

EDITORIAL: CRITIQUE: MEANINGS, METHODS, CONTEXTS

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Editorial: Critique: Meanings, Methods, Contexts

In 2004, sociologist and philosopher Bruno Latour ushered in the ‘postcritique era’ with his highly-influential question: “Why has critique run out of steam?”¹ In the article, he argues that critique has become too abstract and scattered, and has therefore lost relevancy. Even more dangerously, he warns of the ways that critique has and can be misappropriated, such as in the development and dissemination of conspiracy theories. Ultimately he calls for a refocusing of critique around a positive, constructive notion of discussion and advancement. It is within this and the following context that the Editorial Team of *On_Culture* is proud to present Issue #7 *Critique: Meanings, Methods, Contexts*.

Underlying Latour’s question is a basic assumption that critique has indeed “run out of steam.” Whether or not this is the case, critique has been pushed to the forefront of not only various scholarly fields, but even into the mainstream, and in a way that has surpassed Latour’s meta-level of critique. Considering the current global political climate and in light of the surge of a variety of conspiracy theories, it is hard to argue that we have entered into a new and thought-provoking era for critical practices: One in which critique has indeed run out of steam because the very notion of the *fact* has been annihilated. If nothing is true, everything is opinion. If everything is opinion, any foundations can be dismantled. Science, at its core, holds no water in a post-truth world, whether it be medical science (see: anti-vaxxers), natural science (see: flat-earthers), or social science (see: resurgence of white supremacy).

Following along Latour’s line of thinking, literary scholar Rita Felski has been one prominent voice in the relatively new postcritique tradition. In *The Limits of Critique*, she warns against a solely critique-oriented approach when it comes to textual analysis: “it seems increasingly evident that literary scholars are confusing a part of thought with the whole of thought, and that in doing so we are scanting a range of intellectual and expressive possibilities.”² This cautionary note could easily be applied to other disciplines and scenarios. Predating Latour’s seminal article, queer theorist Eve Sedgwick argues in her 2003 book *Touching Feeling* for an “additive and accretive” mode of critique “that wants to assemble and confer plenitude” rather than traditional reductionist methods.³

Critique is however not solely viewed in this way. In some disciplines it remains alive and well and in active utilization. In *Critics Not Caretakers*, Russell T. McCutcheon urges fellow religious studies scholars to assume self-reflexive analytical standpoints rather than act as sympathetic caretakers of religious traditions,⁴ and, throughout his extensive works, historian Dominick LaCapra champions the use of critical-theoretical concepts and frameworks for understanding history. What is more, recent impulses from global intellectual history have led to a de-centering and de-Europeanization of the very idea of critique.⁵ These developments raise the question of how academic disciplines have been transformed by self-critique.

This issue deals with these conceptualizations of critique in a variety of ways, beginning with Mitchum Huehls's *Essay*, which historicizes the transition from critique to postcritique by way of Michel Foucault's concept of governmentality and with special attention to the function and power of norms. Using Paul Beatty's *The Sellout* as a case study for a contemporary treatment of norms and critique, Huehls perspectivizes the scope of the topic and the place of critique in the current moment.

In her article, Johanne Gormsen Schmidt offers an interesting perspective on bringing together Latour's research strategy with the literary practices of writer Robert Walser as an effort to break through the deadlock about critique within the field of literary studies. Furthermore, the article strives for Latour's project to be seen as aesthetically entangled and not solely as a source of inspiration for the humanities.

Turning towards critique and music, Jonas Wolf questions the conventional notion that 'critical composition' is a remnant of the post-war avant-garde, Nicolas A. Huber and the Second Viennese School. With various contemporary composers as exemplary cases, he is able to show that conceptualizations of music as a product of critical thinking are alive and well, but perhaps too diversified to be subsumed under one all-encompassing label.

In Joshua W. Rivers's article, a different type of performance and critique are explored. Taking three well-known examples into account, Rivers argues that queer video games allow the player to explore ways of performing critique by means of not only playing in non-normative environments, but also in non-normative ways.

In the area of contemporary political critique, the article by Carolin Müller delves into the new, creative ways of performing democratic citizenship and belonging. Taking an example in the form of a German/international brass ensemble and their musical

production, performance, and activism, Müller's ethnographic work with the band shows that voicing critique is possible, even if the surrounding environment is resistant to it.

Oliver Klaassen, in a unique *Perspective* with an abundance of photographic examples, analyzes the photo series *Climate Vortex Sutra* by David Benjamin Sherry and argues for a queer ecological reading of the work. This emphasizes the photographs' potential for a resignification of the American West as a queer space while calling attention to – and protesting – climate change at the same time. As always, we warmly welcome readers to contribute to this issue at any time by submitting further pieces for the *Perspectives* section.

The interdisciplinary and varied contributions to this issue of *On_Culture* demonstrate that critique, in all its forms, is sorely needed now more than ever.

Giessen, July 2019

The Editorial Team

Endnotes

- ¹ Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," in *Critical Inquiry* 30 (2004), 225-248.
- ² Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 5.
- ³ Eve Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 149.
- ⁴ Russell T. McCutcheon, *Critics Not Caretakers: Redefining the Public Study of Religion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001).
- ⁵ See e.g. Samuel Moyn and Andrew Sartori (eds.), *Global Intellectual History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).