.

In the sociological literature, there are two main understandings of cultural intermediaries. The broader understanding encompasses anyone involved in the transmission of a work of art (Bourdieu and Nice 1980; Becker 2008 [1973]). A second tradition more narrowly defines cultural intermediaries as those involved in the economic impact of the cultural product (Negus 2002; Wright 2005). Here, we would built on these and argue that cultural intermediaries are also, if not more so, engaged in symbolical transactions. Following Valentin Cornejo (2008), they would be best described as cultural mediators. The intellectuals we study are more and more complexly involved in the production and reception of culture. They blur the line between producer and consumer, as the rise of the "prosumer", discussed below, represents. Differently put, intellectuals as critics and cultural mediators do not only transmit information, but also translate and encode it.

If the deliberative structures that surround cultural production and reception are changing, are we now finally transitioning out of a public sphere, in the sense of a domain of deliberation ruled by a common rationality? The answer, of course, depends on the model being used. Habermas (1989 [1962]), despite the fact that he acknowledged the importance of cultural criticism in the early stages of his argument, ends up contrasting reason and emotion; as a consequence, he diminishes the significance of all deliberation that lies outside the overtly political realm. By looking at intellectuals as critics and cultural intermediaries, we come to an entirely different conclusion. Discussions necessarily evolve between culture and politics, in cultural power struggle or in what Hesmondhalgh calls the "politics of aesthetics" (Hesmondhalgh 2007).

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1   In this broad sense, we are following Ron Eyerman's proposal "to view the intellectual as part of an historical process in which human actors reinvent cultural tradition in different context" (1994: 4).

The public sphere, from this perspective, could be better understood as an "aesthetic public sphere" (Jacobs 2007; Jones 2007; Roberge 2011). Democratic deliberation – the lifeblood of the democratic state – can be redefined as deliberation that deals with any production, artifact, trope or symbol whose publicity is sufficient to permit articulated dissent and advocacy. Nothing is too trivial or sacred not to be the object of criticism; today, we see spirited discussion over matters of surpassing triviality, but these discussions are threads in the tapestry of democratic deliberation. Political orientations are woven from such threads.

The rebuttal, of course, is that not all deliberative acts are created equal. Some forums are more powerful than others, some voices speak more loudly. And certainly intellectuals have traditionally been identifiable as much by the platform from which they speak as by what they speak about. For example, from a more traditional perspective, the editorialists of the *New York Times* are intellectuals, even when they write about trivial matters; but the most learned member of your book club is not, even when she talks about very consequential things. Such was the case. But today, the transformation in means of communication is in the process of equalizing these forums, to a much greater degree than ever before. The linked comments page on a blog about television may shape its readers' voting behavior in ways that David Brooks or Paul Krugman no longer do. And this, in turn, explains why an aesthetic public sphere is today inseparable from a "virtual public sphere" (Papacharissi 2002; Dahlgren 2000; Gimmler 2001). It will come as no surprise that the Internet has revolutionized our way of deliberation and that new media technology allows for a huge increase in deliberative forums. Nevertheless, we need not succumb to technological determinism. Rather, our point is that the current conjunction of culture and technology, of intellectuals and new configurations of the public sphere, represents a development that we are yet to fully understand.

Our central claim is the following: it is the best of times and the worst of times for intellectuals as critics and cultural intermediaries. The dual opening of the public sphere toward art and culture on the one hand, and virtuality on the other, certainly represents a democratization of deliberation to the degree that it allows for more individuals with less expertise to express theirs interpretations and to be heard. There is an substantial gain in reflexivity, which could be seen in the degree of participation and, from there, in the new forms of public deliberation and cultural citizenship. However, there are also reasons to be worried by such balkanization occurring in the increasingly fine-grained debates on the Internet and elsewhere. These forums are not by and large concerned with the sorts of grand issues debated by the earlier style of intellectual. Rather, they are characteristically concerned with minute, particularist issues. Additionally, it is reasonable to assume that the critics' lack of familiarity with grand debates make them more susceptible to shallow but fashionable presuppositions – the classical Tocquevillian fear of "half-baked ideas" threatening democratic culture.

The democratization underway is thus profoundly paradoxical. In order to support this claim, we divide the chapter into two empirical investigations. In the first, we analyse the evolution of music criticism as a way to make sense of both the

popular creation of complex knowledge and the struggle for recognition associated with it. From the legitimation of rock and roll to today's question regarding the globalization of techno music, embedded intellectuals have proven themselves to be important "interpretative activists" (Stamatov 2002). Their discussions about cultural drifts and trends create feedback that loops back into the trends themselves. In the second section, we consider how new media technology has transformed both television criticism and television itself, leading to a proliferation of new aesthetic and business practices and, significantly, the historic (and long prophesied) convergence of this low-art medium with high-art aesthetics. Again, we argue that the feedback caused by the fine-grain analysis of critics (made possible by, but not the direct result of, technology) has significantly encouraged these transformations. While in both cases we root our discussion in the experiences of United States, we turn in the concluding section to a transnational, multilingual model of cultural engagement.

Talking about Popular Music: From the Legitimation of an Aesthetic to an Aesthetic of Justification

To say that music is a "total social phenomenon" *à la* Mauss (2005 [1950]) verges on understatement. Music shapes individual experience, emotional connections between people and the sense of collectiveness that groups can nurture. As Frith nicely puts it, music is "a way of being in the world" (Frith 1996: 272). Nowadays, what is referred to as popular music has migrated into every aspect of mundane life – buying groceries, riding in elevators, driving to work, and so forth (Di Nora 2000). And yet despite its uniqueness, popular music has managed to retain its quasi-sacred character. It certainly retains much of its liminality, that is, its capacity to make sense of crisis or difficult times. Popular music is thus highly political; something one can see, for instance, in its many links with social movements (Eyerman 2002; Eyerman and Jamison 1998; Steinberg 2004; Street 2003). In retrospect, then, it seems obvious that the vast expansion of popular music has profoundly influenced the last 50 or more years. But this is only in retrospect. Within the process itself, this has never been self-evident. On the contrary, popular music was repeatedly dismissed as a serious form of art. Detractors came from all across the spectrum, from Marxists criticizing its alienating effect, conservatives questioning its sexual or moral depravation, and liberals refusing to compromise on the purity of *l'art pour l'art*. Theodor Adorno's article "On Popular Music" (1941), where he dismantles any possibility for rescue or even acceptability, is certainly emblematic in that regard.

Historically, the answer or the defense of popular music – the elaboration of a counter-discourse to its counter-discourse – came from within, from cultural intermediaries and critics alike. Mostly starting from the mid–60s, a gathering of formerly fragmented views about rock and roll crystallized into what Powers

calls "rock intellectualism" (Powers 2010, 535).[2] This is a resolutely non-academic literature, finding its expression in new kinds of journalism emerging in print, FM radio and the like – *Rolling Stone* magazine becoming iconic in that respect. What is common to all these views and discourses is that they promote rock music as a legitimate, genuine, complex and subtle artistic product. According to Regev, the period is characterized by a "discursive strategy of 'proving' [the music's] artistry", that is to say "the producers of rock meanings have formulated an interpretation of the music which applies the traditional parameters of art" (Regev 1994, 87). Other people have lately challenged Regev by saying that rock also found legitimacy in its own newness, although these differences could be considered minor (Van Venrooij and Schmutz 2010, for instance).

Most commentators agree that around these years rock and roll created a space for itself, one that would be highly mythical and one that would revolve around the ideas of authenticity and subversiveness (see also Weisethaunet and Lindberg 2010). From that point on, in other worlds, rock and roll would prove unapologetic and more and more geared towards its own development. In the language of social sciences, it would then be possible to speak of the creation of a popular genre, with all that entails in terms of connoisseurship, symbolical ownership and struggle for and around these.

What we want to stress here is that the creation of a genre, in general, and the rock and roll genre, in particular, is fundamentally a social process through which boundaries are constantly negotiated. What is identified as a legitimate aesthetic or style? Who sounds or looks like whom, and why? All of these questions are indeed "the subject of struggles for definition across the continuum from production to consumption" (Toynbee 2000, 106). Rock and roll emerges as a complex web of interpretative entrepreneurs and activists who play a powerful (because meaningful) game. Periods and values are compared and hierarchized. Some think stadially, for example the British Invasion as a golden age; other prefer to talk in terms of masterpieces, for example *Who's Next* (1971) by The Who; or legends, for example Bob Marley. Obviously, such terms are both rock solid and shaky, but this is what makes them interesting. In yet another recent article, for instance, Powers has analysed the evolution of 'hype' or 'hypeness' in Bruce Springstein's early career only to conclude that it belongs to a rhetorical and thus polysemical reality (2011). And that is the point here. It is always the ambiguity within classifications which fuels passion and, from there, impassioned and sophisticated discussions. Conflicts of interpretation reign supreme. In turn, this gives rise to what Couldry has referred to as an "emergent democratic politics" (Couldry 2006, 70) or what Atton has coined as a "democratic conversation" (Atton 2010).

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2   In his own account of the history of rock criticism, Powers goes further back in the 1910s and 20s and studies a group of bohemian intellectual he claims are the ancestors of rock critics, but nevertheless describes the 60s as the "era of rock intellectualism" (Powers 2010, 540ff).

Professional critics in the press and elsewhere have been instrumental in the development of such open and dialogical space from the mid–60s on. The problem, however, is that this category of "professional" is rather unclear. There's no diploma, no union, just journalists who like to think of themselves as having a little something extra, a real and enduring fervor for popular music. In these circumstances, where is the authority and the legitimacy? And how does this inform a necessary struggle for recognition? In a brilliant article, Bethany Klein has argued that pretty much everything in this realm revolves around alleged aesthetic connoisseurship (2005). Critics have to prove time and again that they "get it right", that they indeed understand why this is good or bad music. It is then a question of intellectual autonomy, but one that could translate in many different strategies. As in Bourdieu's famous discussion of orchestration versus distinction (Bourdieu 1977), rock critics can create alliances within their own group – a consensual wall, so to speak – or they can go against the grain, something that would require more symbolical capital. To this, Klein also adds the rather subtle observation that critics often try to justify their autonomy by saying that they "write for themselves" (Klein 2005, 10). In any case, what critics try to do is to secure their position against a particular kind of symbolical pollution: the accusation of being sold out to the industry. In a world of press kits and all-expenses-paid travel, intellectual probity is both a value and a luxury. The line between purity and impurity is extremely fine, the object of constant scrutiny and negotiation.

Another step in the legitimation-intellectualization of popular music was the emergence of punk and other subgenres starting in the late 70s. These developments were not against rock and roll *per se*, but highlighted some of its tendencies, among which its quest for authenticity and subversiveness.[3] Concretely, what happened during this period was an important increase in publications, and especially a boom in fanzines dedicated to punk. It is not an overstatement to say that they almost universally demostrated an "untutored enthusiasm" (Atton 2010, 519). The discourse and its many complications and justifications became deeply embedded. It was a matter of appropriation and identity, as much as a new mode of symbolic ownership of the music. From clothing shops to clubs, from music stores to independent radio station, people involved in punk created both a dense and chaotic network. It implies a community of listeners, but more than that it implies a community of performance and interpretation. Dick Hebdige's comment remains relevant today, that most if not all of punk has always been about the "meaning of style" (Hebdige 2002 [1979]).

That said, however, it is important to acknowledge the limits of this class of subcultural theories and to argue, as Geoff Stahl has so nicely done, for a subtle renovation of its presuppositions (Stahl 2003). After all, the community in question

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3 By suggesting this continuation, rather than insisting solely on the "resistance" dimension of punk à la Birmingham School, we choose to stay close to Regev's interpretation, for instance, when he states that "punk signaled a maturing of a historical self-consciousness among rock musicians and critics regarding their art" (1994: 94).

was not strictly limited to those among England's youth who experienced the exclusion and despair of the time. What is needed, in others words, is a broader understanding of the embeddedness of legitimating discourse within semi-closed groups that would permit freer movement and association and more positive action. Nowadays, the "music scene" is one such concept as it makes sense of the fact that individuals gather, circulate and create solidary bonds in a more connexionist mode (Straw 1991, 2004; Bennett 2004; Bennett and Peterson 2004). From semi-closed groups, then, the scene perspective gives access to half-open ones where it is often the same individuals who are producers, musicians, listeners and critics, but in a faster and cleaner reversibility. In such complex webs, nonetheless, meanings are being shared and constructed as values are being put forward that are inseparably aesthetic and ethical. Elizabeth Cherry, just to give one example, has analysed the many links between veganism, animal rights and the punk scene in Southeastern U.S. only to conclude that they indeed form a significant cluster (Cherry 2006).

Yet another important moment in this short history of popular music is the surfacing of electronica or techno music in the 90s. This, too, signals the creation of a complex genre – and scene – with all that this entails in terms of legitimation and justification. As remains the case today, what is trendy depends on innovations that can vanish in a split second, as well as on innovations that can blend into other genres or, to the contrary, operate to exclude them. Anything goes as long as its meaning is believed. What came to be call "Big Beat" is a case in point. For Norman Cook – known as DJ Fatboy Slim – the genre formula "was the breakbeats of hip-hop, the energy of acid house, and the pop sensibilities of the Beatles, with a bit of punk sensibility, all rolled into one" (Matos 2011, 6). Complex indeed.

But this has not prevented the style's rapid growth to crash two or three years later, in large part because of its overexposure. Critics and other intermediaries became suddenly aware that the music was "everywhere". Its presence in television shows to movies indicated that the genre had sold-out to the industry and no longer retained any of its original edginess. An even more musically complex example within the techno genre, and an even more intellectualized discourse going alongside, could be found in Glitch, a style building on scratchy and bipy sounds of technological failure. In his analysis, Nick Prior discovered that such avant-garde practice was nurtured by a small group, at least at first, of dedicated connoisseurs (Prior 2008). The discourse was profoundly inspired by philosophy and found echoes in academic or highly sophisticated journals and magazines such as *Parachute* or *Wired*, in the UK. What the example of Glitch indicates, then, is how clear-cut connections between initiates amplifies symbolical mediation and vice versa. As Prior puts it, "in most cases, glitch's support writers are themselves directly involved in the unfolding of the style, and their intervention are either internalist in content – fulfilling aesthetic, formalist or stylistic criteria – or posit glitch as somehow outside the field through the maintenance of a cool distance from pop" (Prior 2008, 307).

Obviously, this kind of new music is inseparable from the technological revolutions of the past 20 some years and, in particular, from the rapid growth of the

Internet and, now, Web 2.0. Nothing is exactly the same nowadays, from production to distribution and consumption (Jones 2000; Granjon and Sorge 2000). If this is self-evident, however, it should not be interpreted either in terms of technological determinism or through any mythical discourses, whether they be highly optimistic or pessimistic.[4] What is needed is a realistic approach, one that would recognize the degree to which Web 2.0 allows and disallows certain practices even as it displaces struggles for recognition, power and the like. It is about "reintermediation" that is a complete reshuffling of the cards in the hands of all cultural intermediaries (Hawkins, Mansell and Steinmueller 1998: 10).

And yet this metaphor of "cards" does not precisely render the profound impact of Web 2.0 on identity, connoisseurship, symbolical appropriation and criticism. Old limits are blurring by the day: professionals and amateurs, producers and communities of fans or performers and audiences. User Generated Content (UGC), for instance in House or Goa Trance music genres, was almost immediately hosted on such websites as Soundcloud.com, where it can be widely disseminated, and on various blogs that will spin, relay and translate their proper content. Because of Web 2.0, in other worlds, cultural artifacts of any sort – including UGC, of course – are now becoming the object of potentially endless commentaries as well as the site for more or less open challenges. In a nutshell, consumers can "talk back" to producers more than ever before. In many respect, then, we are back to Atton's "democratic conversation". This is not and cannot be a public sphere in the pure sense of Habermas – it remains polluted through self-promotion and degrading publicity. Nonetheless, Web. 2.0 gives rise to genuine expressions of culture and concern for culture. It is a place for the construction of meanings that changes how any given actor operates. Foxydigitalis.com, for example, hosts online criticism dedicated to electro music. The site overtly seeks out new embedded commentators: "We already know you love music, or you wouldn't be here. But if you write, too, we could use your help". And the same phenomenon can be found at weeklytapedeck.com: "This is our blog. We love music. We hope that you love the music that we love. If you do not love us loving your music, let us know and we will take it down". Respect for contributors goes in many directions and proves that what could be coined as "electro intellectualism" is not devoid of values.

If electro music and Web 2.0 are so deeply intertwined, they also go hand-in-hand with the globalization of culture nowadays. This is another force to reckon with, a cultural drift that might not be yet the equivalent of a world beat, but which, nevertheless, implies displacements of gigantic proportion. In his most famous article, Will Straw talks about a "system of articulation" that links music scenes from Toyko to Berlin via New York and the like (Straw 1991). Genre, style and trend all travel wide and fast – as fast as the communication of information and meanings. What we witness, then, is a radical reorganization of the system of reference and justification. Matter at one end of this system of articulation relies on

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4   As Papacharissi nicely puts it, "ultimately, it is the balance between utopian and dystopian visions that unveils the true nature of the Internet" (2002: 21).

matter at the other end and vice versa, depending on the capability of the actors to find what they need. The question of whether this creates as much exclusion as it creates inclusion obviously deserves attention. Is this, in other words, yet another case of rising "class consciousness of frequent travelers" (Calhoun 2002), or are we in the presence of a real and enduring cosmopolitism? The question remains an open debate in which embedded intellectuals adopt myriad positions. One thing is, however, certain: what is at stake with such a globalized articulation of music is nothing less than the very identity of the art form. As Berland puts it, "the increasing mobility of music technologies ... reveals how much the ongoing (re)shaping of habits is tied to our changing sense of location: where we are, where the music can take us, where we *belong*" (1998: 133). Talking about music within the music scene is doing exactly that; it gives a sense of belonging, of being part of something meaningful, but something that will be forever mediated and at a distance.

Talking about Television: Intellectuals, Academics, Critics and Fans

In the preceding section, we describe the role played by self-proclaimed popular music critics and intermediaries in the definition, self-understanding and ultimately the meaningful content of popular music. These embedded commentators are often unaware of the way their work feeds into the political and cultural power of music, and instead present themselves as simply categorizing music by genre while demonstrating their own connoisseurship.

As we move our attention to a different entertainment medium, television, we are confronted by slightly different questions. Unlike popular music, television has not been significantly tied to social movements. Quite the opposite: for most of its history, television has almost universally been associated with implicitly supporting the status quo. There are two related reasons for this association. First, in the pre-cable era, only a few television channels competed for an enormous public. Capturing the public meant appealing to widely-shared values, and so enduring television aesthetics emerged that were oriented to very broad publics. Second, although transgressing taboos has always been a means of gaining a temporary strategic advantage in crowded marketplaces, television producers were further limited by advertisers' fears of being tainted by such content. Accordingly, television aesthetics has traditionally been oriented to what David Thorburn calls "consensus narratives" (Thorburn 1987), which gather ideational and emotional components together to affirm in the viewers' eyes the good of the socio-cultural order.

That television is mostly concerned with consensus narratives is rarely questioned. Rather, it is the meaning of these narratives and their effect on the social-cultural order that has been the object of dispute for intellectuals and academics. In other words, classic Tocquevillian concerns have been at the root of much of the debate about television: does the meidum represent a process of democratization? If so, does this democratization threaten democratic culture?

To answer these questions, we need some clarity on who deliberates about television and how their deliberations affect television production. Fundamentally, this concerns the wider cultural drift of our times. In order to deal with this complexity, we divide the field of knowledge-meaning production about television into four categories: first, there are generalist public intellectuals; second, academics and scholars; third, professional television critics; and finally, a dynamic and emerging category of enthusiast critic. This final category is characterized by processes of knowledge-meaning production that we have seen above in the punk and techno communities, and accordingly we borrow the label from Atton's suggestion that they reflect "untutored enthusiasm" (Atton 2010, 519). However, this category is of special note in the context of television, since it is currently undergoing a deep structural transformation, blending into academic discourse to become the realm of the "aca-fan" (Jenkins 2006b).

Here, what is most striking is an absence. American intellectual discourse has largely ignored television – remarkable, given it is, by an enormous margin, the most popular entertainment medium in the United States. This is a more peculiar phenomenon that we might at first think. The comparison with film is revealing: as film came of age, public intellectuals engaged in extended deliberations to assess its relative worth and impact on the mass public. Major elite debates about *auteur* theory, for example, crossed national boundaries between France and the U.S. (Staples 1966–7) and made household names of François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Andrew Sarris and Pauline Kael – in the houses of the cultural elite, at least. Professional film critics, intellectuals and film scholars have continued to cross-pollinate their work and the boundaries between the two are quite permeable. The result has been the creation of an aestheticist tradition in discussing film (Bauman 2001).

However, while the boundaries are permeable, there is a definite hierarchy of taste-making, which has led to a de facto split in the industry between elite production and popular production. Elite taste-makers identify the appropriate aesthetic qualities for admission into festivals and, through award processes, eventual entry into the academic canon. These are the films that are interpreted in aestheticist terms.[5] Oftentimes, at these same festivals, popular films play out of competition, to the delight of the viewing public and consternation of intellectual and professional critics (for example *Mission Impossible* at Cannes). These films are either criticized for perceived aesthetic failures or discussed in instrumental or hedonic terms. The split reminds us that the elite discourse of much film criticism signals a fairly impermeable border between, on one side, intellectuals, academics and professional critics, all of whom share an aestheticist discursive style, and, on the other, popular, enthusiast critics. From a Tocquevillian perspective, film

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5 Formulated in this way, the claim is of course exaggerated: academics do write about popular films just as not all festival films share the same aesthetic qualities. However, the story holds in the main and is significant for its contrast with television.

criticism is the domain of elite deliberative processes that provide for sophisticated but not terribly democratic reflection on the medium.

In Stanley Kubrick's academically-, intellectually- and critically-lauded film *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), the cruel and callow Alex is literally forced to watch television. His eyelids are peeled back with metal hooks: he watches with increasing passivity as his mind is wiped of all revolutionary and anti-social potentiality. Corrupted and corrupting, Alex represents a manic youth culture that threatens the reproduction of the status quo. Television has long been treated with contempt by intellectuals, and Kubrick's film struck a chord with elite commentators for this very reason.[6] From their perspective, like Alex, as it endlessly gazes at television screens, the American viewing public is lobotomized.

Norman Mailer and William F. Buckley Jr. can be taken as two such paradigmatic intellectuals (see Drezner 2008 for more on this). Both were extremely media-savvy and both made distinguished contributions to the history of the moving image. Nevertheless, both viewed television with high degrees of skepticism and concern. Buckley, for example, described television as a "time-consumer" that has led to a decline in "passive intelligence" (Buckley 1996). He argues that the televisual image is so extraordinarily powerful that the written word can simply no longer compete. Likewise, in an essay titled "Being and Nothingness", Mailer accuses television advertisements of both being form without content and of negating the content of all television programming. He notes, "every time you become interested in a narrative on television, a commercial comes on and you are jacked over abruptly from pleasure to nothingness" (Mailer 2004, 166). Mailer draws on the language of existential philosophy to convey the epic scope of his critique: advertisements on television are so completely lacking in value that they infect the medium itself. He continues:

> Filling such essentially empty forms as commercials is a direct species of *nothingness*... many if not most television commercials, no matter how spiked with clash and color, give, nonetheless, little attention to the item they are there to sell... advertisers work to overcome the onus of *nothingness* that the TV commercial inserts into our nervous system. (Mailer 2004, 168)

We see this same attitude perpetuated today in the casual references to television made by our most popular public intellectuals. Both Noam Chomsky and Paul Krugman, identified in a recent poll as the most influential American intellectuals,[7]

6　Indeed, not watching television is often used as a mark of cultural distinction in Bourdieu's sense (1984): for example, "talking intelligently about TV, in many circles, is verboten. It is a taboo subject" (Johnson 1997). Henry Jenkins relates a similar story: "when I tell people that I teach television, they sometimes boast, 'I don't even own a TV set!' All I can say is that we inhabit different realities" (2001).

7　In 2005, *Foreign Policy* and *Prospect Magazine* put together one of the most popular lists of the world's public intellectuals (Drezner 2008). The list was compiled by

describe television in the narrative mode of tragedy. In a 2004 editorial titled "Triumph of the Trivial", Krugman takes the news media to task for replacing serious content with trivia: "Somewhere along the line, TV news stopped reporting on candidates' policies, and turned instead to trivia that supposedly reveal their personalities" (Krugman 2004). Similarly, in a 2005 interview, the year he was named the world's most influential public intellectual, Chomsky noted, "Well, you've seen television ads, so I don't have to tell you how it works. The idea is to delude and deceive people with imagery" (Chomsky 2005).

Perhaps more than any other historical or technological change, television has given rise to Tocquevillian fears of a coarsening of democratic deliberation, fears which have been presented in intellectual discourse as cause for condemnation or outright rejection. This attitude has also been adopted by many academics, perhaps most famously in the work of Theodor Adorno during the 40s and 50s, who saw television not as empty, in Mailer's sense, but as a coercive environment with a single obvious message: buy. This line of analysis has been developed by scholars working within Frankfurt and later Birmingham School logics (Turner 2001). The Tocquevillian dilemma is solved by rejecting the democratizing potential of television and strenuously asserting its corrosive effect on democratic deliberation.

A different solution to the Tocquevillian dilemma is suggested, but not definitively explored, in a second major scholarly tradition. Marshall McLuhan's work on popular culture in the 70s has influenced many scholars to see television as both enriching as well as constraining. McLuhan famously described the television advertisement, for example, as "cave art of the twentieth century... vortices of collective power, masks of energy" (McLuhan 1970, 7). The television commercial is a fossil of deep cultural structures, ideas and feelings, miraculously resurrected in the viewer's mind. This may be coercive, as Adorno argues, or personally enriching and constructive of solidary bonds, as Durkheimian sociologists would argue. Nowadays, cultural sociologists have consistently moved away from Adorno and toward Durkheim. Ronald Jacobs's research into television, for instance, suggests that these very processes of repeatedly encountering shared values and concepts helps both to generalize and to subjectively appropriate those values in a way that has the potential to vastly expand national as well as international democratic deliberation (Jacobs 2007; see also Ang 1985; and Liebs and Katz 1990).

So far, we have encountered three perspectives on television. We argue that the standard intellectual perspective is dismissal. The Adorno-esque academic tradition is both dismissive and alarmist. The McLuhan-esque academic tradition is appreciative and cautiously optimistic. Given these perspectives, how have embedded critics and cultural intermediaries, both professional and enthusiast,

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votes from over 500,000 online respondents and was redone in 2008. In both years, the two top-ranking American public intellectuals were Noam Chomsky (2005: first place overall; 2008: eleventh place overall) and Paul Krugman (2005: sixth place overall; 2008: thirtieth place overall). See *Foreign Policy* (2005) and (2008).

engaged with the television medium, and what do these engagements suggest about the democratization of public participation and deliberation?

As we have suggested above, the boundary between professional film criticism and enthusiast film criticism is fairly impermeable (Holbrook 1999). For example, reception of the film *The Dark Knight* (2008) was sharply divided between enthusiasts and professionals. Professionals assessed the film in terms of genre expectation and technical proficiency, viewing it as just another film of indifferent quality.[8] Enthusiasts wrote from within the imaginary developed by the film and found it to be exceptional.[9] The difference can be detected in the way continuity is understood in the two communities. The professional critic Jim Emerson wrote at length on his blog about technical incompetence on the part of the editor and cinematographer.[10] This held little weight with enthusiasts, who were concerned with how the film established continuity with the broader mythical Batman universe.

Because intellectuals have largely ignored television and academics only rarely address the content of television (Williams and Goulart 1981; Bielby and Bielby 2004), professional television criticism has developed with few ties to elite discourses. Consequently, it is rare to discuss television in aesthetic terms or to engage closely with its artistic values. Indeed, professional television criticism has been largely devoid of aestheticism, and instead dominated by instrumentalist and hedonic logics.

Amanda Lotz (2008) argues that critics have traditionally written with two audiences in mind, an argument that overlaps with our claims about instrumental and hedonic logics. First, critics have written for the mass public, tempting them with the pleasures or warning against the displeasures of upcoming shows. Second, they have written for television producers, whom they seek to influence.

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8 Four leading professionals gave similarly mixed reviews, focusing criticism on the failure to provide coherent editing and a consistent tone. Morgenstern (2008) describes the mood as "suffocatingly dark", the plot as "muddled" and the action sequences as "pounding but arrhythmic". Edelstein (2008) describes the film as "noisy, jumbled, and sadistic", characterized by a "lack of imagination", "uncivil Shavian dialogue", and "spectacularly incoherent" action. Hunter (2008) complains that the filmmakers "McComplicate things up all McFusingly". Dargis (2008) describes the film as "sloppy, at times visually incoherent".

9 One particularly intense fan reaction came from Josh Tyler, who addressed his comments to professional critics and award-givers: "It's more than the best movie of the year, it's one of the best movies ever made. Snub it and there will be consequences" (Tyler 2008). Fans have become so embedded in the imagined universe of the film that there are now websites dedicated to fiction written by fans concerned with elaborating the story-lines of the film (Fanfiction.net).

10 Emerson's first blog posts (2008a, 2008b) on *The Dark Knight* noted the intensity of fan response. In the first, he notes, "two and a half weeks into its theatrical release, is it still a sacrilege to believe, for many reasons, that *The Dark Knight* is less than the greatest whatever ever?" (2008a). As his arguments continued to meet resistance, he eventually began analyzing technical flaws in the film (2009, 2011).

Lotz argues that through three phases of television history, the power of critics in relation to both of these audiences has increased consistently. In the first stage, from its origins until the introduction of previewing in the 60s, critics wrote retrospective pieces that had little impact on viewers but relatively great impact on television producers (see also Spigel 1998; and Frank 2002). In the second phase, critics gained the technology to allow them to preview episodes. Accordingly, in this phase, critical writing was of far greater interest to viewers, which in turn generated even closer ties between critics and producers. These ties often grew at the expense of journalistic integrity. This period ended in the 70s when critics reacted against industry pressures and formed a union. This prevented blackballing and hence allowed critics to write negative reviews and further gain the public's trust.

If we follow Lotz's narrative, we can interpret critics' knowledge-meaning production to have consistently democratized the medium, challenging the coercive structures identified by Mailer and Adorno (the dominance of commercial concerns) and refining the solidary structures identified by McLuhan and Jacobs. However, Lotz ends her narrative by raising penetrating questions about how new media technology, which has resulted in the exponential growth of deliberative venues, will affect professional criticism. Lotz notes that professional television criticism is in danger due to the changing print-media landscape: quite simply, reviewers are being fired and not being replaced. At the same time, she draws attention to an opposing trend. Television shows dedicated to talking about other television shows are increasingly popular (for example Extra, Access Hollywood). Other stranger forms have emerged: shows about shows about shows (for example The Soup, Tosh.0), websites about shows about shows, shows about websites... The television landscape has become massively more complex as well as extremely self-aware and self-referential.

What does this suggest about the Tocquevillian dilemma? Is the fourth phase of television criticism a democratizing of knowledge-meaning-production? Is it enriching or eroding democratic deliberation more generally? These are not idle questions. As academics and intellectuals, we may be too prone to dismiss these trends as the meaningless jabber of a lobotomized public. Put into the broader context of the medium, the rise of enthusiast criticism that is signaled in these changes is suggestive of successful and meaningful deliberation, albeit in a new and difficult-to-recognize form. What we are witnessing is the emergence of an aesthetic forum for public deliberation (Newcomb and Hirsch 1983; Macé 2005).

Glimmers of this aesthetic public sphere can be seen surrounding even the most banal televisual products. Mailer views the television commercial as epically meaningless. Adorno views it as raw coercion. An entirely different perspective on spectatorship, active audiences and interpretative activism emerges on the popular website YouTube.com, which hosts short video-clips that people can comment upon.

The minute or 30 seconds of a television commercial are not always wasted, not always what Mailer terms "nothingness". Sometimes, this is a minute of sublime cathexis for the viewer. A 60-second television commercial for Monster

com, an employment website, is a case in point. In it, the viewer watches as a stork flies through a stormy sky carrying a bundled-up baby. The stork shades the baby in a desert, fends off wolves in a stormy canyon, and finally manages to deliver the baby to his eager new parents. Suddenly, we see a man – the baby fully grown – yawning in a drab office. The man looks out the window and sees the stork, now grown old as well; they lock eyes. A caption then plays across the screen: "Are you reaching your potential?" (YouTube.com, 2008).

The comments to this video include many examples of what McLuhan calls "vortices of collective power". Rabadooda says, "This made me cry. I really need to get a grip".[11] The shame of the emotional response indicates rabadooda's internalization of the Adorno perspective. Arschmagnet commented, "Wow, this made me shiver", an admission that received four thumbs-up from other users – these viewers appear less self-conscious about their emotional response. Trekkergal's observation is particularly effusive: "This is a masterpiece. I can't believe how much I was moved watching this. It even made me cry and reflect on my own life. I think this commercial can change people's lives". Trekkergal received 85 thumbs-up.

Trekkergal, Arschmagnet and Rabadooda's comments differ in their attitude toward the acceptability of being emotionally moved, but they are all manifestly affected by the commercial. That 85 people thought Trekkergal was right, that the commercial can change people's lives, is a statement of the medium's power. This is why the failure of intellectuals and most academics to seriously engage with television is so important: television is not only extremely popular, but it is also extremely powerful.

Comments attached to the commercial also reveal processes of enthusiast-critical deliberation. Someone named bluehawka0, for example, quotes an earlier commenter in their response. The original comment reads as sarcastic and rather banal: "The sap doesn't know the length the stork went through to get him safely to a family and possible life". Bluehawka0's response reads as entirely sincere: "Did not know... or just realizing? I thought (or like to think) the look on the stork's face is that of a reminder, and not condemnation". One commenter responds to another in the spirit of taking the commercial seriously as an artifact that deserves thoughtful but also flexible interpretation. This brief exchange reflects the commenter's process of carefully viewing the commercial, reviewing earlier posted analyses, and then, finally, posting their own thoughts. What is seemingly unlocked in Bluehawka0's mind by this process of deliberating is the decision to believe in the power of compassion and encouragement over tragedy and failure. Banal, bathetic, but loaded with meaning for the commenter.

The deliberative culture of an advertisement's comments page is merely suggestive of broader cultural transformations. The stork commercial is a single

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11 These names are the ones listed by the commenters. Their idiosyncrasies of spelling have been carried over. All comments can be found on the YouTube page (YouTube.com, 2008).

minute of video: YouTube.com claims to have eight years of content uploaded every day (YouTube.com, 2011).[12] Assuming only a small fraction of videos have comments, the amount of human reflection on minutia remains staggering. Matters of surpassing triviality are granted thoughtful analysis in a vast archipelago of micro-forums. What we are witnessing is a process of deliberative balkanization, a shifting toward ever-finer points of dispute. The stork commercial suggests that these effectively unlock the quotidian experience of watching television: a commercial or an episode of a show brings up powerful feelings for the viewer; now, these feelings can be shared and discussed with others, prompting in turn ever more reflection and analysis.

If we aggregate up from a single commercial to a television series and beyond to a television genre, we see a massive proliferation of extremely fine-grained deliberative venues of this sort. Throughout these venues, we see the dominance of the logic of fandom (Jenson 1992). Because the stakes are relatively low and the cost of entry non-existent, people can freely debate on largely emotional and aesthetic grounds. They are freed of the burden of rationality and consistency. The convention of "shipping" is an example of aesthetico-emotional debate in enthusiast or embedded critical communities. The term derives from "relationship" and indicates a fan's identification with or desire for specific characters to enter into a relationship. How precisely this unfolds is the matter of dispute and detailed discussion – even "fan wars" (Biebly and Bielbly 2004). The analysis is not rational, per se, but rather based on individual taste and emotional intelligence. Status hierarchies and symbolical ownership emerge through mastery of the shared object. Accordingly, what emerges is not the hierarchical aestheticism of classic elite discourses, but rather democratically-adjudicated taste. People give Bluehawka0's comment a thumbs-up, but her position is taken even against her own rational judgment. It is an attitude that she prefers, as do others.

Henry Jenkins's research into popular cultural suggests ways that the democratic and aesthetic deliberation of fans seeps into the production of television. He pays attention to industry involvement in fan gatherings, interplay between media technologies, and the role of culture and industry in globalization processes, among other things. He theorizes these processes as aspects of "convergence culture", which he defines as:

> the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who would go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they wanted. (2006a: 2)

However, his work itself is a powerful example of a convergence in critical, academic and intellectual knowledge-production. On his website, *Confessions*

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12   This means that in the time it takes to watch the stork commercial, nearly 3000 minutes of new content has been uploaded.

of an Aca/Fan, Jenkins engages in spirited discussions with fans and academics about how their worlds intersect. Whereas in the film world, professional critics can draw on the symbolic capital of elite, aestheticist discourses as well as technical knowledge in their disputes with fans and embedded critics, television critics have very few conceptual resources at their disposal. The movement is in the opposite direction: academics like Jenkins involve themselves in enthusiast deliberative communities, bringing back to the academy new concepts and refined categorizations.

The balkanization of television's deliberative forums has allowed for the development of highly detailed but very narrow debates (for example shipping debates). This is indeed a democratizing influence to the degree that it incorporates a broad public in the deliberative process of making meanings. Academics like Jenkins should be commended for attempting to maintain such broad-based conversations while simultaneously endeavoring to grant them sophistication and commensurability. On the negative side of the ledger, there is a danger that academics will fall victim the medium's power and lose their intellectual distance even as they become embedded in television debates.[13] Having for long decades ignored the meaning-making potentiality of television, intellectuals and academics now find themselves confronted with the possibility of massively expanding their deliberations by connecting with fan discourse – or being utterly overwhelmed by it.

Conclusion

Being an intellectual in today's digital age is not the easiest task or the most comforting of vocations. Rapid structural changes as well as an increased blurring of many boundaries make it difficult to navigate. What is thus required is a new sense of adaptation and re-questioning of who we are and how we operate. And yet, there is some *grandeur* in the current situation. Indeed, this has been our central claim throughout the chapter: today is simultaneously the best and the worst of times for intellectuals as critics and cultural intermediaries. While looking at the evolution of music for the last 50 years or so, for instance, it is difficult not to be struck by how instrumental critics and cultural intermediaries have been in cultural drifts, the evolution of genres and, more broadly, the way people talk about music. Their embeddedness makes them simultaneously audience and producers of meaning, to such an extent, in fact, that it would be profitable to see them as "meaning prosumers". Simply put, the new critics and cultural intermediaries have

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13   William Julius Wilson's attitude to the HBO television series *The Wire* (2002–2008) is an example of enthusiast tendencies overwhelming critical ones. According to Wilson, this series "has done more to enhance our understandings of the challenges of urban life and urban inequality than any other media event or scholarly publication, including studies by social scientists" (quoted in Penfold-Mounce et al 2011). If scholars adopt the authority of artists over their object of study, then they effectively become embedded critics.

proved themselves to be the more influential precisely because of their deeper *in situ* understanding and more creative interpretation.

Almost the same could be said about the evolution of television and television criticism. The distance from Adorno's dark diagnosis in the 40s and 50s to today's fans and aesthetic deliberation going on all across Web 2.0 is immense. The public sphere has expanded dramatically both in direction of culture and virtuality. Individuals engage deeply with minute aspects of what they see on television, but they also talk back to television – often times via the web. Such discussions cannot be dismissed as mere epiphenomena. They operate at a very fine grain, but in doing so address dense knots of meaning. The individuals involved are not typical experts, but this is exactly what makes them such forceful hermeneutical agents.

But, of course, every coin has two faces: *grandeur* and *misère*. The democratic potential and promises are there, and yet they remain latent. Hence, this is a Tocquevilian moment. The finer grain may paradoxically lead to a coarsened debate. Among other things, the different critics and intermediaries are far from being equal in their capacities or rhetoric, and this necessarily finds an echo in the multiple discrepancies between venues. Each of them has their proper rules of engagement, level of sophistication and the like. In turn, they have a tendency to develop internally, if not autistically. This is what we mean by the balkanization of the aesthetic-virtual public sphere: as they argue at an ever-finer grain, the new intellectuals often lose the sense of what constitutes the unity of the public sphere. Where is the core, where is the margin? Who is in control, who is not? Like Monet's *The Rue Montorgueil in Paris*, the closer we are to the canvas, the harder it is to make out the whole.

If de Tocqueville is still accurate and relevant today, this means that the paradox behind the current democratization process cannot be overcome. But does this imply that it cannot be exposed? Does it mean, moreover, that it is impossible to think of ways to build on, and to try to expend the latent potential? Obviously not. A complementary approach to the widening of the public sphere in direction of culture and virtuality could be to re-interpret this sphere in terms of cultural citizenship and cultural rights. The historical problem with citizenship is that it has been understood as the allegiance to a specific nation-state. Now, by suggesting a cultural version of it, what is proposed is a commitment toward culture itself, its meaning and development. The nation-state frame has little and less to do with it then: the important thing is the engagement of different individuals, their dedication and sense of concern. Culture is interpretation. The competency to talk about it grows by talking about it; no more, no less. And for that purpose, it seems that intellectuals acting as critics and cultural intermediaries pave the way. Indeed, they could serve as an example. What these new and embedded intellectuals have to offer, in other words, is both a mediation and an encouragement. Their voices give rise to thoughts. Their actions allow others to connect and to dialogue, linking subjects to each other and to new objects of analysis. Their passionate and voluntary discussions contribute to the evolution of meanings and meaningful

linkages more than any imposed or formal structure could hope to do. And that, at least, is a hopeful sign.

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