Between Popular Cultural Authorship and Post-Scholarly Criticism: The Structural Analysis of the Digital Video Essay Form

by

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Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

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Abstract

This dissertation analyzes the digital video essay form on YouTube as a recent communicative and communal phenomenon, emphasizing the historical roles academic scholarship and popular cultural production have played in its emergence. On the one hand, by theorizing what I call 'post-scholarly' criticism, I explore and outline the potential influences of academic thought on the contemporary generation of former and current students, who produce video essays for public consumption on this platform. With some of them reaching over one million views, these video essays have become an immensely popular cultural critical genre on English-speaking YouTube, which often mobilizes concepts, contexts, and methods commonly associated with the humanities and liberal arts disciplines. By often expressing their left-leaning views in their analysis of popular cultural phenomena from artworks to digital aesthetics and discourse, today's digital author-critics reproduce scholarly concerns that once famously marked the 'radical' cultural turn in the 1980s and onward. Specifically, video essayists often generate cultural criticism of mass-produced artworks / popular cultural trends and utilize the tools of critical theory to address systemic, institutional and political issues that they identify in contemporary corporate cultural industries as well as in digital cultural consumption and production. By examining this digital genre, I suggest that these critics rely on a loose scholarly *episteme* of intellectual fandom. Importantly, the move away from the professional academic domain encapsulated in the contemporary digital video essay form testifies to the structural process of deinstitutionalization taking place. In other words, I broadly argue that today's digital post-scholarly critics publicly express a cultural and political trend towards deinstitutionalizing academic criticism and scholarship, which, in turn, calls for new articulations of the value of the humanities in academia today.

On the other hand, my dissertation also argues that contemporary digital authorship must be considered as a part of the historical trajectory related to popular amateur creative practices and new attractional multimedia mode of thinking. It has long been stressed that historically creative cultural practices situated around recombining various mediums prefigured the contemporary digital popular production witnessed on social platforms today. However, I suggest that it is important to consider the idea of the post-literary public sphere that has emerged as a direct result of mass cultural production in the west. I conceptualize the broad, post-literary public sphere in terms of the distinctive popular creative practices and communicative forms it has produced, arguing that contemporary digital authorship is an important emerging mode of self-articulation in today's global western cultural context. The conversational, personalized, and immediately situated digital public genre of the video essay attributes heightened importance to individual self-expression as the pathway to broader social, cultural, and political dialogue. Thus, today's digital authorship reminds us of the salient historical value of publicly circulating literary forms — their potential for generating a civic public sphere. Ultimately, by theorizing the digital video essay form through the constellation of post-scholarly criticism and popular cultural authorship, this dissertation offers a dialectical perspective for studying new modes of digital communication.

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Introduction

In recent scholarship on digital media, it has been suggested that "extended writing, such as the essay, has lost its status as our culture's favored way to promulgate ideas" (Bolter 2019: 13). However, the recent emergence of the video essay as a public, communal, critical, and creative practice on English-speaking YouTube testifies to the immense popularity of such extended writing practices outside the university today. In 2019, the loose countercultural phenomenon initially termed BreadTube formed as a leftist response on Reddit to alt-right uses of digital media (Kuznetsov and Ismangil 2020: 204). Pointedly, most prominent BreadTubers were former students and academic dropouts who started to pursue their online careers through making and disseminating extensive video essay pieces on YouTube. Today, many digital author-critics with academically "professional profiles" (Guillory 2022) compose and spread their original audiovisual pieces of literary and cultural criticism through this online social platform, thereby expressing the extramural value of literary interpretation and the humanities more generally. By publicly engaging in practices such as close reading, cultural criticism of mass-produced artworks and popular cultural trends, and employing the tools of critical theory, these *post-scholarly* author-critics attract vast digital audiences and prompt public responses to their critical pieces. Along with comparing distinct works of fiction such as, for instance, *Pamela: Or, Virtue Rewarded* (1740) and the popular *Twilight* (2005–2020) novel / film series, digital author-critics ruminate on their personal identities, thus illustrating a powerful role that fictional contexts can play in expressing genuinely lived human experiences.

To study this phenomenon, my dissertation relies on an interdisciplinary mode of analysis, drawing analytical tools and concepts from a range of disciplines, from fan studies to intellectual history. In terms of the overall digital public environment and the critical theoretical approaches

that may be applied to it, a few crucial reservations should be made. First, it is essential to stress that the contemporary digital media may be broadly assessed as "ephemeral" (Grainge 2011), which is why they are rather difficult to approach from the standpoint of a definitive and qualitative cultural analysis. In this way, to examine the digital video essay as a communal cultural form would be to simultaneously acknowledge the ephemerality and instability of the virtual social platforms on which such cultural forms of digital authorship emerge. Second, following the first observation, it should be acknowledged that some digital communities, otherwise described as "knowledge cultures", possess a markedly voluntary, temporary, and flexible status (Jenkins 2006b: 57). Thus, upon the exhaustion of the communal goals initially set by its members, fans may seek out "new spaces to apply their skills and new openings for their speculations, and in the process those skills spread to new communities and get applied to new tasks" (Ibid.). More generally, I argue that an interdependence exists between the ephemeral characteristics of contemporary platform communication and the tactical interests uniting digital communities online. For instance, while the digital video essay culture on YouTube partially formed as a reactive communal response to the alt-right uses of digital media, it gradually exhausted itself as a distinctive communal form. Arguably, as soon as these incentives had lost their tactical communal value, this knowledge culture dissipated as a distinctive online culture and reemerged as a new form of individual and interactive digital authorship. Upon acquiring a self-sustained status, the digital video essay has recently transformed into a hybrid communicative mode, where individual audiovisual authorship depends less on the initial communal ties than the goal of self-expression. Therefore, particularly in the context of digital communal participation, it is crucial to account for its inherent ephemerality, equally prescribed

by the evanescent, transient, and unstable conditions of contemporary digital communicative genres and the tactical choices surrounding various cultural communities.

Third, while the ephemerality of the contemporary digital environment deserves acknowledgement, it may be added that, on the level of cultural analysis, certain forms of social behaviour and interaction in the virtual space are concrete. Thus, while "[v]irtual communities and interactions are mediated by complex combinations of technologies and occupy the in between world of the Internet", it should be also stated that "they are as often extensions of offline interests and activities, identities and explorations" (Youngs 2007: 49). As opposed to the ephemeral and evanescent nature of digital media itself, the communicative and social interactions witnessed there may be traced to the specific national and transnational cultural contexts that exert their influence on individuals belonging to those contexts in the offline world. The explicit sharing of cultural and social values promoted and spread by institutions, to which various individuals have access, remains the major factor in analyzing and identifying the emergent digital cultures today. However, this concreteness also manifests itself in the conditions of late monopoly capitalism that are imposed on and exercised by active Internet consumers. In this context, it has been suggested that online fandom or actively engaged users provide "palpable advantages to marketers," who feed on the "'active, emotionally engaged, and socially networked' consumer" (Lee and Andrejevic 2014: 46). Digital social platforms such as YouTube, in turn, may be equally said to extract its profit from viewership algorithms, which document, collect, and store users' individual preferences to derive revenue from active user participation. Seen from this perspective, it may be suggested that the sheer fact of digital individual participation on social media today merely represents a useful tool for various

industry marketing strategies and media platforms promoting such late-capitalist business practices as affective economics or influencer capitalism.

However, while it would be tempting to reduce active digital production to individual or collective profit-accumulating tactics exclusively, this perspective does not provide the superstructural insight into specific forms or types of public gathering existent in the digital space. Speaking of the notion of media "convergence" in the contemporary digital media environment, Jenkins particularly suggests that it "is both a top-down corporate-driven process and a bottom-up consumer-driven process", which opens space for consumers to fight "for the right to participate more fully in their culture" (Jenkins 2006a: 14). Thus, I suggest that focusing solely on platform economy and individual profit-accumulating tactics online ignores the specific forms of public cultural participation and expression that are undeniably present in today's digital environment. In sum, while recognizing the individual digital authors' active participation in various content-monetization practices, including providing sponsor links to other media platforms or placing advertising on their channels and in their audiovisual materials, this dissertation examines the complex cultural and communicative phenomenon of the digital video essay.

The English-speaking video essay culture studied in my dissertation initially emerged as a discursive political form of digital cultural production. It has long been established that the loose left-wing digital community 'LeftTube' originally formed in response to alt-right uses of digital media, particularly "to what is now dubbed *Gamergate* — a 2014 online hate campaign of right-wing, sexist harassment of women in the gaming community" (Sankofa 2023: 428). For instance, the video essay content produced by the most famous LeftTuber, Natalie Wynn, or ContraPoints, took off in 2016 as a direct response to Gamergate (Maddox and Creech 2021: 600). The video

essay culture has also been linked with the adjacent English-speaking left counterculture from Reddit referred to as BreadTube, which emerged around 2019 and was inspired by Petr Kropotkin's anarcho-communist book, *The Conquest of Bread* (Kuznetsov and Ismangil 2020: 204). While "BreadTube has no strict definition, [it] can be categorized as a core group of academically minded YouTubers that produce high-concept material with high production values" (Sylvia and Moody 2022: 5). As the digital author-critic Kidology observes in her meta-video essay ("Why BREADTUBE", Nov 1, 2023: 18:15), "leftist" digital authors on YouTube have "left academia in order to pursue their online careers" because "the Internet was recognized by the New Left to be the new marketplace of ideas" and the "domain in which to connect with a far larger and intersectional audience" (12:50–13:07).

Given their academic lineage, the individual digital author-critics have thus started utilizing the procedures and critical tools that have been conventionally associated with multiple professional domains, inclusive of professional filmmaking and scholarly criticism. The explicit employment of the essay genre online testifies to a creative practice that goes beyond the cultural and economic production incentivized by the social platform environment. In the disciplinary context of film studies, the video essay genre has been commonly considered an academic form of expression situated around the analysis of the film medium. While traditional essay films tackle "almost infinite" topics, "from explorations of the film-makers themselves…to various investigations of art, politics, architecture and urbanism, to philosophical speculations and so on", video essays are generally "thematically focused on one particular subject: cinema" (Drăgan 2021: 113). Importantly, digital creators directly associate the digital video essay genre with the academic video essay in terms of their equal focus on the medium. According to the digital author-critic Lily Alexandre, "video essays have existed for decades, but they really kicked into

overdrive with the YouTube algorithm. For most of their history they were an academic medium used in film studies for obvious reasons. You know, if you're talking about an interesting camera movement, [it is] better to show it than describe it. Video has more tools to create meaning than text alone does; you can use not only visuals but vocal intonation, music, even things like the timing of cuts." ("Art Won't Save Us", May 31, 2024, 16:27–16:58). Therefore, because of its academic roots, the digital video essay often tends to explore the subject of cinema and filmmaking. Simultaneously, however, since the video essay also represents a communicative form of semi-public digital authorship directly integrated into the social platform environment, it tends to balance the exploration of the film medium with more immediately situated, topical, and publicly resonant concerns. Moreover, since the original essay form itself has historically public and communicative roots (Adorno 1991), the digital video essay form clearly gravitates towards initiating a public conversation rather than merely generating academically prescriptive explorations of the film medium.

Further, recent research has considered the video essay phenomenon on YouTube from the "social media critical scholar (SMCS)" perspective, which describes "any YouTube content creator who produced scholarship video essays with a critical lens" (Sankofa 2023: 430). Thus, by innovating "a scholarly genre of a video essay", SMCSs are argued to pose and research "open-ended questions through the collection and analysis of evidence and use of a critical theoretical perspective" (Ibid.). However, while I partially concede to this interpretation by treating the digital video essay as an innovative extension of the scholarly video essay genre, its emphasis on the critical theoretical perspective appears too reductive.

On the one hand, given its left-wing countercultural lineage, the digital video essay genre indeed relies on the broad tools of critical academic theory. By often framing their video essays

as an activist form of research, many digital author-critics pursue an intellectual agenda once popularized in English-speaking academia in the 1980s, broadly associated with the so-called 'cultural turn'. On the other hand, however, my dissertation shows that the video essayists' investment in academic scholarship and concepts goes far beyond the concerns of critical theory alone. More specifically, I argue that today's digital environment is witnessing a broader post-scholarly turn whereby younger generations of former and ongoing students tacitly attempt to *deinstitutionalize* academic scholarship by making it more practically, culturally, and politically useful. Thus, by borrowing theoretical, critical, and formal approaches from humanities disciplines and integrating these with their personal experiences and political allegiances, today's digital video essays demonstrate a new public functioning of authorship and criticism.

I argue that there were at least several preconditions for the contemporary digital post-scholarly turn. First, since the advent of the "entrepreneurial university", which largely transformed academic establishments into business enterprises, the traditional value of the professional humanities has waned. In other words, this relatively recent development has made it difficult to affirm the usefulness of the humanities disciplines, now nearly fully entrenched in the contemporary system of corporate labor. In turn, many students today are less and less persuaded by the value and usefulness of humanities disciplines, the pursuit of which is objectively difficult to justify in the age of the neoliberal economy. Second, the digital revolution of the late twentieth century has significantly eroded the traditional understanding of boundaries between professionals and non-professionals, experts and non-experts. Thus, if institutional gatekeeping mechanisms used to largely define these boundaries, the current age of digital social platforms predominantly relies on *individual entrepreneurial authorship*, which does not require professional credentials or expertise in order to participate in the production and dissemination of

original content before vast digital publics. Therefore, today's digital author-critics producing video essays do not require university credentials or status to authoritatively speak on academically adjacent subjects.

Third, on the historical level, given the democratization and massification of university education since the mid-twentieth century, the functioning of academic scholarship has been diversified, reshaped, and forced to account for new cultural and civic perspectives. As a result, the humanities famously underwent a drastic process of revision in the 1980s, which involved formulating new, critical, more actively involved, and 'radical' conceptual-theoretical approaches to academic scholarship. On a narrow scale, the emergence of the new academic disposition within this period, which may be loosely described as the epistemology of intellectual fandom (Mulhern 2000), partly embodied the qualitative consequence of the academic cultural turn for the university establishment. In other words, from the 1980s onward, many scholars in the humanities would start bringing their personal histories and ideologies to the forefront of their academic scholarship, often making their individual political and cultural intellectual attachments more salient than the objects they themselves analyzed. Thus, the return of the metric of personal appreciation — albeit now also understood in explicit ideological terms — to the academic domain eroded the traditional boundaries of professional criticism, which formerly rested on more 'neutral' and detached forms of analysis. In short, the deeper integration of a scholar's own personal attachments as well as their political goals into the professional domain of the university set the new standard for newer generations of students in the humanities. Arguably, this development partly resulted in the perceived loss of professionalization regarding the humanities disciplines. In turn, the preconditions for the contemporary post-scholarly turn

outlined here may at least partly explain the popularity of a counter-institutional sentiment that is commonly expressed in the digital video essay genre today.

My research has identified the following basic components that provide specific grounding to post-scholarly digital authorship: the explicit acknowledgment of one's former or ongoing academic status; the utilization of scholarly concepts; the employment of the video essay form; the reliance on scholarly sources; and the *intellectual fan* approach (i.e., a particular adoption of a critical theoretical / culturally political lens while analyzing artworks / cultural forms). As my dissertation demonstrates, many video essays analyzed consistently combine a reliance on academic scholarship with author-critics' own interests and attachments, particularly regarding artistic objects, cultural phenomena, and popular cultural digital trends. In the video essays in which the digital author-critics openly critique popular cultural artworks, trends, or digital aesthetics (which are as common as appreciative analyses in this genre), these subjects are often either juxtaposed with more affirmative examples of the same kind or even altogether defended. Considering these observations, I suggest that this new form of authorship employs a loose intellectual fan approach, wherein the author-critics' fascination with / rejection of popular cultural objects and tastes informs their engagement with political dispositions and arguments. As part of my dissertation will show, the direct conceptual association of fan identity with scholar identity has a relatively recent intellectual history that is integrally tied to the cultural turn that popularized the assumption of progressive political dispositions in academia. One of the results of this history becomes the perception, according to which, "[a]cademics who write about politics are surely fascinated by politics and follow it in the same way as someone else might follow *Star Trek*, through routine patterns of viewing, through discussion, through communities and gatherings" (Brooker et al. 2018: 64). Therefore, many digital video essayists' fascination

with and rejection of popular cultural objects and themes expressed along with their progressive political stance may indeed have something to do with the intellectual fandom episteme and the history of ideas explored in the present dissertation.

Along with conducting comparative and critical analyses of popular cultural artworks, phenomena, and digital trends, author-critics construct creative audiovisual pieces which appropriate, recombine, and edit various film clips, citations, etc. to produce original video essays. As some of my chapters show, it is appropriate to directly trace most of the digital audiovisual content production to historical amateur practices particularly tied to productive fan activities, which took off in the second half of the twentieth century. For instance, by experimenting with early VCR technology and thus taking audiovisual production in their own hands, some of the underground fan communities would pave the way for much contemporary digital content production, commonly associated with vlog formats. At the same time, there is enough substantial evidence to suggest that cultural historical recombinatory, editing, and reappropriative practices appeared long before the emergence of the new mediums and technologies, with amateur mixed-medley albums and magic lantern exhibitions already proliferating in the nineteenth century. Therefore, although the scholarly essay film or video essay undeniably influences the digital practices of the current generation of author-critics on YouTube in terms of the filmmaking rules, I contend that today's digital video essay genre also takes up these popular historical multi-media experimentations. Accounting for both the scholarly and popular cultural lineages of the digital video essay form, this dissertation argues that today's digital video essays illustrate a new productive development — the cross-pollination between popular creative practices and post-scholarly criticism. To theorize this dual lineage, my dissertation conducts a dialectical analysis of the popular cultural creative production and the

post-scholarly counterpublic criticism, which are embodied in today's digital video essay authorship.

On the one hand, by drawing on Jürgen Habermas' famous concept of the public sphere in the world of letters, I suggest approaching the contemporary video essay form as the mode of authorship that emerged *out of* the public sphere in the world of letters, albeit substantially modified. According to Habermas' original conception, the conversations that transpired in public spaces of the coffee table societies, the salons, and book clubs of the eighteenth century gave rise to the new epistemological model of western society (1998). The gradual involvement of the periodical sphere in such public debates, initially focused on the 'talk of the town' and matters of culture then reserved for artworks, for Habermas, stimulated public criticism and eventually led to public periodical engagements with politics. This literary public sphere, for him, established the foundation for the western political public sphere along with the liberal bourgeois conception of publicity. Despite Habermas himself being consistently pessimistic about the developments of the literary and the political public spheres in the west, my dissertation argues for a substantial re-examination of his conceptual framework in terms of contemporary digital authorship. As my dissertation proposes, it may be viable to consider the notion of the *post-literary public sphere* as a conceptual pathway to understanding popular cultural *creative* and communicative practices, which explore various mediums as the means of individual self-expression. Historically, the spectacle-oriented and attractional forms of expression became popular since at least the nineteenth century, while evidently originating from earlier oral and folk cultures. Thus, if the western bourgeois public sphere was situated in the rather exclusive world of letters, the genuinely popular forms of public authorship today explore and capitalize on performative and attractional communication, which mobilizes various

mediums to immediately situated and communal types of self-expression. In my view, contemporary digital authorship represents a culmination of the popular cultural historical trajectory, pushing creative practices to a whole new mass level of productive sophistication. Since Habermas has recently himself addressed the subject by diagnosing the emergence of a new intimate authorship fostered by the digital social platform environment, revising and engaging with his older argument opens a systematic theoretical path towards analyzing today's digital authorship.

On the other hand, the digital video essay form is inherently based on academic scholarship, which is frequently incorporated into its production. As stressed previously, the video essay on YouTube has much to do with the left-leaning counterpublic sentiment, which refers to the broad critical theoretical counterdiscourse directed against corporate cultural industry and / or academic institutions. Thus, by drawing on the notion of counterpublicity developed by Nancy Fraser (1990), my dissertation examines the overarching left-leaning sentiment commonly expressed in the digital video essay form. While, granted, today's English-speaking video essayists do not always (or, occasionally, at all) represent "subordinated" or "subaltern" social groups in terms of their counterdiscursive expression, it is nevertheless clear that these digital author-critics still largely stand in a *contestatory* relationship to dominant publics (Ibid. 67–70), which, in their eyes, are often represented by corporate cultural industry or university authority. In this way, I suggest that much of today's digital critical authorship shares counter-institutional consensus, which may be broadly associated with the influence of academic environment, ideology, and culture on newer generations of former and / or ongoing students.

However, aside from the influences of academic thought on contemporary digital authors, there exists at least another explanation for their expressed counter-institutional consensus and

sentiment. As I noted earlier, the public arena of YouTube allows private individuals to bypass traditional gatekeeping mechanisms historically tied to professional intellectual scholarship, which, in turn, creates the impression that it is possible to individually compete with institutional knowledge and cultural authorities online. Therefore, I suggest that the post-scholarly counterpublic sentiment commonly expressed through the digital video essay genre also relates to an emergent *heretical* mode of cultural production and authorship. According to Pierre Bourdieu, the conquest of cultural autonomy is an uneasy and heretical process (1996), particularly in relation to legitimate institutions of knowledge and authority such as the university. Similarly, the digital cultural production that the present dissertation analyzes at least partially aims at conquering individual autonomy on behalf of its authors. Thus, by symbolically and sometimes overtly distancing themselves from the university world, today's video essayists strive to conquer their individual autonomy as cultural producers to ultimately establish their authority within the digital communities of which they are part. Simultaneously, by often referring to intellectual capital derived from professional scholarship, these digital author-critics implicitly valorize the symbolic goods produced and spread in the higher educational environment. In such a way, the author-critics are placed in a peculiar 'double bind', or an indeterminate cultural position in respect to legitimate institutions, forced to constantly produce new content to maintain their digital authority and creative originality in addressing scholarly contexts.

On the level of argumentation, this dissertation relies on a loose conceptual method derived from the Frankfurt School theory, which may be described as constellatory analysis. Based on the Hegelian Marxist dialectical reasoning, the method of constellations aims to parse out the individual nodes of an overarching cultural historical phenomenon / concept to examine

its specific and conflictual manifestations. Thus, in the case of the digital video essay, for example, I argue that it is appropriate to independently approach its post-scholarly and popular cultural lineage / characteristics, while acknowledging the likely possibility of intersections between them. Or, while studying this form's culturally dynamic and counterpublic mode of authorial expression, I simultaneously consider the video essay genre as a pathway to digital entrepreneurship, which offers monetary and celebrity dividends to its creators along with the promise of 'authentic' and meaningful self-expression. In such a way, by striving to maintain the necessary conceptual dialogue between the base and superstructure, my dissertation attempts to retain the general philosophical principle of Marxist interpretation and thereby also partly revive the oft-neglected theoretical contribution of the Frankfurt School into *qualitative* and systematic social, cultural, political, and historical analysis. In my view, the radical structural changes partly brought by the social platform environment in recent years especially call for well-developed and qualitative philosophical-theoretical approaches to digital authorship, which must go beyond instrumental and positivistic methods of social communicative research. Arguably, consistent explorations of such an approach may eventually help with developing new normative perspectives on the changing digital and analogue social worlds that we have been exponentially inhibiting on a semi-equal basis.

Apart from applying a larger constellatory method of interpretation to the video essay form, I have also been preoccupied with identifying and analyzing the potential influences that the university scholarship may have produced on new generations of students practicing digital criticism over a few decades. I argue that currently there are no adequate qualitative theoretical frameworks to apply to the new contemporary forms of authorship and criticism that I have defined as post-scholarly, and one of the aims of this dissertation has been an attempt at

understanding exactly why no adjacent frameworks have been offered. Historically, while it is true that, for instance, the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in England provided the most in-depth structural understanding of the British post-war youth culture in terms of its higher educational background, no recent research has attempted to consistently articulate the relationship between academic influences and contemporary popular cultural expression outside of the particular national confines. Arguably, the lack of scholarship that would consistently study the intersection between academia and popular cultural expression / production has intellectual historical roots in the cultural turn, which, among other important developments, inaugurated the post-Cultural studies (Mulhern 2000) — an intellectual phase in the English-speaking humanities disciplines that inaugurated personally involved scholarly analyses of popular cultural and fan discourses.

My dissertation engages with some crucial moments of intellectual history that I see as formative for both the contemporary humanities and digital post-scholarly criticism. As the first two of my chapters attempt to demonstrate, the existing scholarship on what may be loosely called 'intellectual fandom' largely set the terms in which the ideas of popular discourse and interpretation have been perceived in the humanities disciplines. By broadly positioning the role of an academic scholar next to that of popular reader or interpreter, the post-Cultural studies of the late 1980s invented a new epistemological framework from which the non-academic audiences and groups were to be analyzed. In other words, by treating popular cultural groups as distinctive and ideologically progressive interpreters / readers and, eventually, a grassroot mirror of their academic selves, the disposition of the intellectual as fan has been born. I argue that the partial outcome of this disposition has become, at first, an ideological and then later, an epistemological loss of distinction between academic and non-academic forms of reading in

much of the humanities' scholarship. As a result, the logic of intellectual attachment to an object of study has arguably become the key metric of professionalism in many disciplines from literary to fan studies, later extending into the digital practice of post-scholarly criticism.

By studying the metadiscourse of post-Cultural studies, my dissertation identifies the major historical theoretical axis which has defined a new scholarly approach to cultural groups, fans, and popular readers: the idea of affective attachment juxtaposed with that of critical distance. Crucially, these two ideas largely correspond to scholarly dispositions toward their analyzed subjects and communities and relate to a specific intellectual historical moment, wherein the role of a scholar became redefined. Put simply, if a scholar's role in the literary discipline used to be prescribed by the tradition of neutral and supposedly detached analysis of texts, the 1980s brought the metric of attachment as an ideologically progressive scholarly disposition. In recent literary critical scholarship, the attempt at analyzing the dispositions of attachment and detachment (Felski 2015) has gained significant traction, and the claim has been advanced that "a love of text" and "a commitment to theory" (Felski 2020b) constitute two polar academic dispositions. Conversely, I argue that these two dispositions are historically complementary. For example, within the disciplines engaged in the study of cultural and literary texts, the disposition of being in love with theory is commonly paralleled with the extramural cultural groups, whether they refer to popular, fan, media communities or amateur/lay readers. The latter are sometimes posed as individuals or communities of attachment to textual or hermeneutic forms, while academics are argued to transmit the love of theoretical methods (Felski 2020a). In other disciplines, many prominent cultural critics directly associated loving theory with the state of fandom, both academic and non-academic. One of the results of this fusion has become the excessive linkage of fan communities to politically and culturally

progressive or regressive forms of affective attachment. While, in other instances, scholars' and non-scholars' identities are almost entirely fused, such intellectual disposition still often comes to prioritize the mode of academic distinction. In other words, it continues outlining the forms of coexistence between varying degrees of critical objectivity and passionate commitment inside contemporary academic scholarship. In sum, the conceptual dichotomies between 'love' and 'critique', 'attachment' and 'detachment', 'amateurs' and 'professionals', 'academics' and 'fans', and others promote the overarching inter-scholarly metadiscourse that is primarily preoccupied with interrogating academics' own dispositions at the expense of general non-professionals, whose cultural role is essentially reduced to supplying new generations of scholars with varying modes of distinction and critical debate in the intra-mural space. I argue that the metadiscourse of attachment linked with the broad popular cultural mode of textual reading and interpretation ultimately prevented accurate and systematic analyses of potential academic influences on existing popular cultural production, which has especially flourished on digital social platforms in recent years.

Further, in the process of bridging the theoretical gap through relevant intellectual history, my dissertation argues that digital post-scholarly criticism may have much to do with the intellectual developments in contemporary academia. Therefore, scholarly metadiscourse aside, I have discovered that today's digital author-critics often tend to directly mirror and reproduce the post-Cultural studies' approach in their video essays by engaging with the methods, concerns, and even artworks that cultural theory has explored in the academic context since at least the 1980s. As my examples show, the most prominent digital video essayists engage with popular cultural forms, artworks, and authors that have long been deemed emancipatory and progressive by much of the academic scholarship. Moreover, by utilizing a loose intellectual fandom

episteme, these digital author-critics tend to apply critical theoretical lens to their analyzed subjects, grounding their personal ideological and political attachments in these analyses.

In turn, by extracting the logic of intellectual attachment from the professional academic domain, the digital author-critics thereby implicitly challenge it as a scholarly mode of distinction. Since the episteme of intellectual fandom was born out of a specific cultural historical moment in the contemporary university, it appeared, at the time, that such disposition was necessary, emancipatory, and progressive. However, as it was envisioned by a prominent Jamaican-born British intellectual figure and academic, Stuart Hall, the intellectual theoretical program conceived of in politically directive terms inherently does not belong in the institutional academic environment, constrained by the conditions of professionalism and requirements for conducting research. Therefore, in my view, today's digital author-critics who practice culturally political criticism on social platforms prove the astuteness of Hall's observation by successfully mobilizing their intellectual fandom to *culturally* and *politically discursive* rather than academically professional ends. Ultimately, I suggest that this development calls for a reassessment of the intellectual fandom *episteme* that arguably still serves as the chief justificatory mode in many disciplines in the humanities today.

In Chapter 1, I provide a broad conceptual framework for studying the digital video essay form. By analyzing its positioning between scholarly contexts and amateur audiovisual practices, I theorize the digital video essay's incorporation into the digital field of cultural production. On the one hand, this chapter outlines the conceptual intersection between popular creative authorship and scholarly criticism. On the other, another theoretical focus of the first chapter is conceptualizing the potential interdependence between the institutional transformation of the academic critical practice which leads to the latter's employment in the digital domain.

Putting the phenomenon of digital post-scholarly criticism at the center of the discussion, Chapter 1 explores the potential lineage of digital video essays that illustrate a form of cross-pollination between historical popular creative DIY practices and scholarly criticism. First, I contextualize the direct relationship of the video essay form with historically amateur, creative, remediative, and recombinatory practices. Drawing on relevant scholarship, I offer a systematic perspective on approaching the video essay form as a historically popular cultural creative mode. Second, the phenomenon of post-scholarly criticism is broadly contextualized through the historical transformation of the university and, by proxy, the advent of the cultural turn since the 1980s. I observe the digital popularization of the cultural turn through the contemporary video essay, providing examples to substantiate the intellectual link between the two. Third, surveying through the notion of fandom as the mode of intellectual commitment and expertise, I arrive at the broad metadiscursive scholarly disposition of academic-as-fan that emerges through the development of post-Cultural studies. By briefly addressing the scholarly dispositions of 'Theory fan', 'scholar-fan', 'intellectual as fan', and 'aca-fan', I stress the difficulty of studying today's post-scholarly authorship through existing theoretical approaches. I assert that, as opposed to academic scholars, video essays in question approach the task of post-scholarly criticism as a form of genuine cultural practice. Finally, I argue that the difficulty of translation of academic scholarship to non-academic cultural forms of expression may be partially alleviated through a systematic survey of the intellectual history related to studying popular cultural groups and discourses.

To follow up on the systematic theoretical issue identified in the first chapter, Chapter 2 draws a schematic blueprint outlining the historical intellectual trajectory which is commonly associated with cultural studies and Theory both broadly and narrowly defined. I predominantly

focus on the narrower intellectual movement of Cultural Studies inaugurated by the members of the CCCS and its further development encompassed in the unofficial intellectual tenet, post-Cultural studies. First, I study the conceptual blueprints in literary studies and CS which arrives at the 'empathically' ethnographic method of studying subcultural forms. Second, by observing the encounters of the original CS with structuralist / post-structuralist thought, I examine the emergence of a metadiscourse of attachment in (post-)Cultural studies. Third, I engage with the post-Cultural studies' intellectual phase, whereby the correlation between academically critical and culturally affective semiotic practices arises. Finally, I study the dispositional logic in fan studies, which explicitly conflates fan and academic practices through the notion of affective attachment. In general, this chapter should be read neither as a polemic against often exceptionally innovative and insightful work of many scholars working across disciplines nor as a 'critical' exercise in "suspicious hermeneutics" (Felski 2015). Rather, the aim of this chapter is to re-assess the development of the (post-)Cultural studies' thought through the lens of the academic metadiscourse of attachment. Arguably, the original intellectual project of Cultural Studies resulted in the emergence of a metadiscursive form, which significantly departs from its initial cultural political *practical* imperative of returning textual meanings to lived social experiences (Williams 1958). The goal behind this reassessment ultimately concerns the digital mode of video essay on YouTube, which approaches the task of criticism as a subjective form of cultural practice. Therefore, the underlying task of Chapter 2 is to justify the need for composite theorizing of the development of cultural criticism practiced outside academic domain, and to suggest the potential correlation between academic scholarship and new public forms of criticism.

Chapter 3 enters the conceptual territory of popular cultural production and communication in terms of the digital video essay form and contemporary digital authorship more generally. To offer an alternative theoretical framework, I engage with the original as well as newer ideas of Habermas and analyze the applicability of his propositions to contemporary digital cultural production. In his recent work, Habermas has cautiously diagnosed the erosion of the traditional public sphere alongside the emergence of the new intimate form of public authorship in the digital era (2023). When it comes to today's digital media environment, it continues to afford — albeit not without limitation or difficulty — millions of people with access to virtual public debate, private conversation, social engagement, and authorship. Clearly, whether the rules of corporatization, digital surveillance, and censorship will eventually eradicate such processes and thereby continue 're-feudalizing' the public sphere through corporate media, the transformative power of this digital moment should still not be underestimated. Crucially, the potentialities that the digital public sphere(s) offer in terms of providing deliberative spaces through online platforms to its participants significantly exceed those afforded in the eighteenth-century through the periodical sphere. To start with, it has long been stressed that the latter involved only a minuscule part of the social stratum that could gain access — first, to establishments such as salons, and second, to the periodical press. Further, as Habermas himself acknowledges, most of the population in question, including women and working classes, was excluded from these developments altogether. Comparatively, today's publics have unparalleled access to digital platforms that allow them to continuously express themselves on the global scale for the first time in human history. The growing number of the participants, as well as their diverse national, social, economic, and cultural statuses and backgrounds are equally unmatched.

Despite these broad assumptions, it also appears as clear that contemporary digital communication hardly amounts to a unified public sphere, especially given the plurality of actors, publics, and echo-chambers proliferating in the global online environment today. Still, I would like to suggest that Habermas' original theory is extremely fruitful in terms of structurally analyzing contemporary digital authorship. I thus argue in Chapter 3 that it may be appropriate to consider the post-literary public sphere that has emerged as a direct result of mass cultural literary production and consumption in the west from a structural historical standpoint. I specifically theorize the broad post-literary public sphere in terms of the distinctive popular creative practices and communicative forms it has produced. Arguably, these historical popular cultural practices and approaches to creative production prefigured the contemporary digital popular authorship witnessed on social platforms today. By closely examining the narrow burgeoning cultural phenomenon of the digital video essay on English-speaking YouTube, Chapter 3 conceptualizes the new popular cultural form of self-fiction proliferating on digital social platforms today.

Further, Chapter 3 advances a proposition that may be relevant for analyzing digital authorship in terms of its forms and modes of expression. I suggest engaging with the video essay form as a means to social, cultural, and political expression. The existing scholarship that links various visual mediums to their socio-political implications was famously prefigured in the works of German and Russian Marxist thinkers and artists, many of whom directly analyzed the film medium in terms of its potential to be the true art of the people (Balázs 2010; Lukács 2012; Kracauer 1995; Benjamin 1969). The early Soviet filmmakers primarily relied on the film medium's politically radicalizing potential, dialectically mobilizing aesthetic techniques such as montage to expose the proletariat to avant-garde aesthetics and, thereby, to its own class

condition (Elder 2008). The German cultural theorists "looked to film to provide a model for a new kind of aesthetic form which would be…able to represent the contemporary condition" (Aitken 2012: 31). In the more recent visual multimedia context, the interactive museum exhibitions introduced to America in the 1930s by the German avant-garde artistic movement of Bauhaus have been tied to the idea of the "democratic surround", which aimed to propagate the image of actively involved and thus free American citizens on a national level (Turner 2013).

Continuing this broad conceptual framework, Chapter 3 thus examines the specific correlation between audiovisual self-presentation and the cultural, political, as well as communal contexts that such self-presentation may publicly *represent*. Habermas, whose *Structural Transformation* draws on Hans-Georg Gadamer's work, structurally links the idea of official institutional representation to an embodied image of authority, which he dates to the historical moment of feudal lordship (1998). In such a way, for both Habermas and Gadamer, the modern idea of representation has a historically metonymic relationship with that of presentation: i. e., presentation of an individual image of authority automatically represents or signifies its *official function*. However, in the contemporary age of digital production and authorship that bypass institutionally official mechanisms and authority, today's ubiquitous meaning of the idea of presentation through representation has clearly been modified. By examining the specific constellation of visual self-presentation and public *representation* to which it may refer, I argue that today's audiovisual modes such as the video essay explore the tension between authentic presentation and performative publicity. Authenticity, which refers to a relatively realistic form of self-presentation in this dissertation, also necessarily involves a degree of public performativity, which has long been associated with digital participation on social platforms. The tension between these two modes of self-expression inevitably involves the difficulty of

transmitting one's genuinely authentic self-image enacted in publicly performative terms. In general, I argue that beyond the loose communal unification through cultural politics, digital critics are less explicitly and yet more fundamentally aligned through the unspoken terms of the 'authentic' public consensus. I suggest that the criterion of authenticity constitutes the crux of these digital critics' self-presentation and attunement with their public(s), which predetermines the success or lack thereof in terms of individual promotion of digital content. In turn, the pronounced prioritizing of 'authentic' self-presentation in these audiovisual assembled pieces directed towards public audiences has to also correlate with the performative image that is supposed to represent shared cultural, ideological, and political contexts that would be able to resonate with the viewers.

In Chapter 4, I approach the phenomenon of the digital video essay from three main conceptual perspectives. First, by examining Hall's (mis)interpretation of Antonio Gramsci's concept of "organic" intellectuals, I suggest that the former's intellectual intervention in the traditional understanding of the role of an academic scholar may have practical implications for the digital realm today. Hall, by criticizing academic theorizing, concludes that the role of new generations of cultural critics is to be more 'directive' rather than 'specialized': in other words, their ideal task is deemed fostering accessible communication with non-academic social groups and promoting cultural and political solidarity between academics and wider social groups. Today's digital post-scholarly author-critics, beyond gaining cultural and economic capital through their publicly available material on social platforms, also attempt to initiate a comprehensive dialogue with non-academic users. Deeming academic scholarship deficient, post-scholarly author-critics themselves feel the urge to revise and diversify highly professionalized scholarly inquiry by incorporating academic concerns that interest them into

digital social public forums. In sum, while the question of political solidarity is often not explicitly addressed by the digital author-critics, they simultaneously embody Hall's incentive to democratize scholarly inquiry and make academic knowledge more accessible to wider publics, practical, and thus also directive.

Second, Chapter 4 theorizes the loose digital video essay left-leaning community from the perspective of counterpublicity. While Fraser famously theorized the phenomenon of "*subaltern counterpublics*" (Fraser 1990) in pluralist societies as the integral type of the contemporary public sphere(s), Habermas has remained consistent in asserting that the *episteme* of competing public spheres *on principle* erodes the conception of a deliberative democracy based on the moral-rationalist premise of organized dispute (2023). Contrastingly, Fraser theorizes subaltern counterpublics as "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses", stressing that "a plurality of competing publics" has always marked the existence of the bourgeois public sphere (1990: 61–67). Peculiarly, Fraser's revision of Habermas' public sphere theory arguably prefigures the current digital popular trend in the English-speaking world toward expressing the left-leaning counterpublic sentiment. As I stress in the third chapter, many contemporary digital author-critics aim to represent the popular sentiment of marginalized and minority cultures, whose counterdiscursive claims condemning systemic inequalities are deeply ingrained in their individual self-expression and presentation. The influence of the radical political movements since the late 1960s and the cultural turn of the 1980s on the western academy (Scott, 1995; Morley and Chen, 1996; Jacobs, 2011) arguably has much to do with the popular countercultural and counterpublic sentiment publicly expressed in the online English-speaking world today.

Third, by turning to the concepts of Bourdieu, I structurally analyze contemporary digital video essay entrepreneurial authorship from the perspectives of the heretical autodidactism and what he calls 'the double bind'. I examine the tension between its adoption of the higher educational cultural dividends in order to promote its potential celebrity status, gather monetary rewards, and conquer its own cultural autonomy. By assuming an autodidact disposition, digital author-critics, I argue, both challenge the symbolic dividends afforded by university education and assert its intellectual autonomy and authority in the digital social platform space of YouTube. However, by being positioned in the state of the Bourdieuian 'double bind', or the indeterminate cultural position in respect to legitimate institutions, the digital author-critics seem to continuously struggle for individual autonomy of cultural production, never fully separating from the latter's authority.

Finally, to move away from the digital sphere of cultural and intellectual production, the Conclusion turns to the subject of the disciplinary humanities, which is currently in a state of crisis. While digital author-critics pursue online careers that are often built on academic cultural capital, contemporary scholars in the humanities, by contrast, struggle to provide persuasive disciplinary rationales to incoming students. In the last section, I argue for the need to recognize the *episteme* of appreciation which seems to be stifling the contemporary development of disciplinary humanities worldwide. In other words, by suggesting that the metric of individual appreciation holds an overdetermined weight in the contemporary humanities disciplines, I propose an alternative future route for theorizing the value and the purpose of these disciplines. While individual appreciation has been long considered an outmoded professional metric in the literary criticism since at least the age of the New Critics, I argue that, in fact, such a metric has become the main distinguishing quality of the humanities. Since, as my research attempts to

show, digital video essayists hold personal appreciation in especially high esteem, it appears unclear how the intra-academic humanities may *compete* with this digital public trend. Therefore, to move away from the pseudo-professional metrics of appreciation and knowledge collectorship, I argue for identifying some tangible connections between professional intellectual scholarship in the humanities and its relevance to the most pressing cultural, political, and civic concerns.

Chapter 1: Digital Post-Scholarly Criticism: Between Intellectual Fandom and the World of Academia

Historically, academic scholarship has tended to approach popular cultural forms, fan attachments, or popular forms of reading / interpretation as distinctive grassroot forms of engagement with the products of mass cultural industry. However, upon the so-called digital turn, it has become especially difficult to define the distinctiveness of cultural participation and production exercised in today's global and socially mediated online environment. In other words, the abundance of self-promoted creative authorship that may be witnessed in contemporary digital spaces speaks for the unprecedented diversification of cultural production in comparison with all the preceding eras. Thus, referring to Graeme Turner's term "*the demotic turn*", which stresses "that media are no longer passively consumed but instead have become spaces for active audience participation" since the post-network era, Jan Teurlings observes that, for instance, "television criticism has become a 'common' practice" (2018: 210–211). For Teurlings, "critical activities that were in the broadcast era limited to a group of professionals linked to the industry, have now in the post-network era become a common, shared activity", which he describes as "a new 'commons'" (Ibid. 211). Similarly, critical activities that may be witnessed today on various social media platforms can be broadly described as common, even mundane, forms of self-expression and content creation.

Simultaneously, in order to avoid producing unhelpful generalizations, differing forms of creative production in the digital realm today must be always studied in terms of their cultural specificity and distinctive features. The case study explored in this dissertation specifically concerns the relatively recent phenomenon of the digital video essay, which has become an increasingly popular phenomenon on the English-speaking YouTube and beyond since 2020. I

argue that the distinctiveness of the digital video essay as a genre concerns its dual intent: first, the attempt to reappropriate academic scholarship for broader purposes, and second, the personal incentive to publicly transmit individual digital authorship and criticism. What I term post-scholarly authorship and criticism in this dissertation thus generally relates to the purpose of making academic scholarship more publicly relevant *outside* the institutional domain. In turn, the digital author-critics' demand to participate in the digital cultural space as independent authors and critics compliments their post-scholarly intent.

Critically, current research in the digital post-scholarly criticism relies on the core premise that there has occurred cross-pollination between academic criticism and public-facing popular self-expression. Therefore, the first chapter of this dissertation suggests that the process of intellectual transfer from the institutionally exclusive academic sphere to the vast public domain has become pronounced in the digital social spaces. The transfer has been launched and spread digitally predominantly by former university students and graduates rather than professional scholars with institutional affiliation, which testifies to the heightened popularity of practicing post-scholarly criticism outside the professional academic purposes. More specifically, since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, the popularity of the loose countercultural genre of the video essay on YouTube has demonstrated the impressive degree to which the academic scholarship has impacted the digital English-speaking environment populated by recent university or college graduates / dropouts. I would also like to argue that these digital author-critics have begun to transmit and (in)directly engage with cultural political, epistemological, and intellectual concerns that once famously marked the 'cultural turn' in the 1980s western humanities and social sciences (Alexander, 1988; Jacobs and Spillman, 2005), which to a large extent depended on the international transmission of the insights of Cultural Studies, historically

inaugurated by the CCCS, as well as structuralist and post-structuralist scholarship often put into an abstract label of 'Theory'.

While the direct intellectual influence of the scholarly cultural turn on the current generation of digital author-critics requires separate sociological analysis, this dissertation instead explores the potential epistemological influence that the popularization of CS and Theory in the English-speaking academia may have produced on the contemporary digital post-scholarly critics. On the structural level, the historical emergence of subcultural, popular cultural, and fan studies directly influenced by CS's scholarship has greatly diversified traditional scholarly inquiry into the idea of culture, which eventually made it professionally acceptable for academic scholars to profess their own 'metadiscursive' (Mulhern 2000) fan dispositions (Jenkins, 1992; Jensen, 1992; Penley, 1997; Hills, 2002; McKee, 2007; Brooker et. al, 2018) in the institutionalized context. Arguably, these structural developments, in turn, also prefigured the emergence of the digital fan scholarship, produced and disseminated by former or active university students. However, while the loose academic disposition of 'scholar fandom' often implies a metadiscursive gesture through which other scholars have generally asserted their own intellectual and political alignments, the digital author-critics in question abstain from such specialized self-labelling. Instead, by advancing critical arguments regarding culture, both narrowly and broadly defined, these critics approach digital authorship and criticism as a form of cultural practice. Moreover, digital author-critics structurally mirror the historical scholarly inquiries into popular culture, albeit disseminating their digital video essays outside of the institutionalized academic environment. The cultural political imperative embedded in these works of digital criticism, sometimes directly referencing the insights of famous cultural theorists, allows to question the potential influence that the epistemology of the cultural turn may

have produced on the contemporary digital critics. While I specifically reflect on the academic disposition of intellectual fandom in the second chapter, the first chapter of the dissertation theorizes the phenomenon of the digital video essay in terms of its structural post-scholarly disposition.

Overall, the "massification of education" that Stuart Hall and other cultural theorists account for in their collective work on the British post-war subcultural context (Clarke et. al [1975] 1993) has long been a global factor that inevitably puts English-based academic scholarship at the center of contemporary knowledge acquisition, transmission, and proliferation on national and global scales. However, I argue that without analyzing the cross-pollination between scholarly and digital creative practices, contemporary digital cultural and creative practices risk being approached either as decontextualized phenomena or flat participatory and communicative forms.

The first section of this chapter theorizes the mediation existent between academic and broader DIY field of cultural production. In particular, it introduces and explores the phenomenon of video essay from YouTube as a mediated critical form between the more popular sphere of cultural production and post-scholarly criticism. The central examples examined in this section suggest the cross-pollination between scholarly critical practices / concerns and popular production of audiovisual authorial content. It also raises the question of digital content production as the pathway to expressing personal experiences and preoccupations disseminated on digital social platforms. Overall, the first section attempts to theorize the convergence existent between post-scholarly criticism and digital creative production in the video essay form.

The second section of the first chapter emphasizes the general conditions underlying the diversification and extension of contemporary academia. The contemporary digital author-critics

in question demonstrate the demand for moving away from the institutionalized academic environment and the heightened popularity of practicing post-scholarly criticism online. Tracing through the evolution of critical practice in the American academic context, this section suggests recognizing the importance of the cultural turn of the 1980s in diversifying critical practices, as well as students' agency in generating their own theoretical concepts through exploring their subjectivity.

The third section of the first chapter explores the key problematic of theorizing the state of fandom as a form of intellectual commitment and expertise. Tracing through the intellectual history on the subject, the very concept of fandom appears central for the inter-scholarly disposition of academic-as-fan. Thus, while fandom as an autonomous and self-defining type of cultural industry is acknowledged, the broader notion of being a fan is emphasized as an intra-academic form of metadiscourse.

The final section explores the tension between the scholarly metacultural disposition of 'scholar' and 'aca' fan and the contemporary digital practice of post-scholarly criticism. By engaging with some examples of the latter, the fourth section deals with the question of cultural translation of the academic intellectual scholarship to the non-academic digital space of YouTube, suggesting the interdependence between the intellectual legacy of (post-)Cultural studies and the contemporary post-scholarly criticism.

1.1 Digital Video Essay: Creative Mediation Between Popular and Academic Fields of Cultural Production

In the context of contemporary digital media production, which refers to active content creation and dissemination online, the question of what constitutes creativity appears central today. As David Jay Bolter argues, for instance, "[p]articipatory fantasies, DIY communities…,

the remixes of YouTube, and the template-bound self-expression of social networking sites all testify to a new conception of *creativity* as a synonym for art" (2019: 51). Thus, in his view, contemporary creativity "developed from the fragments of the collapsed elite culture and now includes the making or refashioning of almost anything from the new practices supported by social media, to all the older practices of visual art, expressive writing, filmmaking, and so on" (Ibid.). Curiously, Bolter also observes that even though "[m]ore words are being produced (on keyboards) and distributed (mostly over the Internet) than ever before", "extended writing, such as the essay, has lost its status as our culture's favored way to promulgate ideas" (Ibid. 13).

In terms of the more recent context, I would first like to stress that the existence and the immense popularity of the digital video essay on YouTube firmly testifies to the significant cultural status of the essay in the online English-speaking world today. With some of them reaching the length of three hours and beyond, many contemporary video essays receive millions of views, generate extensive comments from thousands of viewers, and even occasionally endow their creators with a celebrity status. Second, I concede that digital creativity, indeed, is broadly perceived as a form of artistic production by the digital author-critics under examination, which can potentially signal the emergence of a qualitatively new understanding of art in the digital era. Despite these general assumptions, however, the genesis of the 'new' creativity theorized by Bolter is arguably misplaced. While he suggests that it emerged out of 'the fragments of the collapsed elite culture' in the twentieth century, what has been more ubiquitously termed as amateur or non-professional creative production can be traced to much earlier historical precedents. Importantly, the notion of amateur creativity has been argued to encompass the practices of reusing and remixing of objects, materials, and tools originally released and devised by larger cultural industries.

According to Jenkins, it is appropriate to trace amateur production generally to at least the end of the nineteenth century, while eventually "Do-It-Yourself impulses spilled over from print zines to include the production and circulation of mix tapes and home videos" (2009: 112). Jean Burgess and Joshua Green state that "amateur video" specifically fits into the long history "of vernacular creativity — the wide range of creative practices (from scrapbooking to family photography to the storytelling that forms part of casual chat)" (2009: 25). In the more recent contexts, Burgess and Green emphasize that the lineage of amateur video, which became widespread on YouTube, "has just as much to do with the social history of the home movie…as it has to do with…consumers appearing on talk shows or being made over on 'ordinary television'" (Ibid.). The roots of audiovisual fan practices have been traced to "the rise of MTV and the popular use of home VCR's during the late 1970's and 80's", which allowed "fans adopt[] the new technology to create music videos and short films of their chosen texts" in a "self-taught" manner (Price and Robinson 2016: 3). Further, one of the recognized underground art forms identified as part of media fandom since the mid-1970s "was inaugurated with the use of slide projectors, developed through VHS technology beginning in the 1980s, and transitioned into the era of digital video in the late 1990s" (Russo 2009: 126). It could also be added that the contemporary video essays on YouTube utilize the structural and practical approach which once characterized broadcast television, famously described by Raymond Williams as 'flow' (1974). Analyzing televised medium, Williams observed that "both British and American commercial television" relied on "a planned flow, in which the true series [of sequence] is not the published sequence of programme items but this sequence transformed by the inclusion of another kind of sequence, so that these sequences together compose the real 'flow', the real 'broadcasting'" ([1974] 2003: 91). Williams describes televised flow as constructed out of opening sequence

"meant to excite interest", which is "succeeded by commercials" and then "apparently quite unconnected material" (Ibid. 93). While Williams applied his definition to broadcast television specifically, it is symptomatic that the contemporary individual digital assemblers also rely on the planned sequence of flow in constructing their audiovisual pieces on YouTube. Following Bolter, I assert that digital media themselves rely on the state of "flow", through which "contemporary cultural experiences" are expressed through repetition and continuity (2019: 23).

To illustrate an example of a video essay relying on the loose structure of flow, the figures depicted below are meant to capture the essence of a sequential audiovisual narrative created by the digital author-critic, Yhara zayd. As these figures show, zayd' video essay opens with a sponsored advertising and proceeds with an audiovisual analysis of the cultural trope, "The Nymphet Femme Fatale", infamously derived from Vladimir Nabokov's scandalous novel, *Lolita* (1955) (Nov 26, 2021). Characteristically, to produce its original creative statement, zayd's video essay remixes and reappropriates existing external material through collages, visual superimpositions, citations, etc. related to Nabokov's work.



Fig. 1.1 The starting sequence of zayd's digital video essay promoting MUBI, a curator streaming service (Nov 26, 2021: 0:04).

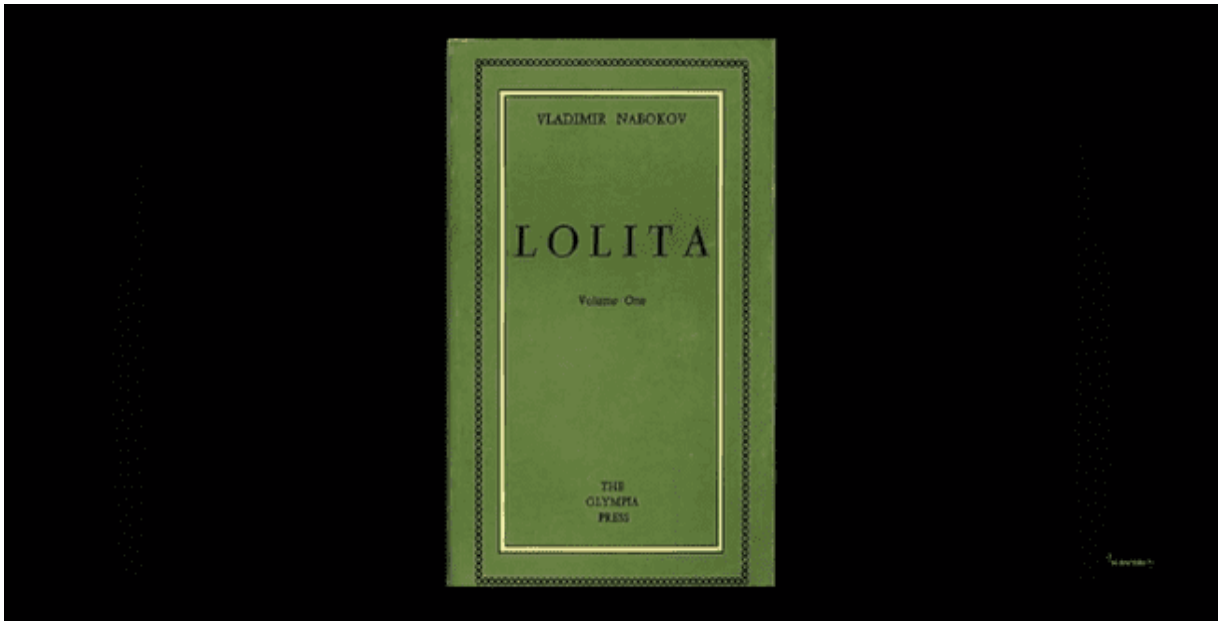


Fig. 1.2 The depiction of the book cover from the original edition of *Lolita* in zayd's video essay (0:20).



Fig. 1.3 The collage of the later book covers of *Lolita* (0:32).

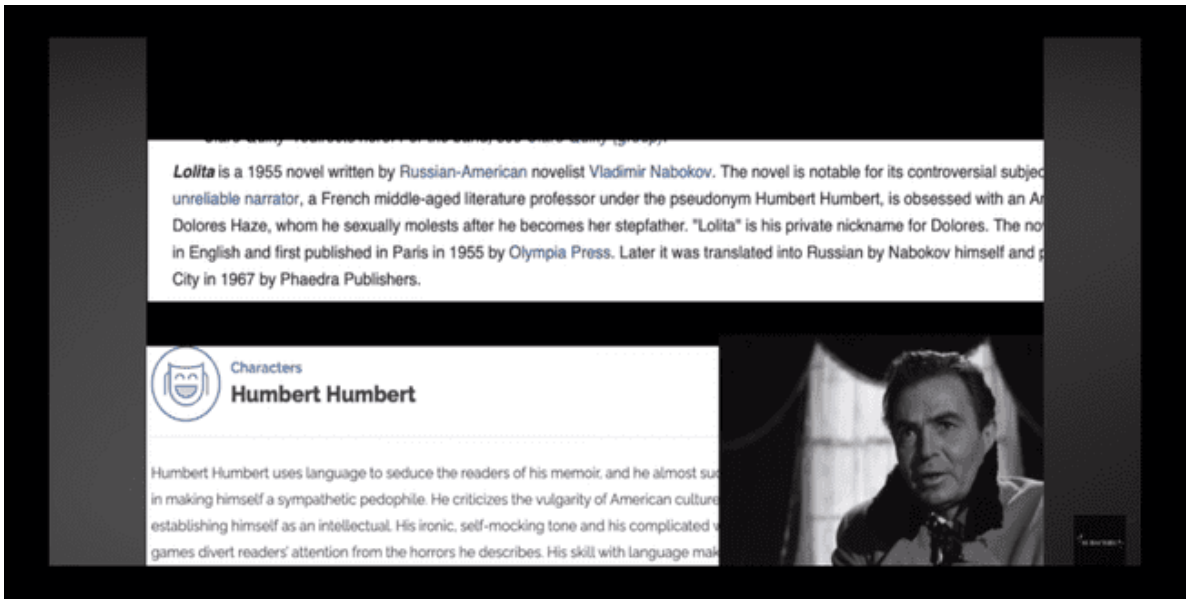


Fig. 1.4 The collage of the visual citations taken from public source websites put next to the snapshot of Humbert Humbert played by James Mason taken from Stanley Kubrick's film adaptation of *Lolita* (1962) (0:36).



Fig. 1.5 The snapshot of Lolita (Dolores Haze) played by Sue Lyon taken from Kubrick's film (1:10).

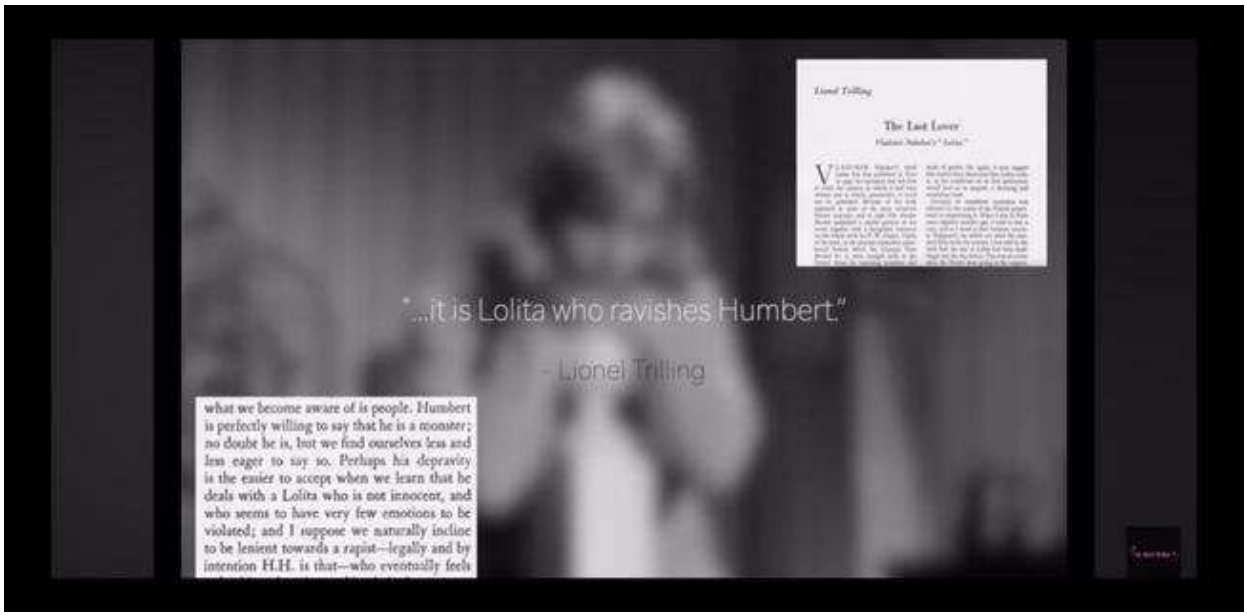


Fig. 1. 6 The visual citations taken from Lionel Trilling's essays on Nabokov's novel which are superimposed over the blurred visual snapshot of Kubrick's film (1:12).

Ultimately, zayd's video essay extensively explores the functioning of the 'nymphette' trope in popular culture, dissecting the common "misreadings" of Nabokov's original work and tracing the harmful influence the trope has produced on American culture (Ibid.).

In sum, through mixing ads with visually rendered and voiceover quotations from the external sources, visual snapshots of filmic sequences and self-recording, the digital author-critics construct the audiovisual sequences which often achieve the effect of a simultaneous creative flow, thus resembling and mimicking the original approach of broadcast television[1]. Moreover, the early "case of fan music vids, which remix footage from cult television programs to popular music" has been argued to create "a distinctive form of cultural commentary" (Jenkins 2009: 117). As William Urrichio contextualizes the development of YouTube content

[1] The roots of the blending of advertising and narrative information in digital media content today may be potentially traced to the model historically introduced by the American film industry. As Christopher Anderson shows, the motion picture and later television industry in America erased the dividing line "between narrative and advertising", stressing that "Disney provided the model of economic and textual integration that has characterized the development of the American media since the 1950s" (1991: 99).

production, while in the broadcast and cable eras users and viewers could exercise "the art of selecti[ng]" desirable programs and channels, "the participatory turn" embodied in social platforms testifies to the emergence of "the art of aggregation" with "the far more active reassembly of sequence" (2011: 32). Thus, Uricchio asserts that "much YouTube content is predicated upon the viewer/user's reappropriation and recontextualisation of existing televisual and film material" (Ibid.). Overall, "the Internet's vast…resources of photographs, films, television shows, and printed texts invite professional and amateur players to appropriate, edit, and combine samples into new versions" (Bolter 2019: 24). Individual digital author-critics today, indeed, remix, (re)appropriate, and recontextualize relevant audiovisual materials taken from television series, films, video games, and other mediums with advertising and self-broadcasting, which, in turn, allows them to produce an immediately situated and distinctive form of cultural criticism. Further, the emergence and proliferation of mass-produced fiction established the salience of serialized and procedural narrative forms, which equally characterizes digital video essay production. Importantly, seriality has been assessed as the key mechanism within the historical production of mass cultural literary fiction, since the latter is primarily motivated by "[t]he goal of producing habitual consumers" (Rieder 2017: 55). Thus, while Umberto Eco's famous essay on seriality points at the exclusionary logic of equating "the products of mass media…with the products of industry insofar they […] [are] produced *in series*" (2005: 192), the historical correlation between mass serial production of fiction and the logic of sustained serial consumption can hardly be dismissed. The result of such serialized character of mass-produced fictional literary works in the first half of the twentieth century, according to John Rieder, was that "the techniques of serial linkage, episodic rationing, and strategic interruption become dominant features of mass cultural narrative to a degree unmatched

in any previous cultural milieu" (Ibid.). In turn, the procedural aspect inherent to a serialized narrative becomes the characteristic of fan-fictional form of writing and 'amateur' modes of cultural production more generally, which, according to the market demands, perpetuates near-infinite forms of authorship and criticism surrounding it. As Anneleen Masschelein aptly observes, "[b]ecause of fanfiction's embrace of serialization and process rather than product, its attachment to rules, and its devoted community, readers not only become writers, but also critics and 'fictioneers'" (2021: 31). Recently, James MacDowell has explicitly pointed at the direct connection existent between video essay and "reappropriative fan fiction", contained in the practice of 'pastiching' popular films like *Joker* and making it the subject of audiovisual criticism (2024: 128).

Recently, it has been also suggested that digital authors' online filmmaking puts them in the lineage of the French film directors who utilized the famous *caméra-stylo* ("camera-pen") — a cinematic formula advanced by the French filmmaker and theorist, Alexander Astruc —, in order "to create a [cinematic] work analogous to the way in which a novel (or any other literary work) is created on paper by a writer" (Drăgan 2021: 112). Historically, however, it seems unlikely that the creation of digital video essays *en masse* can be attributed to a niche national cultural precedent of the French New Wave filmmaking. Practically, it still appears more plausible to count "fan-edited content as a kind of proto-video essay", since both utilize the same production techniques "in all manner of compilation videos, 'supercuts', or fan-made anime music videos" (Ibid. 112–113). Crucially, when it comes to social media platforms like YouTube, its "popular videos are contributed by a range of professional, semi-professional, amateur, and pro-amateur participants", often without illustrating clearly distinguished

boundaries between professional / scholarly and amateur production (Burgess and Green ibid. 55).

Before going further into discerning the structural parameters of the current digital essay genre, however, it is first necessary to establish the contextual background surrounding the digital video essay phenomenon. It has been acknowledged that, since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, a loose genre of video essays on YouTube has gained immense popularity in the digital English-speaking environment populated by recent university or college graduates / dropouts. Often, these digital creators explicitly reflect on their former or ongoing academic status, which also occasionally involves raising the question of whether university education or scholarship is accessible or relevant to the new generation of students. For instance, in her video essay, Canadian digital author-critic Khadija Mbowe refers to herself as "an academia dropout" ("Vice "debates" Feminism…", Jan 15, 2023: 27:26), explaining her reasoning behind exiting university through referring to her engagements with academic texts (Ibid.). Specifically, Mbowe states: "trying to read a sociology, social commentary, social issue text…feels like I can't understand anything that they're trying to say" (27:15–27:21). Thus, reflecting on her 'academic dropout' status through emphasizing the difficulty of comprehending scholarly discourse, Mbowe implicitly explains her choice of entering the digital sphere of critical content production. Terming these digital author-critics "post-academic intellectuals", Steven Proudfoot has pointed at the fact that some of them are indeed former academics, who "present their academic credentials as something that they wouldn't recommend or are helping others avoid" (Proudfoot 2020). Proudfoot acknowledges that these authors "take advantage of this post-academic positioning with patterns like using … humor in place of academic distance to make passionate visual love letters to their favorite things or arguments" (Ibid.). Pointedly, as the

digital author-critic Shanspeare observes, video essays are "more accessible and it's definitely a way of…democratizing academia because you don't have to pay…thousands to be in a classroom to have these conversations" and instead "can…be in the comfort of your own home and not only…learn about different topics, but also…speak about them…and contribute in a way to a conversation" (17:01–17:24). Thus, proposing that video essays on YouTube have direct democratizing effects on the academic setting through digital individual knowledge production, transmission, and circulation, Shanspeare thereby addresses public demand for alternative cultural forms of education and inclusive conversation, which operate *outside* the institutionalized academic field of knowledge production.

It is also important to note that some of the digital authors in question do not actively pursue post-graduate university degrees or, at times, even post-secondary education. As the digital author-critic Elliot Sang puts it, "…to call yourself a video essayist you don't need a college degree, you don't need…to have a job in the field", which is why he considers "the term" "unskilled laborer" to be the systemic definition applied to what he instead defines as the role of the audiovisual "creator" ("The Problem With 'Video Essays'", May 18, 2023, 6:12–6:39). This self-assessment alone testifies to the ever-expanding public practicing of criticism outside the legitimate cultural institutions. Symptomatically, even those digital author-critics who openly proclaim their official university status or credentials on YouTube simultaneously tend to refute the cultural capital that this status implies. Thus, for instance, the digital author-critic Lady of the Library describes herself as follows:

> Hi, I'm Cinzia, a PhD student based in Scotland. I talk all about books,
> ancient history and academia. […]
> DISCLAIMER

> I am just a random student on the internet who loves reading, especially about ancient history and classics. The purpose of my videos is to make classics and ancient history interesting and accessible to everyone. I am not a professional or qualified educator, "expert", historian or classicist. However, I ensure that all the information I use in my video scripts has been collated from numerous credible sources. […] ("Oxford University's Dark Academia", 22 Nov, 2023).

Another digital video essayist, who releases YouTube content under the pseudonym Princess Weekes, addresses the correlation between "the new generation of reimagined classics", or the contemporary popular cultural approaches to Greek mythology, and "fundamentally changing…way we learn these stories in an academic setting" ("Why We Needed To Relearn", Jun 24, 2023, 2:07–2:31). In this video essay, Weekes makes a similar disclaimer, stressing that "…I am not a classicist, and even though I have a Masters in English with a focus on Theory, I don't know everything. What I don't know, I look it up and…have sources…[with] some of them [listed] down below for this video, but I am mostly distilling a bunch of information that I have from the books that I've read…" (5:51–6:09).

Another important characteristic of contemporary video essays is tied to the fact that many author-critics disseminating original material on YouTube are social, ethnical, racial, sexual minorities and women. In terms of the latter, the problem of contemporary university education being unsatisfactory for the purposes of female emancipation, for instance, has been directly raised by the digital author-critics themselves. Thus, the prominent video essayist, Alice Capelle, reflects on her personal decision to no longer pursue a career in academia and to switch to digital content creation instead ("no one wants to go to college anymore", May 16, 2024). Crucially,

devoting the whole video essay to the topic of being dissatisfied with universities and colleges — the ongoing trend among young students she observes today —, Capelle emphasizes the inadequacy of contemporary higher education in terms of the ongoing struggle for women's emancipation. In Capelle's view, while women's emancipation was already historically "not welcome" in academia, the contemporary situation reveals "a growing frustration" in "understanding that in this economy, getting a degree won't necessarily lead to liberation" (6:20–8:57). In short, the transformation of the contemporary university into a capitalist market among many, for Capelle, discourages young women from pursuing academic degrees as a means of social and cultural liberation.

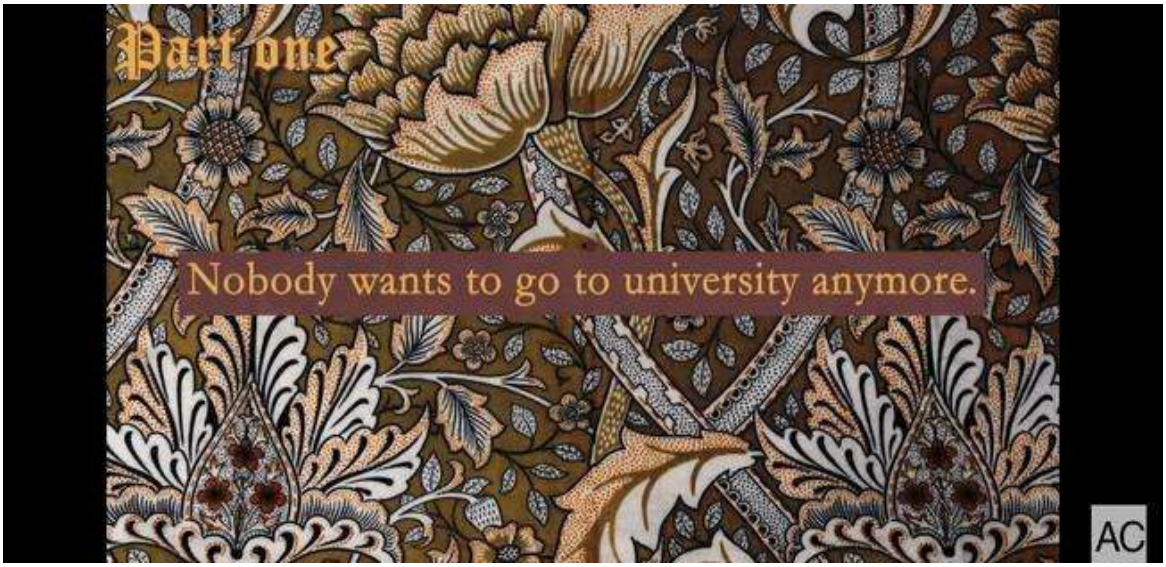


Fig. 1.7 Screenshot opening the first part of the video essay by Alice Capelle titled "no one wants to go to college anymore", May 16, 2024 (5:39).

However, along with the fact that many digital video essayists declare some personal relationship to the world of academia, it is simultaneously crucial to recognize their participation in digital audiovisual production and transmission. In this sense, the broader acknowledgement of the online ecosystems and the active role lead users play there is paramount. As Jenkins suggests in his *Convergence Culture* (2006), the new technological paradigm, through which one

may assess "the flow of content through multiple media platforms," refers to what he terms as "convergence" (2006a: 1–2). Instead of understanding convergence solely in terms of various technological processes permeating the circulation of media content, Jenkins argues that it rather "represents a cultural shift as consumers are encouraged to seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content" (Ibid. 3). Importantly, for Jenkins, convergence specifically occurs when "people take media in their own hands" (Ibid. 17). Thus, for instance, fans of a popular television series "may sample dialogue, summarize episodes, debate subtexts, create original fan fiction, record their own soundtracks, make their own movies — and distribute all of this worldwide via the Internet" (Ibid. 16). Accounting for Jenkins' older concept, I would like to suggest that the idea of convergence in the current digital media context may be understood as the meeting of heterogeneous social worlds explored and channeled through online platforms. The video essays from YouTube, for example, are often created by many current or former students who have simultaneously been exposed to university education in liberal arts, literary, historical, or philosophical disciplines, etc. as well as mass-circulating cultural concerns, digital lifestyles and fandoms. As Nicole Sankofa has stressed, many left-leaning video essayists rely on the "technique of merging scholarly work with entertainment content" (2023: 437), which clearly defines this loose genre's hybridity. I argue that the amalgamation of varying social, cultural, and professional worlds particularly characterizes the convergent craft of digital video essay-making. Thus, on the one hand, these digital author-critics focus on audiovisual creative production, which historically lends itself to popular cultural experimentations with mainstream cultural production. On the other hand, the digital author-critics explicitly and publicly engage with genres, contexts and methods that formerly were the

exclusive domain of scholarly critics. The digital author-critics in question engage with academic methods and contexts that may be broadly applied to digital content production.

To start with, the utilization of a video essay form by digital author-critics speaks for an adoption of the method favored in the discipline of film studies online. And in cases with essay films, video essays, and even literary essays more generally, "the [salient] presence of the enunciating subjects" within these genres should be stressed (Dragan Ibid.). Importantly, this is how Shanspeare characterizes the ruleset for contemporary video essay-making in one of her own meta-video essays, "The Era of the Critic":

> The guidelines for being able to consider yourself an 'essayistic film creator' are very selective, far different from the guidelines of today. You can't just write an essay and perform it on camera. You can't just ask these ruminative questions about any given media and slap a super cut over it. You must start with a mental knot, however various its strands. […] It must contain words, either spoken or visual. This is what sets the essay film apart from the likes of political posters or image-based ads. And since words are integral, voice and perspective have to be considered too. […] I would argue that because the answers of an essay are inherently subjective, they aren't the most important part. It's the process. […] This labyrinth, this mental knot — these are the foundations of what we've come to know as the modern video essay ("The Era of the Critic", Aug 13, 2022: 8:12–11:04).

This passage clearly demonstrates that Shanspeare explicitly recognizes the importance of the 'enunciating subjectivity' that marks the film essay craft more generally and the video essay's

special status as a *professional* genre. In turn, the heightened emphasis on the procedural aspect of video essay-making, the adherence to the communal ruleset, and the creation of cultural commentary simultaneously points at another type of lineage — popular cultural production. Generally, the highlighting of a film essay as a procedural narrative founded on communal guidelines places Shanspeare's stance and audiovisual criticism within the creative logic of popular content production. Thus, by emphasizing the procedural dimension of digital public criticism on YouTube and by formulating virtual community guidelines for conducting criticism, Shanspeare implicitly establishes the direction in which fan cultural production has progressed in the digital age.

However, while these key aspects undeniably characterize the digital video essay phenomenon, Shanspeare's understanding of the video essay form as a *scholarly* genre is significant. In reflecting on the importance of interpretative process over more conventional critical procedures, Shanspeare relies on the quotations taken from the work of a media scholar, Eric S. Faden, which she captures in her video essay in the visual form. By narrating over these visual quotations, Shanspeare stresses that "[t]raditional scholarship aspires to exhaustion, to be the definitive, end-all-be-all, last word on a particular subject", and that "video essay suggests possibilities — it is not the end, but the beginning of scholarly inquiry" (Faden qtd. in Shanspeare ibid.: 9:55–10:14).

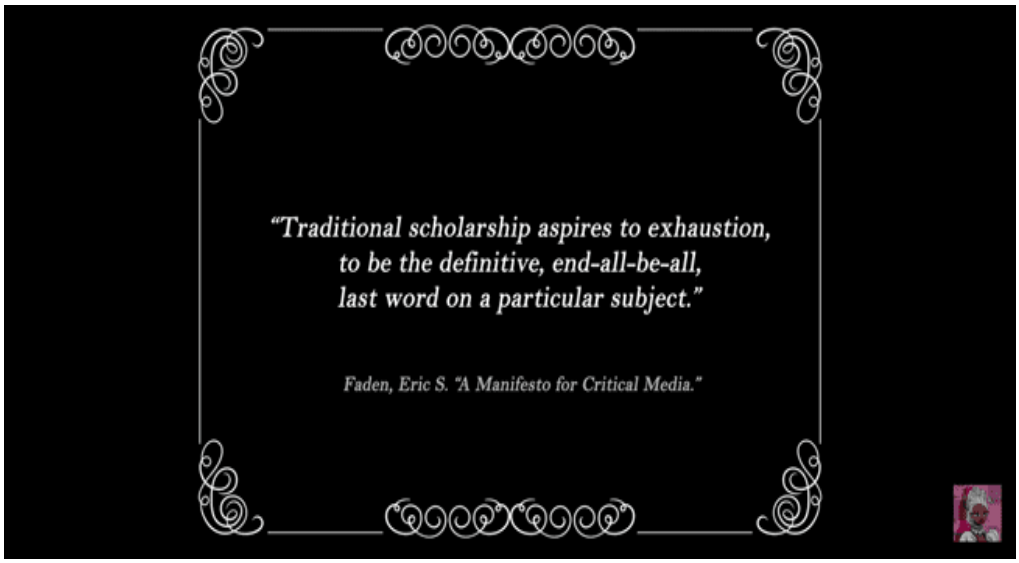


Fig. 1.8 Screenshot with the citation from Eric S. Faden's "A Manifesto for Critical Media" taken from Shanspeare's "The Era of The Critic: Why are Video Essays so Popular (and Hated)?" (August 13, 2022: 10:02).

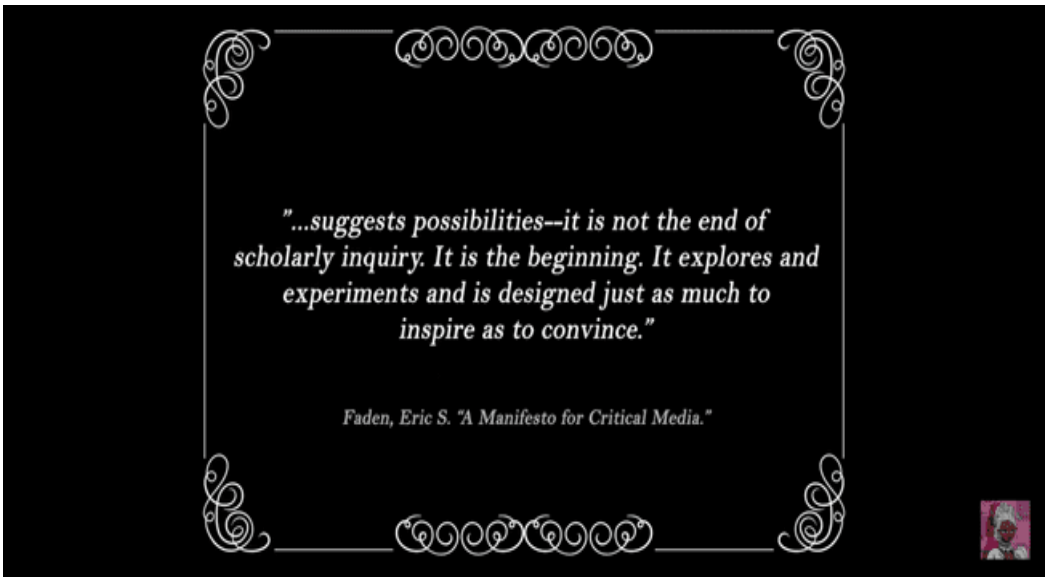


Fig. 1.9 Screenshot with the citation from Eric S. Faden's "A Manifesto for Critical Media" taken from Shanspeare's "The Era of The Critic: Why are Video Essays so Popular (and Hated)?" (August 13, 2022: 10:14).

Thus, I overall argue that what this example partially demonstrates is the development commonly expressed through the popular digital video essay making — explicit public engagement with modes and methods taken from academic scholarship.

Curiously, in manifesto that Shanspeare's video essay quotes, Faden reflects on his creative and critical engagements with Astruc's work, which directly inspired him to coin his own term — "media stylo" (2008: 1). As Faden narrates through his vision, "[m]y work imagined how traditional scholarship might appear as a moving image, and since it combined film, video, voice, text, music, sound, and computer animation, I updated Astruc's phrase and called my work "media stylos" (Ibid.). The idea behind Faden's proposition primarily concerns the academic environment, where 'media stylos' would be "move[d] across a series of potential platforms from classroom to conference presentation to web streaming" (Ibid. 3). Moreover, in suggesting to reform conventional academic essay writing, Faden emphasizes the importance of recognizing that "students are [also] media producers", and that "[i]f we ever hope to fulfill Astruc's vision we need to teach students by becoming producers ourselves and inventing new forms, genres, and techniques. And we need to teach them how to invent so they use media technology's full potential rather than forever emulating what came before" (Ibid. 4).

Indeed, it is crucial to generally acknowledge that the new ways of thinking about cinema inspired by expanding multi-media technologies have affected traditional film scholarship. In Christian Keathley's view, "…multi-media technologies provoke a new way of thinking about film [medium]" as well as "criticism and scholarship" around it by "supplementing them with features that resemble art production" (2011: 179). Echoing Faden, Deb Verhoeven points out that it is necessary to closely study "academics as media consumers", along with "the impact of contemporary media on academic life and the embedding of knowledge in the media themselves" (2009: 155). Verhoeven also suggests that, since the interpenetration of business, media, and university environments, it has become harder to define the latter's "distinctiveness as institutions centered on the production of knowledge" (Ibid. 157). Thus, "auteurist film

academics", for Verhoeven, constitute a different kind of 'knowing audience', one that has to balance between "occupying a place of authority in relation to the film and filmmakers under their microscope" and "their own orientation to self-production, in revealing that they also 'know' auteurism as a creative practice" (Ibid. 158). In other words, this type of academic is bound to mediate between their dual role of "the auteur and the auterist" (Ibid.). However, outside of the context theorized by Verhoeven, I argue that it is vital to recognize the dual role played by digital video essayists, who are both exposed to academic methodologies *and* the popular cultural realm of creative digital production. While the academic genre of video essay or scholarly 'auteurism' may constitute a compelling case for the intra-university environment, I suggest that the digital video essays on YouTube represent a hybrid popular phenomenon. Whether the direct structural link between academically creative projects such as, for instance, scholarly essay film, and self-taught digital content production may be theorized, the qualitative cross-pollination between academic investments and popular cultural interests today is crucial.

Thus, if it was formerly deemed appropriate to assess social platforms like YouTube in terms of the ways in which its "consumer-citizens" partook in "a hybrid model of engagement with popular culture — part amateur production, part creative consumption" (Burgess and Green 2009: 14) —, the more recent development at hand demonstrates the cross-pollination between popular cultural concerns and institutionally promoted contexts and practices. Specifically, the digital content creators publicly transmit and engage with scholarly preoccupations that would formerly be reserved for exclusive academic intellectual consumption in an institutionalized university setting. Through launching and disseminating academia-adjacent contexts and methods before vast and heterogenous digital publics, these author-critics directly embed these in an online environment. Therefore, the scholarly topics and modes mobilized by these digital

author-critics have more or less direct correlation to *personal and practical* interests and preoccupations expressed and exchanged on digital social platforms. In sum, this phenomenon illustrates creative integration of the ideas expressed in a more insular academic environment within the institutionally unregulated domain of digital public communication.

It deserves stressing that, in the case of Shanspeare, Faden's account is seen as directly applicable to the creation of digital video essays, which is why he is quoted as an authoritative source in the first place. However, the main reason why Faden's account, which Shanspeare relies on, is significant is because many contemporary students, who have been exposed to academic contexts and thus acquire "professional profile" (Guillory 2022), have indeed become consistent digital media producers. As I aim to show, the digital critical production underlying video essays is consistently informed by the tools, methods, and interpretative strategies directly taken from institutional academic context. As Shanspeare's example illustrates, academic scholarship is often utilized by the digital author-critics for immediately situated practical purposes. Thus, in Shanspeare's case, Faden's account serves as a mode of *practical advice*, which can be implemented by those practicing video essay craft online. In this way, instead of agreeing or disagreeing with Faden's stance on implementing 'media stylos' in an academic context, Shanspeare treats it as a form of instruction manual that, in their view, correlates to the production of video essays on YouTube. While, in their meta-video essay, they concede to the communal perspective expressed by other digital author-critics and their audiences, whereby the video essay is perceived as a genre with an inherently "elitist" status (Shanspeare ibid.), what is crucial is the direct utilization of academic scholarship for the purposes of digital content creation and the ways in which it manifests itself online.

Further, beyond the utilization of the video essay genre, digital author-critics often tend to explore *scholarly themes and topics* by integrating these directly into the context of subjectively lived experiences transmitted through various channels of social media environment. In the case of the digital video essay form, personal experience underlying one's interactions with the world of academia even occasionally constitutes its thematical core. Thus, in her recent meta-video essay, the digital author-critic under the pseudonym oliSUNvia, who also directly references Shanspeare's piece addressed earlier, stresses that video essays which tend to explore academic concepts "help us make sense of our experiences so that we can have knowledge" ("what can you ACTUALLY learn", Aug 26, 2024: 22:16–22:18). oliSUNvia specifically emphasizes the importance of providing vast digital publics with conceptual resources, which can "help you make sense of your social experiences and communicate them to others" (23:52–23:58). To illustrate the practical application of her point, oliSUNvia notes that, for instance, the concept of 'sexual harassment' did not arise out of theoretical curiosity but emerged as the result of women's practical experience with the phenomenon and their expressed solidarity towards battling the issue. Characteristically, while oliSUNvia speaks of her own involvement in the Canadian academic environment by pursuing a PhD degree in philosophy, she simultaneously juxtaposes the limitations of traditional academia with the benefits of the online environment in terms of expressing and transmitting one's individual experience. Thus, she states: "For example, personal anecdotes are structurally excluded from traditional academia as…a way of justifying an argument. If you wanted to write an academic essay on 'pretty privilege', that paper is not going to be published if the justification for your argument is anecdotes about your own experiences feeling unattractive and the consequences that came from that. But the Internet breaks down that barrier and gives your anecdotes a stage to be taken seriously." (15:36–15:58).

Given such emphasis, it is unsurprising that, in her video essay opening, oliSUNvia ironically comments on the fact that it does not adhere to the conventional essay structure, methods, or tone, thus directly integrating her piece into the very subject that it explores (0:01–0:02). Following Shanspeare's line of argument, oliSUNvia overall recognizes the potential of video essays "to democratize learning" (10:24) and "leftist academia" specifically (11:35).



Fig. 1.10 The screenshot from oliSUNvia's meta-video essay's opening ("what can you ACTUALLY learn", Aug 26, 2024: 0:02).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the reliance on academic ideas and concepts in the loose digital video essay genre often involves explicit explorations of the subject of criticism itself. Moreover, as I attempt to show it throughout my dissertation, many digital video essays exhibit a consistent tendency towards reappropriating academic concepts by integrating them into a digital public conversation, thereby making the former directly relevant and applicable to the issues that are part of the online environment. Thus, for instance, the video essay of the digital author from YouTube under the pseudonym alisha not alihsha with nearly million views asserts the importance of "theory, critique, and analysis" as the antidotes to popular cultural consumption

and anti-intellectualism demonstrated online ("booktok, brainrot, and why it's okay to be a hater", Mar 4, 2024: 17:25). In her video essay, alisha specifically challenges the popular sentiment against elitism, which, in her view, is commonly erroneously conflated with "reflective thought" (18:30). Partial result of such conflation, for alisha, is exhibited in the current online trend of digital cultural communities such as BookTok, whose members tend to showcase thoughtless enjoinment of art and entertainment at the expense of nuanced critical engagement with the works they consume. Therefore, by making her counterclaim against popular anti-intellectualism, alisha argues in favor of a thoughtful and nuanced critique by relying on one of her cited sources: "I'd also like to push back on the idea that interacting with theory, critique, and analysis is always classist or wholly inaccessible. In fact, I find this idea repulsive as it seems to imply that poor people or people with less time in formal institutions are incapable of learning or thinking critically." (Squire qtd. in ibid. 17:25–17:30).

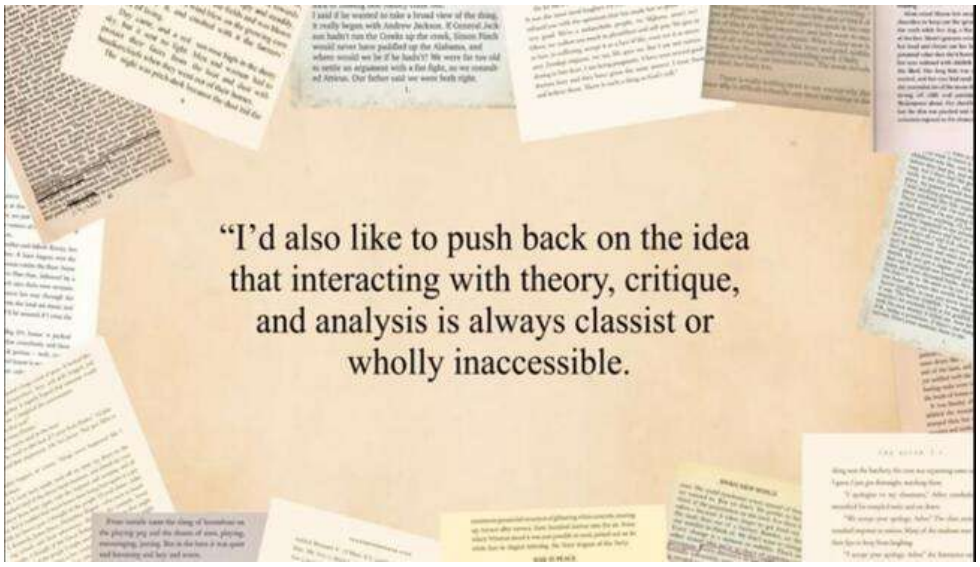


Fig. 1.11 The screenshot with the repurposed quote in alisha not alihsha's video essay titled "booktok, brainrot, and why it's okay to be a hater", Mar 4, 2024 (17:25).

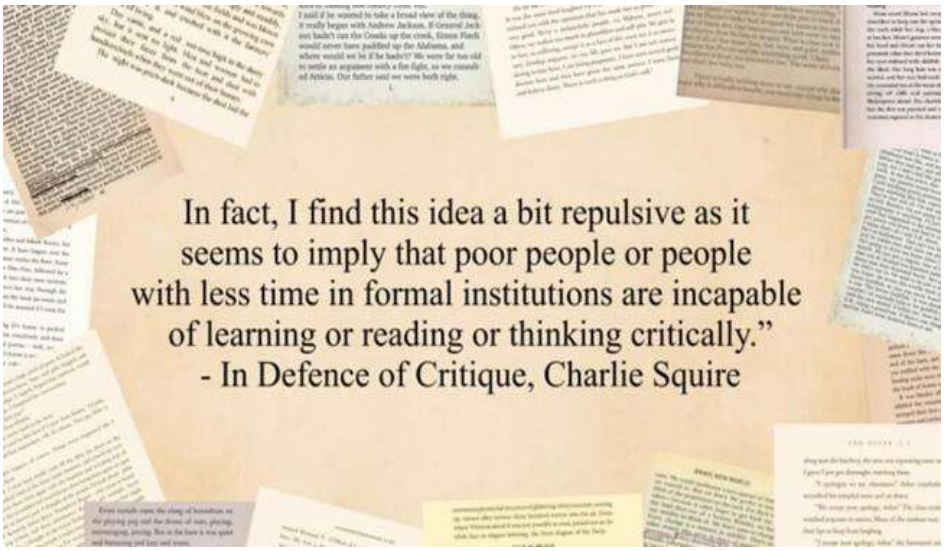


Fig. 1.12 The screenshot with the repurposed quote in alisha not alihsha's video essay titled "booktok, brainrot, and why it's okay to be a hater", Mar 4, 2024 (17:30).

Importantly, alisha's video essay simultaneously implies that the source of the idea associating criticism with elitism may have something directly to do with academia. Thus, investigating the anti-elitist claim against professional criticism, she states that there is an understandable "disdain for the forced analysis in our classrooms, in our timed essays, [which] is born out of exhaustion from classes going through symbolism over and over, until it feels like you're just beating a dead horse" (19:58–20:10). Or, similarly, she points at the popular critique regarding the "overanalysis in English classes, when teachers would prod and poke meaning from the smallest things that seem meaningless" (19:46–19:51). In short, what alisha's video essay seems to put forth is the twofold acknowledgement of both the usefulness and *the inadequacy* of academic criticism in terms of the current digital and social environment, which invites a substantial analysis of the video essay genre on the subject of relevance of literary studies and beyond as well as the role of public opinion in divorcing criticism from its strictly professional functioning.

Overall, these select examples illustrate the implicit claim on part of some digital author-critics to separate themselves from the university world, thereby expressing a tacit imperative for deinstitutionalizing and democratizing scholarly research and criticism. Importantly, creative production of critical commentary testifies to the salience of digital critical authorship, which emphasizes the centrality of the enunciating subjectivity and creative production embedded in the craft of video essay-making. As already stressed, many of the digital author-critics report their relatively explicit ties with higher educational system, which places them in the intermediary status between academic institutions and non-institutionalized digital social worlds. What makes their status intermediary concerns their lack of representation in the institutional sense: they speak from and emphasize their *personal* rather than institutional perspective. While the degrees of influence of information transmission through these intermediary individual channels are hard to determine, the recent emergence of individual intermediary actors between academic public sphere and larger extramural digital spaces of public opinion requires acknowledging. Moreover, the interpretative practices, cultural concerns, and contexts these digital author-critics revolve around make the question of academic intellectual and cultural transmission especially paramount.

Considering the examples illustrated above, I would like to preliminarily suggest that the video essay's *post-scholarly* direction is characterized by the presence of (some or all) of the following aspects:

1. Acknowledging one's university credentials and former (or ongoing) academic status;
2. The use of informal language and communicative presentation in the originally scholarly video essay form;

3. Relying on academic sources in scripting video essays which includes the uses of academic concepts and scholarship;
4. Analyzing aesthetic works / cultural phenomena from culturally political standpoints or / and explicitly critiquing university education for its lack of general accessibility, diversity, relevance, etc.;
5. Adopting a 'fan' approach to engaging with aesthetic objects *and* academic theories / authors.

I generally argue that the combination of most of these aspects characterizes the digital video essay form as a deinstitutionalized mode of public criticism.

To elaborate on the respective aspects characterizing the post-scholarly orientation of the video essay, it is necessary to do so consecutively. First, since many digital author-critics acknowledge their former or present academic status — commonly referring to being a student —, the subject of their involvement in the university context becomes central for identifying their post-scholarly orientation. In other words, the first component may be assessed as an explicit, albeit not necessary, indication of the video essay's post-scholarly status. Second, the utilization of the essay structure / genre for conveying personal thoughts speaks to the relevance of an essay form for transmitting subjective interests and sentiments in the digital public setting. The adoption of an audiovisual essay format, in turn, testifies to the less conventional and standardized, and thus post-scholarly use of the traditional essay format. Consequently, third, the informal language and audiovisual (self-)presentation, which have long become the trademarks of digital vlogging more generally, transform the more conventional essay form utilized in the official academic setting into an informal conversational format. Therefore, the transformation of the traditional essay into a conversational and public form of self-expression endows the digital

video essay with its distinctively post-scholarly direction. The use of academic concepts and scholarship in the digital video essay may be characterized by the same 'popularizing' tendency established thus far.

Further, on the level of content, digital video essays often tend to analyze various aesthetic works or / and cultural phenomena from a culturally political perspective. As I attempt to illustrate it over the course of the dissertation, digital author-critics commonly reproduce and engage with the attitudes and conceptual frameworks employed by various scholars, which were once popularized upon the cultural turn in various academic disciplines from literary to fan studies in the US and beyond. Thus, for instance, video essayists often employ comparative literary historical and cultural analyses of aesthetic works / cultural phenomena which are commonly understood as 'popular'. Since the analyses and standpoints expressed in online video essays are meant to be conversational and public facing rather than formal and specialized, these may be equally described as post-scholarly. Finally, the adoption of a fan approach to engaging with aesthetic objects / cultural concerns by many video essayists characteristically involves their simultaneous reliance on academic sources and authors. A fan approach, in this case, stands for the digital author-critics' explorations of their own interests and attachments to popular cultural texts / issues, which is, at the same time, integrated with scholarly research and broad cultural critical analysis[2]. In such a way, the integrated fan approach demonstrated in many digital video essays on YouTube represents a definitive characteristic of post-scholarly authorship and criticism in the English-speaking digital cultural context.

[2] As I attempt to argue in my second chapter, the academic metadiscourse of attachment or 'scholar fandom' may have influenced the current generation of digital author-critics, whose video essays tend to incorporate a scholarly fan approach to analyzed materials.

Simultaneously, accounting for structural changes that have impacted academic scholarship in the humanities in the last four decades may provide a partial insight into the current digital post-scholarly development. On the broader academic spectrum, Henry A. Giroux has long argued that "many leftist and liberal academics" provide "almost no connections to audiences outside of the academy or to the issues that bear down on their lives", addressing "limited audiences and in a language that is often overly abstract, highly aestheticized, rarely takes an overt political position, and seems largely indifferent to broader public issues" (2002: 451–452). In particular, the more recent normative outlook on the public potential of the literary humanities in contemporary pluralist societies stresses the importance of approaching "literary studies both in academia and in society generally [] [as] a form of pragmatic, theoretically informed historical scholarship…while simultaneously attempting also to make them relevant to our own concerns", which is argued to be "more useful than much of the more heavily theorized recent work in literary studies has been" (Gurr 2024: 199)[3]. As opposed to the official university environment, in which a theoretical, conceptual, and methodological apparatus is codified through narrow academic specialization, post-scholarly modes of criticism publicly displayed on digital platforms tend to be integrated *into* the immediately situated and practically relevant individual experiences. As Burgess and Green aptly recognized in the late 2000s, social platforms such as YouTube warrant accounting for their "*uses*…by real people as part of everyday life" rather than approaching them as "a weightless depository of content" (2009: 8–9). Indeed, YouTube can be said to be marked by "the rich mundanity of the communicative practices that take place there" (Ibid. 8). In turn, this development whereby digital criticism is broadly perceived in the intrinsic link with one's preoccupations in the digital space, transforms the institutionalized modes of

[3] Jens Martin Gurr terms such a normative approach to public literary humanities as a form of 'presentifying' historical literary texts and their analyses (2024).

practicing scholarly criticism. Instead of maintaining a degree of professional critical distance or neutrality, the digital post-scholarly criticism operates on the premise of relative integration, which deems scholarly practices and critical methods as *supplements* to individual practical concerns and investments.

In general, I argue that it is crucial to recognize the role that university education has contributed to the digital public field of cultural production. Notably, it is often far from being acknowledged that popular producers of texts have been also exposed to critical conventions and methods employed in the academic setting. As Jenkins aptly suggests, one must "recognize that a lot of fans carry a large amount of intellectual capital around with them", not in the last part because "many of them are trained academics, librarians, or teachers" (2006b: 13). However, he simultaneously and somewhat paradoxically argues that "academic theory production is simply one subcultural or institutional practice among many", which "doesn't need to be separated out from…other kinds of theory" supposedly produced within fan communities (Ibid.)[4]. In his more recent work, Jenkins has continuously insisted on recognizing today's "media audiences" and their contributions into the making of 'culture' as a "total way of life" (Williams qtd. in ibid.), which, as he maintains, "is not simply what gets produced by those working within the media industry or what gets taught within elite educational institutions" (2018: 23). While acknowledging and recognizing the original works that individual media audiences and producers generate in the shaping of culture(s) is, indeed, invaluable, it is, however, equally vital

[4] Drawing on Thomas McLaughlin's notion of "vernacular theory," Jenkins suggests that some fans "actually theorize their own practice" in an autonomous way (Ibid.). Jenkins understands 'theory' in the conventionally loose sense established since the cultural turn of the 1980s-90s, relating the distinctive subculture of slash writers and readers to a uniquely queer "common ground", which incentivized fan discussions within this community (Ibid. 61-88). However, I argue that such a loose definition of 'theory' is unhelpful in terms of establishing the actual influence of academic scholarship on the contemporary generation of students who produce digital media authorship and criticism today. Therefore, the notion of post-scholarly authorship and criticism employed in this dissertation is aimed at discerning the specifics of the academic background that the current digital video essayists explicitly and implicitly transmit through their online content.

to sufficiently recognize and study the role that the higher educational system has played in today's digital engagements with post-scholarly practices. Thus, without recognizing the ways in which, as Jenkins himself puts it, citing Stuart Hall, "popular culture" both struggles "for and against a culture of the powerful" (Hall qtd. in ibid.: 14), one risks producing the apocryphal vision whereby fan or media audiences exist independently from the dominant cultural or institutional contexts and solely shape and contribute into a unique digital realm of autonomous but also 'totalizing' culture.

More generally, the democratization and expansion of the contemporary university since the mid-twentieth century have enabled academic scholarship itself to transform itself drastically, particularly in terms of the understanding of what constitutes proper critical inquiry. The intellectual turn toward re-examining a scholar's own critical disposition vis-à-vis broader social concerns outside academic domain has gradually transformed the traditional institutionalized role of a university critic itself. Thus, the new historical intellectual imperative for academic scholarship, particularly in the humanities, to become publicly available and socially relevant has gone hand in hand with interrogating the role of the traditional intellectual scholarly disposition. In turn, the understanding of practicality of scholarly inquiry — i.e., its relevance and applicability to the extramural social and political concerns — has significantly diversified the functioning of academic criticism. Especially since the 1980s' merger of Theory with cultural studies in the US, which revolutionized the practice of criticism, it has become the prerogative for many scholars to explore the public implications of academic scholarship. This imperative also included affirming the direct subjective involvement of university critics in producing theoretical knowledge, which has historically rested on the idea of scholarly objectivity, discursive authority, and institutional exclusivity. To briefly trace these developments, the next

section engages with the general subject of contemporary university and the specific historical functions of institutionalized criticism in the (predominantly) American context.

1.2 The Democratized University: The Structural Preconditions of Post-Scholarly Turn

Before elaborating on some of the vital characteristics of post-scholarly criticism in contemporary English language-based digital video essays, it is important to address the underlying conditions that characterize contemporary university. First, the historical process of university expansion since the late mid-twentieth century, which included diversifying and widening the scope of academic entrants, played a central part in transforming contemporary university. Second, the political intellectual movements of the 1980s–1990s have significantly altered the traditional role of academic knowledge transmission, which highlighted the importance of its public-facing rather than strictly institutional functioning. Third, the ubiquitous corporatization of academia since the late 1990s has made it possible to conceive of university as a type of business enterprise, competing with other corporations through the rules of the market and thus losing its traditional claim to intellectual and institutional autonomy. Finally, the contemporary advancement of digitalization has further eroded the overarching traditional boundary between intellectual/non-intellectual, expert/non-expert spheres of knowledge production. In sum, the contemporary university, particularly within the American context[5], can be said to have gradually lost its formerly exclusive claim to producing and transmitting autonomous knowledge. The result of these processes that amounted to the loss of academic

[5] In contemporary context, it is crucial to stress that English functions as an international academic lingua franca, and it is thus important to recognize the centrality of American system as the knowledge trend-setter for both national and transnational universities. For instance, it has been long acknowledged that "…the academy in the United States in some sense defines and 'gatekeeps' quality in higher education. The intellectual infrastructure of academic work globally is largely produced and controlled by academics and institutions in the United States — for example, professional journals and the basic texts and technology of academic work. Even the language (English) in professional publications and at professional conferences globally models the discourse of US higher education" (Rhoades and Slaughter 2006: 120).

autonomy to producing knowledge and authoritative cultural capital, as I argue, may be partially witnessed in the digital critical realm today.

Historically, "the extension and 'massification' of education [particularly] in the 1960s and the 1970s" (Noys 2021: 141) played crucial role in these processes. First, the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, popularly known as the GI Bill, stimulated the post-war explosion in higher education in the US (Reed 2001). Along with the significant public tuition distributed to WWII veterans through the GI Bill, other factors that fundamentally expanded university education of the post-war era were "the general economic prosperity of the period; the rising wages, benefits, and job security available to many unionized workers as part of the Fordist capital/labor accord that prevailed at least in the industrial sector through the 1960s", etc. (Ibid. 2–3). Thus, "[a]fter the post-World War II boom funded in part by the GI Bill and increased state support, postsecondary enrollment rates stabilized in the 1970s only to resume their "upward advance" in the 1980s and 1990s, reaching 65 percent of the population aged eighteen to twenty-one" (Reitter and Wellmon 2021: 250). Second, the "multicultural policies in the 1970s began to significantly widen the range of entrants and solidified to some extent meritocratic claims to equality of opportunity" (Morrow 2006: xxiv–xxv). More specifically, the introduction of "affirmative action" policies and racial inclusion initiatives since the early 1970s "helped bring unprecedented access to a new generation of black students" to the university while still reinforcing and preserving disparities (Johnson 2020: 1).

The emergence of the "radical sixties" in the US famously resulted in campus disruptions, which partly "incorporated [the university] much more firmly into the system of democratic public opinion" (Bloom 1986: 319); the development, deemed unprecedented for traditionally 'neutral' liberal Western academic world based on the autonomous pursuit of reason

(Ibid. 243–313). The political movements of the 1960s generally "came along to demand more equal shares in the distribution of goods and in political power", and to "establish the state as an arena of struggle over entitlements and fix the social categories — blacks, women, Latinos, etc. — by whose fortunes the legitimacy of the social order would in part be measured" (Ohmann 1995: 15). In terms of diversification in academia that followed this historical process, it has been observed that, by 1991, twenty percent of all college students in America were "nonwhite or hispanic and fifty-five percent were women", with the latter amounting to "over a third of all graduate students" and "represent[ing] about twenty-seven to twenty-eight percent of university faculties" (Scott 1995: 32). As the result of such diversification and expansion, "new populations in the universities [begin to] bring with them histories of their own that have not been part of the traditional curriculum", and "their presence challenges many of the prevailing assumptions about what counts as knowledge and how it is produced" (Ibid. 33). Similarly, reflecting on the processes of globalization and transnationalization of the university system that have occurred since the 1980s, Boaventura de Sousa Santos observes that "an ultrapublic social pressure shatters the restricted public sphere of the university in the name of a much broader public sphere traversed by much more heterogeneous confrontations and by much more demanding concepts of social responsibility" (Santos 2006: 75).

Critically, apart from these fundamental changes produced due to the inclusion of different new populations, social and ethnical groups into the academic environment, the gradual inclusion of scholarly voices in spaces of public opinion situated outside its intramural functioning is also significant. It is first important to stress that, in the American historical context, the role of the university departments and research institutes in the national intellectual public life was miniscule in comparison with the liberal professions or independent journals and

magazines up until the late post-war years (Goldfarb 1998: 125). Over time, however, "general interest magazines and critical political cultural reviews" started serving as "appendages of academic departments", and the university overall turned into a major site for "the intellectual action" (Ibid.). Simultaneously, such a shift fostered academic professionalization rather than participation in public intellectual life, with "journal publishing directed at narrow specialists" constituting "the key to academic success" (Ibid. 144). Thus, arguably, "[t]he expansion and improvement of universities [on the one hand], and the decline of the nonacademic public intellectual" on the other represented two sides of the same process (Posner 2001: 29).

In turn, on the structural level, the gradual expansion of the role of the scholar in the late twentieth century has been attributed to the public intellectual movement specifically associated with "the cultural politics of the 1980s and 1990s in the United States" (Jacobs 2011: 84). Thus, "[…] in the academy — in literature, history, and social science disciplines especially — a wide array of voices called for more 'publicly relevant' scholarship, which was often translated into writing op-eds for newspapers or appearing as a commentator on television (Jacoby 1987; Burawoy 2005; Said 1994)" (Ibid.). Since the structural effects of this public intellectual movement have settled in, scholars have gradually integrated themselves in spaces of opinion, both elite and more public ones (newspapers and television respectively). Termed as "media outsiders", academic speakers become more present in the public eye, particularly those belonging to the fields of the humanities and the social sciences, and even start to "compete with pundits and think tankers to define questions of broad social and cultural meaning" (Ibid. 94–98). In sum, the public intellectual movements associated with cultural politics of the 1980s – 1990s has greatly contributed into academic voices becoming publicly visible and represented in the media.

Implicitly reflecting on the new cultural political imperative, Giroux advocated for necessary academic articulation of "[…] what it means to move between the university and other arenas, whether they be media, labor organizations, or insurgent social movements, in order to speak and struggle in a number of public spaces that are actively engaged in the production of knowledge, values, and social identities" (1995: 299). Thus, for Giroux, belonging to "the institutions of higher education" signifies the positioning of "professional academics" "as citizens whose knowledge and actions presuppose specific vision of public life, community, and citizenship" beyond university spaces (Ibid. 298). Ultimately, Giroux argues for "forms of pedagogy that close the gap between the university and everyday life", urging for the importance of stimulating "students to be social agents willing to struggle for expanding the critical public cultures that make a democracy viable […]" (Ibid. 304–306). Importantly, the influence of the cultural turn on academic self-understanding and positioning of scholars in the humanities as publicly — rather than merely institutionally — relevant directly concerns the internal intellectual impact of the broad cultural studies on generations of students and the task of conducting critical scholarship more specifically. Prior to addressing this intellectual disposition and its potential influence outside academia, however, the general functioning of university as the economic enterprise deserves stressing. Pressingly, the creation of the new forms of pedagogy within academic environment envisioned by Giroux is significantly stifled by the economic functioning of university, which problematizes the very notion of academic autonomy in terms of intellectual pursuit of knowledge and its institutional contribution into generating the common good.

Since the advent of economic neoliberalism, universities have become "more heteronomous in nature (i.e., more susceptible to the impositions of the market and the state)",

which endangers their "capacity to promote the common good or even to pursue knowledge and truth in an autonomous way" (Schugurensky 2006: 302). The crystallization of "the entrepreneurial university" (Slaughter and Leslie 1997), diagnosed in the late 1990s, allowed universities to compete with extramural business industries on a semi-equal footing, blurring the former's traditional claim to institutionalized and autonomous pursuit of knowledge. Already in the mid–1990s, Giroux himself identified at least three consequences of capitalist corporatization and instrumentalization for the academic field of knowledge production in the humanities, stressing "the cutbacks in those programs in the humanities, liberal arts, and social sciences that are deemed irrelevant to a society and global world"; the "move toward vocationalization" in the liberal arts programs focused "on highly specialized, theoretical discourses and methodologies"; and "the influence of corporate interests that attempt to link learning not only to the production of a new generation of consumers but also to reconstruction of public schools as sites for capital accumulation" (1995: 297). Thus, the gradual corporatization of contemporary university in the global context has made it problematic to conceive of the knowledge produced and transmitted in the intramural environment in traditional terms.

Along with these factors, the digitalization of knowledge production and the emergence of heightened access to public opinion sharing online have made it especially difficult to conceive of academic institutions and traditional intellectual scholarship more generally as autonomous sites of knowledge production and consumption. In contemporary world, "[t]raditional universities coexist with online communities that share knowledge without any formal credentials" (Bolter 2019: 22). Importantly, since digital technology has become ubiquitous, the very distinction between experts and non-experts, intellectuals and non-intellectuals has become ever difficult to comprehend in terms of the online public sphere. Simon

Susen and Patrick Baert, for instance, observe the trend whereby "*the new communication technologies available in the 'digital age' have made it possible for many individuals to intervene in intellectual debates without having to go through, let alone to rely upon, traditional gatekeepers*" [the authors' emphasis] (2017: ix). Manifested in the practices such as "self-publishing" or "blogging", this digital intervention, for them, "has substantially eroded the boundaries between 'intellectual' and 'non-intellectual' spheres" more generally (Ibid.). The growing popularity of public social platforms among the wide range of users has attracted professional experts and academic scholars to actively promote themselves and their work online. This development has also contributed into the transformed public image of professional experts, whose digital "expressions of subjectivity" testify to the tendency away from "established norms of objectivity" historically attributed to producing expert knowledge (Carrigan 2022: 200). Beyond the negative aspects of such prioritization of subjective expression online, social platforms may also be affirmatively understood "as a place to build alliances beyond the academy for shared undertakings which can transcend the platform e.g. collaborating with journalists on research-informed features, offering expertise to campaign groups or working on shared engagement projects with artists" (Ibid. 203). Whether or not such professional alliances can be actively built and fostered on social platforms, the importance of digital intervention into the domain of traditional knowledge production cannot be underestimated. Recognizing the importance of new digital opportunities for academic environment in the early 2000s, Giroux has insisted on "'a new public space of pedagogy' that employs a variety of old and new media including computers, theater, digital video, magazines, the Internet, and photography as a tool for both learning and organizing" (Szeman qtd. in Giroux 2002: 455). Pointedly, the new digital public pedagogical space, which can otherwise be described as the

digital critical public culture, has recently emerged outside institutionalized academic environment. In order to theorize the specifics of post-scholarly criticism, it is necessary to provide a brief historical account on the institutionalized practice of professing scholarly criticism.

Reflecting on the relationship between common readers and professionals, professionals, and non-scholarly critics, Terry Eagleton observes that "there is a common reader in every professional critic", also noting that "reading, along with talking about what you read, is something that a lot of non-scholarly people do as well" (2017). Historically, however, as Matthias Somers documents, the mid-nineteenth century turn toward "professionalization" brought about the metric of "qualification" which "distinguished the professional man from the amateur", with modern university playing "a special institutional part in this process" (2017: 107). The latter specifically "was marked by a differentiation of knowledge, that is, specialization, which resulted in the establishment of separate departments", including institutionalization of the English discipline at the dawn of the nineteenth century (Ibid. 108). Thus, during the nineteenth century of "professional society", there already arose "the decline of…the "critic", whose locus of operation was the periodical public sphere" (Guillory 2022: x–xi).

As John Guillory has recently reflected on the historical transformation of critical practice,

> [t]he critics of the nineteenth century achieved great visibility and influence without depending upon academic credentials. They were in that sense truly amateurs, representatives of the common reader. They possessed a kind of expertise that was *self-authorized*. Critics succeeded in the public sphere, as they still do today, by creating their public. In the nineteenth century, the

> scope of their criticism extended far beyond literature, to the whole of society. When literary study later sought to identify itself as "literary criticism", it fused the nineteenth-century identity of the critic with the professional identity of the twentieth-century scholar (Ibid. xi).

However, while these different identities of the critic could be said to illustrate a form of fusion, the development itself, whereby the nineteenth century critic transformed into the twentieth century critical scholar, amounted to an uneasy outcome in some national contexts. For instance, in the context of institutionalizing literary criticism in the first half of the twentieth century in America, the New Critics were argued "to shift critical activity away from book reviewers and periodical essayists to professional academics", creating the profession of the "university critic" (Leitch 2010: 34), and "leav[ing] opinion (values, taste, ideology — in short, criticism) in the hands of the…press" (Martin 2008: 292–293). Therefore, while "the turn-of-the-century journalistic man or woman of letters" was "the functional precursor of the academic professor of literature himself" (Menand and Rainey 2008: 11–12), the separation between the scholarly critic as the producer and transmitter of knowledge to a professional class and the literary journalist as the producer and transmitter of "social, political, and cultural debate" established the "distinction between institutions…based on their function" (Martin ibid.). Overall, while the periodical genres of criticism directly explored and dealt with cultural or social concerns, literary New Criticism practiced in universities "tended to separate literature from its social and ideological entailments" both prior to and after WWII (Ibid. 304). The periodical sphere or "belletristic criticism", put under the umbrella term of "generalist criticism" (Graff 2007), specifically "purported to convey literary appreciation" (Somers 2017: 96).

However, the general changes affecting the university since the mid-late twentieth century have structurally altered its traditional dispositions, introducing the cultural political imperative for larger social transformation within its domain. Referring to the "vision" "for the direction of higher education that competed for hegemony" since the late 1960s, Daniel Schugurensky stresses the Marx-inspired conception of "the university as a means of social transformation" (2006: 303). Schugurensky notes that "Marx's original formulation of polytechnic education" specifically inspired the Cordoba university Reform of 1918, which

> […] called for making students subjects — rather than objects — of their learning process, so that they will be active, critical, and creative citizens as well as good workers and to nurture among them a comprehensive understanding of the relations between productive forces and the social, political, and cultural spheres. Although advocates of this vision did not challenge basic research, in general they expressed a preference for "socially relevant" research that addressed the needs of the most marginalized members of society or that contributed to the project of social transformation (Ibid. 304).

In other national contexts, the significant expansion of higher education in the late mid-twentieth century eventually affected the "policy discourse" that "globally has focused on making institutions more responsive to student markets and needs and has increasingly identified greater access for the "masses" as a desirable goal…" (Rhoades and Slaughter 2006: 122). Thus, in general, the transformation of university education in terms of its expansion and the consequent emphasis on students and their agency in the knowledge-making process are significant for the subject at hand.

As Christopher Hilliard has argued, "[t]he professionalization of criticism" in the Western context, perhaps paradoxically, also "meant more amateurs doing it", and since "literary criticism became institutionalized in universities and schools, critical procedures were taught to thousands of people for whom criticism would never become a profession" (Hilliard 2020: 109). Most importantly, the advancement of both poststructuralist theory and cultural studies in the American humanities have provided many students with tools and skills that allowed them to express themselves on intellectual level previously inaccessible. Examining the subject of teaching broadly understood cultural studies in academia in the early 2000s, Simon O'Sullivan cautiously observed that, on the level of "pragmatics", students of this loose intellectual orientation have been "given the tools with which to create their own concepts (their own *quasi* concepts) and produce their own deterritorialisations" (2002). For O'Sullivan, this situation led to the development where "imparting a body of knowledge" or "teaching a set of competences" no longer characterized this kind of pedagogy; instead, he argued, cultural studies as the mode of instruction constituted "an encouragement to experiment" or "an encouragement to *in*competence", which, in turn, resulted not in "producing specialists" but in "providing 'tool boxes'" (Ibid.). In general, the advent of poststructuralist theory and especially cultural studies in the 1980s' America, closely related to postmodernist, critical theoretical, feminist, postcolonial and other adjacent schools of thought, have been argued to promote the vision of "academic work which is also cultural, that is, work which is reflexively and democratically situated within the conditions of all types of cultural practice" (Quinn 2002: 74). Referring to the qualitative shift in academia of the 1980s–1990s, whereby "the overtly politicized language of feminist and multicultural criticism" made it their imperative to challenge "a normatively white and patriarchal culture of knowledge production" (Vadde and Majumdar 2020: 13), Aarthe Vadde

and Saikat Majumdar identify the importance of 'amateurism' as a conscious cultural political scholarly critical tactic. Thus, as Vadde and Majumdar observe, when the "proponents of identity-based critique questioned the 'objectivity' of academic criticism…they turned to personal and autobiographical writing as tools for dismantling, or at least refusing to reproduce" the dominant status quo and authority of legitimized discourses (Ibid.).

Simultaneously, despite the emancipatory intent of the academic cultural political turn, some scholars have assessed the disposition of 'tenured radicalism' as a dogmatic form of "oppositional unthinking", simply unaware of the university's ongoing professionalization and bureaucratization (Posner 2001: 29–31). Reflecting on the disciplinary developments of criticism professionalized through academia, Bruce Robbins acknowledges that, indeed, "work done in institutions like the university will necessary fall within the horizon of professionalism" (1993: 94). However, he also asserts "that to be a professional in not to be cut off from the realm of public value", which is why the realm of cultural political "theory", in his view, "is indeed a professional formation" that "cannot be entirely private, empty, esoteric" (Ibid. 94–95). Therefore, Robbins argues that, "[a]s a professional formation, it [theory] can only survive if it finds for itself some form of public legitimacy" (Ibid. 95). As I attempt to show in this dissertation, the post-scholarly critical authorship exercised by extended digital publics today both demonstrates the successfulness of the broad academic "theory" and the public value of the humanities outside the university.

Historically, the academic semi-autobiographical and involved scholarly disposition has marked critical cultural investigations into multiple objects of study, from subcultures and literary texts to fandoms and objects of popular cultural entertainment. What emerges as the result of this intellectual intervention, as I argue, has broadly contributed into the current digital

post-scholarly practices, where oppositional critical inquiry has become integrated with intellectual fandom. In the extended version of CS, tangibly expressed in the discipline of fan studies, the logic of 'intellectual fandom' represents an important challenge to traditional academic critical distance through its implicitly or explicitly declared ideological stance. The post-Cultural studies notion of 'scholar fans', however, mainly prioritizes the metadiscursive self-fashioning of the academic subject. The next section of this chapter outlines the relevant scholarship that has theorized the state of fandom as intellectually committed activity to establish the ongoing problematic of theorizing intellectual activities practiced in the extramural realm.

1.3 Fandom as a Form of Intellectual Commitment, Expertise, and Cultural Industry: Key Problematic.

> But outside the university precincts another kind of knowledge production is going on all the time. … knowledges have been and still are formed outside the academic procedures. Nor have these been, in the test of practice, negligible. They have assisted men and women to till the fields, to construct houses, to support elaborate social organisations, and even, on occasion, to challenge effectively the conclusions of academic thought (Thompson 1978: 8).

When it comes to defining the state of fandom as an autonomous form of intellectual or expert activity and cultural industry, a few crucial stances should be acknowledged. First, the intellectual aptitude of fans has been broadly tied to sport cultures. As Francis Mulhern acknowledges, the "mass-intellectual" characteristics are easily identifiable in, for instance, football fans: they may be described as "dauntingly learned, concentrated to the point of obsession, [and] masterful in their urge to second-guess every move in the politics of

tournaments and boardrooms" (2000: 143). Notably, the notion of fan itself arose from "slang-filled culture of late nineteenth-century professional baseball", and the definition of "fandom as an enlightened state of commitment" can be traced to the periodical article from 1907 (Cavicchi 2018: 27). In terms of the historical link between fandom and popular investment in artistic or cultural objects, Alexandra Edwards has recently documented the appearance of "the word 'fan' in early twentieth-century American film magazines, signifying a person who follows motion pictures the way a baseball fan follows his team" (2023: 53). Thus, for instance, analyzing the American periodical sphere of the 1910s, Edwards emphasizes the documented correlation between being a fan and possessing "superior knowledge of the film industry" (Ibid. 53–54).

Second, within the crystallization of the film medium, it has been also noted that the early twentieth century "fans could be marketed to, not just as consumers but also as budding experts and hopeful professionals-to-be" (Ibid. 54). Thus, the 1914 issue of the American magazine *Photoplay*, for instance, has been linked to fans with "professional aspirations": through advertisements, the magazine specifically attracted those aspiring audiences who wanted "to write photoplays" (Ibid. 56). In such a way, the *professional aspirations* of early fans could be identified with the growing desire for participating in the professional film industry (Ibid. 54). Similarly, when it comes to the popular genre of comics, "expert fans" were considered "vital" by the industry "because they could increase a series' cultural capital by treating it as a serious form of popular literature and because their activities tended to move beyond reading and letter writing into the realm of fanzine production" (Stein 2021: 59). As Daniel Stein argues, since the mid-twentieth century, "the most dedicated readers" of the American comics come to possess "detailed knowledge about the most arcane elements of the series' past, and…acquire skills that qualify them either as writers or artists of future stories or as perceptive critics of the ongoing

serial storytelling" (Ibid. 56). Thus, "expert fans" of, for instance, *Batmania* comics circulating in the 1960s, "could feasibly dream of becoming industry professionals" (Ibid. 59). Moreover, Stein directly associates fan letters sent to comic books with scholarly practices. Analyzing two fan letters from #114 (1969) and #132 (1970) issues of *Captain America*, for example, he argues that these fan readers respectively "act as proto-scholarly authors, using verbatim quotations and…cross-referencing previous letters" published on the pages of the preceding issues of the comic book (Ibid. 36).

Third, the connection between fans / popular cultural groups and the production of a distinctive kind of expertise and knowledge was posed. In terms of the popular musical production in the mid-twentieth century, Iain Chambers stresses the appearance of "democratisation of music making" in Britain, observing that the emergent phenomenon of "amateur skiffle competitions" in the late 1950s allowed many young people "[w]ith little money and limited musical skill" access to popular music ([1985] 1990: 46). Crucially, Chambers insists on the importance of the "distracted mode" produced by the immersion in popular music, which, for him, generates "a state in which we all become 'experts'"; and "the languages of contemporary urban culture" surrounding the music scene, in Chambers' view, amount to "another 'knowledge'" (Ibid. 211)[6]. Critically, it is worth stressing that the historical intellectual correlation between various cultural expressions and practices and the world of education was famously posed by one of the founding figures of the British CS, Richard Hoggart, who

[6] Chambers' idea of 'the distracted mode' visibly channels Bertolt Brecht's line of thinking. It is worth recalling Brecht's statement in his "Emphasis on Sport" (1926), where he praises the meaningfulness of the spectacle in "sporting establishments" as opposed to theatre: "The demoralization of our theatre audiences springs from the fact that neither theatre nor audience has any idea what is supposed to go on there. When people in sporting establishments buy their tickets they know exactly what is going to take place once they are in their seats…" ([1926] 1988: 6). Thus, Brecht suggests that the spectatorship of sports involves a certain dual mode of "fun" and "learning" (Ibid. 7–8).

examined the uprootedness and "anxiety" of the British working-class distinctive culture through the notion of the "scholarship boy" (1957: 238–249). In Hoggart's view, through entering the world of higher learning, "the working-classes" may experience a sense of "insecurity" and "tension" due to their pull away "from their original culture" and the lack of "the intellectual equipment" necessary for joining "the 'declassed' professionals and experts" (Ibid. 240). Importantly, Hoggart's interest in the intersection of the two cultures — that of the working-class and scholarship education respectively — has undeniable influence on the subcultural researchers of the later Cultural Studies, who consistently examined the tension between the world of education and culturally stylistic expressions of the post-WWII British youth (*RTR* 1975). Further, upon the international incorporation of the ideas formulated by British CS, the explicit correlation between fan and academic practices becomes the common scholarly trend since the dawn of the disciplinary field of fan studies, where fan production is both considered a scholarly and distinctively critical activity.

In his influential volume, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (1992), Jenkins, for instance, juxtaposes "[t]he rules of female fan interpretation" to male reading, suggesting that "[f]an criticism is the institutionalization of feminine reading practices just as the dominant mode of academic criticism is the institutionalization of masculine reading practices" (1992: 110–116). Further, after the emergence of consistent scholarship devoted to studying the fan-fictional industry, Matt Hills and Paul Booth point at the existence of "fandom's own organic intellectuals such as writers of 'meta'" (2016: xviii) and "fans-scholars", specifically observing that these fans "use content, textual, and rhetorical analysis…to assemble a spoiled reading of the extant media object's narrative story" (Ibid. 104). As the study of information produced in fan communities suggests, "meta" "is a significant way for fans to

interpret the source text from an intellectual, sometimes even scholarly, viewpoint", and such fan interpretations of cultural texts are predominantly assessed as the way to "evaluate and deconstruct the object of fannish passion" (Price 2017: 300). For Booth, "fan-scholar research" is situated around the process of verification and confirmation of "all the narrative kernels" fans may "find [in the original text], just as if they were researching an academic tome" (Ibid. 105). Thus, fans studying the spoilers for series *Lost* on the spoiler site *Lostpedia*, as Booth documents, "uncover and display units of information via an academic method of citation and verification", labelling "each of the new spoilers with a citation of where it was found" (Ibid. 106). Overall, Booth reports that 'fan-scholars' in question create spoilers "to make the show seem more researched, and provide a location for this research in the form of a wiki" (Ibid.).

Finally, aside from conceptualizing fandom as a form of intellectual commitment or productive engagement, which clearly emerged through the expanded means of communication represented by periodical presses, advertisements, film, and radio in the early twentieth century, fandom as a relatively autonomous form of *cultural industry* has been considered as its extended development. Thus, branching off "from the commercially produced and published pulps, which were called 'prozines', short for 'professional magazine,'" the American "fanzines" devoted to science fiction roughly emerged at least since the late 1930s, which "represented fans' industry…that required its own systems of production, distribution, communication, and exchange" (Cheng 2012: 222–223). What came to be understood as 'institutionalized fandom' in the 1950s has been associated "with the founding of the first fan conventions" (Lamerichs 2018: 20) and the broader industry of "fan publishing" that eventually developed into "a public forum for evaluating and commenting on individual [televised] episodes and [their] long-plot developments" (Jenkins 1992: 95). Pointedly, the appearance of television in the mid-twentieth

century prompted extended popular engagements with various televised series, with *Star Trek* being placed at the center of the emerging fandom communities and later scholarly examinations within the newly established field of fan studies (Jenkins, 1992; Penley, 1997). With the advent of the Internet, it has been widely observed that the digital world "afforded [fans] the opportunity to contribute to…[the] growing body of fan-related knowledge", which allowed them to "act[] as gatekeepers and knowledge experts to their peers" on unprecedented scale (Price and Robinson 2016: 3).

The brief account illustrated here attests to the importance of fan production, particularly in the historical American context, as a relatively autonomous industry amounting to its own fictional, creative, critical, and communal modes of discursive interaction. Outside of fandom used as a self-descriptor in fan communities which characterizes fan industry in the narrow sense, however, the broader notion of fandom simultaneously represents a certain intellectual conundrum. As I will argue in the second chapter, the academic scholarship has theorized the concept of fan next to academic practices. In other words, the inquiry into the aptitude of non-academic fans for intellectual meaning-production has been consistently posed next to questioning the role of an academic scholar, which is why it often presents rather difficult to comprehensively delineate scholars' conceptual inquiry into their own role as fans from the object of their analysis — fan communities[7]. Importantly, contemporary digital critical authorship challenges the traditional critical and theoretical approaches to social communities situated outside the academic domain.

It should be stressed that the individual digital author-critics on YouTube present their assembled audiovisual material before public display, where the focus on the digital author's

[7] I examine this problem in the second chapter of the dissertation.

identity, self-representation, and public conversation underlies their writings, rewritings, analyses of or interactions with artistic texts proper[8]. Engaged in the practices such as (literary) cultural criticism or analysis of scholarly concepts, these public author-critics dispel the generalized assumption whereby "lay audiences" are argued to be exclusively attached to artistic texts instead of being "invested" in academic concerns or methods (Felski 2020b: 132)[9]. While I examine the deficiency of the conventional theoretical approaches to cultural forms existing outside academia in the second chapter, it is crucial to identify the structural transformations that may have occurred inside the professional university environment in conceptualizing the forms and modes of professing criticism. As I have already observed in my analysis of Shanspeare's meta-video essay, the reliance of this digital author-critic on academic work partially testifies to a post-scholarly public mode of critical inquiry. Importantly, however, it is also crucial to emphasize that the general attitude towards academic critical scholarship has been structurally transformed from within. Already illustrated through Faden's proposition to produce 'media-stylos', the trend towards structurally rethinking conventional scholarly criticism represents a general transformative outlook on what it means to produce academic scholarship. The rise of the new digital media technologies, along with its provided access to information to ever-growing numbers of active online users, has undeniably aided this development.

[8] It is worth stressing that YouTube contains a diverse range of audiovisual materials, inclusive of more encyclopedic individual content that is represented by, for instance, 'easter-egg' videos or long sequence mapping videos particularly excavating televised series, video games, etc. I argue that this type of audiovisual content is more closely intertwined with fan practices that predominantly focus on meta-commentary, interpreting textual plots, tracing, and critiquing production behind cultural texts, or examining fan-specific tropes and tastes, which is why these genres of individual audiovisual material from YouTube are outside of this dissertation's scope. Instead, I examine the hybrid and more loosely defined video essay format, which merges post-scholarly conversation about cultural texts with social, cultural, and political discussion.

[9] Simultaneously, Felski's suggestion that academic "clotted syntax and arcane vocabulary" (Ibid. 133) do not appeal to broader audiences is certainly applicable in terms of the latter's tendency towards deinstitutionalizing the formalized language of criticism.

On the level of epistemological inquiry, the demand for rethinking the role of contemporary cultural critical scholar has prompted some academics to produce alternative and creative forms of criticism situated outside university. Thus, discussing the notion of 'aca-fans' (or 'academic fans') in the academic environment, the scholar of fandom, Will Brooker, reflects on the production of his own "superhero comic series" titled *My So-Called Secret Identity* (Shore, Brooker, and Zaidan 2013–14) (2018: 71). Brooker reports: "I began writing a few years ago, as, among other things, an exercise in putting theory into practice. I started it because I felt I had spent a lot of time criticizing the mainstream superhero genre, specifically its representation of women, and that it would be a worthwhile project to demonstrate a possible alternative, rather than simply attack what existed (Ibid.)." Further reflecting on the series, Brooker states that "[t]he comic is, on one level, a work of criticism, a metatext where the protagonist, Cat, exposes the hypocrisies and power structures of the superhero universe and embodies an alternative" (Ibid.). What this example clearly demonstrates is the direct integration of academic concerns into non-academic creative artistic work, which muses on theory and criticism as the pathways to extrinsic creative production rather than intra-academic modes of theorizing. Most importantly, the insufficiency of theoretical knowledge reported by many contemporary scholars, which Brooker's account partly expresses, reflects the general trend whereby academics pursue conversion of theory into creative practices situated *outside* conventional scholarship. Since academia has been viewed as being divorced from pressing cultural and political concerns, institutionalized theory has been frequently seen as a depoliticized and hyper-professionalized attempt at conducting criticism. Exploring the validity and relevance of theoretical knowledge outside academic mere theorizing, in short, has recently become an important trend among those scholars who deem institutionalized theory unsatisfactory.

Importantly, Brooker's observation regarding his own comic production as a form of 'aca-fandom' opens the larger discussion on scholarly disposition of intellectual as fan — an expression of intellectual commitment to certain modes of critical discourse. On the one hand, the implicit or explicit disposition of being a fan in the academic context allows one to assert their inclusion in fan communities or proclaim their fan commitments in order to situate themselves directly in the cultural form under examination (Brooker et al. 2018). On the other hand, however, such disposition historically serves a larger purpose of critiquing traditional approaches to academic scholarship, which is situated in the metadiscourse exploring the idea of scholarly fandom. Thus, arguably, the metadiscursive scholarly disposition of intellectual as fan provides a form of cultural distinction in the intramural space. As I have attempted to emphasize in this chapter, the cross-pollination between more strictly academic and other non-academic dispositions seemingly eradicates the structural boundary between extramural and intramural approaches to criticism, making it difficult to differentiate between the two.

In the context of contemporary video essay, for instance, the advancement of fan scholarship, while not labelled as such, may be structurally paralleled with scholar fandom: thus, both are equally invested in conducting critical scholarship vis-à-vis fan groups and their interests. On the level of professional distinction, however, the academic metadiscursive disposition of intellectual as fan starkly contrasts with the digital post-scholarly criticism: while the former is historically aimed at disputing traditional disciplinary restrictions and scholarly dispositions, the latter functions as an *active communicative form* of public cultural practice. To detail the alignments between these two modes, the last section of this chapter emphasizes the idea of cultural critical scholarship as a form of translation. Specifically, the question of difficulty regarding the translation of academic concerns to non-academic contexts and vice

versa since the cultural turn in Anglo-American universities becomes most pressing. As the final section showcases, some of the prominent digital authors who practice post-scholarly criticism today directly and indirectly rely on the insights and approaches of (post-)Cultural studies, thus testifying to the latter's popularity outside of the academic domain.

1.4 Facing the Crossroad: Scholars as Fans and the Digital Popularization of Cultural Studies

In his work titled *In Praise of Athletic Beauty* (2006), Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht points to the strategic intellectual positioning of a fan in relation to appreciation of sports, pessimistically observing that "European intellectuals in particular hardly ever root for the teams that occupy the dreams of those they refer to as 'the masses.' In pulling for the forlorn and misbegotten, they turn their role as sports fan into yet another strategy for producing cultural capital in the form of social commitment — and for feeling good about themselves" (2006: 21). Poignantly, Gumbrecht's specific diagnosis may be said to also apply to the broader academic context, particularly situated in the cultural critical debate around the subject of popular culture and fandom. Thus, the notions of "intellectual as fan" (Mulhern 2000: 145) or "scholar-(anti)-fans" (Hills 2002) have been specifically posed as a way of discussing the epistemology of post-Cultural studies in academia. Both for Mulhern and Hills — albeit differently — scholars like Chambers, Dick Hebdige and others who engaged with the context of post-Cultural studies were argued to search for their own place of cultural distinction within the academic community, thereby mythologizing, depoliticizing, or reappropriating the sphere of the popular. Unsurprisingly, the post-scholarly video essayists in question are hardly preoccupied with such specialized intra-academic debate. However, while it could be suggested that they are unlikely to be termed 'Theory fans' in the institutional sense (McKee 2007: 92), the video essayists

simultaneously demonstrate the unspoken investment with the intellectual agenda of the British CS, or rather, Stuart Hall, who directly linked the task of scholarly criticism with a form of *cultural political practice*[10].

Briefly returning to the subject of 'scholar fandom', which continues to represent the metadiscursive academic disposition particularly in the disciplinary confines of fan studies, the advancement of various digital and media technologies has allowed to conceive of 'scholar-' and 'aca-' fandom as intellectual attitudes spanning beyond the traditional academic forms of expression. Hills, commenting on Verhoeven's work, specifically proposed that "scholar-fandom might […] find itself enmeshed in […] media industry processes" through integrating their fan scholarship "into media-paratexts, commodities and systems of value" (2013: ix). Similarly, Karen Hellekson alludes to "technological advances" that may "ease scholars' essays into alternative modes of presentation of aca-fannish thought" (Brooker et. al 2018: 70). Potentially, the post-scholarly mode of criticism embedded in the video essay may be also indicative of such integrative and remediated processes that followed in the aftermath of the digital turn. However, as I have previously stressed, the digital author-critics in question rather possess a professional profile than an expert academic status, which gives post-scholarly criticism its original form. Simultaneously, the digital author-critics do not explore the metacultural concerns related to the scholarly disposition of intellectual as fan. Therefore, it is essential to recognize the underlying stance engrained in the scholarly dispositions of 'scholar-fandom' and 'aca-fandom' in order to delineate these from the intellectual commitment to practicing cultural criticism online.

In general, the disposition of intellectual/scholar-/aca-fandom historically rests on the critical apparatus gradually introduced during the intellectual phase of post-Cultural studies.

[10] See more on this in Chapters 2 and 4.

Reflecting on the notion of 'aca-fan' or 'academic fan', Mark Duffett, for instance, suggests that "an aca-fan is someone who speaks from his or her own fan community and uses cultural studies as a vehicle to represent, support and promote it" (2018: 63). Duffett simultaneously observes that contemporary fan studies gravitates towards "a kind of politics of distraction, where the old concerns of cultural studies have given way to either empirical fascination with rare objects that ultimately maintain cultural capital, or to a return to the production of relatively apolitical concepts based on form" (Ibid. 73). While Duffett's stance arguably dismisses the epistemology of post-Cultural studies, which already represents a dispositional scholarly mode that significantly departs from the earlier political concerns, his core suggestion remains astute. Namely, the 'aca-fan' stance, evolving out of the previous intellectual scholarly dispositions, prioritizes the maintenance of the academic cultural capital enclosed in its epistemology. Thus, retaining the ideological apparatus of Cultural Studies as a vehicle to academic self-representation, the contemporary 'scholar fan' disposition often tends to explore its own fandom[11] at the expense of examining actually existing cultural political concerns. Conversely, the digital author-critics, being practically situated in the digital environment, engage with the cultural and political contexts that go beyond academic metadiscursive self-fashioning.

In the communal sense, especially given their educational lineage, it needs to be emphasized that the digital critics were initially united in asserting and exploring their left-leaning views online. It has been thus observed that some of these "independent online videographers and their surrounding communities" specifically constituted "a leftist response to alt-right use of digital media" (Kuznetsov and Ismangil 2020: 204). Moreover, it can be

[11] The phenomenon of fan scholarship within academia understood as a professionalized form of extramural fan practices, including 'empirical fascination with rare objects', presents itself as a peculiar reverse form of cultural translation and deserves its own study. This subsection predominantly emphasizes the question of cultural translation *of* certain academic concerns and methods *to* the mode of digital post-scholarly criticism.

theorized that these digital authors-critics have begun to transmit and (in)directly engage with cultural, ideological, and intellectual concerns that once famously marked the cultural turn in the 1980s' western academia. Therefore, I argue that it is fruitful to theorize its influence on the generation of video essayists, who directly or indirectly explore their left-leaning views online today through digital post-scholarly criticism.

Before outlining the genesis and the implications that the broad academic positioning of intellectual as fan may pose for the academic context, one crucial aspect of cultural studies as an intellectual label deserves addressing. Namely, cultural studies as a generalized intellectual brand of scholarly thought has provoked scholarly responses that specifically examine the tension between culture as the mode outside academia and academia itself as the mode of 'translating' exterior culture onto itself. In other words, the cultural studies' project within academia has been assessed in terms of its double intention: that of studying culture, and of producing culturally academic value. For instance, Malcolm Quinn asserts that "[c]ultural studies practitioners…think that they are doing one thing and something else, namely academic work which is also cultural, that is, work which is reflexively and democratically situated within the conditions of all types of cultural practice" (2002: 74). Crucially, for Quinn, "the institutionalized versions of cultural studies" "promote the 'double meaning' that academic work is both itself and cultural, and retain a fantasy of distinction through a discourse on transgression" (Ibid. 75). Reflecting on this diagnosed tension inside academia, Quinn ponders the question "of whether academia can still be said to produce itself, or is being produced elsewhere" (Ibid.). He concludes that "[a]cademia is losing the form of its translation from academic to non-academic", ultimately suggesting that "the non-academic is increasingly translating academia back to itself" (Ibid.).

More generally, as I have briefly attempted to illustrate in the second section of this chapter, the public-facing direction of academic scholarship has been historically prompted by the social and cultural movements which urged academic theorists and scholars to address pressing issues to larger, extramural publics. Unsurprisingly, many specific scholarly works that initially addressed narrow professional concerns and audiences became exceptionally popular in light of the countercultural and emancipatory political movements, which started to systematically advance their agendas since at least the late 1960s in the West. Thus, for instance, a famous British feminist film theorist, Laura Mulvey, whose works appeared in the prominent film journal published by the Oxford University Press, Screen, coined a term in the 1970s that would become recognized well beyond the academic domain — 'male gaze' (1975). Characteristically, while Mulvey specifically addressed the Hollywood film industry and its patriarchal treatment of women on screen in her academic work, the term converted into a broadly applied notion, understood by many people across the globe who do not specialize in feminist psychoanalytical film studies or adjacent disciplines. What is especially pressing about Mulvey's example in the current context concerns the fact that the term 'male gaze' is often employed in, for instance, digital videos that specifically address the subject of female self-representation on social media today. The YouTube video by a London-based author-critic Tara Mooknee, for example, analyzes the term 'female gaze' in application to women engaging with audiovisual blogging on social media, while recognizing the root of the original term through a second-hand source ("Why 'The Female Gaze'", Oct 1, 2024).



Fig. 1.13 The screenshots taken from Tara Mooknee's video "Why 'The Female Gaze' kinda sucks…", Oct 1, 2024 (8:44–9:04).



Fig. 1.14 The screenshots taken from Tara Mooknee's video "Why 'The Female Gaze' kinda sucks…", Oct 1, 2024 (8:44–9:04).

In short, what this multi-layered case of translation seems to suggest is the potential for a much broader functioning of the term 'post-scholarly', which may apply to much vaster scope of non-academic uses of scholarly concepts witnessed online today.

At the same time, however, the post-scholarly digital video essays generally stand out from a vaster scope of similar audiovisual content on YouTube. Namely, the increasing number of individual digital author-critics who consistently engage in cultural and media criticism and who have been *explicitly* exposed to academic context, amounts to the specific case of the complex form of cultural translation addressed by Quinn. I argue that the following examples are particularly instructive. For instance, during the first year of the pandemic, the digital author-critic, Broey Deschanel, released a video essay on the subject of "low culture adaptations" ("When Shakespeare Got Cool", Nov 17, 2020). In this video essay, Deschanel specifically examines multiple cinematic popular cultural adaptations of Shakespeare's works and argues that "Shakespeare was never meant to be high culture" (17:06–17:12). Commonly, as Deschanel explains, "we've come to associate Shakespeare with what scholars like to call 'high culture'", linking his works "with the upper classes, things society has deemed to have aesthetic value" and to be "inaccessible to the masses" (1:50–2:05). Counter to such belief, Deschanel shows that the "youth pop culture renditions" of Shakespeare's plays "taught us that Shakespeare is for everyone" (17:22–17:39), providing multiple academic sources throughout this video essay to substantiate her claim. Deschanel specifically refers to and cites academic sources such as Emma French's "Selling Shakespeare to Hollywood" (2006) or "Shakespeare and Youth Culture" (2006) by Jennifer Hulbert et. al., and others.

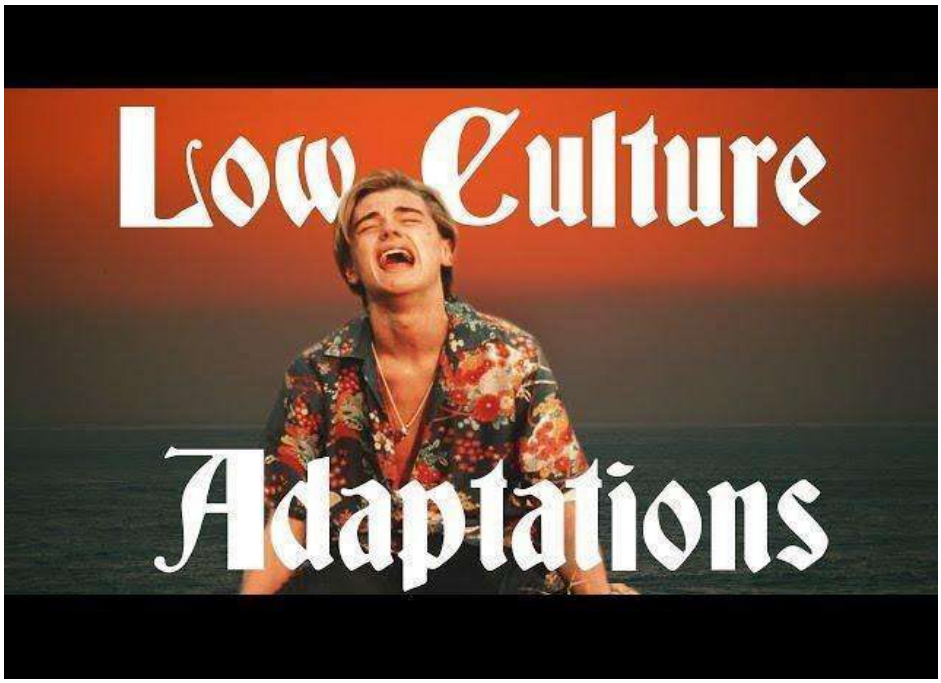


Fig. 1.15 The thumbnail of Broey Deschanel's video essay titled "When Shakespeare Got Cool", Nov 17, 2020.

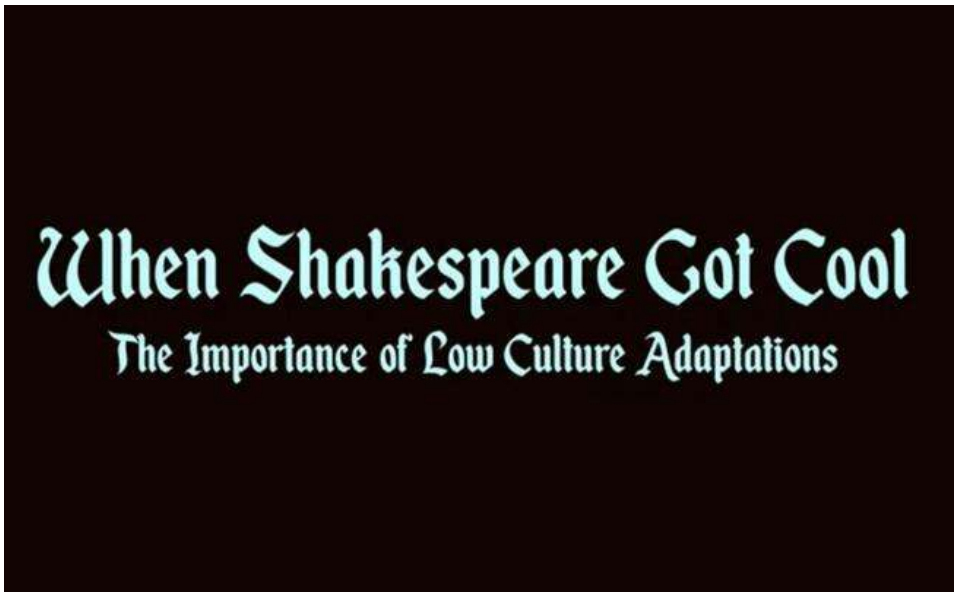


Fig. 1.16 The screenshot taken from Broey Deschanel's video essay titled "When Shakespeare Got Cool", Nov 17, 2020 (1:33).

In other words, it appears that the underlying goal of Deschanel's video essay is to adapt the scholarly approach inaugurated since at least the 1990s, which valorized popular nature of the literary canon, to the digital space of YouTube and its audiences. By highlighting Shakespeare's

historical popularity, she applies it to the more familiar context of his Hollywood adaptations to ultimately conclude that Shakespeare is for everyone, and that his works transcend cultural stereotypes promoted by the proponents of 'high culture'.

More recently, another popular digital author-critic, Mina Le, whose YouTube channel rose to prominence during the pandemic and has over 1.4 million subscribers, released a video essay on the subject of subcultures and the contemporary digital aesthetics ("let's talk about the rise…", Mina Le, Aug 7, 2023). In her video essay, Le explores the meaning of the term "subculture" and dives into the western history of subcultural movements, including the history of academic scholarship engaged with the topic. Thus, she points to the origins of the subcultural theory founded "by sociology professors of the Chicago School who [were] interested in investigating the occurrence of delinquency and crime", stressing that "a lot of femme-centric subcultures were not considered threatening or taken seriously enough to be researched by academic and journalistic institutions" (2:49–3:22); shortly thereafter, Le brings up the Birmingham school of cultural theorists who "emerged to analyze the new working class youth subcultures such as teddy boys, mods, skinheads and rockers in post-WWII Britain" (3:49–4:05). She then proceeds describing the insights of the emergent Cultural Studies in the following way:

> They argued that working class subcultures were evidence of symbolic resistance to the mainstream consumption imperative of capitalism. But you know, despite these radical beliefs, the actual resistance movement was quite fleeting. To the scholars, resistance was merely symbolic because there were no subcultural career paths that these kids could transition into, and so I don't know, it kind of…remained stagnant as this movement. It

> didn't alter the lives of any of these working-class kids in any kind of…economic way (4:05–4:32).

After arriving at this conclusion, Le transitions onto the main topic of the video essay — marketable fashion aesthetics, which finds its viral popularity in the current social platform environment. She states that "[a] lot of subculture styles are resistance styles in the way that they challenge the mainstream [;] [h]owever, nowadays, the mass media and the rise of fast fashion have limited the ability of young people to use their clothes as the tools of a cultural revolution" (5:05–5:16). In sum, in her view, "it is only becoming increasingly common for growing cultural movements to find themselves absorbed and monetized by mainstream institutions" (5:27–5:36).

What is particularly striking about Le's account is the direct correlation she makes between the subcultural academic scholarship and its bearing on the cultural historical developments. Thus, the CCCS' examination of the British post-WWII youth subcultures, in Le's view, relied on the idea of symbolic cultural resistance precisely because these working-class groups could not achieve political or economic liberation through mere stylistic expression. Le explicitly aligns with the subcultural theory's conception of style as a form of subcultural resistance, which is why the contemporary fetishization of aesthetics online, for her, speaks for its co-optation by mainstream institutions and corporations that prevent various styles proliferated on social media from serving 'as the tools of cultural revolution'. Thus, since a historically subcultural style was never anything more than a symbolic expression of the subcultural resistance against the mainstream, the current online aesthetics on social platforms are seen as even less expressive of such cultural resistance. As this video essay demonstrates, for an author-critic like Le, the interest in the insights of Cultural Studies theorists' into youth subcultures is directly linked with her individual concern with contemporary digital aesthetics,

the subject also especially relevant for active social media users. Pointedly, Le is a digital creator herself, whose online presence and personal aesthetics have a direct influence on the successfulness of her channel, which is why this topic has an immediate bearing on her craft. In sum, the application of the Cultural Studies' subcultural theory to social platform aesthetics corroborates the influence of the former on the public post-scholarly criticism.

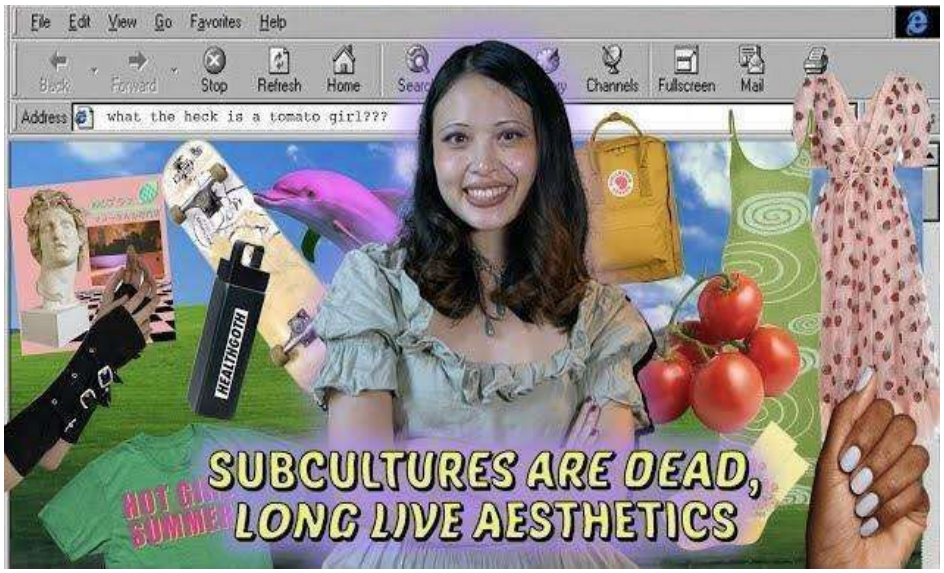


Fig. 1.17 The thumbnail of Mina Le's video essay titled "let's talk about the rise of '-core' and 'girl' aesthetics", Aug 7, 2023.

Another illustrative example in question explores the subject of mass-published popular fiction in terms of representation of female identity and gender. The video essay of the digital author-critic Natalie Wynn under the digital pseudonym ContraPoints, who currently has over 1.8 million subscribers and represents one of the most recognizable digital critical voices on and outside of YouTube, analyzes the popular fictional romance saga *Twilight* through a post-scholarly cultural critical perspective ("Twilight", ContraPoints, Mar 1, 2024). At the start of the analysis, Wynn reflects on popular literary "best-sellers" since the mid-eighteenth century, stressing that fictional novels such as Samuel Richardson's *Pamela or Virtue Rewarded* (1740) have been historically "dismissed as escapist fantasy, "literary opium", an addictive, corrupting

influence" (10:12–10:34). Further, Wynn traces through "continuity from *Pamela* to *Twilight*" embedded in "the persistent anxiety of critics that the romance novel is somehow corrupting the youth, or enslaving women, or both" (14:42–14:49). Importantly, in Wynn's view, "the obsessive moral policing of the romance genre" constitutes "centuries of "concern" that women are reading the wrong kinds of books" (9:14–9:19). Centrally, beyond conducting such literary cultural analysis, Wynn devotes most of this near three-and-a-half-hour video essay to feminist psychoanalytical theory and feminist historical movements, which are generally meant to express the former's personal stance on feminism, identity, and gender representation.

The central importance of Wynn's video essay, as I argue, is contained in its cultural critical imperative to *publicly* engage with the traditionally discarded fictional genre of romance, which historically marked the late-twentieth century post-Cultural studies' scholarship on the subject. Thus, in the mid 1980s, Janice Radway's famous seminal work *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (1984) inaugurated scholarly explorations of female reading publics through the lens of an "ethnography of reading" ([1984] (1987): 4). In her work, Radway explicitly acknowledges the influence of the CCCS in introducing the ethnography to the American English Departments and her research, stressing these theorists' explorations of "ethnographic investigation of behavior and cultural meaning" vis-à-vis "ideological analysis of the structures of determination" (Ibid. 3–5). Critically, Radway emphasizes it in the introduction that her book's argument was a product of her "own intellectual history" and "the community" she "intended and hoped to address" (Ibid. 1). In sum, while Wynn does not cite Radway's work specifically, the former similarly adheres to the personally involved approach to reading popular fictional texts and the ideological context underlying these. Therefore, I suggest that it may be appropriate to conceive of the general influence that the historical academic cultural critical

scholarship has imposed on the contemporary generation of students, who often elect popular fictional genres for post-scholarly cultural critical analysis. The question of translation from the academic to the non-academic, in short, may be proven to be central for systematic engagements with contemporary digital critical forms.



Fig. 1.18 Screenshot from ContraPoints' video essay "Twilight", Mar 1, 2024 (5:08).

To conclude these preliminary points by drawing on Quinn's assessment once more, the difficulty of translation between academic and non-academic contexts appears to be integral for the epistemological core of post-Cultural studies. Arguably, since the proponents of this approach insisted on representing *their own* cultures beyond the mere academic form of distinction, the boundary between its academic and non-academic identity and intent is especially difficult to discern epistemologically. Critically, the subject of post-Cultural studies' influence on the non-academic forms of culture poses the question raised by Quinn in a slightly modified form: namely, can it be stated that the non-academic digital cultural space has started to reflect such historical academic intellectual disposition? If the latter has been intrinsically open to contexts outside its domain through its conscious self-inclusion into the non-academic forms

of culture, then its external non-academic adoption that has recently proliferated in the digital public spaces can at least partially be seen as the result of such intellectual openness. In other words, the extension of post-Cultural studies and its epistemology to the non-institutionalized public spheres could be assessed as the culmination of its emancipatory intellectual intent.

Given the potential importance of such intellectual influence, the second chapter of this dissertation engages with the specific intellectual history of the post-Cultural studies' metadiscourse. In particular, I study the cross-pollination existent between the ideas of affective attachment and disinterested detachment, emphasizing the intellectual influence of the original literary studies (New Criticism and beyond) and CS on the academic metadiscourse of scholar-fandom. Critically, the second chapter opens a pathway that allows us to theorize the contemporary digital post-scholarly criticism as a form of cultural practice, idea foregrounded by the original CS' scholars.

Chapter 2: The Academic Metadiscourse of Cultural Attachment: Conceptual Blueprints and Theoretical Reconfigurations

> [T]he first and most persistent protest culture arouses is an insatiable complaint against the intellectual's own inevitable dividedness — the contradiction between, on the one hand, an intellectual and political ideal of wholeness which gets called 'the intellectual,' and on the other hand a real, necessarily partial place within the division of labor, a place which is called 'the professional.' Literary criticism, though a discipline dedicated to culture, cannot represent culture without inconsistency for the very reason that it *is* a discipline among other disciplines. As a result, critics tend to direct their oppositionality against themselves, often to the exclusion of targets that are more distant and arguably more urgent (Robbins 1993: 62–63).

Reflecting on the early influential work of Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* (1957), Hall asserts that the former was shaped in and by a culture very much excluded from the English national "literary cultural tradition" ([1988] 2016: 10). In Hall's view, Hoggart had to operate "both inside and outside of the tradition which formed him", and in "breaking from it, using it to deal with his own experience, and to generalize from it" (Ibid.). Thus, Hoggart, who was the integral member of the CCCS, "established a practice, brought people together, and made the project […] real as an intellectual development" (Ibid. 11–12). What is crucial about Hall's line of thought, in the case of the digital video essay, is the understanding of intellectual critical scholarship as a mode of a cultural practice, which emerges due to the concrete subjective political interests underscored by one's exclusion from the dominant mode of culture. In other

words, while traditional academic criticism, particularly in its literary critical form, has been historically[12] and institutionally divorced from practical and political concerns situated outside of its purview[13], the new mode of cultural criticism directly speaks to personal concerns conceived inside the excluded cultural political experiences and practices. Thus, in an attempt to revise the traditional positioning of a critic in their narrow and exclusionary definition of 'Culture', the cultural critics of the original Cultural Studies inaugurate the broader conception of culture and academic criticism by sometimes discursively positioning themselves inside the very lived culture that had been previously ignored. Arguably, however, what emerges over time in the post-Cultural studies' phase is a form of metaculture (Mulhern 2000) — the metadiscursive fashioning of an academic subject, which converts scholarly criticism into a "textualist" form (Sparks 1996) of implied cultural participation.

Pressingly, the key issued raised in the second chapter of this dissertation concerns the lack of an up-to-date, systematic and persuasive account in existing scholarship that addresses the intersection between the pursuit of intellectual inquiry and popular cultural commitment to practices situated outside the academic domain. Historically, various disciplinary accounts engaged with studying non-professional or non-scholarly audiences often tend to consider popular, fan, or media audiences as innately intellectual, while also attributing the heightened degree of affective attachment or commitment to cultural texts or practices supposedly enclosed within these different extramural communities. Simultaneously, as I attempt to demonstrate over the course of the chapter, the practices and investments of popular, fan, and lay/amateur audiences have been commonly aligned with the goals and interests pursued by academic

[12] Raymond Williams' contention that 'culture' in general and literary criticism in particular have been historically limited to 'creative and imaginative works' is expressed in his *Culture and Society* (1958).

[13] As John Guillory aptly puts it, "…all scholarly professions are distanced from the sphere of political action by the very institutional structures sustaining the relative autonomy of these professions in society" (2022: 58).

scholars that often overshadow the former. To put it in E. P. Thompson's words, the major risk of such scholarly disposition pertains to the emergence of "a self-generating conceptual universe which imposes its own ideality upon the phenomena of material and social existence, rather than engaging in continual dialogue with these" (1978: 13). In sum, the historical intellectual accounts illustrated here generally testify to the common extrapolation of the pressing scholarly concerns onto the external social groups, which overall presents it as rather difficult to theorize the extramural practices, including contemporary cultural criticism, in their nuanced complexity. When it comes to analyzing and conceptualizing contemporary digital critical practices in particular, it is difficult to discern the roots and the epistemology of the current video essayists without systematically addressing the *metadiscursive gap* which has historically characterized many scholarly approaches to extramural intellectual and cultural practices.

The first section of the chapter offers a brief overview of the ideas of disinterested contemplation, affective attachment, and distance that take root in the discipline of literary studies. While accounting for the lack of a systematic account of these ideas in existing academic scholarship, I outline the potential conceptual blueprint which may have contributed into the emergence of an 'involved' scholarly disposition in post-Cultural studies. By briefly engaging with the conceptual frameworks of William K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley, I. A. Richards, Stanley Fish, and Raymond Williams, I attempt to show the influence of these theorists on the scholarly disposition of affective attachment meant to redefine the role of the professional critic in post-Cultural studies' scholarship.

The second section of this chapter traces through the relevant intellectual blueprint of CS that inaugurated the empathically ethnographic approach to reading cultural and subcultural forms. Emphasizing the dialectic between a subject and an object of analysis, the original

members of CS maintain the importance of recognizing the direct relationship between academic intellectuals and the social world outside university environment. I briefly illustrate that the notion of attachment is particularly used by scholars to describe the relationship between extramural cultural groups and academics' own subjective dispositions. The latter acquire the form of a distinctive scholarly metadiscourse in post-Cultural studies. Simultaneously, I demonstrate that the insistence on the notions of affect, emotion, and empathy has much to do with theorizing various cultural forms and practices in this intellectual tenet.

The third section of the chapter addresses the two critical encounters of CS with structuralism and post-structuralism respectively, locating the emergence of the new intellectual approach to theorizing extramural cultural practices. In particular, by examining the accounts of Thompson and Hall, I demonstrate the emergent understanding of Theory as the mode distinctly situated outside and *above* external cultural influences. Thus, these intellectuals in their own ways raise the question of insular academic theorizing as incongruent with collectively lived social experiences and cultural concerns. Importantly, I briefly address the label of Theory and often vague connotations it entails, attempting to delineate the historical development of CS from other intellectual tenets and assess its intersections with other dispositions and ideas.

The fourth section of examines the development of CS in the 1980s embodied in the post-Cultural studies' scholarship. By studying the accounts of Iain Chambers, John Fiske, and Lawrence Grossberg, I argue that the post-Cultural studies' attempt to reconcile the deficiency of academic language through endowing popular cultural and fan semiotic practices with a distinctive hermeneutic mode. Namely, since high cultural and academic language are deemed here as exclusionary, distant, and conservative, the languages of non-academic cultural groups are instead considered as more affectively involved, attached, and democratic. I suggest that by

relating themselves to external cultural forms, these scholars initiate the trend towards reconfiguring academic critical language to legitimize a more inclusive and involved academic approach to studying the external cultures. The result of this legitimation attempt, I argue, resulted in the production of academic metadiscourse of affective attachment, which becomes widespread across various disciplines in further decades.

The fifth section of the chapter traces the development in the disciplinary field of fan studies, which illustrates the crystallization of the metadiscourse of affective attachment. In it, various fan and later media scholars theorize the relationship between academic and non-academic forms of attachment to cultural texts and practices, overall suggesting structural equality between the two distinct forms of engagement. Therefore, while scholars are deemed to be 'in love' with theory, fans are accordingly deemed to be attached to their objects of passion. Th transposition of academic critical practices such as close or distant reading onto extramural fan reading practices seen during this phase becomes explicit and arguably dismisses actually existing popular cultural activities. Since many scholars of fandom directly consider themselves fans, they directly associate fan cultural forms of reading and criticism with a superior mode of hermeneutic engagement, often understood as better than regular academic procedures conducted in university environment. The appearance of 'scholar fan' and 'aca-fan' dispositions in the 2000s illustrates further amalgamation between scholarly and fan practices, showcasing the post-scholarly turn in academia. Finally, I briefly illustrate how the notion of affective attachment also allows one to theorize fan practices and expressions as a form of cultural populism and political regress in later fan studies, thereby observing the ongoing tendency towards more 'conservative' definition of digital media fandom.

2.1 A Conceptual Blueprint: Literary Scholar's Positioning Between Disinterestedness and Affective Attachment

According to the literary historian Vincent B. Leitch, the disciplinary emergence of "leftist criticism and the expansion of the semiautonomous field of 'theory' co-occurred" in the literary studies departments in the US between the 1960s and the 1980s[14] ([1988] 2010: 326). During the radical 1980s, "[t]he self-conscious linkages of literary theory with ideology and of literary criticism with cultural hegemony opened the work of all academic intellectuals to the domains of politics, sociology, ethics, economics, anthropology, and history. It was this crucial opening that constituted the grounds for an expanded, multidisciplinary project of critical analysis often nicknamed 'cultural studies'…" (Ibid. 333). As English and Love assert, "British cultural studies [specifically] exerted a powerful influence on the field of literary criticism in the second half of the twentieth century", introducing the imperative for criticizing ideology and opposing state violence across multiple disciplines (2023: 10)[15]. By the 1990s literature started "to seem too narrow an object to be viewed in isolation from other social forms", which informed the literary critical struggle toward "becom[ing] cultural" (Parrinder 1991: 339). Thus, during the infamous 'canon wars' of the late 1980s–1990s, the debate on the ideological meaning of literary works and the historical exclusion of the works of the cultural, racial, and gender minorities from the institutionalized literary canon occupied central space in the American literature departments (Guillory 1991). Prior to these developments, the New Critical doctrine famously set the disciplinary standard for proper engagements with literary texts, which

[14]On the disciplinary historical debate within literary studies about literary critical tasks, methods, and field-specific 'theoretical' dimension, see Gerald Graff's influential work titled *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (1987).

[15] In terms of the specific influence, the Leavisite tradition inspiring the early works of Hoggart and Williams already advanced a powerful vision of literary criticism by "offer[ing] ways of 'reading' mass culture and making connections between novels and their 'environment'" (Hilliard 2012: 147).

markedly distanced itself from the culturally political pronouncements of its ideological compatriots — the public intellectuals belonging to the world of the press[16].

Describing the welcome disciplinary shift from "the New Critical cult of irony, difficulty, and ambiguity" towards cultural studies, Rita Felski observes that the latter "offered a vocabulary for talking about the affective and formal richness of popular and mass-mediated art and made a wider variety of objects interesting" (2015: 29). While the affective dimension of textual interpretation indeed receives remarkable salience upon the cultural turn, what Felski does not mention is the transference of the New Critical theoretical vocabulary onto the new diversified field of literary studies. Specifically, to understand the blurry and yet commonly employed notions of 'attachment' and 'detachment', 'disinterestedness' and 'distance', which have been consistently adopted in post-Cultural studies' scholarship and beyond and which have long acquired an apocryphal status in several disciplines, one has to go back to the very disciplinary source of literary studies — the theoretical apparatus of New Criticism. As the current section will briefly suggest, the ideas of affect and attachment, disinterestedness and objectivity, which were individually employed by various scholars from I. A. Richards to Stanley Fish, amalgamated into the foundational theoretical discourse that examined the role of a critic in the literary discipline.

I argue that the ideas of disinterested contemplation, emotional attachment, metaphor, reader-experience, and others provide the conceptual ground for many scholars, who would later start to question their own active involvement as academic scholars in the semiotic worlds of their objects of analysis. Infamously, the New Critical program has been commonly deemed as

[16] Terry A. Cooney's detailed account on the rise of the New York intellectuals of the periodical presses such as the *Partisan Review,* the *New Masses,* the *Dial,* and others illustrates the specific influence of international literary Marxism on the American left-leaning intellectuals of the 1910s–1940s as well offers a comprehensive view into the latter's political life (1986).

an ahistorical and decontextualized attempt at instituting disciplinary readings of poetic texts, which promoted the so-called literary formalism at the center of the discipline. Such decontextualized practice of reading, above all, also implied divorcing individual impressions or affective responses from an act of textual interpretation. As Felski puts it, New Criticism "urged [us] to respect the autonomy or the singularity of the work and warned — at all cost — against imposing our own passions, prejudices, schemas, or meaning-patterns upon it" (Ibid. 28). However, the specific understanding of affect and distance that these select critics engaged with require a more systematic and thoughtful reflection. Put simply, I would like to suggest that the newer generations of scholars, who made it their conscious imperative to account for socially, politically, and culturally relevant texts and concerns since the 1980s, in fact, employed the conceptual apparatus established by their literary critical predecessors. Specifically, by often defending their 'attached' perspective to the object of study from a rationally 'detached' critical gaze, many scholars would continue exploring the theoretical-conceptual trajectory long established by the various literary theorists (and conceived by their intellectual predecessors) but from a *culturally political* perspective.

As Wolfram Schmidgen has recently pointed out, "[t]he tension between intimacy and distance, attachment and detachment" played a crucial role in the professionalization of literary studies in the twentieth century (2023: 1090). In terms of the notion of attachment, Schmidgen suggests a close cultural historical link between the former and the adjacent ideas of literary appreciation and affect since the eighteenth century (Ibid.). However, while this general observation does not deserve disputing, a systematic literary historical account of the ideas of literary attachment, affect, detachment, disinterestedness and distance is yet to be drawn[17].

[17] Felski's work in particular has consistently addressed the idea of attachment through exploring the metaphor of enchantment — "a state of intense involvement…in an aesthetic object" (2008: 54) — or the experience of being

Hardly surprisingly, the conceptual source for these concerns can be generally traced to the modern idea of disinterested contemplation of the beautiful famously promoted in Kant's aesthetics. According to Kant's conception of taste, which he otherwise defines as "the faculty of judging the beautiful", such a mode of judgment implies the contemplation of satisfaction (or dissatisfaction) *without interest* (2000: 89–101). To put it simply, Kant understands interest in terms of an end purpose or a production of a need, which, as he argues, cannot apply to an aesthetic object under examination[18]. Conversely, an object of the judgement of taste possesses objectively universal properties that transcend one's subjective desire or sense of satisfaction potentially derived from the object. Therefore, the goal of the judge of taste, in this case, is to determine whether an object has "a ground of satisfaction for everyone", or, i.e., whether it produces a *subjectively universal* sensation of the kind in everyone else (Ibid.).

Generally, Kant's formulation of the judgement of taste sets an important conceptual blueprint for the modern understanding of aesthetic judgement as a *disinterested* mode of consensus. First, his epistemological approach to the beautiful accentuates the universality of a disinterested satisfaction supposedly unanimously shared by engaging with the aesthetic object. Such universal satisfaction, as it has been already established, presupposes no subjective interest underlying the pursuit of the judgement of taste. And second, such universally shared aesthetic

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'hooked' to an aesthetic object / academic method (2020a); however, she does not trace the idea's complex disciplinary history or conceptual source. In his recent work, John Guillory suggests that the sets of conceptual pairs such as 'negative affect/detachment' versus 'positive affect/attachment', 'depth' versus 'surface', 'professional reading' versus 'amateur reading' etc. in contemporary literary studies are rooted in Eve Sedgwick's influential essay "Paranoid and Reparative Reading" (1997) (2022: 83–91). Despite their differing approaches, both Felski and Guillory associate the idea of attachment/detachment with the metadiscursive tendency within the literary discipline. Importantly, however, the discipline of literary studies has engaged with the notions of 'attachment' and 'detachment' vis-à-vis the tasks of a professional literary scholar since at least the late 1940s. It should also be stressed that Franco Moretti's method of 'distant reading' (2000) is not part of this discussion and should be distinguished from the metadiscursive problem discussed here.

[18] The reason why he deems the object of such contemplation free of interest is tied to the assumption that the judgement of taste cannot rely on the grounds of individual pleasure or gratification, or a means of satisfaction one may subjectively derive from experiencing a sensation of the beautiful.

judgement also implies an objectively perceived consensus on what constitutes the beautiful that is supposed to ground the shared principle in the first place. Or, as Terry Eagleton roughly paraphrases Kant's doctrine of aesthetics, "[b]ecause there are objects which we can agree to be beautiful, not by arguing or analysing but just by looking and seeing, a spontaneous consensus is brought to birth within our creaturely life, bringing with it a promise that such a life…might indeed work in some sense very like a rational law" ([1990]1992: 59). In turn, what is crystallized within Kant's formulation of the judgement of taste is the overarching consensus on "the untranslatability of the artistic work" (Todorov [1977]1982: 192–194). As Tzvetan Todorov shows, starting with examining Kant's assertion that treats an "aesthetic idea" as "the representation of the imagination which induces much thought, yet without the possibility of…[a] *concept*" (Kant qtd. in ibid.), the German Romantics like Friedrich Schlegel, Novalis, Wilhelm Wackenroder and others would equally affirm the inherent untranslatability of poetry. Thus, Novalis and Schlegel, for instance, share the belief that "poetry cannot be rendered in prose; [and that] *art criticism* is a contradiction in terms", unless, as Todorov aptly adds, such criticism itself resembles poetry, music, or painting (Ibid. 194).

Unsurprisingly, upon the development of literary studies in the twentieth century, the modern approaches to literary aesthetics would be deemed methodologically inadequate partly due to their overarching assumption on the ineffable and sublime nature of aesthetic works. Simultaneously, the notion of literary interpretation as a disinterested mode would frequently be valorized in the disciplinary approaches to aesthetic works. Moreover, in Kant's fashion, the notion of one's emotive attachment to poetic works would be similarly associated with abstract impressionism and subjective relativism in the disciplinary context of literary criticism in the US. Thus, in their programmatic piece on "affective fallacy", which would have an enormous

influence on the American literary discipline, William K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley disavow "romantic reader psychology" and specifically Matthew Arnold's notion of emotive attachment (1949: 47–48). Quoting Arnold, who once observed that poetry "attaches the emotion to the idea; the idea *is* the fact" (Arnold qtd. in ibid.), they argue that "[t]he objective critic, however, must admit that it is not easy to explain how this is done, how poetry makes ideas thick and complicated enough to attach emotions" (Ibid. 48). In agreement with the general Romantic premise described above, Arnold declares that "[t]he characters of a high quality of poetry are what is expressed *there*", "recognised by being felt in the verse of the master" rather than through prosaic acts of criticism that tend to obscure the true value of the poem (1973: 170–171)[19].

Characteristically, the Arnoldian understanding of the idea of attachment as an emotive component of poetic meaning did not convert into an adequate analytical method that would satisfy the professional demands of the twentieth century. Therefore, his disciplinary successors would instead favor disinterested detachment or, rather, analysis of poetic affect based on more 'cognitive' methods. Thus, by attempting to divorce literary criticism from its abstract impressionistic implications, Wimsatt and Beardsley hail the "psychological theories of aesthetic distance, detachment, or disinterestedness", which emerged in the early twentieth century and which, in their view, paved the way towards much needed critical objectivity, the principles of which they recognize in the schools of cognitive analysis, paradox, ambiguity, irony, and symbol

[19] In this fashion, the Romantic notion of attachment professed by Arnold — and later explicitly dispelled by Wimsatt and Beardsley — bears a direct close link with the ideas of feeling and emotion that the poem channels through the poetic genius of its master. Arnold's dissatisfaction with the prosaic criticism applied to the poetic text is countervailed through his suggestion to recognize the Aristotelian categories of poetic "manner and style", which, if properly applied, can serve as the markers of true quality of poetry and its "high poetic truth" (Ibid.).

(Ibid. 46). In the case of the latter, they specifically emphasize the impact of I. A. Richards in suggesting a nuanced cognitive psychological approach to literary aesthetics and affect (Ibid.).

Undeniably, when it comes to the notions of 'feeling', 'sense', 'sentimentality', or 'metaphor' especially, Richards formulates the conceptual framework for the English-based discipline of literary studies. As he argues in his *Practical Criticism* (1929), despite the value of the affective dimension of poetry both in its meaning and reception, the notion of feeling as applied to the poetic text can hold critical merit only through its association with intentional cognition. In other words, for Richards, "[t]he most elaborate feelings develop…only through thought and intention" deliberately applied to a poetic object (1929: 310–311). Thus, he suggests that the reader / the recipient "can 'understand' the feeling of a [poetic] passage" either though *undergoing* the same feeling (expressed in a passage) or *thinking of* the feeling (Ibid. 311), which may be respectively associated with what he calls *emotive* and *sense* metaphors [the author's emphases] (Ibid. 211)[20]. In turn, those "with little experience of poetry" or "who appear to have read widely" often equally fail to construe poetic meaning or interpret a poetic text precisely due to their assumed "love for poetry" (Ibid. 294). Therefore, while most readers, for Richards, presume the natural capacity of poetry to convey feelings and emotions, to actually construe or

[20] Reflecting on the "general unintelligibility of poetry" proclaimed in the existing poetic "protocols", Richards specifically suggests considering the means of "apprehending both sense and feeling in teachers and pupils [of poetry] alike" (Ibid. 206–207). Making the distinction between the existing analyses of logical language and feeling, he concludes that the analysis of poetic feeling commonly rests on the vague notion of "introspection", which offers no insight into the "attributes" of feeling or "their system of interconnections" (Ibid. 207). Richards suggests to conceptually differentiate a *sense* metaphor from *emotive* metaphor, where the first one implies the recognition of analogous types of feeling expressed by a given word elsewhere, and where the second one entails no consideration of "the feeling itself" but merely invites affectively accounting for its existence (Ibid. 211). Put simply, an emotive metaphor, for Richards, discourages rather than invites "investigation" of an expressed feeling (Ibid.). Crucially, however, both sense and emotive metaphors do not yet constitute a form of an analysis, since the two are simply the poetic means of expressing feeling. The role of the critic, therefore, is precisely to "explain[] [and analyse] how it works" rather than merely intuit these metaphorical components of the work (Ibid. 212–213).

interpret poetic meaning, one must recognize that these are mental activities which should be treated as a form of "craft…[that] can be taught" (Ibid.).

I would like to suggest that Richards' fundamental work may have produced an influence on the disciplinary conceptualizations of textual affect vis-à-vis scholarly dispositions. Arguably, the conceptual formula of Richards, which suggests interpreting the meaning of a poetic passage either through undergoing a feeling or thinking about a feeling expressed in it, later seems to become engrained in the conceptual logic of semiotic attachment meant to convey one's cultural politics. As the next sections of the chapter attempt to show, the idea of metadiscursive attachment, referring to an expressed culturally political disposition and a subcultural involvement of a scholar, was meant to underscore the role of affect in personal academic alignment with an object of study. Conceptualizing the affectively attached dispositions both of their own and their analyzed subjects, in turn, would allow select scholars to assert their political allegiances and transfer these onto non-academic communities. Such transference would, at the same time, produce new conceptualizations of affective forms of popular reading, which at one time were supposed to express a grassroot political alternative to the perceived hegemonic procedures of academic criticism. Seemingly, Richards' negative definition of the "love for poetry" would also echo in the idea of the "love of Theory", which, despite its different cultural, political, and methodological implications, would equally imply the lack of sufficiently critical close engagement with an object of analysis (in the latter case – with that of 'the masses' or subcultures) in the scholarship associated with the British CS. Thus, if for Richards, the "love for poetry" loosely indicated the lack of a systematic disciplinary approach to analyzing poetry through cognitive means, the "love of Theory", as it is expressed in the works of Hall and beyond, would refer to the inability of post-structuralist thinkers to adequately understand and

relate to popular sentiments expressed outside their theorizing. Therefore, in the disciplinary sense, the idea of loving an aesthetic object (or theoretical framework) has commonly implied a lack of critical understanding and self-awareness in engaging with it.

Crucially, Richards' formulation that deems "[m]ost descriptions of feelings" in poetic language as inherently "metaphorical" and "combined" — i.e., both involving sense and emotive metaphors (Ibid. 212), — provides the conceptual ground for Wimsatt and Beardsley's disciplinary understanding of poetic affect. Characteristically, while the latter denounce contemplation of aesthetic affect as a valid critical procedure (Ibid. 47–48), they simultaneously highlight the importance of metaphor and symbol for disclosing the affective dimension of a poetic text. Thus, Wimsatt and Beardsley state that "[p]oetry is…a discourse about both emotions and objects, or about the emotive quality of objects, and this through its preoccupation with symbol and metaphor" (Ibid. 52). However, by implicitly revising Richards' notion of the sense metaphor, they assert that "[a]n emotion felt for one object is identified by reference to its analogue felt for another", which is why "[t]he emotions correlative to the objects of poetry" constitute its "pattern of knowledge" (Ibid.). Arguably, Wimsatt and Beardsley's conceptual formula allows them to divorce poetic metaphor from an act of critical interpretation altogether. In other words, their emphasis on the recipient's affective perception of the poetic meaning de facto eliminates the cognitive procedure involved in the analysis of poetic feeling postulated by Richards. Moreover, what lends metaphor and symbol their immanent affective meaning, for Wimsatt and Beardsley, rests on their supposed permanent and constant emotive properties accumulated over the identifiable passages of time: "Poetry is a way of fixing emotions or making then more permanently perceptible when objects have undergone a functional change from culture to culture, or when as simple facts of history they have lost emotive value with loss

of immediacy" (Ibid.). Therefore, since metaphor and symbol carry fixed and stable emotive meanings "through the drift of human history", poetic objects already in themselves contain explanations necessary for a reader to receive its emotive content (Ibid. 52–54).

Roughly twenty years after the publication of their essay, Stanley Fish launched a conceptual intervention to Wimsatt and Beardsley's stance, specifically debating the New Critics' prioritization of a passive poetic object over the reader's external psychological response. Directly polemicizing with Wimsatt and Beardsley in his famous essay, Fish argues that "*every linguistic experience is affecting and pressuring*" [the author's emphasis] (1970: 128), which therefore leads him to the understanding of the emotive dimension of an aesthetic object in broader psychologically communicative terms. Importantly, Fish defines his literary critical method as the mode of "a (structured) description of [reader] response" produced by "a number of informed readers, each of whom will be identified by a matrix of political, cultural, and literary determinants" (Ibid. 146). In turn, to produce an adequate literary interpretation, the informed reader must be "sufficiently experienced…to have internalized the properties of literary discourses, including everything from the most local of devices (figures of speech, etc.) to whole genres" in order "to attach" "the [specific] significance and value" to a literary text (Ibid. 145). Thus, Fish's theory rests on discerning "*potential and probable*" response of the reader to the text as opposed to "regard[ing] the work as a thing in itself, as an object" (Ibid.). Clearly, in distinction to Wimsatt and Beardsley's approach to literary text, Fish does not recognize the capacity of language to passively convey its static and permanent meaning supposedly accumulated through history. Conversely, he valorizes the idea of "knowledge" understood as the reader's "experience", which relates to the latter's ability to both *produce and comprehend* "lexical sets, collocation probabilities, idioms, professional and other dialects, etc." (Ibid.).

Arguably, Fish's reliance on the post-structuralist linking of the text with the 'birth of the reader' promotes the discursively attached readerly disposition towards the literary work. Precisely because, in his model, the informed reader would have 'internalized the properties of literary discourses', their response to the text under examination implies the discernment of its literary value and significance. Thus, since the internal response to a literary utterance is predetermined by the properties of a broader 'local' discourse, the distinction between the inside and the outside of the text is largely abolished from Fish's theory of literary interpretation. The mode of attaching the significance and value to the work seen in this model, therefore, rests on the perception of an ideal reader, who both produces and comprehends what is placed in front of them through an informed response. Ultimately, I would like to suggest that Fish's theory of interpretation sets an important precedent for literary studies and beyond in terms of the later disciplinary approaches to semiotic analyses of cultural forms. As I will attempt to show further, the dual logic of production and comprehension of the textual semiotic values and meanings underlies much of the post-Cultural studies' scholarship, whose broad epistemological mode of attachment concerns the internalized experiences of the academic reader directly involved in the act of semiotic interpretation. In other words, the academic reader, in this case, tends to comprehend the external semiotic forms of cultural expression through their own lived experience as scholars and informed readers, thereby equally subjecting themselves and their objects of analysis to an act of interpretation. As Fish stresses, "the deep structure" of the reading event is necessarily modified by the reader's experience, and since the deep structure has been experienced, it has also "existed in the mental life of the reader", which is exactly how the deep structure acquires *meaning* (Ibid. 144). Thus, in the act of interpretation, the 'meaning' accessed

through an act of reading directly corresponds to the reader's lived experience, which would concern explorations of one's political allegiances in the post-Cultural studies' scholarship.

Finally, returning to the idea of a disinterested, distanced, and detached literary critical perspective valorized by Wimsatt and Beardsley, it is important to stress that it also has much to do with the vocabulary and conceptual direction of the post-Cultural studies' scholarship. Thus, the notion of 'distance' would often be interchangeably used by many theorists along with those of 'detachment' and 'disinterestedness'; the terms once affirmatively employed in Wimsatt and Beardsley's programmatic piece against the procedure of affective criticism. Conversely, the post-Cultural studies' scholarship would prefer and hail the critical disposition of affective attachment over the distanced, disinterested, and detached academic approaches to texts. The utilization of these notions directly juxtaposed with those of 'attachment', 'affect', and others in post-Cultural studies scholarship, therefore, allows to view this New Critical conceptualization of the role of the critic as fundamental for understanding the academic metadiscourse of attachment that emerged in the late twentieth century.

Simultaneously, it would be a sweeping overstatement to suggest that the cognitively pragmatic (post-)New Critical approaches to literary texts represent the sole intellectual historical locus of the metadiscursive disposition studied in this chapter. In fact, since the latter has been deeply invested in understanding the role that the cultural, social, and political contexts play in cultural aesthetics and semiotics, the range of intellectual influences on the newer 'involved' scholarly disposition arguably exceeds the national disciplinary confines. While I will be accounting for the potential influence that the intellectual project of the British CCCS has produced on multiple disciplinary fields since the 1980s later in the chapter, one particular conceptual source may prove especially useful.

In his highly instructive and valuable volume of essays on the subject, *Secular Vocations* (1993), Bruce Robbins offers an important glimpse into the definition of the idea of distance bridging over the strict domain of professional literary studies. Thus, as Robbins observes, Raymond Williams' essay titled "Distance" (1982) introduces a broad episteme of the "culture of distance", which the latter is simultaneously argued to criticize "as his [professional] discipline's inner principle" (1993: 58). For Robbins, Williams, whose essay condemns the lack of the adequate coverage of the Falklands/Malvinas conflict on national television, speaks from a position of "a 'critic' in a stronger sense than is required by the academic discipline of 'literary criticism'", the actual field of Williams' professional expertise (Ibid.). In other words, Williams' disposition of a public rather than institutional intellectual is especially pronounced here. Thus, speaking outside of his area of competence by referring to "the general unreality of the presentation of war" on television, Williams muses on "the professional culture of distance" that he himself had been exposed to through a "cool, low-voiced" "antiseptic presentation of the images of war" (1982). As Robbins adds, however, such personalized charge against the distant and antiseptic world of professional media, in Williams' case, also directly corresponds to the latter's frustration with "his own discipline" (Ibid.).

Importantly, Williams links the locus of the professional 'culture of distance' to the inner logic of modernism, marked by an estranged positioning of cosmopolitan intellectuals in respect to a "mobile and dislocated" modern world (Ibid.). The eventual "intellectuals' unheroic institutional grounding" in the university establishment does not in any way resolve but rather deepens the condition of their estrangement from the world's affairs, not in the least foregrounded by the gruesome reality of politics (Ibid. 58–59). The distanced disposition of a critic towards a "social actuality", therefore, is prescribed by their inherently estranged role of

professional intellectuals (Ibid. 60–63). I would ultimately like to suggest that the notion of professional critical 'distance' that both Williams and Robbins wrangle with, bears a close resemblance with the broad definition employed in much of the post-Cultural studies' scholarship. Particularly within the discipline of fan studies, the critical disposition of distance is directly associated with the limits of academic professionalism, which is also inherently integrated into the realm of the hegemonic discourse. As opposed to Williams' and Robbins' explicit awareness of the professionalized 'culture of distance', however, the post-Cultural studies' scholarship formulates an alternative scholarly mode of political involvement. In other words, for many of these scholars and thinkers, overt dispositional resistance from within academia becomes their conceptual modus operandi. Thus, the disposition of critical distance is broadly understood in such scholarship as an apolitical or even politically conservative academic stance, as opposed to the markedly politicized and supposedly more progressive disposition of committed attachment. In order to understand formulations and the progression of the binary oppositions of 'attachment' and 'detachment', 'involvement' and 'distance', etc. in academic discourse, I suggest turning to the original theorists of the CS, who, while being politically influential outside the academic domain, would also drastically reform the contours of professional criticism in the English-speaking world.

2.2 Towards Affective Attachment as the (Meta-)Cultural Mode

The Ethnographic Trajectory in Cultural Studies: Political Attachments to External Cultural Forms.

According to Hall, the literary critical orientation of CS was embodied in Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* (1957), who "deploy[ed] literary criticism to 'read' the emblems, idioms, social arrangements, the lived cultures and 'languages' of working class life, as particular kinds of

'text', as a privileged sort of cultural evidence", while Williams emphasized "highly literary tradition in critical bourgeois thought" in *Culture and Society* (1958) (2016: 5–6) and his other works. Hall acknowledged that, from its inception, Birmingham CCCS was "concerned with 'neglected' materials drawn from popular culture and mass media" and "recommended the adaptation of literary-critical methods in reading these texts for their qualitative cultural evidence" (Ibid. 8). Reflecting on Hoggart's pivotal work, Hall asserts that the former wrote "as a literary critic, attempting to do the kind of analysis or reading of real social and cultural life that he would do on a poem or a novel" (2016: 8). Indeed, perhaps the most striking aspect of *The Uses of Literacy* may be considered Hoggart's consistent reliance on the metaphor of "a feeling heart" in analyzing the English working-class culture, which he seems to derive from W. B. Yeats' poem, "Easter, 1916" (1916).

In his famous poem, Yeats explicitly engages with the uneasy moral outcomes of the Irish Revolution, encompassed by the compact, eerie formula: "A terrible beauty is born" (Yeats, "Easter", 1916). Put in simple terms, Yeats' poem directly acknowledges the glorious feat of his compatriots fighting for liberation while recognizing the dangers that such "sacrifice" may pose for a human "heart", at risk of being "enchanted to a stone" (Ibid.). The final pages of *The Uses of Literacy*, in turn, muse on the nature of western democracy vis-à-vis "cultural matters", exploring the tension between exploitation and "free action" of "working-people" (Hoggart [1957]1961: 281–282). In these passages, Hoggart particularly ponders the influence of "democratic egalitarianism" on the working classes, stressing the former's underlying "refusal to be fanatic, to let the heart ('the feeling heart') become 'enchanted to a stone'" (Ibid. 282). Therefore, by aligning with Yeats' warning, Hoggart simultaneously finds the perceived democratic egalitarian refusal to descend into fanaticism affirmative for the 'present tendencies'

he witnessed in the mid-twentieth century English working class. The question of democratic egalitarianism, in this case, becomes paramount, and the various forms of cultural expression, which Hoggart analyzes throughout the book, serve as the apparent testament to one's inner freedom. Thus, reflecting on the cultural phenomenon of club-singing, which Hoggart himself was consistently exposed to, he explores the collective experience of community singing, which reflected 'a feeling heart' of national popular music full of "warm and shared humanity" (Ibid. 123–137). Critically, Hoggart ties "emotional expression" of the working-class club-signing to "all-embracing unity", "freedom", and communal openness, which he directly links with democratic egalitarianism at the end of this work (Ibid. 128–135).

In sum, what Hoggart's account represents, beyond reading culture familiar to him through Yeats' poem, concerns an important innovation in studying cultural forms. Namely, the attempt at reading working-class cultural practices, lifestyles, and expressions introduced by him advances the affective component, which supposedly characterizes working-class everyday communal living. While previously, the latter had been predominantly associated with overly sentimental, debased, and inferior mass cultural behavior, Hoggart points to the democratic capacity immanent in his own working-class community, which is capable of expressing itself emotionally in a genuine and productive way. The emphasis on the 'feeling heart' of the English working class that Hoggart insists on throughout *The Uses of Literacy*, importantly, is meant to disclose the emancipatory capacity of the people united by daily living, not necessarily nor fully dominated by the reality of mass consumption or politically prescribed consent. By reflecting on his own experience as the member of the working class and incorporating his own cultural impressions into his work, Hoggart actively attempts to eliminate the gap between the 'high' and

the ‘low’, to consistently revise the traditional intellectual preconceptions about the Other, and to ponder the emancipatory potential of ‘ordinary’ people.

Indeed, it is crucial to stress that historically, CS has been generally assessed in terms of its own subjective positioning towards its objects of analysis. Hoggart’s work may be described as the intellectual precursor to subjectively invested explorations of cultural forms (Mulhern 2000). Elsewhere Hoggart’s, Williams’ and Thomspon’s “autobiographical work” was described as ethnographic precisely due to their consideration of “their own experience as part of the data” for conducting cultural research (Brantlinger 1990: 38). Hoggart, in Hall’s retrospective view, was “doing a kind of ethnography, treating his own life as if it were taking place in a village in the South Seas, looking at the strange things people do and say” to ‘affirm’ what had been previously neglected through description ([1988] 2016: 10). Thus, Hoggart’s methodology is assessed by Hall as “exactly that of an ethnographer, listening first of all to the language, to the actual practical speech which people use, to the ways they sustain relationships through language, and to the ways they categorise things” (Ibid.). Importantly, the idea of expressing one’s culture through an active form of description becomes central for the development of CS. As Colin Sparks notes about CS’ first phase, thinkers like Hoggart and Hall, Williams and Thompson undertook “the effort to explore the ways in which certain kinds of life could find expression in certain forms of cultural production and consumption”, defining such intellectual orientation as “expressive humanism” (1996: 79). To return the meanings to experience, as Williams would formulate it (1958), becomes the overarching cultural political goal underlying the work of CS.

Reflecting on the work of Williams, Hall retrospectively observes that the former “argues that anyone with an open mind — by which he means himself as we all do — anyone

who has been formed by the literary critical tradition with its close attention to language and symbolic forms … cannot be satisfied with a theoretical practice which simply brings a rather crude kind of machine to bear on every text, which does not offer any sort of sophisticated description of the complexities of the particular work being analysed" ([1988] 2016: 20). Notably, beyond being merely unsatisfied with a theoretical practice, Williams' analyses of the British literary critical and cultural tradition directly question authoritative connotations deeply engrained in the English language, which historically defined 'culture'. Most importantly, Williams radically revises the commonly accepted assumptions on the role and function of literary criticism, engaging with the latter in broader cultural and anthropological terms. Critically, for Williams, the ideas of culture and experience are integrally tied to the subject of active communication and language.

Somewhat reducing Williams' early metaphorical formula of culture as 'the tending of natural growth', Hall emphasizes "the culture we never see, the culture we don't think of as cultivated" ([1988] 2016: 9). Hoggart, in Hall's retrospective view, for instance, "affirms that culture by describing it, using the tools of intuitive literary critical reading" (Ibid.). In Williams' work, the act of describing one's experience serves as the crux of defining artistic creativity and human creativity more generally. Referring to 'creative imagination' in artistic works in *The Long Revolution* (1961), Williams states that it refers to "the capacity to find and organize new descriptions of experience" ([1961] 1962: 42). He continues this line of thought by arguing for "urgent personal importance…to every man…to 'describe' his experience" as a way of "a remaking of himself, a creative change in his personal organization" (Ibid.). Thus, "in the arts of language, sound, and movement", in Williams' view, "man generally" remakes the environment and himself in transmitting "experience…intended to alter existing real relationships" (Ibid. 43).

Notably, through crafting creative work, the artist "is neither subject working on object, nor object on subject: it is, rather, a dynamic interaction, which in fact is a whole and continuous process" (Ibid. 44). Ultimately, Williams asserts that "[t]he creative act of any artist, is in any case the process of making a meaning active, by communicating an organized experience to others" (Ibid. 49).

Such a literary-critical approach to artistic creativity formulated by Williams is strikingly positioned next to the notions of language and communication understood in terms of broader human experience and political agenda. His treatment of artistic work as an act of transmitting individual experience inherently rests on the creative goal of communication and description, which activates creative meaning for others, thus forming a sense of collectivity. Describing one's experience through the art of language, in sum, is an act of interacting with the world communicated to others. Pointedly, in his earlier work, Williams generally argues for the importance of "tak[ing] a meaning from experience, and…[trying] to make it active", fostering the "process of [cultural] growth" ([1958]1960: 357). In line with his formulated political imperative, he also asserts that "the language we use to enquire into and negotiate our actions, is no secondary factor, but a practical and radical element in itself" (Ibid.). Crucially, Williams' early statement particularly stresses the importance of the self-reflexive critical disposition towards culture (as opposed to that of 'Culture') as an actual social phenomenon: reflecting on the notion of the 'masses' in his *Culture and Society*, Williams proposes "to return the meanings to experience", stressing that 'the masses' "are here, and we are here with them", "[a]nd that we are with them is of course the whole point" (Ibid. 318–319)[21]. Thus, by directly associating the

[21] Historically, the original intellectual objection to treating people as 'the masses' in CS can be traced to the engagements with F. R. Leavis and the ideas expressed in *Scrutiny* in the pedagogical circles of mid-twentieth century Britain. Thus, engaging with the influential pedagogy of Leavis and Thompson, "many tutors held political views that made them uncomfortable with the ease with which ideas about 'the masses' and 'herd instincts' were

notion with a critic's own experience, Williams urges other scholars/critics to "remember that we ourselves are all the time being massed by others", and "[t]o the degree that we find the formula inadequate for ourselves, we can wish to extend to others the courtesy of acknowledging the unknown" (Ibid. 319). Further, emphasizing the importance of fostering "democracy" in his work, Williams activates the metaphor of 'the tending of *natural* growth' as a pathway to understanding the revised "idea of culture", which should be understood in broader terms and as always in the process of forming (Ibid. 356). Therefore, attempting to depart from the moral-static conception of the Other, prescribed in the traditional individualistic romantic notion of 'Culture', Williams suggests that "[w]e have to live by our own attachments, but we can only live fully, in common, if we grant the attachments of others, and make it our common business to keep the channels of growth clear" (Ibid. 356–357).

To sum up, by dealing with conventional literary critical concerns and the traditional notion of 'Culture' associated with those, Williams redefines what the analysis of culture understood in the broader sense may entail. Overall, according to such a conception, activating one's experience through meaning and expression stimulates the process of mutual cultural growth, ideally resulting in the building of communal solidarity for the sake of the long democratic revolution finally succeeding. To recognize the potential of language as 'a practical and radical element in itself' is to acknowledge one's inclusion in the social and cultural processes, obscured through traditionally prescribed monolithic signifiers. The task of a cultural critic, in this case, becomes the ability to relate one's individual experience to the actually lived social and cultural processes and thus account for the other members of a lived culture on

used in *Scrutiny*" (Hilliard 2012: 156). Williams' persistent objection to the category of 'the masses' arguably reflected such discomfort (Ibid.).

mutually beneficial terms. In short, the project of cultural criticism originally entails accounting for meanings as part of a lived experience.

Curiously, Williams' observation regarding creative work of the artist, which is seen as 'neither subject working on object, nor object on subject' but a form of a 'dynamic interaction', potentially provides insight into the development of post-Cultural studies' theoretical disposition. Since the ideal role of a cultural critic is seemingly to, first and foremost, reflect on their individual experience as part of a 'whole' socio-cultural process, the situation of a dynamic interaction between the object of inquiry and the subject undertaking it also describes the potentially ideal outcome of cultural criticism. While such intellectual disposition can be deemed as preferable, however, the lack of separation of a critical subject from their object of analysis in (post-)Cultural studies' scholarship becomes a matter of academic disagreement. Therefore, after CS's ideas started to proliferate in the American literary departments, Tania Modleski observes in the 1980s that some critics of culture became so "immersed in their culture, [being] half in love with their subject" that they would "unwittingly wind up writing apologias for mass culture and embracing its ideology" (1986: xi). Thus, since the new generation of cultural critics of the 1980s, as Modleski states, themselves belonged to "mass culture"[22], their individual appreciation and academic examination of mass culture also became subject to their intellectual and personal bias (Ibid.). Due to their departure from conventional academic "distance", Modleski overall charges these cultural critics with overt subjective attachment to their object of study (Ibid.)[23].

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[22] Andrew Ross notes that the meaning of 'mass' culture in the American intellectual context was largely informed by the *Kulturpessimismus* of the German critical tradition that associated 'the masses' with the fascist ideology (1989: 233). Ross lists Modleski among other contemporaries who, in his view, uncritically utilized the term 'mass culture' historically informed and influenced "by German social theories" studying fascism (Ibid.). The American tradition of mass communication research, however, seemingly played the most decisive part in the customary uncritical utilization of the term 'mass' in the American academic context.

[23] Characteristically, the lack of academic distance within this set of intellectual tenets became the common critique of broader cultural studies in academia in the years to come. Thus, Karl Maton, for instance, charges the broad

As Hall retrospectively acknowledged, "[f]rom its inception, …Cultural Studies was an 'engaged' set of disciplines, addressing awkward but relevant issues about contemporary society and culture, often without benefit of […] scholarly detachment or distance […]" (1980: 4)[24]. Importantly, the ethnographic orientation of CS opens space for consistent understanding of the object of study through an empathically attached scholarly perspective, which eventually exerted an enormous influence on various academic disciplines engaged with studying cultural forms and contexts. Thus, in his opening chapter on the subcultural method, which reflects on the approach of the Subcultures Group at CCCS in the mid-1970s, Brian Roberts establishes the particular roots of such ethnography: the American Chicago School of the 1920s–1930s and beyond with its "ethnographic anthropology" applied to examining deviant subcultural behavior ([1975] 2006). The research inaugurated by the School called 'Participant Observation' (PO), as Roberts narrates, departed from the positivistic quantitative method of conducting social research in favor of the more "empathic" engagement with their object of study (Ibid. 207–209). Thus, "[t]he assimilation of PO to 'ethnography' changes the focus from objectivity and quantification to 'empathic understanding' (understanding from the inside, taking the perspective of the native) and to qualitative work" (Ibid. 208). As Roberts outlines it,

cultural studies with "[m]ethodological and ontological pluralism" due to its lack of definition, and states that in it, "commitment and sincerity often appear more important than purely 'intellectual' criteria", and "praise and critique focus[ed] on political intent" prioritize matters of "the heart…rather than the contents of the head" (2002: 42).

[24] As Hall and Jefferson observe, their mid–1970s investigations into the British youth subcultures would get critiqued for "the mismatch between the 'intellectual pyrotechnics' of … [their] theories and the 'immediate emotional tone and satisfaction' of the situated actions of our actors (Cohen [1980] 2005: 168), with Stan Cohen being the first one to launch such critique (2006: xii). Hall and Jefferson, in responding to the charge of not following proper 'ethnographic' conventions in *RTR* by inserting themselves into the object of investigation, rapport that their volume did not purport to be 'ethnography' in the first place, and that they were preoccupied with "much larger terrain" (Ibid. xiv–xv).

> [t]he advantages of PO lie in the quality of knowledge about the field which it yields. The researcher gets to know both the intimate surface of his 'field' and also how the real world runs under the surface. He picks up the 'informal' as well as the formal culture. He is sensitised to the experiential nuances of the native members. His approach is shaped by a *humanistic* affirmation of the reality and validity of lives and experiences other than his own – a humane belief in social *contact*. A less charitable view is that he is seduced into a vicarious, romantic attachment to 'other cultures'. This romantic trap is often tactically off-set by the adoption of a certain hard-boiled surface-style […] (Ibid. 209).

In sum, he emphasizes that "PO has never fully confronted the positive method on its own terms. Instead, it has formed a sort of sociological 'subculture' of its own: a more humanistic and 'empathic' enclave within the mainstream" (Ibid. 208).

Thus, in reflecting on the PO's innovative method, Roberts poses an important formula: attachment as the adoption of 'surface-style' on part of the researcher who himself belongs to a sociological subculture of his own. The researcher's 'empathic' approach to the analyzed subcultures, importantly, is what markedly separates him from the positivistic academic mainstream. However, while, in Roberts' view, the romantic attachment of the researcher to the object of study represents a negative form of seduction into other cultures, the post-Cultural studies' theorists analyzing various cultural forms seemingly follow this trend. Thus, on the post-Cultural studies' spectrum, it has been argued that the theme of the discursive fashioning of the subject who claims to represent popular culture is problematically situated next to the celebration

of the popular cultural object[25]. Thus, Mulhern argues that "a sentimental or wishful valorization of the popular cultural object [in post-Cultural studies]" represents a form of cultural populism, which is positioned next to "the discursive fashioning of the subject who claims to represent it" (2000: 141). In sum, the emergence of the attached surface-style disposition adopted by the subjectively involved scholar becomes the central development in post-Cultural studies, which can be directly linked to the ethnographic method inaugurated by the subcultural theorists from the Centre. If Williams' and Hoggart's emphases on subjective attachment to others and affect respectively serve as the aid to their overarching political argumentation, the 'Subcultures Group' opens the pathway towards establishing the new involved theoretical *method* of analyzing cultural forms.

Simultaneously, however, the roots of the post-Cultural studies' metadiscursive mindset must be assessed in light of the broader intellectual developments occurring in the second half of the twentieth century. Namely, the emergence of Theory since the 1960s brings out the question of blind theorizing in Thompson's work, who deemed French structuralism to be a form of intellectual idealism. The ubiquitous popularity of poststructuralist Theory in the 1980s is what informs the critique raised by Hall regarding the unproblematic love of theorizing rather than studying the 'external influences'. By launching the implicit defense of the extended cultural studies as a socially conscious and aware intellectual mindset, Hall charges poststructuralist Theory with being in love with itself. These CS' encounters with Theory, in short, put the former's original emphasis on the extramural cultural forms in contradistinction to the

[25] On the affirmative side, English and Love point at such structural correlation in the development of Anglo-American literary studies, stressing that "the focus on highly prized texts and the elevation of a new canon" ran parallel to "the special importance attaching to the figure of the teacher as the literary professoriat underwent dramatic changes" in the 1980s (2023: 11). They directly associate this correlation with the CS' international influence (Ibid.).

problematics of academic theorizing, and thus arguably prefigure the future pathway towards the intellectual blending of the two in post-Cultural studies.

Poverty and Love of Theory: The Critical Encounters

> A university is a curious accretion of historical conflicts that it has systematically forgotten. Each of its divisions reflects a history of ideological conflicts that is just as important as what is taught within the divisions … (Graff [1987] 2007: 257–258).

> He [Althusser] has offered to us less an epistemology which takes into account the actual formative motions of consciousness than a description of certain procedures of academic life. He has abandoned the lamp-lit study and broken off the dialogue with an exhausted table: he is now within the emplacements of the École Normale Supérieure (Thompson 1978: 8).

It is first worth stressing that historically, there has been a discomforting lack of separation between what has been understood as 'critical theory' (initially conceived of by the proponents of Frankfurt School of Critical Theory) from 'French Theory' (i.e., the conception of French (post-)structuralism as a specific mode of intellectual importance to the UK and America) and 'cultural studies' (initially associated with the Birmingham Centre of Cultural Studies (CCCS)). First, when it comes to the introduction of critical theory, first to American, then to the international context, it has been observed that it "constituted a significant development in American social thought" particularly after WWII (Hardt 1996: 105). The influence of Frankfurt School critical theorists like Herbert Marcuse, Theodor Adorno, and Max Horkheimer in particular "provided American social theorists with an alternative approach to the questions of power, change, and the future of society" (Ibid.). However, the Frankfurt School members'

distinctly pessimistic outlook on the culture industry "found a modest and eclectic response among communication and media scholars" in the US (Hardt ibid. 108). At the same time, "the Neo-Marxism of the Frankfurt School…provided important source material for leading members of the American left in the 1960s and thereafter" (Leitch 2012: 16). By drawing the connections between Marxism and Freudism, "the radical importance of women's liberation and of rational treatment of ecological issues", the Frankfurt School's theorists began to establish their unique influence in the 1960s' America (Ibid.).

Second, as Gisèle Sapiro and Lucile Dumont have recently documented, the specific label "French Theory" emerged in the 1960-70s America in response to "[t]he international circulation of [French] structuralism" within the same period (2020: 32). Paul Reitter and Chad Wellmon specifically trace "[t]he arrival of poststructuralist theory in American universities" to the 1970s, primarily tying this development to the popularity of intellectual figures like Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida (2021: 250). One of the most influential moments of transmission of 'Theory' was the conference that took place at John Hopkins' University in 1966, "The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man", which hosted Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, and Paul de Man, among others, which launched the poststructuralist moment in the US and the English-speaking world (Sapiro and Dumont ibid. 44). However, according to the recent study of Sapiro and Dumont, the structuralist/post-structuralist boom of Theory in academia as well as in the professional associations and journals for literary studies in America can be consistently traced to the beginning of the 1980s (Ibid. 49).

Lastly, the arrival of Cultural Studies to the American universities and its consequent popularization have been accordingly linked to the 1970–1980s. In the late 1980s, the prominent sociologist Andrew Ross argued that the British CS possesses too great a "national specificity" to

be absorbed by the American cultural studies[26] (1989: 7). Simultaneously, Ross acknowledged the establishment of cultural studies "as a discipline within the academy" since the mid–1970s and implicitly recognized its popularity in the American universities (Ibid. 233). In their retrospective account, David Morley and Kuang-Hsing Chen assert that "British cultural studies…began to make an impact across national borders, especially in the American academy" in the mid-1980s (1996: 1). Importantly, recognizing pivotal role of Hall and his intellectual impact, Morley and Chen refer to a series of lectures Hall delivered at University of Iowa in 1985 and assess this moment of transmission of ideas as substantial (Ibid.). As Sparks attests, Hall "has without question been the central figure in the development of the internationally dominant version of cultural studies" (Ibid. 71). Thus, "[t]he energy of British cultural studies made its way into political criticism and identity-based subfields such as feminist and African American criticism in the United States in the 1980s" (English and Love 2023: 11).

Critically, "[a]lthough cultural studies originated in close relation to critical theory, political economy, and Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony, its academic popularization in the 1980s was increasingly defined by its association with postmodernism and poststructuralism" (Morrow 2006: xxii). As James F. English and Heather Love aptly observe, "[t]he confluence of British cultural studies and European poststructuralism [in the 1980s] gave rise to a specifically American form of cultural studies, in which the focus on social class was softened in favor of a critical form of identity politics" (2023: 11). Morley and Chen particularly emphasize Hall's central role in initiating "a dialogue between postmodernism and cultural studies" in American

[26] In particular, Ross notes that the British intellectual tradition historically relies on "the ethnic and regional coherence of working-class institutions and experience, the bourgeois-aristocratic strength of the cultural Establishment, the power of monarchic and imperialist histories…" which are lacking in the American context (Ibid. 233).

academia[27], stressing that by then "postmodernism had already emerged as a key site of debate" (Ibid. 1–2). Thus, illustrating the influence of Hall's critical impact, they list Chambers', Grossberg's, Fiske's, Hebdige's, and others' influential works that came out since the 1980s, all of whom approached their investments with post-Cultural studies through their engagements with postmodernism (Ibid. 2–3).

Importantly, the distaste for Theory expressed by the Cultural Studies' theorists reflects the relative permeability of this label in its reception. Thus, on the one hand, Thompson released the volume of essays under the title *The Poverty of Theory & Other Essays* in 1978, predominantly engaged in dispelling Lois Althusser's and Karl Popper's visions of history. Overall, by departing from the newer intellectual tendency in CS, Thompson charges Althusserian structuralism and its "acolytes" with philosophical idealism and "theoretical imperialism", since they supposedly ignore the real experience of social beings (1978). On the other hand, Hall critiques French Theory in the 1980s, which he primarily links with Jean Baudrillard's and Jean-François Lyotard's poststructuralism. For Hall, these thinkers engage in a celebratory mode of western-centric theorizing, neglecting the social and cultural reality outside their intellectual purview. Overall, while Thompson's and Hall's accounts differ drastically, both of them reflect on the problematic of academic theorizing in terms of French structuralist and poststructuralist thought respectively. These two critical encounters with Theory, crucially, pose the question of insular academic theorizing next to the external social phenomena. Arguably, such critical encounters with French Theory through the lens of cultural studies prefigure the academic trend of aligning theory with extramural cultural semiotic practices broadly defined. In sum, the fusion

[27] CS' own move away from its 'culturalist' orientation to a 'structuralist' paradigm was initiated in the 1970s, while the influence of structuralism on the Centre can be traced to the late 1960s (Sparks 1996: 80–82). The Centre's chief understanding of 'structuralist marxism' particularly referred to Althusserian marxism (Ibid.).

of cultural studies with international structuralism and poststructuralism is seemingly what shapes the distinctive metadiscourse in post-Cultural studies examined further in this chapter.

Through critiquing Althusser and his followers for abandoning historical materialism, Thompson charges Althusserian theory with bourgeois elitism that continually reproduces the "division between theory and practice" (1978: 3). Thus, by breaking the circuits "between intellectuality and practical experience", Althusser's epistemology rests on an "a-historical theoreticism" that derives from "a limited kind of academic learning-process" rather than a concrete socio-historical reality (Ibid. 3–4). More specifically, Thompson's key concern with Althussser is tied to the latter's (mis)understanding of empirical reality: instead of confronting material object existing in the real world, Althusser "interrogates…the word: a pre-given linguistic artefact, with an indistinct social genesis and *with a history*" (Ibid. 6–7). Thus, debunking Althusser's supposedly Marxist dialectical method, Thompson observes that the former's "raw material" — "object of knowledge" — awaits "passively its manufacture into knowledge" without having any tangible correlation to actual experience (Ibid. 7–8). Moreover, since for Althusser, as Thompson sees it, such "raw material" is inevitably contaminated with ideology, the object of knowledge is bound to reflect an abstract and passively received "common sense" as opposed to the knowledges produced by "ordinary" people (Ibid.). Therefore, what Thompson charges Althusser for is the latter's disregard for material reality and lived social experience, which specifically ignores "the *dialogue* between social being and social consciousness" (Ibid. 9). Thompson understands social being as an active object of inquiry, and social consciousness as a "lived thought" the interaction between which Althusser supposedly neglects (Ibid.).

In sum, Thompson's account of Althusser formulates the overarching charge against Theory advanced by one of the CS' founding fathers — its perceived disregard for lived experience and knowledge produced outside academic procedures results in the production of theoretical idealism. Althusser's insistence on the primacy of ideology proclaims a "theoretical practice" as a "a sealed system within which concepts endlessly circulate, recognise and interrogate each other" and where "historical "truth" can be disclosed only within theory itself, by theoretical procedures" (Ibid. 13–15). As the case of Hall showcases, the inadequacy of Theory in relation to cultural and social expressions is theorized in terms of poststructuralism as well. Thus, for Hall, while cultural studies is open to the "external" preoccupations, Theory is conversely assessed as closed off from such "influences": "I am not interested in Theory, I am interested in going on theorizing. And that also means that cultural studies has to be open to external influences, for example, to the rise of new social movements, to psychoanalysis, to feminism, to cultural differences. […] In that case, cultural studies cannot possibly thrive in academic terms from those external influences. […] It is theorizing in the postmodern context, if you like, in the sense that it does not believe in the finality of a finished theoretical paradigm" ([1985] 1996: 150). According to such a description, Theory here stands for "a finished theoretical paradigm" conceived in "academic terms", and cultural studies instead refers to the process of "theorizing" the "external influences". Crucially, what Hall stresses in this statement encapsulates, as he sees it, two interrelated lacunae of intellectual engagement: the problematics of theorizing in academic context and the necessity of accounting for "external influences" that are situated outside Theory.

Thus, first, for Hall, the theoretical project of postmodernism became too complacent to recognize the underlying ideologies embedded in its assumptions. In reflecting on post-

structuralist thinkers such as Baudrillard, Lyotard, and "precursor-prophet of postmodernism", Marshall McLuhan, Hall argues that these thinkers "are involved, not simply in identifying new trends or tendencies, new cultural configurations, but in learning to love them" (Ibid. 131). The fundamental vision that underscores this formula "to lie back and love it ['postmodernism']", as Hall sees it, lies in the fallacious assumption that contemporary culture is impossible to comprehend and should thus be accepted simply as something "to reconcile" with (Ibid. 132–138). In actuality, "the postmodern ideologues", for him, converted "the disillusionment" with previous systems, rationality, and stable signification into a "celebratory" intellectual mode that is inherently "uncritical" and ultimately "western-centric" (Ibid. 132). In short, the uncritical postmodernist love of Theory, for Hall, became the purview and epistemology of predominantly western continental postmodernist thinkers, leaving them blind to the world outside insular theorizing.

Second, in charging these poststructuralists with complacency, Hall directs his attention to the familiar problem of the 'masses' vis-à-vis traditional intellectual dispositions. Therefore, emphasizing the French intellectuals' "tendency to use 'the masses' in the abstract to fuel or underpin their own intellectual positions", Hall charges them with "their own kind of cultural elitism" towards "the Other" (Ibid. 140). Crucially, Hall points to the inability of these select French intellectuals to apply their own *epistemes* to 'the masses': while the former "renounced critical thought, they feel no inhibition in renouncing it on behalf of the masses", continuously endowing the latter with "nothing but a passive reflection of the historical, economical, and political forces" (Ibid.). Therefore, Hall deems it "ironic that the silent majority, whom the intellectuals only discovered yesterday, is fueling the postmodernist collapse" (Ibid.). Hall's objection to the uncritical love of Theory in poststructuralist thought parallels with what he

considers as blindness on part of the postmodernist thinkers towards the supposedly silent and uncritical 'masses'.

Hall's critique against the poststructuralist Theory can be at least partly explained through his own political and professional preoccupations. Famously, the chief focus of Hall and the Subcultures Group laid in their methodical and consistent examinations of the cultural groups situated outside the elite intellectual worlds. As Chambers generally observes in 1996, "[u]ntil quite recently popular culture has lacked a 'serious' discourse" and was previously "invariably disassociated from intellectual life, usually considered its demonic antithesis, and so was completely underrepresented in theory, except by negation; in other words, it was not 'culture'" (1996: 204). One of Hall's major contributions, in Chambers' view, laid precisely in emphasizing 'the masses' as "individual historical subject[s]", whom the former identified in "the diverse modalities of urban popular culture" (Ibid. 205). Hall's epistemological project is encompassed by the collective volume titled *Resistance through Rituals*, which initially came out on the pages of a double issue of *Working Papers in Cultural Studies* (7/8) in 1975. This volume was supposed to document the activities and findings of the Subcultures Group. As Hall and Tony Jefferson retrospectively reflect on the Subcultures Group, which was formed to facilitate and promote "the Centre's individual graduate research projects" studying youth culture, their interests in "[t]he rise of youth cultures" "seemed to…[them] one of the most distinctive — indeed, 'spectacular' — aspects of contemporary British culture, and thus of the process of post-war social and cultural change which was inscribed as a privileged object of study and theorising at the inception of the Centre's work. As it was widely phrased at the time, youth was 'a

metaphor for social change'" (2006: viii)[28]. In Hall and Jefferson's retrospective view, "[s]pectacular youth subcultures raised questions about the necessarily contested and contradictory character of cultural change, and the diversity of forms in which such 'resistances' might find expression" (Ibid.). They conclude that, despite its shortcomings, *RTR* was "crucial", and that this project itself remains, however times may have changed, important "if we are to make sense of (as opposed simply to describe, celebrate or denigrate) what some young people are making of what is being made of them" (Ibid. xxxi–xxxii).

The importance of Hall's late accounts lies in his consistent understanding of theorizing into the object of analysis vis-à-vis articulating the subject who commits intellectual inquiry. Hall is particularly clear in asserting that the tendency towards loving Theory in postmodernist intellectual thought or celebrating the object of study — as embodied in popular audiences or young people — cannot count as satisfactory intellectual orientations. Both, for Hall, are inherently uncritical. The postmodern love of Theory, in Hall's view, runs parallel to the *critical* treatment of 'the masses' as passive and corrosive external forces that lay outside the insular interests of the intellectuals. However, the overcorrection to the traditional intellectual disdain of 'the masses' that later emerged, exhibited in the intellectual-academic celebratory embrace of the popular, arguably produced its own discomforting results. Whether Hall's charge in loving Theory and 'laying back' primarily concerned the continental European poststructuralist thought, it is important to note that this phenomenon may be also associated with the post-Cultural studies, whose many unofficial members would often celebrate popular culture by embracing their own everyday scholarly subjectivities. As Mulhern observes, "the reconciliation of subject

[28] Prior to the subcultural theoretical moment, Williams stresses that "[a]ny culture, in its whole process, is a selection, an emphasis, a particular tending" "based on common decision" ([1958] 1960: 357), which informs the Centre's later investments into spectacular and distinctive subcultural forms.

and object in post-Cultural studies, the intellectual as fan" (2000: 144), would become the tacit intellectual motto of some of its proponents, who, as he argues, in treating culture as "distraction on the town", would absolve it of any cultural or political impetus (Ibid. 147).

Curiously, already in his earlier work, Mulhern comments on the broad advancement of Theory in literary criticism by suggesting that Marxist "radical literary studies" represents a form of "subculture", which produced "the institutional chimera named 'Theory'" (1992: 17), thus implicitly establishing the direct association between the intellectual project of cultural studies and (post-)structuralism. His diagnosis, simultaneously, was not limited to the disciplinary specifics of literary criticism. Though recognizing the intellectual achievements of the "leftist intelligentsia" since 1968, Mulhern overall observed that "left intellectuals became increasingly exposed to the norms and priorities of the dominant order, and particularly those of the academy, where so many of them worked" (Ibid. 16). The result of such exposure, in his view, was far from complimentary: "The political demand for fresh thinking could be recoded as the academy's positivistic requirement of 'progress in research'" which ultimately resulted in "a 'politics' of adaptive novelty" (Ibid. 16–17). While Mulhern's account represents a particularly situated vision, I suggest that the academic popularity of Theory in the international context did, indeed, drastically affect the conceptual development of the project of Cultural Studies. As I attempt to demonstrate it in the following section, the theoretical subculture inaugurated by the prominent academic practitioners of post-Cultural studies formulates the new cultural critical forms of affective commitment in order to tacitly launch the process of scholarly self-justification.

2.3 Theoretical Reconfigurations: The New Cultural Critical Forms of Affective Commitment

> Working-class people are on the whole just not interested in artists or intellectuals; they know of their existence, but regard them as oddities rarely seen within their orbit, like snail-eating Frenchmen (Hoggart [1957] (1961): 152).

Reflecting on the work of the CCCS over the years, Hall remarked: "Popular culture was always a problematic area: largely descriptive in definition (often no more than a mere listing of residual customs and forms) and inscribed within the inadequate terms of the 'cultural debate' (with its 'popular/high' culture oscillations)" (1980: 29). Indeed, in the seminal work of Hoggart, for instance, "working-class pleasures" are described as a form of "sprawling, highly-ornamental, rococo extravagance" (1957: 118). Further, Hoggart explicitly suggests that the working-class "loves what might be called (without necessarily implying an historical link) the 'baroque'", asserting that its outdoor lifestyle represents "specific acts of baroque living" (Ibid. 118–120). Arguably, such transference of the high cultural register onto working-class attitudes, lifestyles, and practices also prefigures the widespread academic tendency towards assimilating scholarly concerns with extramural cultural practices. As this section demonstrates, the cultural debate, in which popular culture is commonly juxtaposed or aligned with academically 'high' culture, is what attributes post-Cultural studies its distinctive mindset. The particularity of such parallelism can be seen in the sets of terms utilized to establish the apparently affirmative distinction between popular and academic forms of engagement: if popular audiences or fans are 'attached' to, 'invested' in, or 'pleased' by the culture they consume, academics, conversely, are 'detached', 'distanced' from, and 'critical' of their object of study. The underlying goal behind

such distinction, as it appears, was initially to resolve the central difficulty inherent within academic criticism — its elitist, exclusionary, authoritative, and condescending disposition towards the Other. However, in undertaking this task, the problematic displacement of the external audiences in favor of redeeming and justifying the pursuit of scholarly criticism itself is arguably what followed. Thus, the porous realm of popular culture begins to serve the narrow intramural purpose of professional self-justification.

Importantly, the prominent post-Cultural studies' critics attempt to legitimize their intellectual project of cultural criticism by endowing popular cultural communities with a distinctive form of intellectual engagement — an affective mode of commitment. Arguably, what necessitates conceptualizing such difference within the post-Cultural studies' phase concerns the main aftermath of theory, or the inescapable ideological nature of scholarly criticism, historically tainted by its exclusionary, critical, and authoritative underpinnings. Therefore, in order to overcome the inherently detrimental essence of academic criticism, the post-Cultural studies' theorists conceptualize the new external cultural modes of commitment as emancipatory and affective. Thus, Chambers, Fiske, and Grossberg, for instance, arrive at the following corresponding categories of discursive engagement: 'distracted reception', 'popular discrimination', and 'asignifying affectivity'. Simultaneously, to achieve the desired intellectual legitimacy in the academic context, these theorists often directly claim their own participation in the new cultural modes of commitment. In sum, the semiotic reading of cultural forms in the post-Cultural studies' phase was seemingly aimed at resolving the issue centrally posed by theory: the authoritarianism of academic language. To mitigate the latter, the post-Cultural studies' theorists attempt to subvert academic critical language by introducing the distinctive emancipatory forms of popular cultural reading.

In 1980s, challenging the perspective whereby "'culture' and industry are diametrically opposed forces", Chambers, in his *Urban Rhythms: Pop Music and Popular Culture* (1985), stresses that the British post-WWII popular culture "was increasingly indifferent to the accusations launched against it from 'above'", revealing "a constructed, contradictory and *contested* history of producing viable daily experiences: ones that make 'sense', that contain pleasures, that are livable" ([1985] 1990: 5). To dissolve the elitist opposition between culture and industry, Chambers stresses that "a culture is produced via distinctive patterns of consumption" in industrial societies, where "[t]he purchase is worked over, accrues a use, a 'sense'" and "envelope[s] the commodity with desire" in "a *particular* and individual reality" (Ibid. 6). One of such examples in Chambers' work, where "livable pleasure" coexists alongside the enveloping of a commodity with desire, can be situated in his analysis of the dance halls which emerged since the 1950s in England (Ibid. 41–44). In this environment, where, for him, "the romantic syntax of youth pleasures" becomes crystallized, females were afforded "a charged public extension of a culture" concentrated around their inner domestic sexuality (Ibid. 43–44). Thus, while historically, "the girl fan was encouraged to organise her commitment around a romantic attachment to the star", the dance hall environment offered females to be "enwrapped in the romantic sonorities of pop" and thereby extend the private sexual "context of reproducible marriage" on the dance floor (Ibid. 44).

Chambers' metaphors of being romantically 'enwrapped' and publicly 'charged' via female consumption of popular music on the dance floor are not merely markedly suggestive but, crucially, also indicative of the semiotic mode of affective cultural attachment he associates with the British urban popular culture. For him, consumption, instead of representing a passive and mass fetishization of cultural commodities, pertains to the popular register of pleasure, through

which the distinctive youth groups get to express and thereby make 'sense' of their lived grassroot culture. Thus, the process of being enwrapped and charged through public consumption of pop music, according to Chambers' model, is inseparable from the emergence of the romantic syntax through which such youth pleasures and attachments get expressed. Critically, Chambers' semiotic reading of urban popular music culture appears to displace the object of his inquiry by directly incorporating it into his own cultural critical concern. Namely, the language of popular cultural style, taste, or pleasure in Chambers' model is apparently meant to, first and foremost, counteract the high cultural and authoritarian expression.

On the one hand, upon concluding his analysis, Chambers links the urban youth British popular culture to "an imaginative conquest of everyday life": in tastes, styles, and pleasures in pop music, "there exists a detailed use and flexible dialogue with the languages of contemporary urban culture: languages that apparently pose us as their 'subjects'/objects" (Ibid. 211). Thus, the urban popular cultural language, for Chambers, permeates the relevant objects of pleasure through which the subjects get to express themselves in the first place. On the other hand, however, he simultaneously argues that the adoption of a certain popular cultural urban style or lifestyle places "us" "inside another 'knowledge'; one quite distinct from the narrow perspectives of 'High Culture', its rational concentration and formal aesthetics" (Ibid.). Elaborating on what the 'narrow' side of the spectrum really entails, Chambers notes that it is the one which reduces culture to traditional aesthetics. In turn, urban popular cultural forms constitute its antidote: "The presumed unity of an authoritative 'knowledge' or 'Culture' is undermined and dispersed by the heterogenous pressures of diverse knowledges-cultures" (Ibid. 252). Thus, for him, "despite its obvious commercial organisation", urban popular culture "is more dynamic, and potentially

more democratic, than the tired conservative prospects it encroaches upon and supplants" (Ibid. 207).

Chambers' peculiar conflation of popular cultural language with that of 'high culture' appears contradictory in one crucial respect: as I have showed earlier, he himself stresses that popular urban culture is largely indifferent to concerns expressed from above. Simultaneously, his persistent inclusion of popular cultural tastes, styles, and pleasures into the dynamic of authoritative knowledge and Culture appears rather disorienting. However, the utilization of such comparison is precisely what allows him to label popular culture as more democratic in contradistinction to its perceived conservative counterpart, 'high culture'. Urban popular culture, according to Chambers' conception, constructs and employs heterogenous knowledges and languages as a means of undermining rational concentration and aesthetic formalism of Culture, thus being placed in direct dialogue with traditional aesthetics. This signals the emergence of the structural logic in post-Cultural studies, whereby popular cultural groups supposedly embody democratic impulse through their affective investments in the ordinary and the popular, thereby providing a grassroot alternative to conservative formal appearances and rational critical elitisms. In sum, it appears appropriate to question the sustainability and relevance of such distinction, and whether it does any justice to the object of analysis placed markedly outside of the 'high cultural' domain, understood as the privileged mode of rational concentration and formal aesthetics. Most critically, the transposition of the subjective intellectual concern in the post-Cultural studies, which Chambers' vision embodies, onto the object of study — urban popular culture — results in what Mulhern has described as the intellectual tendency towards "cultural populism": on the one hand, "a sentimental or wishful valorization of the popular cultural object", and, on the other hand, "the discursive fashioning of the subject who claims to represent it" (2000: 141).

In his *Culture/Metaculture* (2000), Mulhern altogether charges Chambers with reducing the everyday to "the simple other of 'high' culture and its associated faculties" with "fast food and dance" serving as "its likeliest epitomes" (Ibid. 142–143), thus similarly questioning the actual locus of Chambers' concern. Building off the critique of Meaghan Morris, who links Chambers' approach to the object of study with the renunciation of 'critical reason' (Morris 1996), Mulhern highlights the latter's "new theory or format of knowledge" — the so-called "popular epistemology" (Ibid. 141). Engaging with Chambers' later work, *Popular Culture* (1986), Mulhern points at the dichotomy already alluded to in the former's earlier study: "the dominant forms of knowledge" juxtaposed with popular culture as "a different kind of 'expertise'" (Ibid. 141–142). Namely, as opposed to academic "contemplation" guided by "an abstract aesthetic research amongst privileged objects of attention" (Chambers qtd. in ibid.), Chambers insists on popular culture being the pathway to 'distracted reception', the formula he repeatedly derives from Walter Benjamin. Thus, he conceptualizes "the public as an examiner", who has "an informal knowledge of the everyday, based on the sensory, the immediate, the pleasurable and the concrete" at its disposal (Ibid.). Mulhern comments on the popular cultural 'expertise' and 'intelligence' theorized as such in the following way: "the novelty and special value of its kind of critical intelligence is that it is the opposite of the familiar [, academic] kind" (Ibid. 142). Such epistemology, in Mulhern's view, ultimately deprives non-academic cultural groups from intellectual contemplation of any kind and serves the primary goal of academic self-fashioning.

In sum, Chambers' distinction between academic 'contemplation' and 'distracted reception' vis-à-vis different social cultural groups can be assessed as a form of intellectual legitimation, which is why the former explicitly stresses his own involvement in the 'distracted

mode' ([1985] 1990: 211). Critically, the dichotomy posed by him is inherently problematic, first and foremost, due to its displacement of the object of analysis with a much narrower textualist and theoretical academic concern. As the rest of this section demonstrates, the reduction of the realm of popular culture into its perceived distinctive form of reception — in Chambers' case the one marked by 'distraction' — gradually becomes distilled into the formal practice of reading. In other words, moving further away from popular culture as a lived social phenomenon (its anthropological dimension) the post-Cultural studies' tendency overemphasizes the affectively *textual* forms of popular cultural, fan, and media user engagements with aesthetic objects. In turn, the scholarly affirmation of active, involved, participatory, and affective attachment to texts by more grassroot social groups becomes inseparable from the adjacent denunciation of its counterpart — the distanced, detached, rational, and critical forms of reading deemed ideologically exclusionary and authoritarian. As the case of Fiske demonstrates, the notion of fan, which inaugurated the emergence of fan studies and its crystallization into a separate discipline, was heavily influenced by the disposition of post-Cultural studies outlined above. Thus, despite the assumption that deems the "intervention" of Fiske, who insisted on "his own fandom as a resistant stance within the culture offered by capitalism", as a challenge to the original "orthodoxy"[29] of CS that "had previously encouraged researchers to disengage from their fandom and maintain sufficient emotional distance in order to treat their subject matter critically" (Duffett 2013: 64), his exploration of fans remains firmly within the intellectual trajectory of post-Cultural studies. Therefore, as previously suggested, the blending of Theory

[29] Hall himself is adamant regarding CS and its lack of 'orthodoxy', stressing that "[t]heoretical openness has by no means been easy to sustain within the Centre, but the Centre has consciously attempted to undercut any attempts to establish an 'orthodoxy'" (Hall 2016: 26).

with the project of cultural studies is what endows post-Cultural studies with its dispositional metadiscursive form.

In his highly influential early work on fandom, *Understanding Popular Culture* (1989), Fiske sums up the distinction between fans as active and enthusiastic readers and what he understands as more exclusionary 'critical stance' in the following way: "Fans are excessive readers: Fan texts are excessively popular. Being a fan involves active, enthusiastic, partisan, participatory engagement with the text. Fandom is part of what Bourdieu identifies as proletarian cultural practice, in contrast to the bourgeois distant, appreciative, critical stance to texts" (1989: 146–147). Apart from his peculiar direct association of fandom with an abstract 'proletarian' sensibility, Fiske's visible transposition of academic category of fan onto the external fans illustrates an important and symptomatic example. Since the rational critical distance and detachment within the post-Cultural studies' logic refers to critical academic and thereby conservative approach to text, the involved and enthusiastic scholarly attitude, conversely, signifies more involved and thus democratically progressive intellectual stance. In Fiske's case, the distinction is labelled in abstract ideological terms of 'proletarian cultural practice' and 'bourgeois' 'critical stance' respectively. In order to fully grasp his own academic disposition, however, it is required to follow Fiske's line of argumentation more closely.

In his later piece, Fiske openly states that "fan knowledge or expertise, which may at times be both voluminous and esoteric, constitutes a fan cultural capital that is equivalent of the official cultural capital of the educated bourgeoisie" (1991: 112). Peculiarly, however, the key line of distinction between the two primarily concerns the types of *narrative texts* and the differing structural, ideological, and receptive modes they pertain to. Thus, firstly, if a traditional bourgeois 'highbrow' text relies on the authority of the author, popular narratives, conversely,

"ignore traces of authorial signature and focus[] rather on generic conventions", which "also open the text up to productive reading strategies" (Ibid.108–109). Characteristically, the latter statement visibly fuses the concerns of theory with those of cultural studies in locating the emancipatory popular reading strategies in the ideological apparatus of textual semiotics. Blending these orientations, Fiske thus simplistically concludes that "[g]eneric readers know the conventions and are thus situated in a far more democratic relationship with the text than are the readers of highbrow literature, with its authoritative authors" (Ibid. 109). Second, in terms of the differing modes of textual engagement, Fiske draws the distinction between 'popular' and 'critical discrimination', suggesting that "popular functionalism" lies in contradistinction to "bourgeois aesthetic distance" respectively (Ibid. 105). What he understands as 'discrimination' generally pertains to "[t]he ability of the people to discriminate between the products of capitalism, particularly those of its culture industries" (Ibid. 103). In short, while, for him, 'popular' discrimination is situated around "the immediate social situation of its readers" and is thus deemed functional, 'critical' discrimination, conversely, relies on 'aestheticism' that "distances art from necessity" of life, which makes such mode distinctively 'bourgeois' (Ibid. 104–105). Thus, the already illustrated central opposition between active proletarian and distant bourgeois forms of reading in Fiske's work emerges yet again. Thirdly, and finally, the last point relevant to the subject at hand concerns Fiske's observation on the role of the academic scholar studying fans and popular culture, suggesting that academics both "enjoy and experience" the popular cultural artifacts "but also theorize, write, and teach about the objects of their enthusiasm in their alignment with institutional power" (Ibid. 113). Importantly, the way in which such academic disposition pertains to the popular cultural register chiefly concerns the resolute political-pedagogical alignment of the scholar towards the popular. Thus, by upholding a

strategically “developed political sensitivity”, the scholar will “investigate” and “theorize” the popular by “eventually” “feed[ing] back into it and enhanc[ing] the challenge it offers to the power-bloc” (Ibid. 113–114). In sum, “a study of the popular can enhance academia’s ability to critically examine the society of which it is part” (Ibid. 114).

Seemingly, Fiske’s juxtaposition between popular and critical forms of readerly discriminations and investments in a capitalist society prioritizes the role of a popular cultural / fan scholar in the process of challenging ‘the power-bloc’. In other words, while popular cultural and highbrow texts are theorized here as diametrically opposed primarily on the level of cultural production and reception, the scholars’ investment in the popular cultural cause, deemed as more democratic, potentially provides a form of internal reconciliation. Namely, since academics are both enthusiastic and theoretical toward the popular cultural artifacts, their ‘political sensitivity’ represents the ideal outcome of cultural studies. Thus, while, granted, Fiske emphasizes the importance of the academic and the popular to “remain in conflict” in order to avoid the hierarchical incorporation of the popular “into the academic canon” (Ibid. 113), he simultaneously erases the boundary between the subject and the object of inquiry, extrapolating his own academically exclusive form of cultural progressivism onto the external audiences. Unsurprisingly, the specific blending of affect and theory, in this case, is what endows the new academic disposition with its distinctively progressivist form. Arguably, embracing such a progressivist and enlightened scholarly disposition allows Fiske to indiscriminately label all fans as more democratic and anti-authoritarian without relying on the burden of empirical proof to substantiate his claims.

In sum, if the popular and the highbrow are theorized as structurally and ideologically different on the level of reading and artistic texts, the scholarly disposition of academic as fan

advanced here simultaneously attempts to fuse its 'enthusiastic' and 'theoretical' orientations, thereby shaping the alternative intramural mode of cultural politics. What Fiske's case seems to clearly demonstrate is the direct transference of the progressive academic *critical* and enthusiastic disposition onto fans, conceptualized as 'active', 'partisan', and 'proletarian' readers. The amalgamation of the enthusiastic academic stance and fans respectively theorized as active readers, therefore, produces the conflation of the subject and the object of analysis, and, by proxy, provides *legitimacy* to the scholarly subject. Overall, Fiske's early work on fandom clearly illustrates the metacultural approach to popular culture that Mulhern identifies in the post-Cultural studies' scholarship.

Another pioneer of fan studies, Lawrence Grossberg, continued to explore the trajectory established thus far. In line with Chambers and Fiske, Grossberg similarly argues that "fan's relation to culture…opens up a range of political possibilities" suggesting that "fan's investment of energy into certain practices always returns some interest on the investment through a variety of empowering relations" (1992: 64). He specifically proposes that "[f]ans' investment in certain practices and texts provides them with strategies which enable them to gain a certain amount of control over their affective life, which further enables them to invest in new forms of meaning, pleasure and identity […]"; a cultural process, which Grossberg potentially associates with "popular struggle, resistance and opposition" (Ibid. 64–65). By linking fandom with "affective investment" and empowerment, Grossberg therefore overall concludes that "fandom is, at least potentially, the site of the optimism, invigoration and passion which are necessary conditions for any struggle to change the conditions of one's life" (Ibid. 65).

Reflecting on the updated version of Grossberg's argument on fandom and affect, Helena Popović suggests that his account illustrates the shift in analytical focus within fan studies "from

ideology and politics to pleasure and consumption (clearly noticeable in the change of discourse: from 'socialism', 'class' and 'power' to optimism, passion and affectivity); from political possibilities emanating from subcultural resistance to political possibilities emanating from affective consumption practices" (2011: 5). Thus, while, in Popović's assessment, Hall's understanding of popular culture was directly linked to its socialist political potential (Ibid. 4–5), Grossberg's prioritization of passion and affectivity signals the emergence of a different approach. Importantly, however, Grossberg also advances his own definition of "a politics of feeling", the term he derives from Benjamin: "Affective struggles cannot be conceptualized within the terms of theories of resistance for their oppositional quality is constituted, not in a negative dialectics, but by a project of or struggle over empowerment, an empowerment which energizes and connects specific social moments, practices and subject-positions (1996: 168). Apparently, Grossberg's intellectual disposition reflects the encounter of cultural studies with Theory, which illustrates a particular blend of the ideas advanced by the Frankfurt school's critical theory, poststructuralism, and the cultural project of expressive humanism pursued in the first intellectual phase by CS.

Thus, Grossberg, while remaining faithful to the discursive impetus within Hall's engagements with culture and ideology, also aimed at theorizing and describing "the 'sensibility of mass culture'" through the aid of deconstruction (Ibid. 169–172). Therefore, suggesting that Hall's and others' theories of ideology that are "rooted in structuralism" "too easily abandoned the insights" of Williams and Hoggart, Grossberg proposed to reengage the respective notions of "the structure of feeling" and "the texture of lived experience" (Ibid.) to conceptualize 'affect' as an expressive form of empowerment. In an attempt at dismantling the boundary between the rational and the irrational, Grossberg considers "resistance" and "empowerment" as the two

poles of popular "ideological and affective struggles" (Ibid. 169). Therefore, while "resistance" presupposes theoretical articulation and prioritization of the 'negative dialectics', the notion of expressive "empowerment" allows Grossberg to endow 'popular' "moods and emotions" with "an asignifying effectivity" (Ibid. 168). In short, the focus on ideology in cultural studies that Grossberg sees in its later phase, for him, could be remedied through reintroducing the earlier conceptual insistence on expressiveness. Despite Grossberg's emphasis on 'affective economy' (1986) and the 'mattering maps', which was aimed at resolving "overemphasis on the line of the ideological" in the post-Althusserian cultural studies (Chen [1992] 1996: 312), Chen argues that the former failed to articulate "the *inner* logics of the affective" (Ibid.). While, granted, Grossberg, in Chen's view, could "pinpoint the visible configurations of styles, of body, of youth", he did not simultaneously reflect on the historical contingencies "or surrounding social conditions" underlying these 'configurations' (Ibid. 313). Thus, for Chen, "Grossberg is not able to historicize the affective structure", producing a theory that remains "a shell without trajectories" (Ibid.).

In sum, while the notion of affect itself could undeniably be fruitful in analyzing fans or media users, the historical functioning of this concept in theorizing fandom illustrates its substantial limitation. The affective dimension prioritized by thinkers like Grossberg in studying fans maps the trend for conceptualizing fandom as an inherently empowered culturally political mode. This conception eventually converts into the following narrow textualist formula: being a fan signifies the love of texts, which also serves as the foundation for empowered behavior. Conceptual terminology ranging from 'affect', 'attachment', 'feeling', 'emotion', and so on is therefore used to describe fandom as a potentially democratic form of cultural participation. Conversely, this affective dimension could eventually be redeployed in conceptualizing fandom

as a populist form of cultural engagement. Thus, the appearance of a reactionary stance that considers the mode of being a fan as a potential pathway to ideologically regressive perspective is unsurprisingly underscored with the conceptual insistence on affect. In short, the idea of affect in fan studies often functions as the theoretical link to determining political orientations of social and cultural groups.

As the next section illustrates, the metadiscourse of fandom in fan studies has consistently relied on the notion of affective attachment. By specifically addressing the dispositions of 'scholar fandom' and 'aca fandom', I continue outlining the metacultural intellectual heritage of post-Cultural studies in the discipline of fan studies. Exploring the 'complicated' scholarly approach to fandom, which ranges from exploring the intellectual capacity of fans to their populist inclinations, I demonstrate the ongoing significance of the logic of attachment, detachment, and affect in this disciplinary field. I argue that the importance of this overview concerns the post-scholarly direction within academic scholarship, which popularizes the fan-scholar approach in the professional context and thus disrupts traditional definitions of the role of the scholar.

2.4 Towards Disciplinary Legitimation: The Metadiscourse of Academic Fandom

Between The Love of Scholarship and the Love of Objects: The Dispositional Logic in Fan Studies

> Perhaps only a fan can appreciate the depth of feeling, the gratifications, the importance for coping with everyday life that fandom represents. Yet we are all fans of something. We respect, admire, desire. We distinguish and form commitments. By endeavoring to understand the fan

impulse, we ultimately move towards a greater understanding of ourselves (Lewis 1992: 1).

In the beginning of 2000s, fan scholar Matt Hills released his inaugural volume, *Fan Cultures* (2002), where he charged the "ethnographic methodology" employed in studying fan communities for being reductive (2002: 38). Specifically, for Hills, in much of the scholarly fan ethnography inspired by broad cultural studies, "[f]andom is largely reduced to mental and discursive activity occurring without passion, without feeling, without an experience of (perhaps involuntary) self-transformation" (Ibid.). Therefore, suggesting that "[p]revious fan-ethnography has largely erred on the side of accepting fan discourse as interpretive 'knowledge'", Hills aims instead "to reconsider fan discourse as a justification for fan passions and attachments" (Ibid.). Despite Hills' pronouncement, however, it will be demonstrated further that much of the academic discourse within fan studies from the early 1990s to the late 2010s rests on the overarching definition of the state of fandom as distinctively affective. Contrastingly, the later notions of 'scholar-, aca-, anti-fan' or 'fanidentity' will illustrate the importance of defining fandom as an affectively attached mode for legitimating the cultural and professional status of a scholar studying fan communities.

Importantly, Hills directs his primary attention to the problematics of fan cultures serving "as miniaturised models of academia" in fan studies (Ibid. 42). Albeit equally universalistic[30], his early attempt to revise "cultural studies' ethnography" with its insistence on inherent "fan 'knowledgeability'", or "the fan's (supposedly) preexistent form of audience knowledge and

[30] Specifically, I do not share Hills' peculiar overemphasis on fan activities deemed as primarily affective and neither do I concede to the rejection of popular cultural interpretative forms or knowledge; conversely, this dissertation project partially aims to resolve the historically reductive conceptual binary of affective/rational popular discourse employed in fan studies and beyond.

interpretive skill" (Ibid. 38), aptly points to the apocrypha established during the post-Cultural studies' phase. Indeed, it appears that Chambers', Fiske's and Grossberg's insistence on popular cultural interpretation understood as a grassroot *intellectual* pursuit sets an important conceptual precedent for the emergent discipline of fan studies. In turn, the introduction of affect conceived as a distinctive mode of popular readership provided these thinkers with a conceptual alternative to critical, distanced, and privileged academic gaze. As it will be shown over the course of the final section of the present chapter, the discipline of fan studies has historically balanced the conceptualizations of fans as affective readers and scholar-fans as critically affective interpreters, thus once again modifying the metadiscursive logic established by its academic predecessors.

First, it deserves stressing that, for a moment, fandom as a scholarly notion seemingly threatened to replace the already familiar and infamous concept of "mass" culture, historically utilized as derogatory. Thus, when Williams irritatingly comments on the term "mass" in application to culture in the mid-1980s, he repeatedly emphasizes that it often entails "anti-democratic prejudices about anything that reaches or is addressed to a large number of people", and additionally opposed this "term" due to its negative market-driven connotation (Heath and Skirrow 1986: 3–4). Instead, he prefers the term "popular" which he defines as the "active word of everyday conversation and exchange" carrying a surplus "partisan" implication (Ibid. 5). In the following decade, the post-Cultural studies' epistemology continued to systematically challenge 'mass'-oriented approaches to culture, though through employment of different terminology. Thus, in consistently replacing the term 'popular', the notion of fandom emerged at the center of the conversation, which, in turn, provided professional justification to the new discipline of fan studies.

Since the early 1990s, the emergent fan scholarship embarked on the conceptual path once pursued by its influential predecessors: in other words, it attempted to dismantle the conservative presuppositions concerning popular communities. Thus, Joli Jensen, reflecting on the notion of fandom in the inaugural 1992 volume observes that "[t]he fan is understood to be, at least implicitly, a result of celebrity [cult]" and "is defined as a *response* to the star system" generated through the exposure to popular mass media (1992: 10). Because of this perceived link between fans, celebrity, and mass media, as Jensen argues, "the literature of fan-celebrity relationships" presented "a psychologized version of the mass society critique" (Ibid. 16). Thus, surveying both popular and scholarly accounts of fans and fandom, she identifies "two fan types" in them: "the obsessed individual and the hysterical crowd" (Ibid. 9). Crucially, in contesting this deviant mass image of fans in academia, Jensen draws the familiar link between scholars and the external audiences in terms of cultural hierarchy. Analyzing fandom as a conceptual mode of deviancy, Jensen proposes that such characterization "supports the celebration of particular values — the rational over the emotional, the educated over the uneducated, the subdued over the passionate, the elite over the popular, the mainstream over the margin, the status quo over the alternative" (Ibid. 24). Importantly, the major distinction between fans and academics that Jensen identifies revolves around the two cultural poles — that of emotional "excess" and rational "affinity" respectively (Ibid. 20).

Therefore, academics, for Jensen, demarcate these cultural differences as follows: if fandom presupposes irrational and obsessive behavior, academic scholarship contrastingly implies objective and detached evaluation (Ibid.). To contest this observed distinction based on mass-cultural stereotyping, Jensen particularly links fandom with the modes of affection and attachment applicable to academics and non-academics alike: "Fans, when insistently

characterized as 'them,' can be distinguished from 'people like us' (students, professors and social critics) as well as from (the more reputable) patrons or aficionados or collectors. But these respectable social types could also be defined as 'fans,' in that they display interest, affection and attachment, especially for figures in, or aspects of, their chosen field" (Ibid. 9).

Beside the self-perceived autonomy and rational "critical insight" of fan scholars that Jensen identifies (Ibid. 20), she also suggests that defining fans as deviant allows academics to romanticize "[the] exotic and dramatic" and thereby ignore "the normal, everyday, and accepted" (Ibid. 25). Conversely, Jensen insists on studying "the variety of ways people make meaning in everyday ways", or, in other words, "varieties of affection, attachment, sentiment and interest, *as they are manifested in people's lives*" (Ibid.). Her formula recalls Williams' response to the interview question regarding potential approaches to studying "mass culture": for him, the most feasible one was meant "to understand precisely the production of certain conventions and modes of communication right inside the [cultural] form" (Heath and Skirrow 1986: 14). Jensen, in turn, argues that "[s]ocial inquiry…should be a form of respectful engagement…and should illuminate the experiences of others *in their own terms*, because these 'others' are us…" (Ibid. 26).

I would like to suggest that Jensen's approach to the question of fandom maps out the trajectory in the disciplinary fan studies derived from post-Cultural studies. Namely, to overcome the scholarly mass-cultural critique of fans, Jensen follows the incentive of the post-Cultural studies at demonstrating the interdependence between academic and non-academic forms of cultural attachment: both, for her, display interest and affection. Moreover, what testifies to the new disposition advanced by Jensen also being directly influenced by post-Cultural studies is her comparison between loving the chosen scholarly field and the state of fandom. First, what allows

her to debunk the elitist mass-critical approach to fans is her explicit assertion that academics are as attached to their *chosen field of study* as fans are attached to their objects of passion. Thus, similar to the approaches of Chambers, Fiske, and Grossberg, the dispositional trajectory pursued by Jensen in terms of fans pertains to the understanding of intellectual scholarly practice in everyday terms: namely, every scholar is as emotionally attached to and invested in what they study as fans are in what they love. Second, by deeming academic language inherently objective, detached, and critical in its evaluation, Jensen emphasizes the attached qualities of scholarly work thereby attempting to reform traditionalist and exclusionary academic approaches to the cultural group of fans. While the post-Cultural studies' theorists still clearly demarcate academic language from popular cultural semiotics and merely relate themselves to the latter, however, Jensen reworks the post-Cultural mindset by directly suggesting structural and *behavioral equality* between scholars and fans on the level of affective attachment. Therefore, the metadiscourse of fan studies whereby these two distinct forms of attachment structurally display the same form of cultural behavior towards an object of interest begins to shape the new disciplinary field of fan studies.

Most crucially, while Jensen does not directly define 'a chosen academic field' as a mode of Theory, later fan scholarship illustrates the importance of such conceptual conflation in studying fans. Thus, in the late 2000s, Alan McKee merges the phenomena of politically charged Theory and fandom understood as an affectively attached critical practice outside academia. In his assessment,

> Academics are fans, by any workable definition. We know very well that a passion for Theory is just as much a form of fandom as is loving *Star Trek*…[, and] in a classic instance of disavowal we sometimes choose to

> forget this…as though, despite all the evidence to the contrary, *our* cultural pleasures are rational and our ideas are genuinely challenging to capitalism, while the cultural pleasures of *others* are emotional and their ideas don't genuinely challenge the system (2007: 96).

In his text, McKee raises the conventional question of intellectual and conservative bias towards popular fandom. However, the importance of the illustrated paragraph concerns the specific formulation McKee advances on the subject of academic and fan critical production. On the one hand, this statement points at the already familiar behavioral equation between academics and fans. Since academics belong to the non-academic world as much as they are immersed in the academic contexts, loving Theory and loving popular fiction are posed here as indistinguishable forms of attachment through pleasure. On the other hand, since McKee directly introduces the notion of *Theory* to the discussion, doing so significantly narrows down the locus and the purpose of the comparison. To put simply, Theory is specifically understood here as the *affective* ideological mode of challenging capitalism on rational critical terms. In turn, the popular engagements with mass-produced fictional narratives are argued to structurally resemble such theoretical disposition and procedure. Thus, by disputing the premise of fan irrationality, McKee unambiguously asserts that "there may indeed be some fan production that does indeed produce and circulate interesting ideas that challenge the ideological foundations of capitalist social systems" (Ibid. 97).

In short, the two different forms of affectively critical and ideological engagement, equally supposedly enclosed in the mode of theory and popular cultural interpretation (albeit merely theorized as a potentiality in the case of the latter), uncontroversially place McKee's argument in the intellectual trajectory of post-Cultural studies. Thus, the co-habitation of affect, attached

cultural forms of *reading*, and emancipatory intent present here testify to the fundamental influence produced through the merger of cultural studies with poststructuralist theory in the academic setting. As opposed to his predecessors, however, McKee equates popular cultural interpretation to academic criticism, thereby visibly eliminating the boundary between the two. In producing such equation, he also addresses the culturally problematic disposition of academic scholars, once critiqued in the context of poststructuralism by Hall. By pointing at the familiar intellectual elitism of academic theoretical practitioners towards the Other, McKee simultaneously stresses the importance of recognizing the rational critical capacity of popular cultural interpretation. Therefore, in the spirit of Hall, who pointed at the hypo*critical* logic of select poststructuralist thinkers, McKee suggests considering the rational critical capacity of fans, thus appropriately questioning the ideologically biased mode of academic theorizing in general. In sum, however, the importance of McKee's account concerns his explicit parallelism drawn between academics and fans in terms of their semi-equally *affective* and *rational* capacity at interpreting cultural and fictional texts. Ultimately, the rational-affective form of cultural interpretation theorized as such is meant to underscore the ideological allegiance between scholars and fans, who are willing to challenge the ideological foundations of capitalist social systems through differing yet similar forms of critical reading. As it is shown further, the relationship between scholars and fans thus posed can be witnessed in the metadiscourse of 'aca-fandom', which represents an evolved form of the dispositional fusion. The complete dissolution of difference between academics and fans, however, already occurs when the notion of 'scholar fandom' enters the discussion.

In the same volume where McKee's piece was published, Hills's essay examines the general disposition of "scholar fandom", the attacks on which, as he argues, were initially

launched “for its supposed transgression of scholarly detachment” (2007: 34). Hills specifically questions the negative attitude towards “scholar-fans…[seen] as carrying some hybridized or logically regressive identity in relation to their academic status”, while stressing that academics’ own “scholarly selves cannot be cleanly separated out from their media-audience-based identities” (Ibid.). Thus, proposing that “apparent destabilizing of scholar versus fan identity may have worked as a kind of academic-ideological feint”, Hills critiques conventional “academic’s self-legitimating and claimed identity” that rests on “critical rationality, objectivity, and neutrality” (Ibid. 34–35). Overall, by generally maintaining the importance of safeguarding the involved fan disposition against the rational-critical academic identity, Hills engages in the standard line of argument advanced since post-Cultural studies. Similarly, the concept of fandom, in this case, underscores the attached, subjective, and involved stance. However, the clear dilution of the post-Cultural studies’ concern pertains to the established distinction between critical and objective scholarly detachment versus more transgressive scholarly attachment. When the original CS, for instance, maintained the importance of cultural attachment as the means of connecting to the social world outside elite intellectual worlds, Hills launches the defense of scholar-fans, who are markedly attached to their object of study. Therefore, while previously, working-class, popular cultural or subcultural forms were to be amplified and defended through the derogatory lens of the mass-cultural critique, Hills’ model amplifies and defends *scholar fandom* from supposedly carrying ‘some hybridized or logically regressive identity’ in terms of their cultural *academic status*. Importantly, through introducing the new dispositional categories of ‘scholar-fan’ and ‘scholar-anti-fan’, Hills raises two critiques once raised against the more autoethnographic and the mass-critical approaches to cultural forms

respectively. Thus, Hills identifies what he sees as "two related forms of aesthetic judgement…: celebratory scholar-fandom and critical scholar-anti-fandom" (Ibid. 42).

Referring to his earlier work (2002), Hills describes "scholar-fans" as "those scholars who are also self-identified fans of what they study" and suggests that this "faction of media/cultural studies…ha[s] tended to study texts that they profess to love", which "resulted in specific taste cultures being overrepresented academically" (Hills qtd. in ibid. 40). On the other and of the spectrum, "scholar-anti-fans" are defined as academics who tend to "enact their distaste for certain forms of popular culture by dismissing, ignoring, or stereotyping them" (Ibid. 40–41). Hills described this latter intellectual orientation as the one that produces "neo-Marxist, anti-fan, or non-fan critiques of disfavored texts" (Ibid. 41). Perhaps the most striking aspect of Hills' critiques launched here against both 'scholar-fans' and 'scholar-anti-fans' concerns the prioritization of *texts* rather than cultural forms: to put simply, while 'scholar-fans' are overtly attached to select popular texts, 'scholar-anti-fans', conversely, are too eager to dismiss, ignore, and stereotype those popular cultural texts they don't like. Seemingly, the dichotomy posed as such merely transfers the earlier scholarly charges against both celebratory and mass-cultural forms of critique onto the new terminological binary. Strikingly, however, while the latter charges concerned the study of *cultural forms* existent outside university, Hills' preoccupation is instead directed at the intramural academic dispositions. As my final example demonstrates, the concept of 'aca-fandom' represents the culmination of the dispositional logic of attachment in fan studies established thus far.

In conversation with Hills, which became a part of the first chapter of the work titled *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers* (2006), Jenkins refers to what he calls "a generation of aca-fen…; that is, people who are both academics and fans, for whom those identities are not problematic to

mix and combine, and who are able then to write in a more open way about their experience of fandom…without the need to defend the community" (2006b: 12). In the collective interview conducted in the late 2010s, Mark Duffett adopts this term, suggesting that professing 'aca-fandom', beyond adopting a conscious "methodology or ethical stance", involves "a kind of rhetorical strategy in academic debate" (Brooker et. al 2018: 63–64). The autoethnographic disposition of an 'aca-fan', as Duffett observes, relates to a scholar's involved mode of self-expression and personal investment in being a fan (Ibid. 64). Importantly, in his view, "aca-fandom is not just about an academic writer proclaiming or implying her or his personal fandom; rather, it is the academic writer claiming participation in the fan community to a point where she or he is willing to represent it" and "to translate it to an outside audience" (Ibid. 67). Thus, Duffett points at the intersection between fans and aca-fans in terms of their "ownership" functions: "just as fans assume ownership of their objects (recognizing chosen texts or heroes as theirs), so aca-fans assume a kind of ownership of their fan communities and position themselves as spokespeople, individuals who operate in a translating role" which also allows the latter to maintain "an implicit distance" to the object of study (Ibid. 64). In other words, for Duffett 'aca-fans' are those scholars who claim 'fan community ownership' and thus take on a role of 'spokespeople' translating knowledge and language present in such community to academic audiences. What allows 'aca-fans' to maintain an implicit distance, as Duffett also paradoxically suggests, is their disciplinary inclination to practice an ethnography (or autoethnography) presumably because these academic genres imply a translation of an outside culture to a different audience (Ibid.). Thus, Duffett's assertion seems to indicate that an academic critical method, however autoethnographic in ethos, a priori entails distance due to its specialized language and implied scholarly addressee. Critically, while recognizing "one's individual academic privilege"

in studying fans as well as simultaneously condemning "the false separation of fans and academics", Duffett urges other scholars to use their position and status "to give fans a greater voice, plus exploit …[their] position by using it as a platform to help others — sometimes speaking as fans, sometimes offering fellow fans a platform and thus addressing the ignorance or arrogance of others" (Ibid. 70). Further, he stresses that academic scholarship is often prescribed by researchers' own individual tastes, and that "Fan studies has the potential to avoid the guiding influence of latent fandom because it necessarily is a field of study that prizes […] self-awareness as part of the investigation" (Ibid. 73).

Importantly, Duffett's stance particularly resembles the attitude of post-Cultural studies scholars towards audiences and social groups situated outside academic and elite intellectual environments, which required affirmation for the sake of building strategic alliances. Thus, reflecting on the 'post-marxist' phase in Cultural Studies of the 1990s, Chen argues that, in its more radical form, post-Cultural studies "ought perhaps sometimes […], by using already occupied social positions, to open up spaces, so that minor discourses may speak (or not) and be heard" (1996: 310). Notably, Duffett's stance markedly departs from the earlier cultural political imperative of building possible strategic alliances between dominant and minor discourses, narrowing his focus down to abstract and largely depoliticized fan communities. The broad aim expressed by Duffett — to address the arrogance or ignorance of others in providing platform to fan communities — is also markedly intra-academic, despite his suggested vague imperative of helping others outside the academic environment. Thus, he emphasizes the importance of academic fan studies for representing those fan voices situated outside institutionalized academia. Critically, since the category of 'aca-fans' encompasses both academic and fan identity, Duffett relies on the blurred and depoliticized distinction between academics and fans,

which allows him to simultaneously acknowledge academic privilege and reserve strategic space for scholarly engagements with their fandom.

The normative stance advanced by Duffett in this interview ultimately seems to argue for the affirmative role of academic fan as both a discursive and cultural mediator between academics and fans. The former can potentially amplify those voices positioned outside academia specifically through assuming an 'aca-fan' spokesmanship and disposition. However, the account drawn by Duffett also seems to illustrate a strikingly disorienting contradiction at hand: namely, while academics are supposedly not principally different from fans, they are simultaneously fans of a rather distinct kind. Thus, on the one hand, academics occupy a privileged position and status vis-à-vis their object of study and, on the other, this position also somehow allows them to occasionally speak as fans on behalf of other fellow fans outside academia. The reconciliation between these categories advanced by Duffett, therefore, appears to fully depend on deliberate and discursive self-fashioning of the academic subject — an already familiar intellectual disposition crystallized within post-Cultural studies. Surprisingly, however, "latent fandom", which Duffett unambiguously associates with taste, is not considered here an ideal guiding mechanism for fan scholars, which is why academics should instead rely on the self-awareness supposedly enclosed in the very act of disciplinary investigation into fans. Thus, disciplinary self-awareness, properly selected methodology, and dispositional translation implicit in scholarly fan research, for Duffett, are what makes an ideal fan scholar beyond being merely an avid collector of "empirical data" surrounding fan discussions (Ibid. 67).

Further, Will Brooker's account on the subject of 'aca-fans' from the same interview illustrates another compelling case in the development of the metadiscourse of attachment in fan studies. Elaborating on the term, Brooker emphasizes that 'aca-fans' stand for "fans of popular

culture — often, more specifically, science fiction, superheroes and fantasy…— who write critically about something they love, and about the communities around it, often but not always including an exploration of their own fanidentity and their attachment to the fan object" (Ibid. 64). He continues this thought by stressing: "many or most academics are also aca-fans, studying something they are deeply and personally invested in, and balancing that investment with a scholarly objectivity" (Ibid.). For Brooker, the comparison between academics and non-academic fans concerns the familiar forms of attention directed to the object: thus, "[a]cademics who write about politics are surely fascinated by politics and follow it in the same way as someone else might follow *Star Trek*, through routine patterns of viewing, through discussion, through communities and gatherings" (Ibid.).

It appears clear from Brooker's account that the analytical move towards equating academics and fans on the level of behavior acquires a form of a disciplinary tradition. Thus, when McKee states that scholars love Theory as fans love *Star Trek*, Brooker asserts that academic investment in politics is structurally the same as fan investment in *Star Trek*. In Brooker's case, however, the earlier formula is markedly altered: namely, aca-fans specifically 'write critically about something they love'. Thus, the amalgamation of the formerly opposed categories, love and critique, finds its culmination in the aca-fan disposition. Same as Duffett, Brooker acknowledges "a level of security in terms of writing about popular culture" in the academic setting, while emphasizing that such "critical-love engagement" may not require imposing 'labels' (Ibid. 65). Concluding this line of thought, Brooker observes: "I would suggest that most academics are fans of what they study, in whatever field, and also that most fans practice something similar to scholarship in their close analysis and archival cataloging, so I think the term sets up definitions and boundaries that perhaps aren't useful or valuable any

more" (Ibid.). Simultaneously, however, for Brooker, while academics and fans can both do research, close analysis, and archival cataloguing, the scholarly 'critical-love engagement' remains the salient trait of academic fans, who balance personal investment with critical objectivity.

To conclude, the metadiscourse of attachment in fan studies finally resolves the central difficulty of reconciling alternative cultural forms of expression with academic criticism. I would argue that the fusion of fan identity with identity of the scholar allows one to move beyond the irreconcilable opposition and focus on the question of academic self-identification proper. While, in the disciplinary context of fan studies, there are clear benefits to scholars themselves emphasizing their own inclusion in various fan communities outside academia (including having more insight into the analyzed fan groups and communities), the assumption of scholar or aca fan identity appears problematic. Due to the ideologically charged understanding of academic scholarship, historically defined as authoritarian, critical, and, in some cases, 'bourgeois', the scholars studying popular and fan cultures resorted to theorizing alternative modes of cultural expression as a pathway to declaring one's progressive political stance. However, it seems hardly possible to eliminate the genuine cultural and professional distance existent between fans and scholars by producing theoretical self-labels. In other words, the fundamental difference between academics and non-academics is bound to remain because of the institutionalization of scholarship understood in professional terms. The difference in the cultural capital, in turn, should be equally acknowledged if we are to do justice to the inherent power imbalance between academics and fans. Thus, raising a fair concern in his recent piece, Jonathan Gray observes that, "if acafandom becomes the field's norm, and we're expected to study fans 'like us,' we should be unsurprised that our image of the fan is limited to, well, people like us (predominantly Anglo-

American or Northern European, white, middle class, feminist, and academic in mode)" (2018: 439). Despite this potentially discouraging development for studying external cultural forms, however, I argue that scholars engaged in the discipline of fan studies were and have been exposed to, in Mulhern's words, "the norms and priorities of the dominant order" of academia. Therefore, it appears beyond dispute that the institutionalized academic environment inevitably forces the logic of disciplinarity and the search for professionally adequate theoretical vocabulary onto scholars, whose field of inquiry has been subject to intellectual suspicion due to its historically unwelcome, relatively novel, and unconventional object of study — fans.

With the digital turn and proliferation of vast active online users, the disciplinary field of fan studies has recognized "the primary challenges…[of] the rapidly expanding and increasingly interdisciplinary field of fan studies" which, given the current media landscape, have made the definition of "fan" itself "increasingly malleable and marketable" (Scott and Click 2018: 1). In this context, as Suzanne Scott and Melissa A. Click fairly ask, "[a]fter all, who exactly qualifies as a 'fan' once fan culture moves from the margins to the mainstream?" (Ibid.). As Cornel Sandvoss, Gray, and C. Lee Harrington assert, "fan practices and affective attachments take many different forms across a wide spectrum of contemporary culture and far beyond what we have historically regarded as the 'popular.'" (2017: 20). While the conventional definitions of 'popular culture' or 'fans' may be appropriately revised, questioned, and contested in light of the ever-expanding digital media landscape and changing scholarly paradigms, however, I would particularly urge against neglecting the underlying metadiscursive context which inaugurated such notions at the dawn of the disciplinary fan studies. Otherwise, even if the concept of fan is eventually replaced by the category more appropriate to the digital era or even fully discarded, it

still risks retaining the underlying scholarly suppositions which once marked subcultural, (urban) popular cultural, and fan categories respectively.

Complicated Anti-Fandom: From Affective Forms of Readership to Populism

Finally, to conclude the present chapter, I deem it necessary to briefly address the intellectual phases within fan studies in terms of the discipline's approaches to fans as affective and politically active members of society. According to conceptual periodization within the discipline illustrated further, it appears as if fan studies has abandoned its initial methodological and conceptual premise that rests on 'activist research' by moving onto a more 'complicated' theoretical direction. While it is true that contemporary fan studies has largely departed from hailing fans as necessarily progressive social and political actors especially in light of the populist digital turn, I would like to suggest that some fan scholarship still tends to accept fans' special affective status at face value. As I have attempted to demonstrate it in the present chapter, the idea of affective attachment is historically tied to the episteme of political progressivism in post-Cultural studies. In turn, this idea is also inseparable from the self-proclaimed role of academic scholars acting as professional carries of cultural resistance, not in the least prescribed by their personal participation in fan communities. Therefore, for instance, it appears unsurprising that some contemporary fan scholars understand the fan mode of affective attachment as a form of politically regressive populism. Counter to the disciplinary evaluation, I would argue that, first, much of influential fan scholarship since the early 2000s has theorized fan practices in terms of their supposed transgressive modes of affective reading, often directly compared with academic forms of interpretation. Thus, while such a stance does not exactly prioritize progressive fan politics, it still subscribes a degree of countercultural behavior supposedly enclosed in fan modes of reading in contrast with more conventional academic forms

of interpretation. And second, occasionally — especially in more recent fan scholarship —, whenever fan activities are not analyzed in terms of their modes of reading, they are conceptualized through the idea of affective attachment to an object of passion, understood in broader psychological and political terms. Symptomatically, the second approach gravitates towards diagnosing fan behavior often encountered on social media as politically regressive and populist. Ultimately, the concluding section of the chapter focuses on the scholarly examples theorizing affective fan attachments from these two respective conceptual angles.

As Edwards observes in her recent work, fan studies generally have been commonly identified with three roughly chronological approaches: "fandom is pathological"; "fandom is beautiful"; [and] "fandom is complicated" (2023: 137). In their piece, Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington specifically define the first "wave" of fan studies as "Beautiful", stressing its "ethnographic orientation" and its advancement "by scholars enjoying insider status within given fan cultures", thus terming it "a form of activist research" (2017: 3). The 'beautiful' approach to fandom is commonly associated with the work of Henry Jenkins, who, being "[i]nspired by a departmental visit by John Fiske, … was then at the graduate school in the University of Iowa, began to formulate his own ideas on fandom. One of the things that marked Jenkins out from other scholars at this time was his history as a fan and his personal willingness, despite criticism, to speak as an 'insider' about fandom" (Duffett 2013: 64). Beyond his 'insider' approach to fans, Jenkins also insisted on the importance of studying "fans as readers" and "as spectators who transform the experience of watching television into a rich and complex participatory culture" (1992: 23) in his influential monograph, *Textual Poachers* (1992).

Prior to the first wave of fan studies, as Sandvoss, Gray, and Harrington document, critics who coded fandom as "pathological" "had…assumed fans to be uncritical, fawning, and

reverential" (Ibid.). Thus, the first wave of fan studies aimed at demonstrating "that fans were "active," and regularly responded, retorted, poached" (Ibid.). The second wave fan scholars, for them, "were still concerned with questions of power, inequality, and discrimination, but rather than seeing fandom as an a priori tool of empowerment, they suggested that fans' interpretive communities (as well as individual acts of fan consumption) are embedded in existing social and cultural conditions" (Ibid. 5). The achievement of the second wave, in their view, was ultimately "the creation of a conceptual and typological apparatus that allowed scholars to position and compare specific studies and findings" (Ibid.). As they continue outlining the developments within fan studies, Sandvoss, Gray, and Harrington reflect on the "changing communication technologies and media texts", which begin to "contribute to and reflect the increasing entrenchment of fan consumption in the structure of our everyday lives" (Ibid. 6). Thus, the fan studies' "third-wavers", including the authors themselves, are argued to encompass

> […] the continued methodological and epistemological reflections about the relationship between academic enquiry and fan cultures and reflection of the field itself; the study of anti-fans, fantagonisms, and conflict between fan groups; an examination of changing forms of (digital) textuality, including in particular the role of paratexts; reception and value in fandom; the interplay between space, place, belonging, and fandom; the role of fan identities, experiences, and practices in the life course; the intersection of fandom and formal and informal political processes and activism; and forms of fan-generated content, fan productivity, and the eroding boundaries between media production and consumption (Ibid. 11).

In sum, as Edwards fairly suggests, the third wave of fan studies may indeed be described as 'complicated'.

What is especially important in Edwards' observation is her assertion that the proponents of the complicated approach have insisted on the departure from "celebrating all fannish activities as inherently good, asserting instead that fandom as a social and cultural practice is value neutral and can be leveraged toward texts, causes, and ends that range from progressive to conservative, even regressive" (Ibid.). Indeed, as it is illustrated further, complicated fandom also encompasses theorizing fan behavior as populist and regressive. I would also like to argue that the characteristics of the third wave approach in fan studies outlined by Sandvoss, Gray, and Harrington provide significant insight into the complicated state of the later fan studies. The key aspects of interest that concern this section of the chapter, however, are primarily the 'epistemological reflections' about the relationship between academic enquiry and fan cultures and the study of anti-fans specifically. Importantly, the relationship between these two areas of concern within the third wave directly relates to the question of metadiscursivity and the problematic notion of 'anti-fans', which, as I attempt to demonstrate further, is primarily informed by the theoretical reconfigurations established in the post-Cultural studies. Gray's notion of 'anti-fans' partially illustrates the complicated conceptual direction in fan studies, where the idea of fandom directly correlates to the scholarly practice of close reading.

Coining these terms in the early 2000s, Gray, in suggesting the departure from Hall's famous encoding/decoding negotiation model in fan studies, asserts that "television offers the added complication of partly and differently read texts, demanding that we add the dimension of fan, anti-fan and non-fan to that of dominant, oppositional and negotiated" (2003: 68). Gray states that, while Hall's oppositional readers "are one thing", 'anti-fans' are defined by him as

readers who markedly dislike *something* (Ibid. 71). In Hall's case, however, the encoding / decoding negotiation model was specifically aimed at understanding the ideological implications of popular readership, underscored by the markedly political imperative. Gray, in turn, fully abstains from considering fandom in terms of ideology, which explains why the notion of 'anti-fans' can perfectly coexist in his model alongside dominant, negotiating, and oppositional fan impulses. Thus, if the second and the third waves of fan studies no longer pursued establishing potentially emancipatory or radical traits in fan communities, activities, or behavior, then the theoretical departure from political implications of fandom, in this case, seemingly becomes the consequence. The depoliticization of fan category in Gray's model specifically corresponds to different *readerly* reactions and demands that different mediums incentivize. At the same time, Gray's seminal article on 'anti-fandom' expresses the intellectual trend already analyzed in the previous sections — popular culture understood as a distinctively transgressive cultural mode of readership.

First, in Gray's model, fan attachment to text is linked with the literary critical practice of close reading. Specifically, Gray explores fans' supposedly more innate and involved capacity at reading texts closely. Thus, he states that "fans experience a proximity as close (if not closer) to the producer's text/nucleus as any researcher", and that they "frequently [are] more than close readers, but…also and always-already close readers to some degree, and never escape a deep awareness of the work" (Ibid. 70). Returning to the familiar insistence on academics performing "supposedly neutral analys[is]" of a text, Gray metaphorically defines such disposition as a "neutron" (Ibid. 69). Conversely, fans are described by him as "always related back to the positively energized environment of the proton, back to the textual nucleus" (Ibid. 70). Therefore, in simultaneously tying and contrasting scholarly research to fan reading practices,

Gray asserts: “if as researchers we turn to fans to go beyond our own neutron position and the work itself, fans still have close links, so there is still further yet to travel, with more motion to track” (Ibid.).

Second, however, by exploring the notion of ‘anti-fans’, Gray simultaneously suggests interrogating the binary of close and distant reading as the central scholarly modes of textual analysis. He specifically observes that, as opposed to fans, anti-fans often do not engage with an actual text and still form their negative opinion on it. Thus, if regular fans are endowed with the positive “proton” disposition towards the text, anti-fans “spin[] around a text in its electron cloud, variously bothered, insulted or otherwise assaulted by its presence” (Ibid.). Based on this observation, he concludes that, “…if we can show that people engage in distant reading, responding to texts that have not been viewed, and more importantly if we can track exactly how the anti-fan’s text or text stand-in has been pieced together, we will take substantial steps forward in understanding textuality and in appreciating the strength of contextuality” (Ibid. 71). Additionally, while anti-fans are seen here as distant readers, they are also argued to demonstrate strong “affective involvement” to what they dislike (Ibid. 73).

Overall, Gray’s model launches the new conceptual approach to “different types of textuality” in relation to “different types of audiences”, inclusive of anti-fans (Ibid. 78–79). As he states, “it is not enough to pick one type of reader and tailor the text exclusively to this reader’s measurements” (Ibid. 78). Therefore, if the approach of media and cultural studies commonly starts from “the nucleus of a text” and then proceeds with examining “what else becomes attached” to it, the anti-fan approach calls for starting “at the outside, at a point where the close reader’s text itself does not exist” (Ibid. 73–74). Thus, adopting such an approach allows one to appreciate “the power and role of textuality by feeling its reverberations, by

measuring or otherwise sensing the gravitational pull that it exerts in society at its furthest climes" prior to "mov[ing] inwards towards the text as object on the page or screen" (Ibid. 74).

In sum, Gray's model seemingly attempts to further revise the traditionally neutral disposition of a fan researcher by introducing other distinctive cultural forms of textual engagement. Ranging from close to distant reading, different types of fans are argued to employ different reading strategies, not in the least motivated by their affective responses to the text. The task of the fan researcher, in this case, is to pay attention to these different reading strategies, existing outside the scholar's gaze, and thus to "study how the text changes — what atomic forces are at work — as it meets different audiences and viewing environments" (Ibid. 79). Pointedly, however, the reading strategies Gray attributes to fans and anti-fans are explicitly derived from the academic vocabulary and standpoints. In other words, the scholarly categories of close and distant reading are directly transferred onto the supposed fan and anti-fan forms of readership. Thus, while the latter's engagement with these is postulated, it is difficult to discern why, for instance, fans would exactly employ the New Critical method of close reading in their engagements with texts. Similarly, it is hard to discern why anti-fans are exactly labelled as distant readers, given that this category directly concerns professional criticism. Moreover, the affective component of fan readership theorized in Gray's model mirrors the approach inaugurated in post-Cultural studies, where popular cultural forms of affective readership are theorized as distinctive and thus distinct from scholarly criticism.

To conclude, while Gray's conception does not rely on hailing the perceived 'proletarian' or oppositional sensibility of the popular culture, it still directly muses on fans' distinctive reading abilities in comparison to traditional scholarly approaches. The attached fan readers are juxtaposed with more neutral scholars and are argued to be inherently better at doing close

reading than the latter. The detached anti-fans, on the other hand, are argued to be primarily motivated by their affective involvement in the text, which is what apparently enables them to practice distanced reading in the first place. The academic pathway to 'the textual nucleus', obscured through perceived 'neutrality', thus apparently lies through direct engagement with fans and their distinctive forms of readership. The academic's role in this process is, firstly, to recognize the existence of Other forms of textual reading and, secondly, to assess how the text changes as the result. Seemingly, Gray's conception ultimately argues that, in order to diversify and revise scholarly reading of fans, one must prioritize the external cultural forms of readership, supposedly different from conventional academic approaches. In sum, the prioritization of academic methods of reading over discerning the actual external forms of readership, renders the anti-fan model problematic.

The development of the notion of anti-fandom in later scholarship specifically illustrates the problematic assumptions engrained in it. Namely, the affective dimension theorized by Gray as foundational for developing one's anti-fandom also contains the trace of the original condescending scholarly attitudes towards the 'masses', historically deemed as politically regressive. The notion of anti-fandom thus becomes open to theorizing fans as an affectively populist mode of participation and engagement. One of such examples is contained in Sandvoss' description of fandom as, first and foremost, an affective cultural form of conservative populism. Sandvoss, in studying the phenomenon of "political anti-fandom", observes that in it, "a self-reflective bond between fan and fan object is formed that underscores the affective bond to the fan object as an important marker of self-identity" (2019: 137–140). Conducting a psychoanalytical reading of political anti-fandom, with drawing on object relations theory taken from Donald Winnicott's and Melanie Klein's works (Ibid. 132–133), Sandvoss suggests that

"[t]he emotional significance of objects of fandom and anti-fandom, on which fan practices are based, derives from their function as spaces of projection and introjection that impose the polarities of the id onto the object world" (Ibid. 134). Thus, for him, "the fanization of political participation and activism privileges the dichotomous perception of the world that necessitates a symbolic Other against which the "good" fan object as projection of self is constructed" (Ibid.). The main conclusions that Sandvoss lands on in this chapter, however, lead to an arguably far more significant implication: namely, he proposes that "[t]he fanization of politics", in some cases, involves "populist, rather than democratic, participation" (Ibid. 138–139). Thus disputing Jenkins by rejecting "linear causality between participation and democratization" the latter had stressed (Ibid. 142), Sandvoss instead links "populist…mobilization" with (anti-)fandom (Ibid. 140). In sum, thereby returning the notion of fandom to its originally regressive connotation in academic scholarship, he asserts that "[e]xploring the emotive qualities and premises of contemporary participatory engagements in politics hence suggests a need to conceptualize populism, not just as an ideology or discourse, but as a particular mode of reception and engagement— one that has commonly been described as 'being a fan.'" (Ibid. 139).

Sandvoss' conceptualization of anti-fandom, therefore, relies on the following premise: since fans form affective bonds to objects of their passion, the latter 'function as spaces of projection and introjection' of the self. Thus, Sandvoss theorizes populism 'as a particular mode of [fan] reception and engagement', which supposedly imitates fan affective engagements with their objects of passion. While Sandvoss does not specifically link this phenomenon to textual reading, the idea of the 'affective bond' that fans form with the objects unambiguously points in the direction of close rather than distanced relationship that fans supposedly have with the objects. Since fandom is broadly understood here as a means to one's self-identification, then the

participatory engagements with politics equally constitute the self-identifying means. However, such behavioral or psychoanalytical conflation reduces broader ideological and political presuppositions and allegiances existent in the social world to the state of (anti-)fandom proper. Thus, Sandvoss unambiguously suggests that the affective bond to an object is what generates one's attachment to political populism. In sum, reproducing the common stance of the twentieth century's mass-cultural critique that once characterized the *Kulturpessimismus* of the German critical tradition, Sandvoss suggests theorizing fandom as a form of populist and affective engagement, thus coming full circle.

As Sandvoss, Gray, and Harrington state in their essay, "studying and theorizing fandom matters most lucidly" due to its possible "manifestation in political processes and the public sphere" (Sandvoss et. al. 23). Thus, "the rise of extreme political partisanship on the right", for them, represents "a form of anti-fandom as much as of fandom; and it has thereby contributed to — though far from being singularly responsible for — a remarkable and dramatic erosion of rationality, civility, and reason in contemporary political and public life in the United States and beyond" (Ibid.). More generally, I would argue that their perspective is not unfounded: indeed, the rise of populism in the contemporary global context seems to have some clear correlation to the consumption practices that have historically characterized popular culture. Therefore, the contemporary tendency to perceive political participation and form political opinions has distinctly sensationalist underpinnings, perhaps, not in the last part informed by celebrity culture and consumption practices which have proliferated in late capitalist societies. However, reducing these developments to the state of (anti-)fandom appears problematic. First, there exist multiple forms of fandom that a person may or may not adhere to throughout their life. Thus, for instance, one's simultaneous attachment to a tendentious politician and a particular sport team cannot

unproblematically amount to a distinctively unified populist form of political fandom. Secondly, by suggesting that fans or anti-fans 'have contributed to…a remarkable and dramatic erosion of rationality, civility, and reason', one merely reproduces a traditionally elitist form of othering once critiqued by Hall in application to poststructuralist intellectuals. Since academics possess cultural and intellectual capital that cannot be matched to that of non-academic fans, it appears that the main duty of scholars engaging with such subject matters is to generate a nuanced discussion of external cultural or political groups rather than treat these monolithically or uncritically. In short, reinstituting the notion of fandom understood as a form of pathology arguably obscures the complex historical, cultural, and political processes underlying contemporary societies in their current forms of participatory engagement. In sum, the contemporary forms of participation, particularly in the context of digital media, seemingly require more structural and nuanced analytical approaches. One of the key strengths of the disciplinary field of fan studies concerns its culture-oriented, ethnographic, and qualitative approach that goes beyond mere instrumental collection of sociological data. I argue that these particular strengths should be preserved and fostered in future fan scholarship and beyond.

2.5 Postscript

In his recent work, Mulhern offers an intellectual historical evaluation of the institutionalized phase of cultural studies, emphasizing the latter's indebtedness to the German cultural critical theory, also dubbed by him as a liberal-conservative *Kulturkritik*. Mulhern states:

> [e]merging some sixty years ago, new perceptions and valuations of majority culture — 'mass' or 'popular'…— rose to challenge the conventional accounts of the modern landscape of meaning, most influentially in the institutional form of Cultural Studies. This too [same as

> their intellectual predecessors — E.S.] was conceived as a critical discourse, not less so because of its unambiguous positioning on the left, though it tended at times to settle into a reflex egalitarian defence of majority culture against the elites of *Kulturkritik* and their alter ego, a remote, uncomprehending 'left', and in some incarnations became notorious for its wishful political transvaluations of popular cultural experience (Mulhern 2024: 283–284).

Needless to say, 'a reflex egalitarian defence of majority culture' embodied in much of post-Cultural studies' scholarship that led to 'wishful political transvaluations of popular cultural experience' can be defined as its binding conceptual motif, clearly seen across many works of different scholars examined in the present chapter. As the last section of this dissertation chapter aimed to show, in some instances, the academic metadiscourse of attachment converted into a new form of mass-cultural critique, which sees fandom as an emergent affective form of proto-fascist, alt-right wing behavior. Thus, the re-emergence of German cultural critical tradition with its *Kulturpessimismus* in academic setting has acquired new conceptual traction in fan studies and beyond. In the end, seemingly, the historical securing of one's status as a politically progressive academic intellectual is what has allowed newer generations of scholars to launch their invectives against the unthinking and affect-driven mass-popular fans of politics. Still, due to its high cultural origins, the general tendency towards intellectual elitism, — however anti-elitist in ethos, — has arguably characterized post-Cultural studies' scholarship from the start.

In conclusion, as I have attempted to document it in this chapter, many prominent cultural critics directly associate the idea of loving Theory with the state of fandom, both internal and external. The result of this fusion, however, often becomes the excessive linkage of fan

communities to politically and culturally progressive or regressive forms of affective attachment as their supposed primary modus operandi. While, in other instances, scholars' and non-scholars' identities become fused, such intellectual disposition still often comes to prioritize the mode of academic distinction. In other words, it pursues outlining the forms of coexistence between varying degrees of critical objectivity and passionate commitment inside contemporary academic scholarship. In sum, the dichotomies between 'love' and 'critique', 'attachment' and 'detachment', 'academics' and 'fans', and others arguably promote the overarching inter-scholarly metadiscourse that is primarily preoccupied with interrogating academics' own dispositions at the expense of general non-professionals, whose cultural role is essentially reduced to supplying new generations of scholars with varying modes of distinction and critical debate in the intra-mural space.

Ultimately, I would argue that the conceptual fusion of the insights from literary studies, the original project of CS, as well as structuralist and poststructuralist Theory, amounted to the academic metadiscourse of cultural attachment, starkly situated outside of the analyzed cultural forms and practices. Despite the problematic metadiscourse, however, some of the influences theorized in this chapter arguably produced far more significant results in terms of the more recent generations of students. I suggest that the post-scholarly disposition within the epistemes of intellectual-as-fan and fan scholar has drastically altered the conventional understanding of the professional role of the critic. In turn, the post-scholarly author-critics seem to adopt such disposition in their digital video essay creation, deprofessionalizing the task of criticism further by making it fully public facing. Finally, it appears that the intellectual revolution conducted in the academic setting by the most politically active academic theorists influenced the new generations of students who have become unsatisfied with intellectual dividends provided by

contemporary university. Invested in cultural criticism as a form of cultural practice, today's digital author-critics illustrate the trend towards deinstitutionalizing academic scholarship by making it conversational, public, and politically involved. As chapters three and four will illustrate, given that many digital author-critics' consciously articulate their departure from the official university setting, it may be appropriate to conceive of the contemporary social media criticism as a form of a 'counterpublic' (Fraser 1990) response to institutional academia. Therefore, it will be argued that the contemporary video essays on YouTube warrant examination through the revised theory of the public sphere, originally advanced by the famous German critical philosopher, Jürgen Habermas.

Chapter 3: From the Post-Literary Public Sphere to Contemporary Digital Authorship: Towards the Structural Analysis of the Digital Video Essay Form

In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989 [1962]), Habermas famously proposes the socially historical link between the bourgeois public sphere in the world of letters and the consequent emergence of the public sphere in the political domain. Through conducting his analysis, Habermas theorizes the existence of "a public sphere in apolitical form — the literary precursor of the public sphere operative in the political domain" (1998 [1989]: 29). Therefore, in his view, "critical debate ignited by works of literature and art was soon extended to include economic and political disputes…" (Ibid. 33). From the standpoint of political theory, it has long been stressed that Habermas' emphasis on the western-centric deliberative conception of democracy[31] is inadequate in terms of theorizing normative and "actually existing" democratic processes in pluralist societies (Fraser 1990). As Thomas Häussler extensively demonstrates it through his recent thorough engagement with Habermas' deliberative model of democracy, the critiques of Habermas' theory have ranged from its assessments as "an unrealistic [and idealistic] account of the democratic process"; as the unattainable and even threatening to the democratic process notion of "rationally motivated consensus" associated with it; that "the rationalistic nature of deliberation privileges merely a select few" (2018: 19–21), etc.

However, when it comes to his conception of the public sphere in 'the world of letters', systematic scholarly engagements with this side of the constellation have been far from exhaustive (Warner, 1990; Keen, 2004; Luckhurst, 2012). Critically, Habermas' original

[31] Reflecting on the generations of critical theory and its proponents, Neal Harris underscores Habermas' turn to a normative sociology in exploring "a repository of untapped normative potential within communicative exchange" (2022: 6–7), introducing "an intersubjective-sociological turn within critical theory, with his work bridging Karl Otto-Appel's pragmatism, Weberian sociology, and analytic philosophy (see McCarthy, 1978)".

historically materialist account of the development of the bourgeois public sphere from the literary domain remained markedly pessimistic: he famously argued that, as soon as the rules of market exchange and the commodification of thought took hold in the nineteenth century, the 'culture-consuming' public replaced the 'culture-debating' public, resulting in the erosion of the literary and political public spheres alike (1998: 169). Thus, after the further extension of the commodification and the corporatization of the reading market in the twentieth century, as well as further proliferation of mass mediums, the concept of the public sphere supposedly loses its initial normative potential. In response to Habermas' fundamental work, I would like to suggest revitalizing his original concept of the literary public sphere in the contemporary context.

I argue that, today, it is appropriate to consider Habermas' theory of the public sphere in terms of his original proposition: namely, that the political public sphere emerged out of the public sphere in the world of letters. Critically, Habermas' initial historical materialist theory relies on the constellatory procedural argument, underscored by the dialectical analysis. His argument specifically operates on the premise whereby bourgeois epistemology is considered a liberating fiction built on the objective condition of individual autonomy of citizens gained through private property ownership. While, in some crucial ways, this mindset produced an emancipatory logic and allowed the bourgeois to gain their autonomy from the state and the church as private citizens, it simultaneously concealed capitalist conditions gradually penetrating their private domain. In such a way, the original argument postulates the eventual collapse of the western bourgeois public sphere in the literary *and* political domains due to their full absorption by the corporatist market and the gradual encroaching of the national states on the private realm through economic means.

In 2022, the new volume of Habermas' essays was published under the title *Ein neuer Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit und die deliberative Politik*, translated into and published in English in 2023, where he offers a remarkably substantive adaptation of his early work, originally published in German in 1962. Importantly, this volume addresses the contemporary issues that have arisen in the western society with the appearance of the Internet, which provides the most recent, authoritative, and comprehensive view on the evolution of the concept of the public sphere in the digital context. The opening essay titled "Reflections and Conjectures on a New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere" (2023) particularly contains the vital set of ideas, both old and new, that require establishing prior to moving back to Habermas' original theory. Therefore, this chapter also deals with Habermas' revitalized concept of the public sphere and offers the potential systematic directions in theorizing and applying it to the digital context. For the purposes of this project, I specifically focus on those constellations that Habermas identifies in terms of the digital authorship that directly apply to the current case study from YouTube. The nature of the new transformation, for Habermas, is integrally tied to the environment of contemporary digital social platforms, through which digital authors court public acclamation from anonymous audiences while asserting their intimate and private subjectivities online. As a result, he puts the potential for meaningful intersubjective conversation in the Internet era more generally into question.

Central to my argument is the proposition to assess the western literary public sphere as significantly transformed since the advent of mass cultural consumption. Whether the rules of mass-produced entertainment and corporate environment may be considered absolute, depriving cultural consumers of agency and the capacity for informed civic deliberation, the specific emergence of popular creative practices and their conversion into the digital realm have not been

considered as a significant communicative force in contemporary globalist societies. I suggest that some examples of today's digital authorship constitute a historical development of the public sphere in the world of letters, which I would like to call the *post-literary public sphere.* Specifically, I argue that it is necessary to approach popular cultural forms as a structural development which historically occurred through the emergence of new visual mediums, popular literary periodical communicative exchange in the late nineteenth–early twentieth centuries, and a range of creative practices often linked with mid-twentieth century fan production and industries (Cheng, 2012; Lamerichs, 2018; Edwards, 2018, 2023). By communicating about various cultural works, the participants of popular discursive exchange would engage with popular culture as a mode of conversation, which eventually becomes absorbed by the self-taught creative practices such as fan fictional or amateur video production, and which originally may be traced to the earlier communicative and self-expressive practices. Digital social platforms have arguably begun to incorporate the cultural legacy of the post-literary public sphere, ultimately allowing its "lead users" (Burgess and Green 2009) to be "empowered as authors" (Habermas 2023 [2022]: 55), thus signaling the emergence of qualitatively new forms of self-fiction being spread on digital social platforms today. Therefore, studying this constellation may allow scholars across different disciplines to identify the unique aspects of the post-literary public spheres and their epistemic implications for contemporary digital authorship, criticism, and communication more generally[32].

The narrow case of the digital video essay explored in this chapter is meant to showcase the transformation of the post-literary public sphere into a new distinctive form of digital authorship. On the original BreadTube, author-critics "use[d]…pop culture as an inroad to explaining

[32] The extended project on the subject must also necessarily involve the study of the specific aspects which characterize the development of different national post-literary public spheres outside of the western context.

ideology and viewpoints" by embedding their political views "within their analysis of pop culture" (Ibid. 6). Today, the post-BreadTube digital video essayists similarly express their personal views predominantly through matters of popular culture — artistic works, digital trends, popular cultural concerns, lifestyles, events, etc. Recently, it has been stressed that 'LeftTubers' "regularly analyse movies, TV shows or videogames", suggesting that the subject of contemporary pop culture helps make ideological concepts accessible to wider and potentially "less politically oriented" audiences (MacDowell 2024: 126). These developments remind us of the original premise of Habermas, whereby art criticism as a form of conversation was argued to foster a distinctively modern and amateur mode of public deliberation originating in the literary public sphere (1998: 40). In turn, the digital video essay points to the historical interdependence between the post-literary public sphere in the popular cultural realm and contemporary forms of authorship. By engaging with popular cultural themes and creative practices, digital author-critics demonstrate their deep cultural ties to the post-literary public sphere, historically marked by the emergence of mass-cultural consumption and popular readership. Generally, in order to study contemporary digital authorship of the video essay in its nuanced complexity, I suggest revitalizing Habermas' original public sphere theory while accounting for his recent adaptations of it.

The first section of this chapter outlines the three crucial undertheorized components of Habermas' original public sphere theory founded in the historical locus of the western republic of letters. First, by arguing that his conceptualization of the public sphere in the world of letters primarily concerns the subject of bourgeois epistemology, I illustrate his paradigmatic interest in the broad literary public sphere. The second crucial component of Habermas' public sphere theory addressed here concerns his investment in the philosophical sociological implications of

the bourgeois family institute, which, in his view, establishes the epistemological ground for the emergent public sphere. The third central component studied in this section explores the dialectical relationship Habermas postulates between the base and the superstructure; or i.e., between the capitalist market of cultural commodities and the western bourgeois rational-critical epistemology. Finally, by examining Habermas' recent applicable conjectures on his original theory, I engage with the idea of a new intimate digital authorship, which, as he suggests, partly signals the potential transformation of the traditional liberal bourgeois public sphere today.

The second section of the present chapter theorizes the broad post-literary public sphere as a structural phenomenon. In it, I examine the theoretically deficient treatments of the idea of the (popular) cultural public sphere as well as suggest a potential way of understanding the broad area of popular interests associated with historical creative amateur production, the film medium, as well as the attractional and recombinatory mode of popular thinking. I argue that the contemporary digital video essay form implicitly draws on the concerns developed during the historical phase of the post-literary public sphere, which is illustrated through relevant examples.

The third section of this chapter approaches the subject of audiovisual performative authenticity, associated with the contemporary semi-private, semi-public mode of authorship. I argue that, while Habermas' pessimistic treatment of the notion of publicity of representation may apply to officially and corporately regulated domain of the public press, the contemporary digital authorship tacitly advances a structurally new form of representation, integrally tied to the affordances and unique characteristics of audiovisual social platform environment. By drawing on the notions of presentation and representation, authenticity and performativity, resonance and attunement, the third section offers a constellatory interpretation of the contemporary digital

audiovisual authorship in the video essay form, ultimately conceptualized as the emergent popular example of personalized self-fiction.

The fourth and final section of this chapter addresses the tension between the ideas of intersubjective communication in the digital platform environment and the plebiscitary mode of popular authorship currently exercised online. While conceding to Habermas general notion, whereby the contemporary forms of digital authorship tend to gravitate towards the self-interested staging of singularization, I simultaneously aim to argue for the recognition of specific modes of digital authorship that rely on inter-group communication and conversation. Thus, by examining some structural examples of communal conversation within the digital video essay form, I arrive at the notions of counterpublicity and post-scholarly criticism, which are aimed to ultimately reveal the specificity of this form of digital authorship in the final chapter.

3.1 Public Sphere in the World of Letters: The Original Blueprint and Further Conceptual Conjectures

In recent literary historical scholarship, it has been fairly acknowledged that Habermas' early notion of the public sphere has been "adopted principally in sociology, philosophy, political science, and media studies, not by and large in literary studies", "despite Habermas' contention that the literary public sphere was the precursor of the genuinely political public sphere…" (Murray 2018: 2). The existing substantive accounts on the subject, in turn, arguably misplace Habermas' core dialectical argumentation. First, I would like to note that from a literary historical standpoint, Habermas' concept has been erroneously interpreted as the structural exploration of the eighteenth-century print medium and the supposedly new forms of reading surrounding it. For instance, applying Habermas' idea of the republic of letters to the eighteenth-century American print discourse, Michael Warner suggests that "reading holds the key place" in

Habermas' narrative, which ultimately crafts "a story about new uses of texts" (1990: x). Thus, focusing on "printed objects" which he "commonsensically" defines as "publications", Warner's work "examine[s] the cultural matrix of the [printed] medium and the metapolitics of the speech within it" in the American historical context (Ibid. xii). Second, other existing literary scholarship exploring Habermas' idea has tended to insist that his notion of the public sphere in the world of letters almost exclusively pertains to the realm of literary fiction. For example, it has been observed that Habermas' "definition of [the] 'literary'…refers primarily to epistolary novels — a genre which combines the private world of the imagination with the social activity of letter-writing", which apparently had resulted in his failure "to appreciate the considerably broader and highly contested definition of literature in the period" (Keen 2004: 14–15). Similarly, Roger Luckhurst asserts that "Habermas sees fiction as a laboratory for experimenting with how to represent private bourgeois subjectivity in public discourse", whereby, "[i]n a mutually reinforcing loop between 'realist' fiction and its nascent public, the reader imaginatively recreated the relationships depicted in print, drawing upon past experiences in order to bring them to life in the mind's eye; and in turn fiction provided a way of preparing oneself for new everyday relations with others" (2012: 71). John Rieder, in explicitly relying on Keen's account and implicitly extending Luckhurst's line of thought, considers Habermas' concept of the bourgeois public sphere as adjacent to that of "traditional literary authority" (2017: 71). Thus, Rieder states that, "[i]f 'traditional literary authority' was aligned with what Jürgen Habermas theorized as the emergent bourgeois public sphere in eighteenth-century England, the Gothic's anticlassicism and popularity are symptoms of the actual heterogeneity of the bourgeois reading public and a response to the exclusions inherent in the hegemonic construction of civil society" (Ibid.).

However, despite these observations, it is essential that Habermas' model is significantly more expansive and nuanced. Thus, for instance, although the western idea of national literature has been argued to exist at least since the Renaissance, its crystallization into the realm of tradition occurred only when literature became specialized through criticism, which, in turn, became "at once a *discrimination* of the authentic 'great' or 'major' works…[vis-à-vis perceived 'minor' works], and a practical realization and communication of the 'major' values" (Williams 1977: 51–52). Art criticism as a specialized aesthetic notion signifying "methods of developing laws of beauty, their recognition or production" appeared in the mid-eighteenth century, and then overall was argued to become "characteristic for the genesis of the bourgeois sense of self" (Koselleck 1988: 108). Generally, while Habermas did indeed analyze the bourgeois mindset through the emerging phenomenon of literary fiction in his work[33], I nevertheless deem it crucial that he approached the emergence of the public sphere in the world of letters as a structural and epistemological phenomenon *preceding* the formation of institutionalized literature, bourgeois reading culture, national literary tradition and authority, all of which, as he implies, partly contributed into the dissipation of the literary and the political public spheres alike.

To start with, "the emergence of a public sphere of informal discussion and debate…[was generally] afforded by the growth in print culture and literacy through books, pamphlets and, especially, the press" (Lunt and Livingstone 2013: 89). Habermas himself deliberately considers private correspondence, critical discussions of texts at book clubs and other venues, and cultural commentary on the pages of weekly newspapers such as *Tatler* or the *Spectator* in England as

[33] It is true that Habermas emphasizes the genre of the domestic novel as a "psychological description in autobiographical form" which aided the later emergence of the psychological novel (1998: 49–50). However, he also adds that literary forms such as the private letter or personal diary *a priori* carried a degree of publicity with them, which is why their interior "intimateness" was bound to be countervailed through their periodical reproduction (Ibid. 49).

coextensive with the world of letters. In this context, he specifically points at the periodical genre of 'moral weeklies' in England, which constituted periodical essays that "were still an immediate part of coffee-house discussions" and therefore retained "proximity to the spoken word" (1998: 43)[34]. The *Spectator*, which ran from 1711 to 1714, published letters from real and imagined readers as well as essays that referred to the reception of those essays, both representing public conversation in print and constructing the figure of a private reader (Warner 2002: 70). Engaging with "the scene of circulation itself", the *Spectator* presented a "repertoire of highly temporalized affects and interests — scandal, fascination, fashion, news addiction, mania, curiosity" which reflected the interests of its public (Ibid. 71). Famously, the eighteenth-century periodical genre of the essay was specifically marked by its "involvement with the public sphere of private individuals", and which represented "part of the evolution of the professional writer from his or her role as a creature of the court or parliament to his or her reliance on publishers and, through them, on the reading public" (DeMaria 2008: 528). Importantly, the functioning of criticism in eighteenth-century England lacked specialization (Eagleton 2005 [1984]), later introduced by the advent of professional society in the nineteenth century. In commenting on the historical moment of *Tatler* and the *Spectator*, Eagleton stresses that "[c]riticism here is not yet 'literary' but 'cultural': the examination of literary texts is one relatively marginal moment of a broader enterprise" situated around crystallizing moral-rationalist bourgeois cultural politics, which involved the discussions of art, ethics, religion, philosophy, and everyday life (2005[1984]: 18). Therefore, before the arrival of professional society, English criticism of the nineteenth century's

[34] In historical scholarship, it has been noted that while London coffeehouses are often considered more democratic than taverns, "their customer base tended to divide across occupational lines and probably excluded the poorest Londoners and most women" (Bucholz and Ward, 2012: 188). The emergence of coffeehouses as an autonomous institution has been traced to the 1650s (Ibid. 194). The eighteenth-century clubs of London were much more exclusive, private, and on average tended to function as "bastions of upper-class male privilege" (Ibid. 197–201).

periodical public sphere still covered "the scope…[that] extended far beyond literature, to the whole of society" (Guillory, 2022: xi). Speaking of an early art critic (*Kunstrichter*), Habermas himself notes that "it was not an occupational role in the strict sense": the former "retained something of the amateur; [and] his expertise only held good until countermanded" (1998: 41). As he elaborates on this practice, "lay judgement was organized in it without becoming, by way of specialization, anything else than the judgement of one private person among all others who ultimately were not to be obligated by any judgement except their own" (Ibid.). Conversely, by the mid–nineteenth century, the reading culture "had already almost become an ideology" because cultural consumption and corporate administration of literary goods replaced earlier cultural debate and collective self-reflection through literary forms (1998: 162).

Although Habermas is less detailed about the eighteenth-century French popular pamphleteering or *libelle*-writing (Darnton 1982), these discursive phenomena also corroborate his stance on the heterogenous functioning of literary forms in the period, and the interdependence of the world of letters on relatively public and inclusive cultural sites such as, for instance, the Parisian Salon (Crow 1985). Reflecting on the "large market for the printed word" in eighteenth-century Paris, Thomas Crow examines the "unofficial [Parisian] Salon commentary" embodied in the pamphleteering periodical genre of *libelle*, which generally explored "political events, sensational court case[s], revelation of scandal in high places, stockmarket fluctuation, successful play, or other cause for public talk" (1985: 92). Crow stresses that the Parisian Salon exhibitions became genuinely popular in the mid-eighteenth-century France and generated the pamphlet trade, which both commented on the Salons' "walls" and "the crowd", often utilizing "certain modes of parody, burlesque, and grotesque humor which properly belonged to the carnivalesque oral tradition" in its "self-conscious social criticism"

(Ibid. 94). According to Robert Darnton, counter to the "democratic display of wit" proclaimed by the French salon — another distinctive and most influential arena for public gathering, — it nevertheless "remained a rather formal institution" (1982: 23). Therefore, in order to get "entry into a salon" at all, one had to rely on "the old devices of privilege and protection" (Ibid. 22). Conversely, cafés were "open to everyone, just one step from the street, although there were degrees in its closeness to street life" (Ibid. 23). The "overeducated and underemployed littérateurs and lawyers" also occupied "the overpopulated underworld of letters" (Ibid. 19–21), which operated on anonymity, was prosecuted from the top, and comprised of different kinds of deviant literary material[35].

Second, along with these developments, the ideas of criticism and rational conversation are also approached by Habermas through the general historical lens of western liberalism, which emerged as the new bourgeois philosophical form of self-understanding. In turn, the lack of institutional representation of the early bourgeois public has been argued to aid the formation of its unique epistemology and self-awareness as a political class. In this vein, Reinhart Koselleck's influential work, *Critique and Crisis* (1988 [1959]), — which unambiguously served as the conceptual trampoline for Habermas' public sphere theory — recognizes the importance of non-institutionalized bourgeois places of gathering in continental Europe, such as the libraries and literary societies, "where one talked about arts and letters, not about the policies of the state" (1988: 66). Dealing directly with the newly shaped stratum of continental enlighteners, Koselleck particularly acknowledges that these highly diverse social groups were unified in their

[35] To be sure, Habermas did not engage with this literary underground phenomenon. He stresses that "[t]he masses were not only largely illiterate but also so pauperized that they could not even pay for literature" and acknowledges the "bourgeois" origins of the mid eighteenth-century "great" public "that formed in the theatres, museums, and concerts" (1998: 38–43).

"being unable to find an adequate place within the Absolutist State's existing institutions", and since these people were not included in the political process of decision-making, their search for social influence in the public sphere was beginning to establish (Ibid. 65–66). While analyzing the developing western world of arts and the republic of letters, Koselleck negatively defines it as "the moral tribunal" that relied on the faculty of progressive rational-critical judgement (Ibid. 102). Thus, on the one hand, as he argues, this new cultural stage "serve[d] apolitical criticism", since "an independent jurisdiction" of the world of the arts and *belles lettres* belonged to the moral aesthetic realm exclusively (Ibid.). On the other hand, in his view, it "also form[ed] the basis" of political criticism proper (Ibid.). Therefore, Koselleck describes this situation as "a genuinely historical-dialectical fact", which, for him, places moral-political criticism at the center of "the dualistic world-view that marked that era" (Ibid.).

While upholding a more normative stance on the formation of the bourgeois public in the eighteenth-century, Habermas simultaneously seems to follow Koselleck by suggesting that this new social and political class formulated its unique and self-aware mindset via broad and conversational literary criticism, which directly foregrounded its deliberative political participation. Importantly, however, Habermas' understanding of the world of letters was particularly founded on his analysis of the emergent bourgeois family institute, which, for him, would later play a central epistemological role in the functioning of the modern western press. Thus, third, in contrast with Koselleck's analysis of European intellectual thought, Habermas theorizes the foundational structural aspects of the bourgeois family vis-à-vis the individual family members' reception of each other's personal letters and diaries (1998: 48–50). And, while diary was historically a type of "literature of the self and for the self; yet paradoxically, notorious past diaries that broke through these boundaries become models for subsequent diarists, infusing

in them the desire to follow suit" (Ben-Amos and Ben-Amos 2020: 7). In such a way, the modern diary encapsulated an important public rather than strictly private dimension (Ibid.).

Eventually, as Habermas argues, by gathering to "critically" discuss what one "had read" in "book clubs", "reading circles", "subscription libraries" by the mid-eighteenth century, the new enlightened public was formed, "held together through the medium of the press and its professional criticism" (Ibid. 51). As Habermas concludes this line of argument: "They formed the public of a rational-critical debate in the world of letters within which the subjectivity originating in the interiority of the conjugal family, by communicating with itself, attained clarity about itself" (Ibid.). Therefore, counter to the suggestion that Habermas "sees the dissemination of print quite simply as creating new opportunities for individuals to make public use of their reason" (Warner 1990: x–xi), he rather argues for the emergence of the bourgeois self-awareness gained *through* rational deliberation with the aid of publicly disseminated — albeit historically intimate — written word. Ultimately, Habermas emphasizes the conversational aspect of the western world of letters, maintaining that interactive communicative and critical exchange between private individuals in public forums regarding what had been read allowed the liberal bourgeois to gain their individual and collective self-awareness.

Finally, Habermas' deliberative theory founded on the conceptual premise of the bourgeois world of letters is inherently tied to the historical materialist method, aligned with the Frankfurt School's critical theory. Thus, he dialectically theorizes the original bourgeois mindset and its perceived autonomy through considering the economic aspects of free capitalist market vis-à-vis the emergence of the bourgeois critical mindset. Describing the historical development of bourgeois literature, for instance, Habermas acknowledges its commodity status since the advent of capitalism, whereby literary-philosophical works "were produced for the market and

distributed through it" (Ibid. 36). What is central for his argument, in this case, concerns beneficial aspects of literary commodification in the philosophically historical sense: if formerly "church and state authorities had the monopoly of interpretation" on the literary works, the availability of these cultural products on the market removed them from authoritative impositions of the church and the state alike (Ibid. 36–37). In such a way, "[t]he private people for whom the cultural product became available as a commodity profaned it inasmuch as they had to determine its meaning on their own (by way of rational communication with one another), verbalize it, and thus state explicitly what precisely in its implicitness for so long could assert its authority" (Ibid. 37). Over time, however, the commodifying aspect of the literary field is partly what overtook the genuinely emancipatory and rational-deliberative social impulse.

Making his structural argument, Habermas generally argues that "[t]he rational critical debate of private people in the *salons*, clubs, and reading societies was not directly subject to the cycle of production and consumption, that is, to the dictates of life's necessities" (Ibid. 160). At the same time, he stresses that, "at one time the commercialization of cultural goods had been the *precondition* for rational-critical debate" (Ibid. 164). To resolve this seeming contradiction, he draws the distinction between the commercial aspect of cultural goods and rational-critical debates surrounding them: "you had to pay for books, theater, concert, and museum, but not for the conversation about what you had read, heard, and seen and what you might completely absorb only through this conversation" (Ibid.). Therefore, cultural consumption as an embedded aspect of cultural goods lies in contradistinction to conversation situated *around* these cultural goods, so long as the debate itself is not directly subject to market exchange. Simultaneously, Habermas sees the collapse of the bourgeois public sphere arising precisely from the

commercialized character of literary works, and the detrimental influence the latter eventually carried over onto political periodical press.

Reflecting on the eventual collapse of the bourgeois public sphere, Habermas consistently emphasizes its origin point — the world of letters. First, as he argues, the commercialization and the ideologization of the bourgeois reading culture in the mid-nineteenth century led to the final transference of literature into the rank of cultural consumption (Ibid. 162). Second, the institutionalization and curation of literary criticism resulted in its loss of the link with critical deliberation. As soon as literary criticism was subject to curatorship and mass consumption, it absolved the reading public from the free and independent interpretation of literary works. Thus, "the weakening of the role of criticism", for Habermas, was tied to its tendency towards capitalist administration and curation, through which "the lay judgement of the private people with an interest in literature had been institutionalized" (Ibid. 167). In turn, Habermas concludes that "the culture-consuming public whose inheritance derived from the public sphere in the world of letters more than from that in the political realm attained a remarkable dominance" (Ibid. 169). The extension and massification of the literary market, for him, affected the expanded and massified political periodical press. Therefore, Habermas observes that over time, "the news…is made to resemble a narrative from its format to stylistic detail (news stories)" and that "[n]ews and reports and even editorial opinions" evoke "the accoutrements of entertainment literature", abolishing the distinction between "fact and fiction" (Ibid. 170). Thus, the mixing of "journalism and literature", "instead of doing justice to reality, has a tendency to present a substitute more palpable for consumption and more likely to give rise to an impersonal indulgence in stimulating relaxation than to a public use of reason" (Ibid.). To conclude, the

summary of Habermas' overarching argument provided above establishes the necessary conceptual blueprint which characterizes his early work.

Strikingly, in his latest essay, Habermas returns to his original blueprint by making a new structural observation: he suggests that today's digital media environment has witnessed the emergence of the "new intimate" digital authorship (2023). Focusing on the new developments in light of ubiquitous digital communication, Habermas specifically proposes that the new digital media have structurally and "radically alter[ed] the pattern of communication that has been dominant in the public sphere until now" (Ibid. 36). Namely, the structural transformation of the new media, for Habermas, lies in their capacity of "*empowering* all potential users in principle to become independent and equally entitled authors" (Ibid.). Thus, he stresses that "the internet opens up virtual spaces in which users can empower themselves as authors in a new way" (Ibid. 54). To elaborate on his point, Habermas asserts that social media "…seem to acquire a peculiar anonymous intimacy: …they can be understood *neither as public nor as private*, but most readily as a sphere of communication that had previously been reserved for private correspondence but has now been inflated into a new and intimate kind of public sphere" (Ibid. 54–55). Therefore, he suggests that the key structural change encompassing the broad digital public sphere today concerns the emergence of the new type of "semi-private, [and] semi-public" authorship (Ibid. 21).

As Habermas himself argues here, a new intimate digital authorship that he attributes to contemporary digital expression partly correlates to the original western practice of private letter writing and exchange. The crucial difference between the two, however, concerns their respective quality of communicative exchange and intended addressee: namely, in contrast with private letter writing, which, prior to acquiring its literary public form, was oriented towards a

private receiver of a privately and intimately composed letter, contemporary digital authors direct their private thoughts and self-expression to *anonymous* publics. In other words, the component of intimacy, which is often enclosed in individual digital authorship, is not directed at a particular and equally *private* receiver of information. As a result, this situation, for Habermas, a priori cannot amount to a sufficient level of mutual understanding ideally achieved through meaningful intersubjective communication. Thus, counter to generating an intersubjective communication or critical debate, the contemporary digital author is argued to rely on receiving *acclamation* from an anonymous audience, thus soliciting plebiscitary forms of approval from the like-minded through likes, subscriptions, etc. (Ibid. 54–55). In such a way, for Habermas, the situation of anonymous intimacy enclosed in much of the contemporary digital authorship represents a contradiction in terms. Thus, for instance, one's intimate and private vlog directed at an unknown and abstract addressee cannot possibly achieve the result other than individual *acclamation* as opposed to meaningful public conversation. Summing up, according to such conception, digital authorship is simultaneously private and public, or essentially neither, which is why its implicit departure from the meaningful intersubjective dialogue is presumed in Habermas' new work.

While I concede to Habermas' general diagnosis of contemporary digital media authorship, I simultaneously would like to suggest a step-by-step engagement with his propositions, both old and new, in terms of the digital video essay. First, I will argue that a nuanced discussion of digital authorship must involve the analysis of the medium through which it is conveyed. Since it is marked by audiovisuality in the case of YouTube, I deem it necessary to examine the relationship between the medium of expression and what — as well as how — information is expressed through it. In this regard, since Habermas himself does not revise the

idea of publicity of representation in terms of the contemporary digital authorship in his recent essay, I offer my interpretation of the functioning of public representation in today's narrow audiovisual digital context. Second, I propose to analyze the relationship between the social platform of YouTube as a form of digital cybersalon next to the idea of atomized, singularized, and acclamatory type of authorship proliferating on this platform. Thus, by exploring the dialectic of communication and acclamation in the digital video essay, I attempt to contextualize Habermas older and newer observations through concrete examples. Before proceeding with these topics, however, I would first like to theorize the idea of the post-literary public sphere, which, as I have already suggested, provides a broad alternative conceptual direction for engaging with Habermas' idea of the public sphere in the world of letters.

3.2 From Post-Literary Public Sphere to Digital Authorship: Popular Culture as Conversation

In interdisciplinary scholarship, there exist few accounts that attempt to understand Habermas' literary public sphere as a sociocultural rather than strictly literary fictional or periodical phenomenon. Engaging with Habermas' original theory in his literary historical work, *The Public Face of Modernism* (2001), Mark S. Morrison theorizes modernist little magazines from the early twentieth century America and Britain as alternative public institutions or 'counterpublic spheres'. As Morrison shows, the commercialization of the press diagnosed by Habermas "increases exponentially in Britain and the United States between 1905 and 1920", stressing that modernist writers such as Ford Madox Ford, T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, James Joyce, Williams Carlos Williams and others used "modernist literature and art to reshape public [print] culture" (2001: 8–9). Despite often "espousing a myth of a public sphere in decline" by critiquing the new commercial mass-market publications, these modernists, for Morrison,

appropriated "some of the institutions of the newly emerging mass publishing world to create counterpublicity" by both incorporating and attacking commercial aspects of mass publishing (Ibid. 9–11). In other words, Morrison attempts to paint a complicated picture of the modernist public sphere, where exploring arts "was a [crucial and] shared motive" among its members (Ibid. 11). However, while Morrison's monograph establishes a useful precedent for systematically analyzing the early twentieth century's literary public sphere, his case study privileges professional literary figures, many of whom represented elite national cultural circles. Contrastingly, Habermas' investment in the bourgeois public sphere of the eighteenth century was underscored by his attempt to analyze the emergent bourgeois public as the new western social, economic, and political stratum, which arrived at its own self-understanding through conversational and semi-fictional dialogue it produced about itself and partook in. In this sense, the mid-eighteenth century's 'great' bourgeois public attending museums, theatres, and concerts was less of a priority to Habermas' larger argument. Therefore, it appears more plausible to apply the structural notion of the literary public sphere, whether understood pessimistically or normatively, to public cultural and critical perceptions circulating outside strictly or tacitly elite periodical worlds. Given the ubiquity of mass entertainment, the theoretical attempts accounting for the paradigmatic functioning of the bourgeois public sphere concept in the twentieth–the twenty-first centuries have specifically emphasized the realm of (popular) culture.

Specifically, to mitigate Habermas' distinctively negative assessment of the culture industry, it has been suggested that the developments of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have made it appropriate to speak of the "cultural public sphere" (McGuigan 2005), the "popular cultural public sphere" (Hermes 2006), and "vernacular creativity" as the pathway to the digital "cultural public sphere" (Burgess and Green 2009). Jim McGuigan, for instance, suggests that it

may be appropriate to speak of the contemporary "cultural public sphere", which, as opposed to the eighteenth-century republic of letters, "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" (2005: 435). Popular culture has been also theorized as a pathway to nurturing "cultural citizenship" through "the broader domain of media culture" (Hermes 2006: 29). Speaking of the notion of cultural citizenship, Joke Hermes specifically argues that it should be understood as "the consequence of actions and debates in the range of contexts that make up the (semi) public sphere of mass media consumption" (Ibid. 34). In the context of social media platforms and amateur video content creation, the notion of "vernacular creativity" has been aimed to describe "formerly private media consumption and cultural production" as "a [now] legitimate part of the cultural public sphere" (Burgess and Green 2009: 26). Similarly, this perspective considers YouTube as a potential "site of cosmopolitan cultural citizenship", where participatory activities "from peer-to-peer guitar lessons to 'memes' based around everyday consumer-citizenship" as well as "genuinely empathetic spaces for identity-based communities" are seen as transmitters of everyday cultural citizenship (Ibid. 77–83).

From what has been illustrated, it appears clear that these accounts loosely theorize the idea of the cultural public sphere through the perspective of cultural citizenship, seen as a potentially normative force in largely depoliticized contemporary pluralist societies. However, by attempting to remedy the negative attitude of Habermas towards mass cultural consumption, the idea of cultural citizenship arguably overextends the concept of the public sphere in the world of letters, which sits directly at odds with Habermas' original theory. Famously, in line with the Frankfurt School's historically materialist critique of the culture industry, Habermas himself stressed that "[t]he world fashioned by the mass media [and cultural consumption] is a

public sphere in appearance only" (1991: 171). Moreover, in his view, by enchanting the public with "impersonal indulgence in stimulating relaxation", audiovisual media takes away the distance that would enable individuals to say something and to disagree, therefore eradicating the potential for "a rational-critical exchange" (Ibid. 170–171). Ultimately, for Habermas, "the consumption of mass culture leaves no lasting trace" and merely stimulates inconsequential enjoyment (Ibid. 166).

In general terms, while I partly concede to McGuigan's, Hermes', and Burgess and Green's overarching objection to Habermas' mass-cultural critique, their overemphasis on the idea of the public sphere as a cultural rather than political concept still arguably dismisses Habermas' dialectical argument. Therefore, to avoid imposing an overdetermined weight on the culturally critical realm at the expense of a normative political public debate, I argue that it is necessary to overall resituate Habermas' notion of the literary public sphere in contemporary context. Specifically, in theorizing the contemporary forms of cultural participation and authorship, it would be more viable to account for Habermas' original structural proposition to assess bourgeois literary communicative forms as conducive to the emergence of new forms of collective and individual *self-fiction*. Thus, I suggest that the post-literary public sphere must be approached as a contextualized historical development of the bourgeois public sphere in the world of letters, which has recently converted into contemporary forms of digital authorship.

During the emergence of democratization of education and the significant increase in global literacy, reading and writing became more accessible to people from middle and lower classes, as well as women, which attracted these new groups of readers "to new genres such as the gothic novel, romance, science fiction, mystery, horror, adventure, and erotic tales, that were associated with sensationalism and escapism" (Masschelein 2021: 7). Theorizing the formation

of a whole new "mass cultural genre system", Rieder identifies the development of the marvelous romance and popular melodrama in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as the precursors to science fiction, also stressing the importance of detective fiction, Gothic romance, and horror novels for the latter's emergence in the twentieth century (2017: 164). Notably, "[t]his type of fiction was mass-produced in the heydays of 'pulp fiction' [in the US] … from the end of the nineteenth century until the Great Depression" (Ibid.), which partially led to the emergence of "new 'imagined communities' of readers and writers…contributing to the formation of the world's first mass-mediated, multiethnic, consumer capitalist society" (Fitzpatrick 2022: 12). Characteristically, beyond the growing popularity of mass-published literary genres in the late nineteenth–early twentieth centuries, the increase of amateur literary production also marked the first half of the nineteenth century. During the antebellum years in the US, for instance, "[d]iverse common people authored literary diaries, letters, poetry, and essays not intended for print", with many young people producing "spontaneous, often therapeutic, but ever creative [literary] expressions prompted by amusing incidents, momentous occasions, unusual events, religious experience, natural settings, or everyday reading" (Zboray and Zboray 2005: xix). Thus, young writers produced "mainly verse, but also short essays, songs, meditations, and even diaries, often themselves inherently literary, but also repositories of the other genres" (Ibid.). In such a way, the expansion of fictional forms, which suited the demands of the rising reading markets, as well as the emergence of mass amateur authorship through growing literacy in the western society signal the advent of a substantially *new* literary public sphere.

Once again acknowledging Habermas' stance whereby the culture-consuming public is argued to replace the culture-debating public, it is necessary to reiterate that the original western

bourgeois reading public of the eighteenth century was largely an exclusive socio-cultural group. Conversely, the birth of the new readers, writers, and media which followed the growing popularity of mass literary production and consumption meant the emergence of qualitatively novel publics, whose interests and demands differed from those of the earlier privileged rational-critical bourgeois. The end of the nineteenth century specifically illustrates the appearance of periodical forms that now correspond to the demands of the new mass reader. Generally, the historical expansion of the press market in the end of the nineteenth century was tied to "the mechanization of newspaper production" in the western countries (Kaplan 2015: 44). By the late 1800s, "mass-market magazines achieved unprecedented levels of circulation, most of it through subscription" (Smith 2000: 20). In turn, this expansion also implied the commercialization and adaptation of more traditional journalistic content to the demands of the mass market readership. For instance, in the late nineteenth-century Britain, journalist venues such as the *Daily Mail* and *Daily Express* deliberately extended "the concept of 'news'…beyond the traditional areas of business and politics to embrace stories about the everyday life of the ordinary people", supplying new mass consumer with "the same aesthetic pleasure that literature gave to the more sophisticated, and commercializ[ing] what had previously circulated informally as a component of popular culture — in gossip, ballad and broadsheet" (Carey 1992: 7). In such a way, while Habermas theorizes the perceived *transformed* public sphere of the nineteenth century as fixated on leisure, entertainment, and self-indulgence, it is seemingly more appropriate to suggest that the *new publics* enter the newly formed cultural periodical scene, which had been formerly reserved for the sophisticated, literate, and rational-critical bourgeois of the eighteenth century.

Perhaps one of the most spectacular venues which marked the rise of the new public entering the periodical literary cultural sphere in the beginning of the twentieth century were the

pulps. American pulp magazines of the early 1900s, named for the untrimmed, rough, wood-pulp paper on which they were printed, "adhered to nineteenth-century publishing practices, eschewing the heavy use of advertising and relying on cheap production costs and newsstand sales to stay in business" (Smith 19). As it has been documented, pulps provided their readers with cheaply produced escape literature designed to be thrown away once read (Ibid.). Lamerichs acknowledges the proliferation of popular letter-writing in the west directed to author figures such as Arthur Conan Doyle since the appearance of the telegram, while emphasizing the practice of 'fan' letter-writing as already fairly common for the nineteenth century (2018: 20). However, in the early twentieth century context of American science fiction, Cheng shows that the letter column section from readers in pulp magazines became a specific conversational "backyard" space "where readers discussed not only their fiction and science but also other, broader social concerns" (2012: 52). It has been suggested that readers of the pulps were predominantly working-class, immigrant, young, and poorly educated audiences, with most of them being office or factory girls, soldiers, sailors, miners, dockworkers, ranchers (Smith 2000: 23). Occasionally, these emergent reading publics specifically attached to science fiction discussed the works within this genre by writing *letters* to pulp venues that drew responses from other readers, which then appeared in subsequent issues of the magazines to which they wrote, thus generating new "currency of collective exchange" and the shaping of a distinct community (Cheng 2012: 59). Thus, the birth of the new national periodical genre such as the pulps also established a new medium, through which the most active readers of popular fiction managed to *publicly* converse with their peers on the broad scope of topics that interested them. As Edwards has recently pointed out, however, diverse literary fan cultures in early twentieth century America developed alongside science fiction fandom, emphasizing that interactive and

communal engagements with various popular fictional texts arose through the intersection of fans and new "integrated" forms of media more generally (2018: 58–61). Therefore, the rise of the new media in the twentieth century and their popular appeal may be said to especially attract various new readers and authors, which would later be commonly known as fans.

As I have suggested in the first chapter, the emergence of fandom as an autonomous and developed cultural industry in the mid-twentieth century demonstrates an extension of these earlier discursively periodical, interactive, and communal practices. Thus, initially branching off from the commercially produced and published pulps, which were called 'prozines', short for professional magazine, the American 'fanzines' devoted to science fiction roughly emerged at least since the late 1930s, which "represented fans' industry…that required its own systems of production, distribution, communication, and exchange" (Cheng 2012: 222–223). The process of science fiction crystallizing into a cultural form in the US became nearly complete by the late 1940s, with the end of the 1950s signaling the transformation of science fiction into "the more capital-intensive venues of film and eventually television" (Rieder 2021: 92–165). Indeed, the appearance of film and television in the twentieth century eventually prompted extended popular engagements with televised series, inclusive of fan fictional writing.

As Penley documents, women writers who partook in the fan production of zines, novels, artworks, and videos devoted to *Star Trek* television series contributed to the creation of "[a] mini-industry", which came to represent "a form of vertical integration — control over every aspect of production, distribution, and consumption" (1997: 104–105). The first fan fiction devoted to the series can be traced to the late 1960s, and many of the TV shows which inspired fan fiction in the 1970s and early 1980s were science fiction and police shows (Pugh 2006: 19). Equally, the primary means through which these fans collaborated and received feedback were

fan clubs and conventions, writers' groups, fanzines and letterzines (Ibid. 117). Generally, the developments of the new fan public spheres might be said to also encapsulate the visible trend towards reworking and *appropriating* the official products of the culture industry. One of the differences between the cultural products released by growing corporate industries and the forms of production developed in the more autonomous fan industries symptomatically concerned their uneven access to economic capital. Thus, for instance, as opposed to institutionally legitimate and corporate cultural industries, popular cultural (or fan) capital in the western historical context did not as a rule convert into economic capital (Fiske 1992: 35–36), which also puts Habermas' sweeping conceptualization of the homogenous liberal western public as a strictly culture-consuming audience into question[36].

Prior to addressing the developments occurring in contemporary digital context, it is essential to generally stress that the new multimedia logic is precisely what characterizes the expanded publics consuming and producing cultural forms as *post-literary*. In other words, when different media become repurposed, reappropriated and incorporated into new samples of creative production, the distinctively literary dimension that marked the original bourgeois public sphere gives way to qualitatively new modes of self-expression and communication. In such a way, the post-literary dimension of the new culture-consuming and -producing public refers to a distinctive multi-media perception. As I will argue further, the reappropriative logic that is ingrained in the post-literary public sphere concerns the attempt of active amateur creators to *reappropriate* legitimized and officially authorized modes of culture installed by the educated or influential bourgeois. Arguably, the participants of the post-literary public sphere would write

[36] Symptomatically, today's digital video essayists do not as a rule demand economic dividends from their publics (aside from the paid subscription services) for viewing their content beyond promoting sponsored advertising or alternative sources of funding such as donation systems.

themselves into the cultural forms that were once authorized by institutionalized bourgeois culture, and thus constitute a *challenge* to its authority.

Unsurprisingly, the remarkable dominance of the film medium in the twentieth century firmly establishes the new audiovisual consciousness, which continues to expand and transform in the twenty-first century context. Prior to the appearance of television and other more contemporary (audio)visual / textual multimedia, however, cinema was considered "as the only popular art at a time when the theater, the social art par excellence, reaches only a privileged cultural or monied minority" (Bazin 2004: 56). In turn, cinema was also the pioneer mass-cultural industry that actively relied on the feedback from its vast consumers. As Kracauer argues in his early essay on cinema, as opposed to traditional bourgeois artistic mediums, film uniquely forces its producers to *a priori* account for the taste of the audience and "the need for social critique among the consumers" to make a profit (1995: 291–293). Kracauer specifically describes cinematic production as inseparable from its intended 'mass' audience:

> [t]hey [films] are financed by corporations, which must pinpoint the tastes of the audience at all costs in order to make a profit. Since this audience is composed largely of workers and ordinary people who gripe about the conditions in the upper circles, business considerations require the producer to satisfy the need for social critique among the consumers. A producer, however, will never allow himself to be driven to present material that in any way attacks the foundations of society, for to do so would destroy his own existence as a capitalist entrepreneur (Ibid. 291).

Therefore, forced to consider the tastes of the popular audience in creating a product, film producers must account for the feedback of its consumers, not fostered by the traditional

bourgeois artistic mediums largely perceived as a "timeless" and "classless" affair (Ibid. 293–294).

Indeed, as the French film scholar André Bazin acknowledges, "[c]inema developed under sociological conditions very different from those in which the traditional arts exist", and that "[t]he first film-makers effectively extracted what was of use to them from the art with which they were about to win their public, namely the circus, the provincial theater, and the music hall, which provided slapstick films, especially, with both technique and actors." (Ibid. 57). Reflecting on the aesthetic and epistemological clash between conventional artistic forms and the new medium of cinema, the Soviet Russian filmmaker, Sergei Eisenstein, specifically highlights the influence of "the basic principles of the circus and the music-hall" on "the emergence of 'montage' form of thought" ("Through Theater", 8–12). For Andreas Huyssen, technologies of mass production and reproduction that crystallized in the twentieth century overall led to the development of a loose "technological imagination", characterized by "artistic practices such as collage, assemblage, montage and photomontage", and which finds its explicit reflection in the mediums of photography and film (1985: 9).

Arguably, however, the popular lineage of cinema is what aided the medium's distinctively recombinatory, attractional, and spectacle-oriented characteristics. Importantly, the "temporal and recombinatory" logic of cinematic montage clearly predates the new visual mediums, already "evident for example in nineteenth-century programming of magic-lantern exhibitions, where showmen learned to rebuild — and rework — stories from the slides that they happened to have" (Urrichio 2011: 28). Further, the collage-like and recombinatory amateur practices have been historically linked with the early nineteenth-century private album production. As Deidre Lynch persuasively demonstrates, the early nineteenth-century bibliomaniac trend included the

production of the "mixed-media medley" albums, through which the select female members of the English society reworked the print world by combining "original poetry and prose…with hand-copied extracts from published sources sometimes augmented with clippings from newspapers and periodicals", herbarium, etc. (2015: 137–139). Therefore, these observations suggest the historical correlation between the popular amateur logic of recombinatory practices that equally characterize the early creative uses of multimedia and the film medium. In turn, both "early cinema and online video are both characterised by an 'attractional' mode of display marked in different eras by their relation to emergent visual and temporal regimes" (Grainge 2011: 5). Thus, the multimedia and participatory direction of the post-literary public sphere lead to its ongoing separation from the traditionally valued bourgeois cultural forms, which are expressed through the emergence of the new recombinatory popular *visual* creative practices, eventually reproduced in popular digital audiovisual authorship.

As argued previously, the audiovisual and authorial production of the early amateur video makers and fan-fictional writers has undeniably much to do with the technological developments of the late nineteenth–early twentieth centuries. Thus, "the tradition of fan song videos, or vids — montages of visual material culled from mass media source texts and set to music" clearly emerged in the late twentieth century as part of media fandom (Russo 2009: 126). Beyond privileging the logic of collage, montage, or serial production more generally, however, the members of the developed fan industries would also find mass-produced and -marketed cinematic works most resonant to their interests, which becomes apparent in critical and creative fan production devoted to filmic and televised works. Arguably, contemporary "vernacular creativity" can be altogether described as "a productive articulation of consumer practices and knowledges (of, say, television genre codes) with older popular traditions and communicative

practices (storytelling, family photography, scrapbooking, collecting)" (Burgess 2006: 207). Reflecting on changing communication technologies since the digital era, Sandvoss, Gray and Harrington observe the trend towards "the increasing entrenchment of fan consumption in the structure of our everyday lives", transforming fandom into "an ever more integral aspect of lifeworlds" (2017: 6). Click and Scott argue that the technological shifts which occurred since the advent of the Internet "have infrastructurally and industrially bolstered the participatory and productive forms of media consumption long favored and modeled by fans", thus making fan cultures part of the mainstream (2018: 1). As Adrienne L. Massanari acknowledges, "the sort of active [online] engagement we see today with popular media is not new — fanzines, underground publications, and the like have been around since the 1940s (and amateur press and radio involvement long before that)" (2015: 7). In short, however 'spectacular' or western-centric they could have been in the cultural sense, the historically documented fan communities were clearly "early adopters and creative users of emerging [digital] media" (Jenkins 2006b: 12).

As I have illustrated in the first chapter, the specific history of amateur video has much to do with earlier creative fan practices, including the creation of mix tapes, home movies, and compilation videos since at least the late 1970s. Importantly, contemporary social platforms like YouTube "allow for discussions grounded in a particular artifact (videos and audio clips)" (Massanari 2015: 27), which centralizes the creation and dissemination of audiovisual content that historically emerged upon proliferation of mass multi-media production. Therefore, whether YouTube's discussions may be predominantly linked with the viewers' / listeners' public comments to posted content or digital authors' own generated and spread video material, the centrality of audiovisuality in receiving or creating content on the platform speaks for the exceptional influence of the twentieth-century's mass multi-media forms on contemporary digital

conversation and authorship. Even in the common cases where video essays feature textual citations, headlines, or other instances of written text, the latter are always incorporated into the visual fabric of such authorial content. In short, the salience of audiovisual forms in contemporary authorial online production clearly derives its historical lineage from commercial mass media and pre-Internet DIY productive cultural practices.

Ultimately, I argue that today's digital video essay represents a form of reappropriative authorship that was once part of the historical bourgeois media (inclusive of newspapers, tabloid presses, literary periodicals, and so on). I suggest that reappropriative authorship writes itself into the authorized fields of cultural production and thus produces new forms of self-fiction that are inherently marked by its counterpublicity, i.e. its challenge to authorized cultural forms. This form of authorship parses these forms and reconstructs them to implement into its creative self-expression, which suggests that the post-literary public sphere represents a unique structural development. In turn, its form of expression is marked less by a rational deliberative impulse, which Habermas associates with the original bourgeois public sphere, but by its modes of *presentation and representation*, explored further in this chapter.

Seemingly, current video essays from YouTube explore popular cultural concerns and themes historically derived from the developments of the post-literary public sphere. The range of topics and themes commonly explored by the digital video essayists include — though are not limited to — the following:

1. Audiovisual artistic and aesthetic works (from film, television, to video games, etc.)[37];

[37] It is worth stressing that YouTube contains a diverse range of audiovisual materials, inclusive of more encyclopedic individual content that is represented by, for instance, 'easter-egg' fan videos or long sequence mapping videos particularly excavating televised series, video games, etc. This type of audiovisual content is more closely intertwined with fan practices that predominantly focus on meta-commentary (Booth, 2016), interpreting textual plots, tracing and critiquing the production behind cultural texts, or examining fan-specific tropes and tastes. These genres are outside of this project's scope. Instead, I examine the hybrid and more loosely defined video essay

2. (Proto-)mass cultural literature (from Gothic novel, detective fiction, to contemporary romance);

3. Popular history;

4. Popular culture *as a lifestyle* (from twentieth-century subcultures to digital aesthetics);

5. Cultural and ideological arguments that are popular in the digital realm.

As this schematic list implies, video essays range from analyzing particular cultural objects to general ideas, all of which are unambiguously connected to the broad domain of popular culture. Importantly, the topics outlined above frequently intersect in most video essays, suggesting a degree of recombinatory generativity embedded in their production. The procedural, serialized and montage aspect of video essays recalls the original approach established by what Rieder terms 'the mass cultural genre system' (2017: 55), which was further adopted in the later fan fictional cultural industry (Maschelein 2021: 31). Since this digital genre thrives on being produced in series prescribed by the necessity for consistent production of content, the commentary that video essays incentivize is inherently cyclical and thematically diverse. As I argue, however, the genre's thematic core still revolves around the broad spectrum of popular culture that both encompasses 'imaginative and creative works' (Williams 1958) and culture perceived as a (predominantly digital) lifestyle. Ultimately, these authors' attention directed at mass cultural art and aesthetics, as well as their participatory *engagement* in direct conversation with these forms, allows us to theorize their digital authorial production as derivative from the popular modes of creativity explored in the post-literary public sphere, which is arguably separate from the more acclaimed traditional bourgeois literary cultural forms. As a consequence, contemporary digital authors attempt to assert their autonomy from the corporate

form, which merges post-scholarly conversation about cultural texts/concerns with social, cultural, and political discussion.

entertainment industry, which testifies to a degree of independence that today's digital entrepreneurs exercise in producing authorial content.

When it comes to the subject of cinematic and televised cultural objects, digital author-critics tend to relate the latter to their own pressing personal, cultural, and ideological concerns. The following two examples are arguably quite instructive. In the video essay titled "Nice White Teachers, Bad Brown Schools: Hollywood's Pedagogy on Urban Education" (June 25, 2022), the digital author Yhara zayd considers Hollywood films *Dangerous Minds* and *Freedom Writers* among others from the perspective of critical race theory, stressing that these films "aren't about critiquing the education system" but rather "leaning a little heavily into a white savior narrative" and romanticizing human "trauma" and "poverty" (9:10–10:59). Through studying and remixing footage from iconic Hollywood films as the starting point for a larger discussion, she devotes more than half of this forty-minute video essay to researching and critiquing the American education system, emphasizing the black schooling experiences and expressing her own views on how the national education system should be reformed. Critically, zayd's video essay does not merely present her individual research and thoughts on the subject; rather, its dual goal is to interrogate the cinematic products of Hollywood as a pathway to criticizing the institutional education system and incentivizing her audiences to think critically about it as well (37:48–38:01).



Fig. 3.1 The remixed posters of films *The Marva Collins Story* (1981) and *Bright Road* (1953) appearing in Yhara zayd's video essay "Nice White Teachers, Bad Brown Schools: Hollywood's Pedagogy on Urban Education", Jun 25, 2022 (19:15).

Similarly, the subject of history can be witnessed to be covered through the discussion of popular cultural context. Since 2020, the digital author-critic Kaz Rowe has been consistently producing video essays on their channel which excavate and analyze 'weird' historical facts or myths tied to popular culture as well as gender identity, sexual orientation, and social inequality. Rowe addresses themes ranging from 'the Queer History of the Old West', to 'the Dumb Rich People Drama' of the Vanderbilt Ball of 1883, producing close readings of these obscure historical topics and events. Their video essay titled "The Endless Horror of TikTok's Historical Misinformation" (May 16, 2023) reflects on the historical issues distorted on social media "as benign as the old claim that corsets were women-hating murderous death cages to issues as serious as lies about the Holocaust" (10:14–10:20). Rowe particularly attempts to debunk popular myths expressed on TikTok such as the belief in public urination being common for the French nobility of the eighteenth century (17:43–20:34). After dispelling this popular myth, Rowe unambiguously suggests the direct causation between "revolutionary propaganda" directed

at the court of Versailles and the French monarchy to interested audiences today: according to Rowe, people "now…have to sort fact from fiction" because revolutionary French writers once produced "slander and lies" (20:41–21:21). What Rowe's video essay, which has over one million views, illustrates is the explicit association drawn between popular cultural myths about history and the larger issue of misinformation being spread on digital social platforms today. Notably, Rowe's digital production visibly engages with topics that were formerly addressed by tabloid presses, which have historically been labelled as sensationalist.

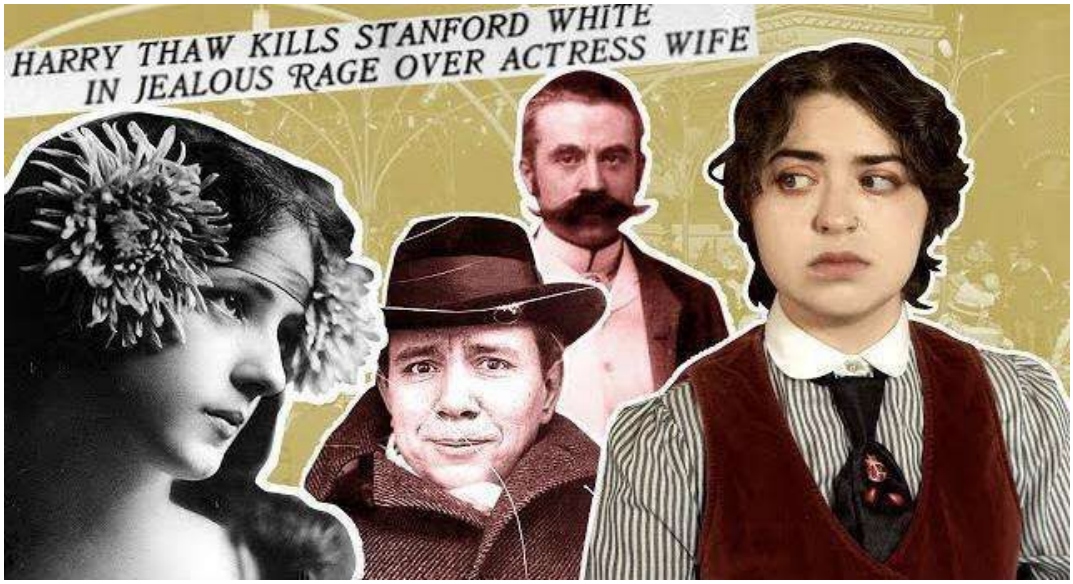


Fig. 3.2 Thumbnail from Kaz Rowe's video essay titled "The Tragic Story of Evelyn Nesbit and the Murder of Stanford White", Sep 14, 2022.

As the examples showcased here briefly illustrate, popular culture as conversation has become a distinctive form of authorial criticism in the case of the digital video essay. According to Habermas, "[t]he innumerable pamphlets criticizing or defending the leading theory of art [were] built on the discussions of the *salons* and reacted back on them", which, for him, was the cultural phenomenon termed "art criticism as conversation" (Ibid. 40). Seemingly, in terms of YouTube, the individual digital author-critics assemble in this virtual space to critique and

comment on everyday social, cultural, and ideological issues through engaging with the matters of popular culture. Thus, popular culture as the mode of conversation appears here as the framing subject for critical engagement, which mediates the discussion of other more practical and immediate contexts.

However, while the comparative logic of this kind may sound conceptually plausible, there undeniably exist many other structural aspects at play in terms of the contemporary digital media environment and the public sphere theory itself. As I have already implied, Habermas' original theoretical model seems to have clearly overemphasized the rational-critical aspect of the early bourgeois communicative exchange, which later famously converted into his broader theory of communicative action (1984 [1981]). Building off the newly proposed "resonance" theory, Hartmut Rosa has recently emphasized the necessity of understanding the public sphere "as a physical as well as virtual, conceptual and aesthetic space of encounter", partly characterized by affection and emotion that are supposed to generally "define a dynamic relationship of mutual listening and responding" (2022: 20). Indeed, it is arguably as crucial to account for resonances characterizing the relationship of listening and response as for an exchange of rational arguments and the negotiation of interests which must be ideally transpiring in the contemporary public sphere(s). Vitally, Rosa further argues that, in order for the process of "mutual adaptation" through resonance to take place, "the heterogenous lifeworlds and media universes of citizens [must]…share a certain minimum stock of knowledge and interpretation" as well as "significant images, stories, narratives and even songs", or what he overall defines as a shared "*visceral basis*" (Ibid. 30). While Rosa's own diagnosis regarding the existence of such shared visceral basis in contemporary pluralist societies is negative (Ibid.), I would like to suggest that the idea of the post-literary public sphere may provide an alternative contextual

framework for theorizing the contemporary generation of young adults, many of whom have been exposed to relatively shared and recognized popular cultural knowledge, images, narratives, and creative practices. In other words, the ubiquitous sharing of popular cultural context by these authors and other relatively young and active members of the digital public in the English-speaking world speaks for the potential of popular cultural contexts and practices to be tacitly — as well as viscerally — shared and recognized by many people across different online platforms. Since, as I have argued, the post-literary public sphere is characterized by the salience of visual forms and their amateur creative recombinations, the next section will study the structural role that personified audiovisuality may play in today's digital public authorship.

3.3 Audiovisual Publicity of Representation in the Digital Public Authorship: Performativity, Authenticity, and Attuned Consensus

In assessing the transformed bourgeois public sphere, Habermas stresses that "the public sphere of civil society again takes on feudal features" by relying on representation rather than genuine deliberation — the mode of "personal prestige" combined with "supernatural authority" (1998: 195). Pointing at the "publicity of representation [that] was concentrated at the prince's court" during the High Middle Ages (Ibid. 9), Habermas describes this older form of representation as "a status attribute", which was concerned with representing "lordship not for but 'before the people'" (Ibid. 7–8). He further suggests that special interest groups overseeing publicity work in the transformed liberal bourgeois public sphere in turn rely on "an acclamatory consent" or else "benevolent passivity" from "a mediatized public", which are not invested in generating public discussion but rather demand representational acclamation from the public (Ibid. 199–200). Thus, Habermas observes that "[t]he public sphere becomes the court *before*

whose public prestige can be displayed — rather than *in* which public critical debate is carried on" (Ibid. 201).

To put it simply, by analyzing the transformed bourgeois public sphere in his original work, Habermas treats representation through publicity as a newly feudal form of co-optation. Thus, in it, an abstract and amorphous public must now encounter an official image — whether channeled by individual and corporate officials or the media representing an official function — and thereby acclaim of the official function that such image represents. Within such a corporatist mode of 'refeudalized' publicity, there appears to be no place for genuine public deliberation that was formerly reserved for the press. As Williams puts it in application to the national British press of the first half of the twentieth century, "the technique of observing certain aspects of mass-behaviour — selected aspects of a 'public' rather than the balance of an actual community — formed the natural ideology of those who sought to control the new system and to profit by it" (1958: 332). However, the recent emergence of digital authorship where private members of society interact with the world around them through publicly displayed creative and critical practices incentivizes substantial revision of the idea of publicity of representation advanced by Habermas. Since the digital author-critics and bloggers have partly taken the media production in their own hands, it is appropriate to reconsider the idea of publicity of representation from the perspective of individual authorship. In the case of YouTube, the question of a distinctively audiovisual mode of self-representation becomes especially paramount.

It is worth stressing that Habermas derives this concept of representation (Ibid. 252) from Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method* (1989), where representation in the early Christian mindset is described by the latter as a form of "replacement", "as when someone 'represents' another person", or the divine (1989 [1960]: 141). Referring to representation on the

stage as a form of "a religious play", Gadamer thus stresses that prior to the seventeenth century representation does not signify secular "performance" or "play" since "it means the represented presence of the divine self, which takes place in a liturgical performance" (Ibid.). Later secular age, for Gadamer, illustrates a peculiar extension of the earlier Christian mindset in "the concept of legal representation", where "the bearer of a public function — the ruler, the official, etc." necessarily carries a "representative presence" with them (Ibid. 142). In other words, by making "an official presence", the bearer of the public function "does not appear as a private individual" but as the carrier of his official *function* (Ibid.). Thus, by analyzing "the special case of the representational picture", Gadamer argues that "the ruler, the statesman, or the hero" appearing on it "must show and present himself to his followers" and therefore "represent" what is expected of him in the picture (Ibid.). As the result, he concludes that "[p]ictorial presentation is a special case of public presentation", which is founded on the appearance of self-presentation that amounts to "the representation in the picture of this self-presentation" (Ibid.).

What is particularly striking about Gadamer's account is his acknowledgement of representation as the official public function conveyed through a self-image, which suggests approaching contemporary visual authorship and forms of publicity existent in them as conceptually allied. Clearly, in the absence of a license for the official public function or authority, digital audiovisual authorship instead asserts the relative individual autonomy of its private maker, whose new intimate form of self-representation concerns a peculiar semi-public mode of performance. Namely, while the semi-private aspect refers to the attempt at capturing the authentically real image of the author, the semi-public expression is related to their performative image, which, in case of its successfulness, is expected to represent the ideological, cultural, and political expectations as well as shared values of the audience. As I will attempt to

illustrate it further in this section, the public mode of digital representation in the digital video essay form relies on this dual mode of performative authenticity. Thus, digital author-critics, on the one hand, have constructed distinctive public personae based on a popular form of theatrical role-play, and, on the other hand, subverted their own ironically performative image through asserting their 'authentically' private self. The public function of the digital video essay genre, therefore, is arguably entirely dependent on the channeled image of its authors, deliberately constructed as at once a distinctly performative and semi-authentic form of self-presentation.

Following Gadamer, Habermas equally associates the official late medieval representation with public display, suggesting a metonymic relationship between public appearance of individual lordship and its display of 'representative' power before the people. Critically, this form of substitution of the whole with its part, for Habermas, signifies the form of publicity whereby no genuinely public response to an official function or image is implied. Considering the observations made above, one may generally feel compelled to conclude in Habermas' fashion that the contemporary digital self-display thus primarily concerns the mode of representation tailored to virtual public appearance 'before' rather than 'for' its projected audiences. While I see this relationship between the public and the private as distinctively metonymic in today's digital authorship, however, I simultaneously deem it necessary to revise Habermas' diagnosis wherein late capitalist publicity of representation mainly relies on the goal of transmitting official public prestige before the 'court' of consumers. Crucially, due to the relative autonomy of their entrepreneurial production, the digital authors rather rely on inter-group acclamation and communication than on what counts as an official form of representation. I would like to argue that the individual audiovisual public self-image represents the self as the transmitter of shared cultural and ideological values (rather than official or institutional

functions), which co-exists with the expressions of private interests and intentions put on digital public display. Ultimately, to extend on Gadamer's and Habermas' lines of thought, the displayed image of self (presentation) and what it expresses as a public value (represents) could be analyzed as a way of understanding public consensus — or the lack thereof — in today's digital video essay environment.

To be sure, the contemporary mode of representation generally conforms to the conditions of capitalist liberal market, which fosters acclamatory public consent over freely expressed genuine public opinion. As Georg Lukács once aptly described the relationship between an artist and their audience in capitalist environment, the former merely "confronts the abstract market as a producer of goods", which is why "capitalist development turns the connection of every art with its public into a commodity-market" rather than a space of "mutual interaction" (2013a: 140). In turn, the creative audiovisual digital production today is no exception since in it, capital acts as the inevitable mediator between the individual producer and its audience particularly in the developed capitalist states, which Lukacs associated with "formal democracies" (2013b: 68). From this perspective, it is indeed hard not to see "the blanching and abstraction of public life resulting from [capitalist] formal democracy" (Ibid. 74) in today's prominent forms of digital creative authorship. Thus, it may be suggested that the contemporary digital authorship represents a simulacrum of public engagement that relies on acclamatory consent of its public to capitalize on self-image and individually expressed thoughts.

The ways in which such acclamation manifests in the digital video essay form deserve acknowledging. On the level of cultural consumption, it has been generally observed that "[d]eveloping and maintaining an authentic artistic identity is central to commercial success in creative industries", which is why the fetishization of "the authentic or the real" has been argued

to characterize the contemporary digital and analogue commodity cultures (Arriagada and Bishop 2021: 570). As Allan S. Taylor suggests, authenticity represents "a two-way process that needs to be *authenticated* by the network of connections in order to be deemed as such" (2022: 7), which is why he defines it as "an act of co-creation between user and audience 'as publics'" (Ibid. 16). Thus, for instance, while analyzing Reddit in her monograph in the 2010s, Massanari suggests that despite it being a "multifaceted, complex, and contradictory concept", "authenticity" is closely linked with "transparency" and "candor" within the Reddit communities; the communicative qualities valued especially highly by its members (2015: 50–52). When it comes to YouTube, one can specifically understand its functioning of "authenticity" "emerging as a property of a performance that combines the reproduction of familiar tropes (such as vlog formats) that are understood by the audience, credible manner of speech and gesture, and the context in which the performance is nested" (Giles 2018: 132), which, in turn, has been also linked with the capitalist incentive of "self-branding" (Ibid. 137). Arguably, by relying on the hybrid and shifting forms of performative authenticity, the digital individual author-critics express themselves in original ways in their video essays to receive public acclamation and potential profit.

In light of this, it could be first suggested in Habermas' fashion that the contemporary digital video essay relies on a specifically understood acclamatory consent of the public to effectively capitalize on its own self-image and expressed thoughts. Studying audiovisual essays performed by scholars, Catherine Grant observes that these pieces "convey meanings that can be summarised in writing" but first and foremost, that they also represent "self-contained performative acts" (2016: 261). Speaking about the cultural phenomenon of BookTube reviews, Anna M. Brígido-Corachán follows Grant's argument by suggesting that, within video pieces in

the genre, "research is not merely presented…[but] is performed", which, for her, puts "performative research" at the center of this digital activity (2021: 131). Further, since the digital video essay is primarily disseminated online, it drastically differs from the more academically authorized video essay form. Reflecting on the digital literary sphere today, Simone Murray aptly observes that, for instance, a social cataloguing site such as Goodreads juxtaposes its "authenticity" to "university-generated literary criticism" that "has virtually expunged emotion from authorized literary responses" (2018: 125). Thus, Murray overall assesses "the…tone of digital book-review culture" as "personal, intimate, conversational, resoundingly and unembarrassedly *affective*" (Ibid.). Arguably, the interrelation between the digital video essay genre and its publicly conversational form highlights its equally performative and authentic aspects, which also designates a way of representing individual authority and personal image within the assembled digital community. In this sense, ensuring that their content can become viral and successful, the authentically performative expression of the individual digital author-critics is directed at receiving public acclamation, which manifests in acquiring subscriptions, likes, channel sponsorship, or other tangible forms of public approval.

Second, on the level of audiovisual presentation, authenticity within video essay production may be said to correlate to this genre's tendency towards relatively realistic forms of self-depiction. In terms of digital creative production, Kimberly Ann Hall has, for example, pointed at "the significance of amateurism in social-media content" as a way to "reduce the separation between the producer and the viewer by presenting the self as documented rather than stylized, and thus more authentic" (2015: 132). Referring to the "*amateur* nature of online media production", Arturo Arriagada and Sophie Bishop have equally stressed that "[digital] platform work" is often understood as "authentic" due to the level of "inexperience" promoted by its

practitioners who operate “outside of the professional hierarchies” of filmmaking or expertise (2021: 571). Indeed, by often utilizing their personal rather than professional equipment to record the material at hand, the individual digital filmmakers and their respective audiences emphasize the spontaneous and thus ‘realistic’ aspects of filmic expression, which appears more authentic than the filmic content produced by the industry or professional filmmakers. For most contemporary digital filmmakers on YouTube, the prioritization of ‘authentic’ expression is expressed through their visual depiction of themselves in everyday settings appearing before the camera. The presence of the filmmakers themselves in their video essays necessarily channels the heightened sense of personal investment into the subject at hand and the desire to directly face one’s audience, which thus reduces the perception of hierarchical barriers existing between the traditional filmmaker and the spectator. Building such visual connection with their spectators, the individual digital filmmakers demonstrate their openness to their audience, the topic at hand, and potentially, public conversation.

However, as my next example will show, the digital video essay form has originally relied on a spectacular, extravagant, and theatrical mode of communal performativity, which visibly illustrates this original genre’s distinctiveness in terms of other digital content such as traditional vlogs. As I would like to restate, the representational aspect of individual digital authors and their critical pieces may be said to rely on a hybrid authentically performative mode of expression. It has been previously stressed that the initial video essay genre on YouTube emerged as an extension of the subcultural digital community, loosely termed BreadTube, and this is how its novel modes of presentation are described by one of the YouTubers in their own ‘meta’-video-essay:

> [These new authors] were gradually garnering hundreds of thousands if not millions of views and subscribers, and are still lauded as authorities on the subject matters they cover. Of course, these weren't just 'a girl sits in front of a camera talking' video essays; these were full length well-edited theatrical masterpieces, they involved collaboration, skits, outfit changes, and set designs. The aesthetic and vibes were as important if not more important than the message. The theatrics were enticing and caused a stir mainly because of how mysterious and idiosyncratic these essayists were. Viewers wanted to know everything about them, they wanted to read the books they read, they wanted to dress and talk the way these essayists dressed and talked (16:06–16:55, Nov 1, 2023).

Indeed, the inherently theatrical aspect of the early video essayists on YouTube relates to its authors' deliberate prioritization of extravagant cinematic self-performance, characterized by their outfit changes, eccentric costumes, elaborately staged set designs, etc., all montaged into long format digital videos, which reminds us of the prominent fan communities engaged in various cosplaying practices. The author of the meta-video-essay quoted here, Kidology, also illustrates the BreadTube moment by incorporating famous examples of performative digital authorship in her own essay:

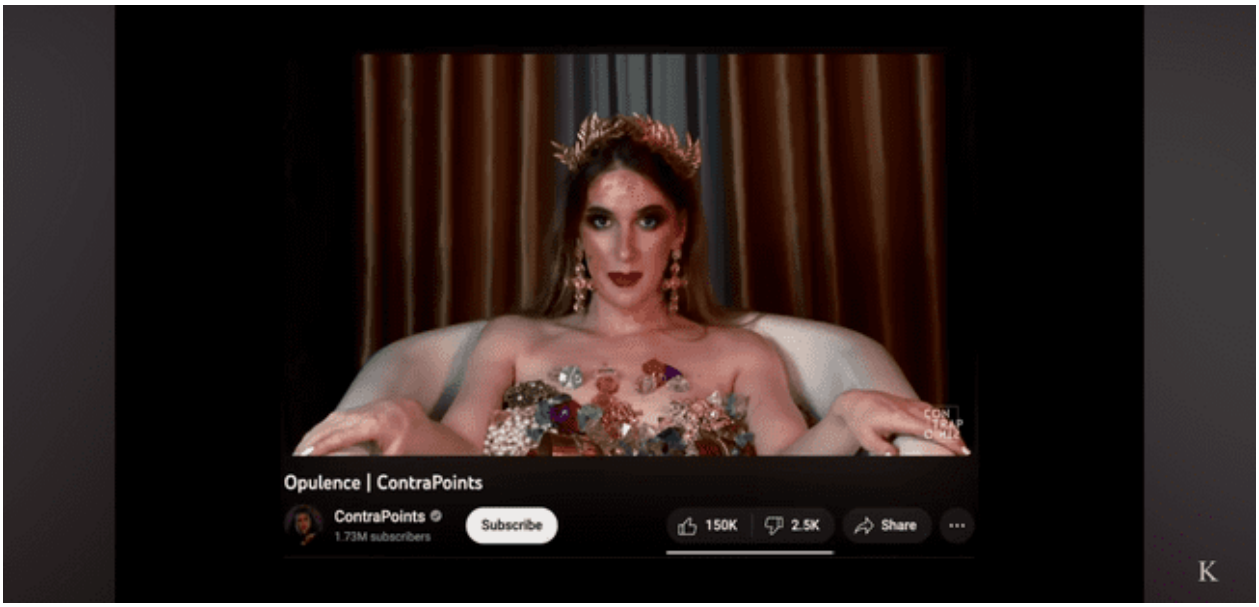


Fig. 3.3 The snapshot from ContraPoints' video essay titled "Opulence" included in Kidology's meta-video-essay (16:25).

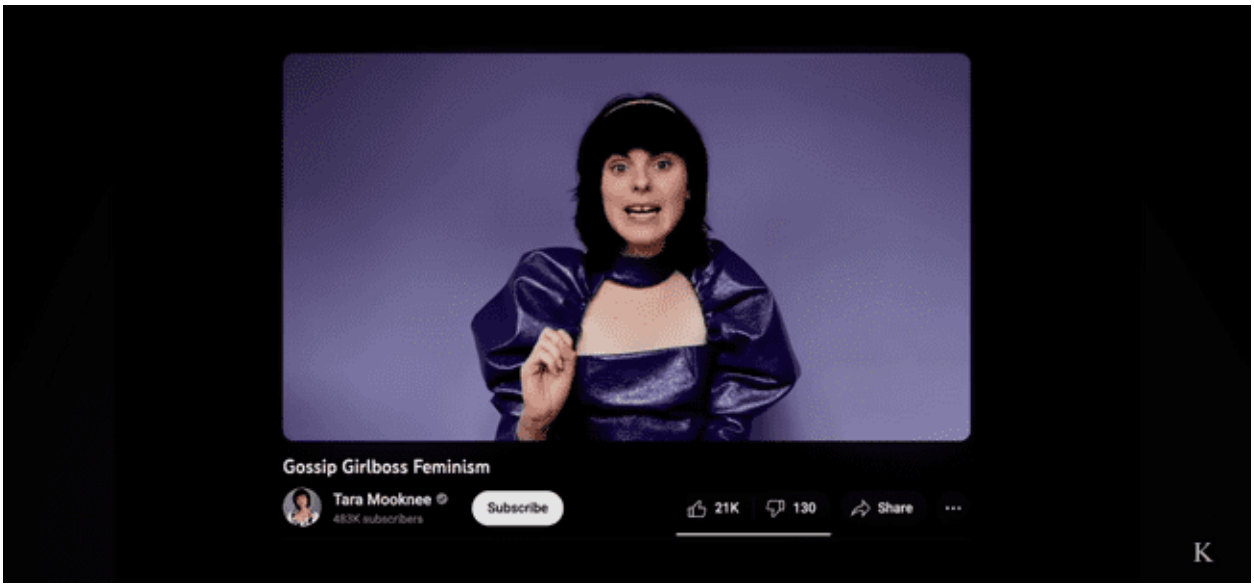


Fig. 3.4 The snapshot from Tara Mooknee's video essay titled "Gossip Girlboss Feminism" included in Kidology's meta-video-essay (16:27).

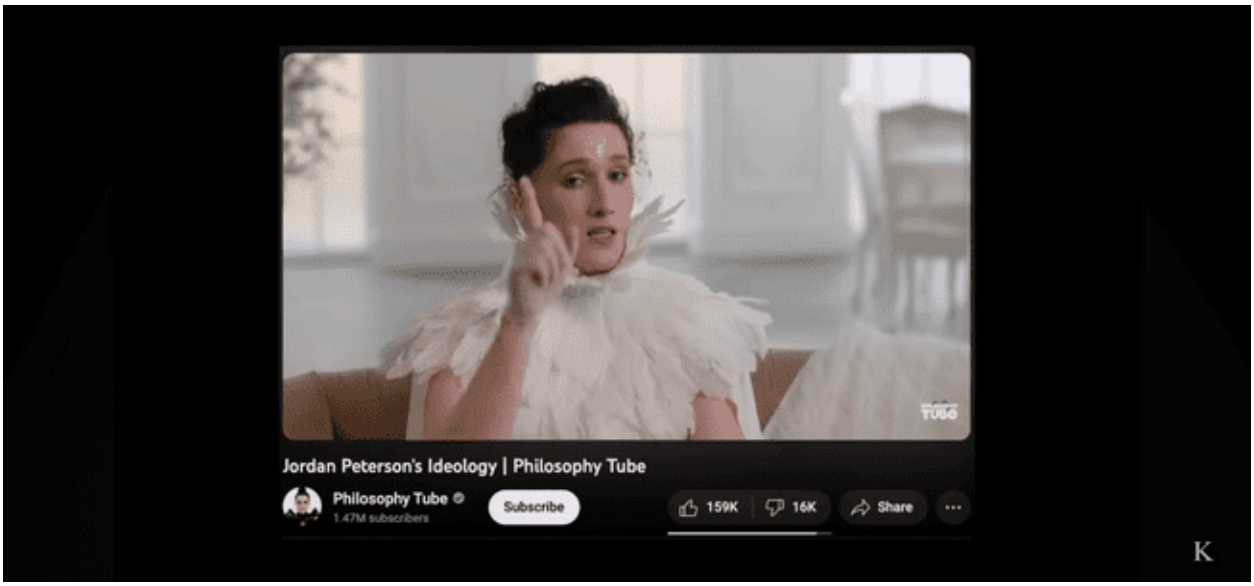


Fig. 3.5 The snapshot from Philosophy Tube's video essay titled "Jordan Peterson's Ideology" included in Kidology's meta-video-essay (16:29).

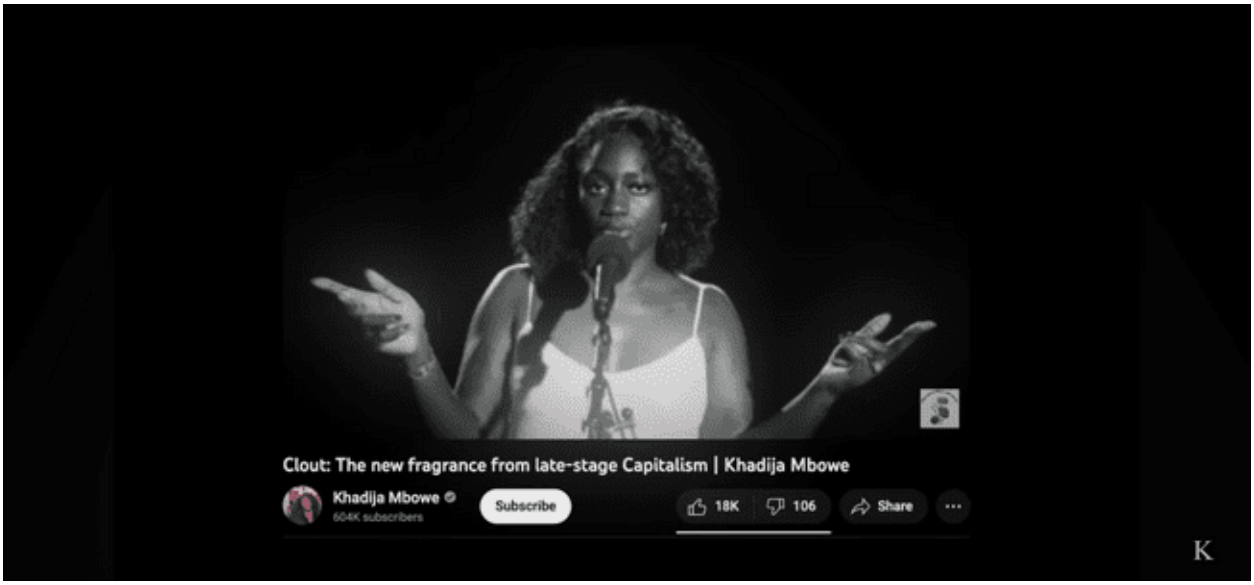


Fig. 3.6 The snapshot from Khadija Mbowe's video essay titled "Clout: The new fragrance" included in Kidology's meta-video-essay (16:32).

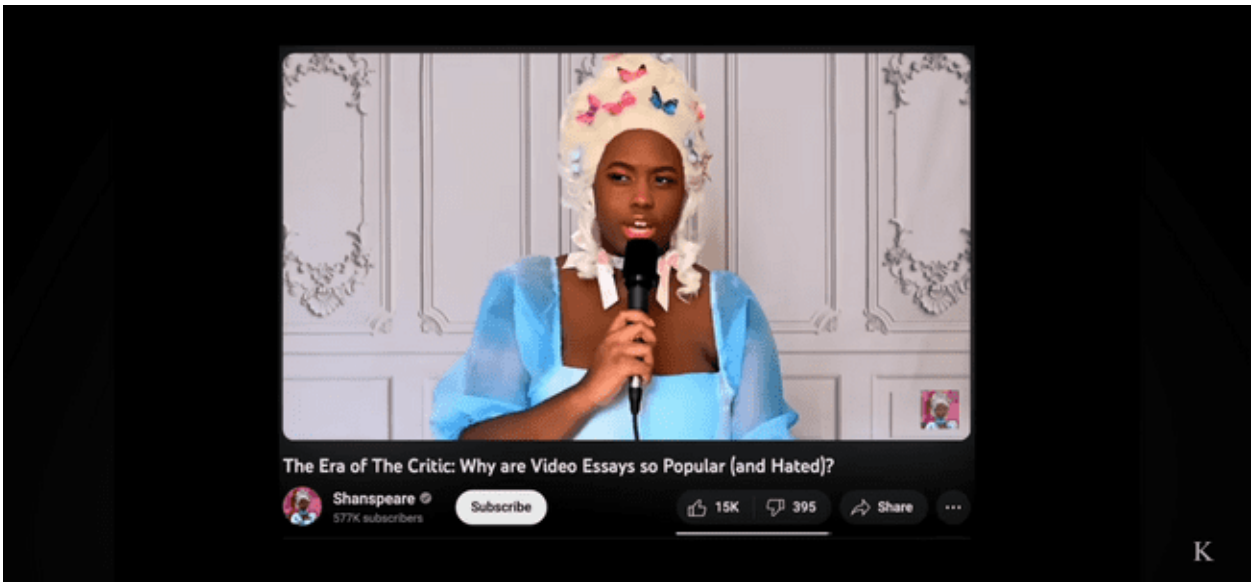


Fig. 3.7 The snapshot from Shanspeare's video essay titled "The Era of The Critic" included in Kidology's meta-video-essay (16:33).

Crucially, however, the performative theatricality constituting the original video essay genre does not merely concern the digital aesthetics of individual self-presentation proper. Rather, moving beyond the surface level of self-presentation, it appears essential to recognize the role that such personified theatrical performativity has played in publicity of representation channeled by the digital authors. Thus, aside from the spectacle-oriented mode of theatricality undeniably embedded in these performances, the BreadTube video essayists, as Kidology also observes, first and foremost, espouse the broad ideology of "today's new left" (12:25). What this means, in terms of the BreadTube authorship, is that the spectacular audiovisual performance channeled by many of the video essays unambiguously represented the systemic problems associated with social, cultural, racial, and gender inequalities / biases, which would undeniably resonate with many young viewers espousing similar critical stance. In turn, the eccentricity of self-presentation in this genre also aims to critically subvert conservative-leaning myths and ideologies, which are perceived to be starkly at odds with the views espoused by the cultural and

political new left. To provide one example of this, ContraPoints' earlier video essay titled "Opulence" (2019), also listed as one of the characteristic examples of BreadTube in Kidology's piece, directly illustrates the functioning of personified performative publicity as a form of predominantly negative representation. Throughout this nearly fifty-minute video essay, Wynn adopts multiple performative personae, most of whom are summoned to represent various cultural, historical, and fantastical figures that are supposed to embody the ideas of individual wealth and prestige: in other words, they are meant to serve as allegorical representations of the notion of opulence.



Fig. 3.8 Wynn's personified presentation of the overarching notion of opulence (3:34).



Fig. 3.9 The image of Wynn personifying the specifically American notion of wealth (2:54).



Fig. 3.10 Demonstrated through elaborately performed makeup and costume, Wynn's third character presents a generalized confused member of society, torn between the desire of opulence and the acknowledgement of opulence itself as a myth (9:14).



Fig. 3.11 The glamourous diva image represents an allegory for a classical Hollywood depiction of wealth and luxury (14:31).



Fig. 3.12 The image of a dignified vampire is meant to illustrate the mythological cultural functioning of the idea of opulence (42:14).

Thus, by exposing historically widespread ideology of richness and opulence, Wynn's performative masks amount to a satirical commentary designed to mock and critique the specifically American individualist cult of wealth; the critical stance likely shared by the left-

leaning audiences. Importantly, ContraPoints' video essay also directly muses on Wynn's own intimate experience, which includes frank personal reflections on the difficulties of being transgender, the lack of social acceptance and bullying associated with transitioning, as well as long-term participation in cross-dressing. Therefore, while the performative masks in this video largely personify and satirize the American obsession with wealth and the mythological national promise of ascending 'from rags to riches', Wynn's reflections on personal experiences are simultaneously aimed to capture an authentic image of the author.

Already three years after, however, the digital author-critics began to explicitly parody the original BreadTube performances, juxtaposing these with their more 'down-to-earth' self-presentations. Openly reflecting on the new trend, Shanspeare, for instance, observes the gradual shift from melodramatic performativity towards more authentic forms of expression on YouTube, suggesting that the more recent digital video essay "era" "seems to prioritize conversational and vulnerable presentations over melodrama", seen by them as a way to overcome showing off in public (25:02–25:17). To start with, same as Kidology, Shanspeare' meta-video-essay acknowledges BreadTube's emergence "as a left-wing counter-genre against the alarming rise of alt-right content on social media" (12:39–12:45). Thus, early BreadTubers "presented left-wing ideas to millions of viewers and primarily referenced other left-wing creators or left-wing sources" (12:45–12:51). Second, Shanspeare likewise emphasizes these creators' prioritization of "elaborate sets, props, and costumes" as well as "lush editing and theatrical performances" presented in their video essays (13:03–13:12). Characteristically, while presenting this information on BreadTube's original content, Shanspeare appears in a romantically decorated set and costume which are clearly meant to imitate the theatrical and 'elitist' phase of the digital video essay genre. Contrastingly, in the second part of their meta-

video-essay that addresses the more “conversational and vulnerable” era of this digital genre, Shanspeare appears in a markedly more relaxed everyday setting, lying in bed under the blanket while holding a microphone.



Fig. 3.13 Shanspeare’s representation of the theatrical phase of BreadTube (13:03)



Fig. 3.14 Shanspeare’s presentation of a more down-to-earth critical era (39:59)

Simultaneously, however, while the originally eccentric, extravagant, and theatrical video essays have truly acquired a more 'authentic’ form of presentation in recent years, the publicly

performative component still arguably plays a significant role in this mode of authorship. Indeed, despite varying modes of self-presentation and expression existing online, no form of a 'purely' private authenticity can possibly exist in an inherently virtual and vastly public platform environment. As I have suggested earlier, the idea of performance, in this context, generally refers to the audiovisual, personified, and semi-public channeling of ideological, cultural, political expectations and shared interests of a largely anonymous target audience. To put it simply: what is nested in a performative representation of this kind seems to be the anticipation of public resonance, which must amount to a relatively shared 'visceral' and critical 'basis'. In the case of the video essay, the audiovisual presentation developed over the years by the loose BreadTube community has a distinctively theatrical and *conversational* underpinning, precisely because different authors from the community have individually engaged in the personified audiovisual dialogue with other authors. Arguably, the essence of such inter-group dialogue is as tied to the most shared critical views of the left-leaning community members as to the mutually recognized appreciation of the creatively expressive value enclosed in the video essay genre. In turn, the video essay's performative resonance with a larger public receiving this digital content should also presumably correlate to their relatively shared ideological, cultural, political expectations, interests and preferred modes of reception.

Before concluding this section, I would like to briefly return to Habermas' specific understanding of audiovisuality in respect to media publicity. In his recent work, he diagnoses that the ongoing popular tendency towards sensationalism and spectacle overpowers the investment in "politically relevant news and problems" (2023: 44). Elaborating on his point, he suggests that "the dramatic loss of relevance of the print media compared to the dominant audio-visual media seems to point to a decline in the level of aspiration of the offerings" (Ibid.). What

proves this for Habermas is the fact that "the politically leading daily and weekly newspapers have adjusted their offerings to the colourful format of entertaining Sunday newspapers" (Ibid.). Thus, in comparing the new media to "the tabloid and popular press", he diagnoses the new trend "towards entertainment, emotionalization and the personalization of the issues of concern for the political public sphere" (Ibid. 49). Similarly, already reflecting on the detrimental influence of radio, film, and television on the rational critical debate in his original work, Habermas pessimistically asserts that the immediacy of information received through these mediums drastically reduces "to a minimum the distance that a reader is forced to maintain toward the printed letter" (1998: 170). As opposed to the printed word, the new media relying on (audio)visuality eradicate the necessary distance and time that historically enabled the early reading publics to absorb information privately and qualitatively (Ibid. 170–171). Thus, for Habermas, if the written word stimulates *distance* necessary for the qualitative absorption of information and debate, audiovisual forms are meant to entertain and foster immediate emotional rewards[38].

[38] To be sure, Habermas' perspective on audiovisuality in terms of its potentially detrimental cultural and social influence has been clearly inspired by his conceptual predecessors. Poignantly, the ideas of immediacy and surface as applied to the film medium illustrate the influence of the Frankfurt School-adjacent critical theorists on Habermas' negative definition of audiovisual forms. Originally, in the German context of the 1910s–1920s, the initial *kino debate* inspired by the emergence of popular cinema was a "polarised" polemic "between a view of the cinema as constituting a threat to the continued authority of the high arts and bourgeois culture, and one which viewed the cinema as offering a much needed corrective to that authority" (Aitken 2012: 30). Thus, on the one hand, cinema was considered as "the threat posed to high and bourgeois culture by the emergence of the mass media, mass society, and the hurried expansion of the 'great city,' or 'Großstadt'" (Ibid). On the other hand, however, German cultural theorists also "looked to film to provide a model for a new kind of aesthetic form which would be better able to represent the contemporary condition" (Ibid. 31). In his early essay on film, Lukács, for instance, postulates that "the essence of cinema is movement as such, perpetual flux, the never-resting change of things", which is alien to "the temporality and flow of great moments" and eternal value of theatre (2012 [1913]: 182–183). Being compared to a *fantastic* life "made up of pure surface", film medium, for early Lukács, represents "a stage of *recuperation* from oneself, a place of amusement…and never one of edification or elevation of any kind" (Ibid. 182–185). In such a way, Lukács concludes that "[t]he insurmountable urge for amusement has almost completely expelled the drama from our stages" and that it fits much better within "a world of pure externality" of the film medium (Ibid. 185). For Walter Benjamin, due to its openness to the dynamic functions of "improvement" and "immediacy" (28-35), film's influence on the public becomes unparalleled in the new age of mechanical reproduction. By being both culturally and instrumentally improving rather than permanent medium, film commits "radical renunciation of eternal value" and "detaches the reproduced object from the sphere of tradition", thus

Responding to Habermas' negative diagnosis of audiovisuality, I would like to open a dialogue towards approaching the analysis of audiovisual perception from the perspective offered by another Weberian German-speaking Marxist thinker, Lukács. If, in Habermas' view, the fundamental issue with the audiovisual presentation of information concerns its lack of *distance* necessary for its qualitative absorption, for Lukács, the film medium's unique characteristic of *immediacy* endows it with an incomparable and potentially normative mode of *authentic* expression. Thus, in his late essay on cinema, Lukács somewhat optimistically asserts that the film medium "possesses the potential to be a true and great popular art, which can become a comprehensive expression of general, deeply, and commonly felt emotions of the people" (2012 [1963]: 201)[39]. To substantiate his claim, Lukács polemicizes with Benjamin's famous thesis on the mechanization of art and suggests that film differs from all the traditional mediums precisely because it can create the impression of 'life-perception' in the spectator and thus offer "a form of expression…enabling…something new to become clearly visible" (Ibid. 190). Specifically, he states that "Film's closeness to everyday life means…the tendency to portray life as immediately transparent and graspable, a demand that is also true for the everyday person in relation to his/her own environment" (Ibid. 195–196). In such a way, the film

"provid[ing] the equipment-free aspect of reality they [people] are entitled to demand from a work of art" (22-35). In Kracauer's view, film as a medium represents a construction of life, channeled through things that were torn out of their fragmented world and which now reconstitute another illusory world (287). However, from his Marxist psychoanalytical perspective, even "[s]tupid and unreal film fantasies" a priori reveal and represent "the *daydreams of society*, in which its actual reality comes to the fore and its otherwise repressed wishes take on form" (292). Thus, "the more incorrectly they [films] present the surface of things, the more correct they become and the more clearly they mirror the secret mechanism of society" (292).

[39] It is worth stressing that Lukács' provisional theory of film aesthetics follows the neo-Kantian understanding of 'eternal value' in art, which is why, in his view, the inferior 'mass' films relying on grotesque and kitsch, for instance, merely represent "art-like forms, that, in their inner content, are really only simple continuations, vicarious realisations, and counterfeit intensifications of the daydreams of everyday life" (Ibid.). Contrastingly, for him, the realistic advantages of the film medium can produce its elevated aesthetics, in which "the transformation of the whole human being of everyday life (*des ganzen Menschen des Alltags*) into the 'whole human being' (*Menschen ganz*)" may occur (Ibid. 196).

medium's "mimetic realistic-character" is argued to "flow[] from its…authenticity, [and that it] must be so organised that each image, each series of images, primarily evokes a definite and strong unity of atmosphere…[*Stimmungseinheit*]", which must serve as "the main vehicle for the spectator" (Ibid. 208–209). In turn, "the choices and arrangements made by the director and operator in particular complexes of images become comprehensible in relation to notions of achievement and performance: what matters is the auditively accompanied, but primarily visual-atmospheric value of images and their sequence" (Ibid. 208). Poignantly, the first part of the German word *Stimmungseinheit*, *Stimmung*, can be variously translated into English as 'mood', 'atmosphere', and 'attunement'.

In the spirit of Lukács, I would generally like to propose that popular digital authors today generate their publics of attuned consensus, which is tacitly shared around regularly produced and publicly circulating forms of individual audiovisual self-expression. In other words, I suggest that successful digital authors, by regularly communicating *through* themselves audiovisually and publicly, generate the semi-authentic sense of themselves intuitively recognized by their audiences. Since, as Lukács also maintains, the visual medium has a distinctively mimetic realistic-character due to its unique immediacy and authenticity, it is plausible to assume that the new relevant modes of authorship exercised digitally today produce an immediately received and specific atmospheric communicative value. Arguably, depending on how realistically authentic their audiovisual self-image or presentation is, such a mode of authorship can produce a unity of atmosphere that may successfully resonate with its public. In turn, since such a personified image or presentation also performs itself before the digital public through introducing specific and elaborate gestures, voiceover, crafted montage, etc., it immediately acquires a certain creative *self-fictionalized* form. Thus, it can be argued that a self-

fictionalized form of presentation characterizes digital communicative genres such as the video essay, which partly originates from the post-literary public sphere. Ultimately, it could be theorized that the extent to which the new virtually personified forms of self-fiction is thoroughly reproduced and imitated by other digital authors may partly help to determine whether one's deliberately crafted self-image holds any publicly representative value on social platforms.

3.4 Between Digital Cybersalons and Acclamatory Authorship: The Struggle for Engaged Communication

In terms of the digital environment, the idea of the public sphere has been considered as a pathway to understanding public communication which may potentially foster meaningful democratic participation. According to Häussler, Habermas' model of deliberative democracy has recently attracted the recent research interest of communication scholars "towards the internet to examine how far it can live up to the normative expectations of a communicative space free of power that connects equals" (Ibid. 46). Surveying different accounts on the subject, Häussler concludes that "the literature on the status and quality of deliberation in traditional and online media paints a complex and ambivalent picture": thus, "on the one hand, certain circumstance seem to be favorable to deliberation", and, "[o]n the other hand,…public sphere and the media that constitute it are subject to power ridden distortions, which they themselves tend to reproduce" (Ibid. 47–48). Reflecting on the early digital discussion groups termed by her "cybersalons", Jodi Dean observes that their "modes of interaction" resemble "everyday communication", "table talk in coffee houses", and "multilayered discussions among friends" (Dean 2001: 259). Seemingly, mirroring the informal conversational setting of coffee table societies and salons in this respect, today's digital individual author-critics promote virtual public gathering on the social platform of YouTube through electing narrow thematic pretexts

for a broader public conversation. Stressing the importance of "the interplay between conceptions of the public sphere and the media environment" (Edgerly et. al 2015: 4) in Habermas' account, the authors Edgerly et. al identify YouTube's qualities that align this social media platform with the notion of the public sphere. Namely, its self-promotion "as a space for community and the exchange of ideas", its exposure to wide audiences and topics, its "possibility for opinion and information sharing", and its potential at facilitating "quality political exchanges" are argued to serve as the valid premises for examining this social platform through Habermas' conceptual lens (Ibid. 7–10). Apart from YouTube itself containing the prerequisites for being considered a space for public sphere(s), however, it should be also reasserted that Habermas' specific idea of conversational art criticism directly applies to the video essay genre. Thus, structurally resembling the eighteenth-century mode of conversational criticism pointed out by Habermas, the current digital author-critics on YouTube assemble their audiovisual pieces of criticism often termed by them as video essays situated around cultural objects, which places them in the historical lineage of periodical literary expressions.

Simultaneously, it appears clear that the connection between contemporary digital authorship and its incorporation into a newly generated public sphere is, at best, idealized. Seen from a more pessimistic perspective, "[b]logging is, for the most part, a travesty of the more democratic public sphere the development of the weblog seemed to promise" (Mulhern 2024: 270). Importantly, the plurality of publics, fractured globalization, social fragmentation, and the dissolution of traditional professional gatekeeping mechanisms in the digital age hardly allow for the unified conception of the public sphere to be relevant today. First, as Rosa persuasively argues, "the loss of perceived common ground between different lifeworlds" along with "[t]he erosion of these *shared* spaces (particularly those of the *media*) in the face of the digital world

which is globally connected but increasingly differentiated" profoundly challenge the singular concept of the democratic public sphere connecting equal citizens (2022: 24). Second, Rosa also fairly observes that "[t]he established construction of a common world of facts, interpretations, stories and personalities on headline radio and television news programmes as well as in printed media has given way to a wide varieties of media sub-universes that are not so much in competition as sealed off from each other" (Ibid.). Third, in Habermas' own view, while any "highly complex media system requires a professionalized staff that plays the *gatekeeper role* […] for the communication flows", inclusive of "journalists who work for the news services, the media and the publishing houses" (Ibid. 30), the contemporary digital media platforms, contrastingly, rely on highly *unregulated content* due to the intrinsic lack of these "professional filters" in the digital space (Ibid. 37). As the result, while digital social platforms stimulate "the spontaneous exchange of possible contents between potentially many users", their "egalitarian and unregulated character", in Habermas' view, have so far converted into "the desolate cacophony…[of] fragmented, self-enclosed echo chambers" (Ibid.). Expanding this earlier stance, Habermas stresses in his recent work that while "the press…has the greatest inherent affinity for the discursive character of opinion and will formation by *citizens*", digital platforms "are soliciting the attention of *consumers*", which necessarily relies on "attention economy" that affects all public media (Ibid.). In turn, the overall 'platformization of the public sphere' today, for him, has led to a situation whereby the traditional media equally suffer "both economically and in view of dwindling journalistic influence and the adjustment of professional standards" (Ibid.). Therefore, the heightened preference that is given to social platforms as opposed to print mediums today, for Habermas, amounts to the general state of media 'deprofessionalization'.

Indeed, the deprofessionalization of expert knowledge transmitted online (Carrigan 2022), along with the erosion of traditional intellectual gatekeeping mechanisms in the digital age (Susen and Baert 2017), have been recognized. More generally, as opposed to journalists and professional columnists, academics and writers have been argued to *a priori* hold a 'media outsider' status (Jacobs 2011: 78). While these broad observations may hold true, the narrow case of video essay attests to the existence of tech savvy semi-professional authors in the digital space. As stated in the first chapter, because many of the digital author-critics report their former or ongoing ties with higher education, this also endows them with 'professional profile'. Thus, John Guillory describes it as "a set of cognitive skills, manners, values, attitudes, and cultural references that are not so much specific to individual fields of study as to the 'college-educated' generally" (2022: 42–43). Therefore, whether the qualitative aspects of their professional profile may be a matter of disputation, the digital author-critics from YouTube can nevertheless be structurally described as semi-professional communicators who also possess highly developed technical skills necessary for sophisticated digital production.

Further, similar to the stance advanced by Christian Fuchs (2021), Habermas has diagnosed the fragmentation and erosion of the western liberal public sphere into self-enclosed and competitive communicative filter-bubbles proliferated on digital social platforms (2023: 55). As Habermas observes, "[u]sers empowered as authors" generate "the unstructured public sphere" through gathering the comments of readers and the likes of followers, which results in "the formation of self-sustaining echo chambers" (Ibid.). Before Habermas' recent conjectures, it was argued that "embedded individualization" has characterized "a new ultra-pluralistic form of public sphere" since the advent of online blogging (Youngs 2009: 132). For Habermas, today's "influencers who court the approval of followers for their own programme and reputation" are

likely to instead achieve the "narcissistic" staging of singularity — "the visibility and gain in distinction…through spontaneous contributions on the internet" rather than the promise of individualization (Ibid. 50–51). However, despite the general validity of his claim, contemporary video essayists complicate Habermas' generalized assumption in several ways.

First, much like the private individuals in the public sphere of the world of letters, these contemporary digital author-critics express their lay individual judgements before the virtual assembly, which will either approve of the digital critical piece via viewing, sharing, commenting under video content, subscribing to author's channel, or altogether disregarding it. Arguably, however, in contrast with the venues of the republic of letters, social platforms tend "to create an experience wherein one's views are merely confirmed rather than challenged, likely the opposite of the democratic, deliberative nature of the 'potential' of the internet" (Massanari 2015: 9). Markedly, this plebiscitary form of authorship exercised online is starkly at odds with Habermas' adapted normative theory (1984) that valorizes communication conducted for the shared purpose of mutual understanding (Lunt and Livingstone, 2013: 92). Second, digital video essays simultaneously generate innovative communicative forms. Thus, interview conversations that occasionally occur between individual digital authors, which are remixed, recorded, and publicized through video essays, cannot be considered a strictly acclamatory form of digital presence since they are virtually intersubjective and contain deliberative potential. Further, the emergence of 'tag-alongs' — video essayists imitating successful works of their predecessors — speaks for this genre's high susceptibility for producing digital authorial content. Thus, as the video essayist Kidology suggests, today's many other digital creators 'tagged along', and started actively producing their own video essays, often capitalizing on most viral content produced by

the most prominent creators. Finally, video essayists often reference one another in their pieces, thus establishing a dialogue between each other.

To elaborate on these points, I would like to apply Habermas' latest conjectures to the digital video essay form. First, in terms of individual self-presentation, the semi-private quality of such authorship can be described as follows: one's private image is represented publicly, which is neither fully private nor public. In the case of the video essay form, the new intimate digital publicity corresponds to the public channeling of the author's personal image that is aimed at resonating with or attuning to the interests and preferences of abstract and anonymous audiences. Likewise, the aspect of intimacy enclosed in such 'authentically' presented works correlates to the new form of intimacy aimed at producing desirable resonance in the viewers. Second, the semi-private and semi-public aspect of public communication in the digital video essay form concerns its hybrid form of address: while the main audience in mind here is largely anonymous, the intersubjective public conversation still occurs within this communicative 'genre'. The latter may be particularly witnessed through interpersonal interviews, occasionally enclosed in semi-public / semi-private video essays, which are conducted between individual producers of this type of content. Another example of the intersubjective public communication concerns individual references to video essays of their peers, who, in turn, may respond to these references in their own audiovisual content. Such semi-private interpersonal exchange is, therefore, situated around a relatively small like-minded cluster of individual digital authors, who are united through their similar critical-authorial activity on the same social platform. Thus, the semi-public aspect of the digital video essay is illustrated through their intersubjective conversation that runs parallel to their public address to anonymous audiences.



Fig. 3.15 Shanspeare in conversation with Capelle as presented in their video essay ("The Era of the Critic: Why are Video Essays so Popular (and Hated)?", Aug 13, 2022: 16:25).



Fig. 3.16 Shanspeare depicted in conversation with Capelle as presented in their video essay ("The Era of the Critic: Why are Video Essays so Popular (and Hated)?", Aug 13, 2022: 36:18).



Fig. 3.17 The screenshot taken from oliSUNvia's video essay which references Shanspeare's "The Era of The Critic" ("what can you ACTUALLY learn", Aug 26, 2024: 17:33).



Fig. 3.18 oliSUNvia's video essay referenced in the previous figure serving as the point of discussion in charli chats' video essay ("So…reading has become a status symbol?", Dec 29, 2024: 16:33).



Fig. 3.19 Capelle's video essay referenced and discussed in According to Alina's video essay ("Is literature useful? Unemployment, elitism, and BookTok and politics", Dec 8, 2024: 15:11).



Fig. 3.20 ContraPoints' video essay "Twilight" referenced in Lily Alexandre's video essay ("Art Won't Save Us from Capitalism", May 31, 2024: 18:38).



Fig. 3.21 Kidology's interpretation of the BreadTube's progression today ("Why BREADTUBE VIDEO ESSAYS", 1 Nov, 2023).

Concluding these remarks, I would argue that video essays exhibit a general trend towards new digital forms of authorship that tacitly invite other users to also *become authors*. The unified cultural context related to popular cultural works and themes explored in video essays potentially allows for new types of self-fiction and mutual understanding to emerge.

As I have attempted to show in this chapter, each individual case of digital critical authorship requires appropriate contextualization and layered consideration from various structural angles. In the case of the digital video essay the twofold conclusion may be drawn. On the one hand, in order for whatever is being addressed or discussed in a video essay to resonate and gain popularity, the author's public identity must receive a tacit acclamation from their audiences in the first place. Like in other examples of public digital content from social platforms, video essayists rely on semi-public and semi-private performative authenticity, which is instrumentally channeled through their audiovisual self-presentation and -broadcasting. As the

result, the interdependence of the discussed topic and the author's digital public persona appears near absolute, with this form of semi-public intimacy aimed at producing desirable affective resonances in prospective viewers. Since the digital format of the video essay promises potential celebrity status and monetary rewards, it can also be theorized that video essays invite acclamation from mainly anonymous, like-minded publics and prioritize individual success over qualitative communicative exchange.

On the other hand, however, the post-scholarly dimension of video essay content and its multifaceted exploration of popular culture as conversation, which has gained immense popularity in the English-speaking digital environment beyond YouTube, speaks for the degree of culturally attuned consensus taking place. Since digital media content tends to spread across platforms (Jenkins et. al, 2013), the counterpublic sentiment of contemporary video essayists may be frequently witnessed on various social platforms, including TikTok and Instagram, which testifies to the general popularity of left-leaning English-speaking authorship online beyond specific filter-bubble communities. Spreadability, as Jenkins, Ford and Green define it, stands for "the idea that the effectiveness and impact of messages is increased and expanded by their movement from person to person and community to community" (2013: 21), which can be clearly witnessed in contemporary digital left-leaning English-speaking authorship spreading across platforms. In turn, "the cross-pollination among moving-image mashups that the infrastructure for Web video sharing has enabled" since the digital turn (Russo 2009: 128) builds shared cultural and producerly contexts between different digital authors, allowing for mutually recognized cultural ecosystems to proliferate online.

Crucially, these author-critics tend to explore their personal identities through topics that may be of common concern to their publics, which points to the process of mutual self-

articulation taking shape. Thus, rather than engaging in the purely narcissistic staging of singularity, digital authors tend to openly discuss their own positioning in the world largely perceived by them as alienated and corporatized (Sylvia and Moody 2022). As research has shown, the BreadTube community demonstrates "the incongruity of using YouTube while also speaking out against capitalism", often describing its own participatory coping tactic as "survival under capitalism" (Cotter 2022: 9). In turn, by deliberately articulating their disagreement with the corporate structure of YouTube algorithms and censorship, the digital author-critics are able to publicly reflect on genuine personal experiences situated outside the digital domain, thus presenting these as more authentic to the public. Generally, Habermas' original insistence on the bourgeois production of liberatory self-fiction as the key component to the bourgeois public sphere in the literary domain seems to be a relevant lens for examining new countercultural forms of authorship. Finally, the popular cultural aspect of the digital video essay constitutes a thematically and culturally salient theme that unites English-speaking authors beyond their political or ideological allegiances. Therefore, the currently undertheorized post-literary dimension of the public sphere can provide an invaluable epistemic insight into the contemporary creative approaches, themes, and preoccupations commonly expressed through public digital authorship. In such a way, whether Habermas is right in his assessment that the role of authorship needs to be actively learned prior to its assumption, we may still learn a great deal from the contemporary forms of digital critical authorship practiced publicly today.

Chapter 4: Post-Scholarly Organicism, the Counterpublic Consensus, and the Heretical Mode of Cultural Production: Towards an Alternative for Contemporary Humanities

> Indeed cultural studies, in common with other creative practices, might involve taking up different materials from different milieux. At stake in these experiments is the accessing of other worlds…
>
> And in such project our allies might not necessarily be within the Academy. Our allies will in fact be on the outside, or at least at the outermost edge. Indeed cultural studies is also about locating these allies, these anomalies that stalk the fringes (O'Sullivan 2002: 92).

In his recent work, Mulhern brings the important and relatively new development to the fore that, I argue, also poses an especially relevant significance to the digital video essay form from YouTube. In it, he analyzes the specific intellectual cultural phenomenon, the New-York based publication *n+1*. As he describes it, *n+1* represents a dual-platform magazine, "combining a print publication" "and an online supplement", with its first six-seven numbers appearing over the four years from summer 2004 to fall 2008 (Ibid. 258–259). In Mulhern's view, *n+1* is more than a publication but "a microculture, a whole way of intellectual life" (Ibid. 259). Crucially, as he explains, *n+1* has demonstrated "a strong attachment to critical theory (of differing kinds) and unbending resistance to the logic of the market", representing "part of a general effort to renew the reach of the literary" (Ibid. 266). Reflecting on the late 2010s issues of this publication, Mulhern emphasizes the editors' focus on the left intellectual work and its historical reevaluations, who ruminate on one of its ideal potentialities: "The declassing of intellectuals currently in progress might sharpen the edge of a critical culture and enhance the social credibility of those who labour to produce it in visibly unprivileged circumstances. In this, and

the creation of independent and accessible institutions of popular learning, were preconditions for the emergence of truly organic intellectuals of the working class […]" (Ibid. 279).

As the final chapter of this dissertation will demonstrate, beyond the explicitly intellectual and semi-professional niche venues like *n+1*, the emergence of a genuinely popular critical culture on YouTube in the recent decade illustrates the importance of formerly academic concerns for larger audiences. The widespread attachment of many video essayists to critical theory of differing kinds as well as their commonly voiced resistance to the logics of capitalism signifies the trend whereby popular social platforms have become exponentially utilized by self-appointed author-critics with academic experience or professional profile, particularly in the humanities, liberal arts, and other adjacent disciplines. Further, doing so allows many of them to significantly expand the reach of the literary, exposing vaster publics to themes, concepts, authors, and concerns that these video essayists have studied during their time spent in the university. Importantly, entering the public realm of YouTube, author-critics engage in post-scholarly criticism, which, in this case, refers to a form of intellectual cultural political communication divorced from the professional constraints of theoretical knowledge. In such a way, by transferring intellectual academic concerns into a public communicative domain, today's author-critics produce self-appointed, semi-independent and relatively accessible sites of *popular intellectual work*. Whether it can be described as a whole new way of digital intellectual life, the video essay form from YouTube undeniably serves as a trampoline to popular intellectual work that is capable of resonating with cultural, political, and social contexts shared by many inhabitants of the global digital English-speaking world beyond the university.

Arguably, the post-scholarly sentiment shared by many video essayists directly correlates to the intellectual project once conceptualized by Hall. Hall, as this chapter argues, produced an

important new contemporary conceptualization of an academic or, rather, post-academic intellectual, whose politically active role in a society is described by him as 'organic'. Drawing on Gramsci's conceptualization of intellectuals, Hall understands intellectual-political work as organic, juxtaposing it with the more traditional and specialized role of a professional academic. In terms of my case study of the video essay, I will argue that Hall's suggestion to approach academic scholars as organic intellectuals may provide insight into the contemporary digital practice of criticism. Most vitally, the current critical trend established in the digital space of YouTube testifies to a similar cultural political imperative of moving intellectual engagement away from institutionalized academic environment. The tacitly and openly expressed distaste with the world of academia by the digital author-critics in their video essays particularly recalls Hall's cultural political intent to approach different audiences — academics and larger social groups — through the tension between more traditional theoretical / intellectual work and practical experience. Critically, Hall clearly recognized the importance of university education in terms of active political and cultural work, and arguably envisioned the contemporary popular incentive for cultural and political criticism practiced outside institutionalized academia.

On this note, it is especially important to recognize the counter-institutional sentiment shared by many video essayists engaged with cultural and political criticism derived from the world of academic learning. Moving beyond the structural analysis conducted in the previous chapter, if one were to consider the digital video essay public as "self-organized by discourse", it is especially crucial to account for its "preexisting forms and channels of circulation", inclusive of criteria like shared social space, habitus, topical concerns, intergeneric references, speech genres, etc. (Warner 2002: 75). As I have argued in the first chapter, on the level of a shared social and cultural space/habitus, digital video essays commonly practice post-scholarly

authorship and criticism, which also channels their creators' distinctively counterpublic sentiment. Often espousing left-leaning views and speaking from minority cultural standpoints, many video essayists tend to publicly transmit and engage with scholarly preoccupations that would previously be reserved for exclusive academic use, which endows them with a certain post-scholarly status. Crucially, these digital authors explicitly separate themselves from the elite university world, thus making a tacit claim to deinstitutionalizing scholarly research and criticism. Therefore, the cultural phenomenon of the digital video essay reconciles creative popular practices with post-scholarly authorship and criticism, thus exemplifying a unique and hybridized mode of authorship existent on social platforms today. Due to video essayists' educational lineage and espoused political and ideological views, the post-scholarly aspect of video essays from YouTube concerns their distinctly counter-institutional impetus. As this chapter will demonstrate, today's digital authors practicing the craft of the video essay tend to express the overarching sentiment which questions and contests corporate cultural and professional institutions. Therefore, the practice of digital authorship does not merely provide these individuals with potential monetary dividends and online celebrity status but also with an opportunity to connect with the like-minded virtual (counter)publics, who may personally resonate with popular cultural themes and left-leaning criticism commonly expressed in the video essay genre.

In order to approach this subject, this chapter uses the concepts of Hall, Fraser, and Bourdieu respectively to study the contemporary video essayists' organic, counterpublic, and autodidact popular cultural critical work.

4.1 The Successful (Mis)Interpretation: Stuart Hall's Organic Intellectuals and the Contemporary Post-Scholarly Public Criticism

Hall / Gramsci: The Organic Intellectuals

In the British historical intellectual context, "a key role in the formation of the New Left was played by various (then student) colonial intellectuals, who came from outside Britain, and who were connected to, but never part of the dominant institutions of the British left" (Morley and Chen 1996: 11). Poignantly, the Jamaican-born thinker like Hall, who initially had moved to England in pursuit of his academic career, was later preoccupied with broadly reframing the role of academic and non-academic intellectual work in the new cultural historical milieux. Specifically, Hall's deep investment in Antonio Gramsci's work resulted in the latter's important concept of 'organic intellectuals' to be re-employed by Hall to challenge the traditional understanding of institutionalized intellectual practice. Overall, Hall's dual and, as it had seemed at the time, irresolvable "commitment to being at the very forefront of intellectual, theoretical work and, simultaneously, the commitment to the attempt to transmit the ideas thus generated, well beyond the confines of the 'intellectual class'" (Ibid. 20), arguably inaugurated the tectonic shift from traditional intellectual scholarship to post-scholarly criticism.

Generally reflecting on the work and insights of his predecessors, Hall asserts that the practitioners of CS as the conveyors of the post-war New Left movement in England explored the "tension" "between what might loosely be called 'political' and intellectual concerns", refusing to remain within "the confines of an intellectual debate" (Hall [1980] 2005: 4–5). Such tension, which Hall insisted on exploring, was also retrospectively deemed utopian in the more theoretical context: as Dick Hebdige comments on the influence of Roland Barthes' semiotics on CS, for instance, "[i]t was hoped that the invisible seam between language, experience and reality could be located and prised open through a semiotic analysis…: that the gulf between the alienated intellectual and the 'real' world could be rendered meaningful and, miraculously, at the

same time, be made to disappear" ([1979] 2002: 10). As I attempt to show, Hall's investment with Gramsci's intellectual work prompted the former to articulate a new vision of the post-scholarly organic intellectual, whose newly defined functions were supposed to remedy the 'gulf' between the institutionalized intellectual and the 'real' world that Hebdige addressed.

In the mid-1970s, Hall advanced a definition of organic intellectuals with his co-researchers of the British subcultures. As Clarke et al. state in *RTR*, post-WWII Britain saw "the growth of the intermediate white-collar and lower managerial strata, the rise of new professions alongside the old, a growth in the administrative and 'welfare-state' non-commercial middle classes, and new strata connected with the revolutions in communications, management and marketing", whom they describe as "organic intelligentsia of modern capitalism", marked by their "directive" and technical capabilities (Clarke et al. [1975] 2006: 49). Quoting Gramsci, they also add that "[s]chools and universities are the instruments 'through which intellectuals of various levels are elaborated[']", attributing the "expansion of education" to the formation and the self-articulation of the middle-class youth cultures (Ibid. 49–50). Five years later, however, Hall would provide a more specific definition of the organic intellectuals, whom he will directly associate with the intellectual work conducted at the Centre.

Prior to proceeding with establishing Hall's interpretation of intellectual organicism, however, it is first necessary to briefly account for Gramsci's original definition. In his famous essay that would be published as a part of his *Prison Notebooks* (1971[1929]), Gramsci argues that in order to analyze how the "activities" of intellectuals are different from "the activities of other social groupings", it is essential to understand these "in the ensemble of the system of relations in which these activities (and therefore the intellectual groups who personify them) have their place with the general complex of social relations" (1971: 8). In other words, Gramsci

dialectically examines the formation of a socio-historical *process*, in which relations between different social groups and their activities, including the intellectual ones, are formed and posed. The new paradigmatic conception of the intellectual that Gramsci advances rests on the general understanding that "the intellectual activity" in its organicist, "muscular-nervous" form "exists in everyone at a certain degree of development" (Ibid.). However, for him, it is precisely the combination of the organic human "practical activity" in both physical and social senses that can generate "a new and integral conception of the world" (Ibid.) that differs drastically from the older conception. Critically, Gramsci's organicism fully depends on the notion of class and the socially determined function of meaning-production.

Gramsci specifically proposes to distinguish the older, 'traditional' type of intellectuals from the newer, more integrated, 'organic' type, in terms of the modern social class structure and their historical function. First, due to the "uninterrupted historical continuity" between former aristocracy and the newer social groups, the traditional intelligentsia that forms on this basis (the ecclesiastics, *noblesse de robe*, etc.) (Ibid. 7) historically and ideologically acts in the name of general social interest rather than represents the organic interests of a particular class. Since the values upheld by traditional intelligentsia are deemed universal and, in this sense, are postulated as broad, they have no direct involvement in practical social and political matters. In other words, traditional intelligentsia is positioned above the concerns of practical life and is ideologically removed from those. In this sense, active participation in practical social life is not within this group's purview since it is historically positioned markedly outside concrete political or social class interests. Most importantly, the interests of traditional intelligentsia are not historically tied to the fundamental relations of production and thereby are not, in this sense, 'organic'.

Second, conversely, the new social group of 'organic' intellectuals, for Gramsci, would organically represent the interests of their own fundamental social classes (bourgeoisie, working class) and thereby may be able to formulate a new conception of intellectualism. Thus, if the interests of traditional intelligentsia are transhistorically positioned outside of "the development of the real forms of life" and whose activities are thereby merely "specialized" rather than "directive", organic intellectuals are directly invested "in active participation in practical life" and thereby are motivated practically and politically to social action (Ibid. 10). Crucially, Gramsci argues for the assimilation with and conquest of the traditional intellectual dominance on behalf of the new 'organic' intellectuals. Importantly, the detached and universal character of traditional intelligentsia can be remediated through the figure of a new 'organic' intellectual who, by being directly invested in practical concerns due to their class interests, could bring collective self-awareness of different classes to the fore. The 'organic' intellectuals, as Gramsci insists, necessarily need to come to their self-awareness as a class in order to ascend to the social and cultural hegemony. Therefore, by mobilizing the already existent stratums of traditional intelligentsia that should be also invested in pursuing the interests of the working class, Gramsci proposed to connect the working class to the "dominant social group" (Ibid.). Doing so, for him, would ensure that the 'organic' intellectuals bring self-awareness to its own class from the perspective *of* this class and are able to articulate their 'organic' class interests in the name of the project of collective liberation.

Counter to Gramsci's socially and structurally determinist account, Hall's later version of organicism asserts a different vision. More generally, Hall's famous departure — alongside that of his intellectual allies — from the structurally determinist division between base and superstructure opens an unbounded space for the concept of ideology, meant to alleviate Marx's

orthodoxy supposedly situated in class reductionism. In turn, disputing the notion of class deemed as overtly determinist and prescriptive, Hall aims at theorizing and conceptualizing the role of the new organic intellectual strictly in terms of ideology, and especially in terms of one's inclusion into institutionalized and thus 'specialized' environment, favouring Althusser's revisionist structuralist account of Marx rather than Gramsci's. Therefore, on the one hand, Hall describes Gramsci's traditional intellectuals as those "who set themselves the task of developing and sophisticating the existing paradigms of knowledge" and, on the other, organic intellectuals as "those who, in their critical role, aim to become more 'organic' to new and emergent tendencies in society, who seek to become more integral with those forces, [and] linked to them" (Hall [1980] 2005: 34–35). The latter, for Hall, are also those "capable of reflecting what Gramsci called the 'intellectual function' in its wider, non-specialist and non-elitist sense" (Ibid. 35). Centrally, according to Hall's interpretation of Gramsci, "those aiming to become 'organic' intellectuals" will have to set themselves to the dual "task" of "challeng[ing] modern ideologies" and pursuing "popular education" (Ibid.).

What follows from Hall's re-definition of 'traditional' and 'organic' intellectuals respectively is the new key proposed distinction: between those who dwell in the existing paradigms of knowledge and those who critically explore new and emergent tendencies in society in a 'non-specialist' and thus 'non-elitist sense'. Critically, the link to intellectual organicism thus formulated by Hall is situated in the academic environment, exemplified in the work conducted and promoted by the Centre. Since the 1970s and onwards, as he emphasizes, the Centre's imperative had been "to generate a new kind of intellectual practice and to give it an organizational form" which would "make intellectual work more collective in the actual forms of its practising" and "constitute research and groups of projects and studies around working

collectives rather than serial groups of competing intellectuals" (Ibid. 32). This was done, in Hall's account, to ultimately promote and establish "Cultural Studies as a field" (Ibid. 33). The work performed at the Centre, in turn, attempted to reconcile its produced intellectual "theory" with "practice", which could "develop [into] new forms of collective intellectual practice" (Ibid. 34). In short, the task of the Centre was "to forge…a unity of knowledge and practice" by "constantly" becoming "*more organic*" — collective, organized, and connective (Ibid. 35), first and foremost, as a political intellectual movement.

The task of the movement, however, as it is described by Hall, is simultaneously situated in the uneasy explanation he provides to Gramsci's understanding of intellectual organicism: for Hall, it particularly lies on the axis of "specialist language" and "widely available vocabularies" (Ibid.). Thus, in the latter's formulation, the Centre's dual task was, on the other hand, "to address…[themselves] to central and relevant problems and issues, even if their original formulation required a specialist language not instantly available; and also, [on the other hand], where and when we could, to undertake the by no means easy task of translating [them]selves into more widely available vocabularies" (Ibid.). In turn, quoting and paraphrasing Gramsci further, Hall lands on the conclusion that specialized "theory-practice" is unthinkable without 'the masses' reaching this specialized level and influencing it (Ibid.). Therefore, on a broader scale, what Hall understands as "a unity of knowledge and practice" of the potential organic intellectuals at the Centre stands for the necessity of acknowledging the degree of "specialization" embedded in producing theory and endowing the latter with the grassroot practical imperative — an "effective kind of intervention" into socially divided realm of knowledge itself produced in and by academic institutions (Ibid.).

For Mulhern, counter to Gramsci's more paradigmatic conception, Hall's distinction thus formulated is aimed at 'stylistic' and 'dispositional' redistribution in rethinking the role of intellectuals in the traditional academic context. As Mulhern argues, by interpreting Gramsci's traditional and organic intellectuals, Hall poses the new distinction "between academicist and partisan dispositions and styles of practice" respectively (147). Thus, by imbuing the traditionally 'elitist' academic disposition with "everyday-partisan" ('organic') properties, Hall's conception, for Mulhern, speaks for the displacement of Gramsci's notions, which dismisses the latter's Marxist socially determinist account. Simultaneously, however, Mulhern's own interpretation of Gramsci does not include the discussion of the latter's key distinction between 'specialised' and 'directive' functions of intellectuals, whereby traditional intellectuals are not invested "in active participation in practical life" due to their merely historically "specialised" and thus not organically "directive" function (Ibid. 10). Arguably, along with overemphasizing the role of academic language and its forms of translation, Hall's vision of organic intellectuals relies precisely on Gramsci's distinction or, rather, its misinterpretation.

In his later account on the subject, Hall, expressing a certain disillusionment with the academic enterprise, consistently alludes to the importance of developing cultural studies as an intellectual political project beyond its strictly academic functioning. He thus asserts:

> I come back to the difficulty of instituting a genuine cultural and critical practice, which is intended to produce some kind of organic intellectual political work, which does not try to inscribe itself in the overarching meta-narrative of achieved knowledges, within the institutions. I come back to theory and politics, the politics of theory. Not theory as the will to truth, but theory as a set of contested, localized, conjunctural knowledges, which have

> to be debated in a dialogical way. But also as a practice which always thinks about its intervention in a world in which it would make some difference, in which it would have some effect ([1992] 1996: 274).

Pointedly, right before making this concluding statement, he stresses that "intellectual work and academic work" are "not the same thing" (Ibid. 273–274). Reiterating and clarifying the already proposed task he had attributed to organic intellectuals from the Centre, the latter, in his view, entered "the…forefront of intellectual theoretical work" to compete with "the traditional intellectuals" in knowledge acquisition (Ibid. 267). Thus, for him, these organic intellectuals "had to know more" than the traditional ones in a genuine rather than a formalist way (Ibid.). At the same time, Hall maintains the centrality of "responsibility" on the part of the organic intellectuals "of transmitting those ideas, that knowledge, through the intellectual function, to those who do not belong, professionally, in the intellectual class" (Ibid.). In sum, the combination of theoretical specialization and the task of translation of the ideas produced in institutional environment to non-professional class is what aids the creation of "intellectual and theoretical work as a political practice" (Ibid.).

The key to Hall's misinterpretation of Gramsci lies within the former's misunderstanding of the latter's dichotomy between 'specialized' and 'directive' functions of intellectuals. Namely, Hall understands the 'specialized' function of traditional intellectuals, i.e., traditional academics, as a form of institutional *specialization*. In turn, he attributes the 'directive' function to 'organic' intellectuals. The misinterpretation construed as such is arguably what allows Hall to endow the 'organic' intellectuals, whom he also directly associates with the CCCS, with the 'wide' and 'non-specialist' ethos. Thus, by misinterpreting the distinction between 'specialised' and 'directive' functions of intellectuals that Gramsci suggests, Hall insists on the potential ability of

'organic' intellectuals practicing cultural studies at making a practical difference as opposed to more 'traditional' academic intellectuals who are satisfied with the institutionally prescribed status-quo. However, if the major point of distinction between 'traditional' and 'organic' intellectuals lies in the qualitative knowledge received and transmitted by these respective groups in the *academic* setting, then such a conceptualization could not be farther away from its source. Since Hall purges the notion of class in its historically materialist development and instead focuses on ideology produced in the academic context, Gramsci's distinction is bound to lose its original historical point of departure and potency — in other words, the academic scholarship that Hall focalizes can hardly be made 'organic'. In this sense, cultural studies as an institutionalized intellectual project cannot possibly be considered non-specialized. Simultaneously, however, counter to Mulhern's objection to Hall's interpretation of Gramsci, Hall's proposition can hardly be reduced to 'academicist' and 'partisan' dispositions or styles in respect to what he understands as academic intellectual work.

As Mulhern observes, Hall theorizes Gramsci's concept of 'organic' intellectuals in a misplaced fashion by ultimately attempting to revise 'traditional' academic scholarship by supposedly making it more partisan, emancipatory, involved, and thus 'organic'. If Hall's premise is understood this way, then his conception, indeed, becomes oxymoronic because it fails to account for the institutional reality of academia completely and can be thus labelled as 'farcical' (Mulhern 2000: 146). Such a dispositional and textualist interpretation of Gramsci, one could also argue, simply provides Hall with a convenient strategy of intellectual and institutional legitimation of the work produced and initiated by the members of the Centre. However, Hall's vision is arguably far more nuanced and does some important justice to Gramsci's original conception. Hall, in rejecting the traditional 'elitist' academic intellectual disposition, juxtaposes

it to the actively involved ‘organic’ disposition of the cultural studies’ movement. If ‘traditional’ academics maintain the status quo and are ideologically removed from the practical and political concerns, then the ‘organic’ intellectuals are ideally invested in these, making it their responsibility to challenge the former from inside and make intellectual work more accessible and politically viable. Importantly, for Hall, the ideological conquest of the ‘traditional’ intellectual disposition and theory does not involve mere theorizing or altering academic dispositions and styles; thus, he expresses his discontent with ‘formalism’ as the ‘dangerous’ result of the cultural studies’ “theoretical fluency” (Hall [1992] 1996: 273). Conversely, Hall’s intellectual project pursues a much broader political — and, in this sense, ‘non-specialist’ — concern.

While both Hall and Mulhern significantly reduce Gramsci’s notion of ‘traditional intelligentsia’, which, for instance, includes historical social groups such as schoolteachers or priests who actively participate in the social reproduction of meaning, ‘traditional’ intellectuals within academia are also undeniably included in this social category. In other words, Hall is hardly mistaken to implicitly consider traditional academic dispositions and language as the ideological products of traditional academic intelligentsia that institutionally and historically stands above directive political life. The key members of CS, including Williams, Hoggart, and Hall, themselves represented the excluded social groups. The elite academic circle in England, which they entered, was bound to be questioned, contested, and revolted against on the intellectual level by these thinkers who inherently did not belong to the world of ‘traditional’

intelligentsia. To this extent, they did represent the 'organic' tendency within the traditionally elite university environment.[40]

Pointedly, Hall's conception of 'organicism' is both political and pedagogical in the spirit of Gramsci precisely because it aims at revolutionizing institutionalized traditional academic enterprise through making it more 'directive' rather than strictly 'specialised'. Whether such a misinterpretation can be labelled as utopian or deficient in terms of the institutionalized academic space is the question I raised in the second chapter. Most importantly, I would like to argue that Hall's re-conceptualization of Gramsci deserves recognizing the practical gravity of the former's contribution: namely, the contemporary practicing of digital criticism online in the English-speaking context suggests the practical vitality and successfulness of the intellectual intervention he makes in the academic context.

Overall, Hall's later adaptation of what he understands as the role of 'organic' intellectuals is largely consistent with his earlier formulation: in short, it represents a fruitful attempt at making theoretical knowledge produced in institutional academic environment more accessible and actively engaged with the extra-academic concerns. The enlightening function that he attributes to 'organic' intellectuals engaged in such a political project would, in his view, ideally produce connections between different social groups, building a bridge and collective solidarity between professional and non-professional intellectual 'classes'. However, as Susen has fairly noted, "the idea of partnership between researchers and grassroots communities" is "appealing *in theory*", while "[i]t is far from obvious…what it actually means *in practice* and how it can be converted into *feasible* modes of organizing spheres of knowledge production,

[40] Thus, while Mulhern asserts that, "[i]n Hall's reading…social-structural determinations dissolve into a pattern of more or less conscious, resolute 'alignments'" (Ibid. 147), such a statement arguably dismisses the 'organic' tendency within Hall's own socially determined disposition of an intellectual.

which can claim to shape constitutive realms of society in a…universally empowering and, hence, emancipatory…fashion" (2017: 76–77). I would argue that the contemporary digital media social environment offers a glimpse into understanding the contemporary sentiment behind young people leaving academia in order to express their ideas to non-academic or post-scholarly audiences.

Articulating Post-Scholarly Organicism in the Digital Space: The Case of JohntheDuncan

In this section I aim to show that Hall's practical imperative at transmitting ideas beyond the confines of academic intellectual class implicitly finds affirmative response on social platforms. Thus, first, the digital author-critics in question often comment on the deficiency of university education in terms of its actionability: the elitism and the lack of relevancy of the academic enterprise are often considered its key detrimental aspects. Second, the digital author-critics often question the practicality of university education in terms of its relation to the actual lived experience: thus, many of them comment on the incongruence between the knowledge received / produced in academic setting and 'real life'. However, while these author-critics pursue the task of publicly expressed criticism outside academia, their investment in intellectual labor persists and finds an outlet online. Their consistent reliance on academic scholarly sources and concerns, particularly those related to the digital environment itself, pop culture, capitalism, and identity politics, clearly reflects such an investment. Crucially, the latter is underscored by the digital author-critics extensively commenting on practical cultural and political concerns that preoccupy them, which potentially testifies to the successfulness of Hall's intervention. As suggested previously, many video essayists on YouTube represent "a community of social media scholars [who] are conducting work consistent with academic tenets of critical research", or a professional "ethical framework grounded in social justice and rightness" (Sankofa 2023: 428-

437), which is why Hall's definition of an organic intellectual may be especially applicable to this genre.

Characteristically, the following video essay example directly applies the idea of organic intellectualism, which is derived from Gramsci's original work, to the analysis of the digital public environment. Thus, the video essay of the author under the pseudonym JohntheDuncan, titled "Can We Save Them?", directly muses on the subject of public intellectuals in the contemporary digital era through the perspective offered by Gramsci (Dec 21, 2023). To contextualize his background, the digital author-critic, John Duncan, is a recent PhD graduate from the humanities in England, whose YouTube profile states that he "researches neoliberalism, Marxism, Social Reproduction, and Human Rights" (JohntheDuncan). At the start of this video essay, Duncan directly asks his audience: "Are we intellectuals on here [YouTube]?", thus unambiguously raising the question of whether the video essay genre on the platform has anything to do with public intellectual work (4:30–4:36). Duncan further explains that his video outlines his "understanding of what an intellectual actually is, using Gramsci to expand beyond the traditionally understood view of the smarty pants' lecturer to a whole host of activities which play a role in organizing production through culture" (7:20–7:36). Importantly, the utilization of a standard video essay structure (i.e., the inclusion of structured 'thematic' parts), the insertion of an extensive list of academic references, the engagement in performative self-presentation, as well as the appeal to popular cultural context, places JohntheDuncan's essay in the traditional digital video essay form long explored by the original BreadTubers.



Fig. 4.1 The thumbnail from JohntheDuncan's video essay titled "Can We Save Them?", which presents a number of public (as well as popular cultural) figures — including himself — as the potential representatives of contemporary public (both 'bourgeois' and 'organic') intellectuals (Dec 21, 2023).



Fig. 4.2 The opening of JohntheDuncan's video essay establishing its topic (3:50).

To start with, Duncan proposes to differentiate the "common" perception of what a figure of public intellectual is from the Gramscian notion. Therefore, he states that "in common terms", a public intellectual is "understood to be a figure who often, though not always, has some sort of institutional connection, you know, to university or something; maybe they have a fancy

qualification…[or] maybe they wear a turtleneck and have glasses" (8:14–8:35). Illustrating what a public intellectual figure is commonly perceived as through examples, Duncan lists the names of Jordan Peterson, Christoper Hitchens, Malcolm Gladwell, Stephen Fry, Noam Chomsky, Michel Foucault, and Robert Oppenheimer (9:18–9:28). The main interpretation underlying the common conception of a public intellectual, in Duncan's view, is related to the perception that deems intellectuals as rational mediators "between the great minds and the people", who "serve the function of transmitting and popularizing philosophic knowledge" (10:25–10:35). Conversely, as Duncan explains, Gramsci "expands the concept well beyond the enlightenment ideal and situates it within the social forces of production, reproduction, and culture rather than just a man of letters" (11:45–11:51). Thus, Gramsci understands "the intellectual as someone who performs a specific organizational function within the social relations of the dominant hegemonic form of production; they don't have to be smarty pants academics or journalists but are often organizers of production: entrepreneurs, technicians, party officials, managers, workers" (19:49–20:07).

To illustrate what an intellectual according to Gramsci should look like, Duncan references one of the episodic characters from the Disney series *Andor* (2022), a televised prequel to the original *Star Wars* saga and spinoff film, *Rogue One* (2016). The series' character that Duncan engages with in his video essay, Kino Loy, is a prisoner from the Imperial prison labour camp who is forced to supervise his team of inmate labourers while fearing physical punishment and death by the camp's administrators and guards. As Duncan suggests, Loy, portrayed by Andy Serkis, is a perfect "illustration" of Gramsci's idea of the organic intellectual because the latter is supposed to represent "a member of a social class of workers in his prison", who is "an expert" in his area of production, and whose "organizational social role" lies "in

ensuring that production takes place" (12:51–13:08). Thus, having an immediate social function, Loy is argued to be the true 'expert' and organic intellectual in the Gramscian sense.



Fig. 4.3 The quotation taken by Duncan from A. S. Sassoon's monograph, *Gramsci's Politics* (2019), superimposed on the visual shot of the character Kino Loy from *Andor*, portrayed by Andy Serkis (12:51)

Beyond questioning the validity of Duncan's illustrations of Gramsci's concept[41], I suggest that the most important aspect of his video essay concerns the following imperative: to define what a YouTube intellectual is or whether one can even exist in this digital social space. Thus, the third part of Duncan's video essay directly muses on the idea of being a YouTube intellectual.

[41] It is worth stressing that Duncan's interpretation of Gramsci's concepts of traditional and organic intellectuals is not entirely accurate: i.e., in Duncan's view, traditional intellectuals, for Gramsci, transmit the rational-moral bourgeois intellectual impulse, while Gramsci himself is quite clear in asserting that traditional intelligentsia transmits the disposition of a universal moral stewardship which is *historically* positioned *outside* the directive interests of a particular class.

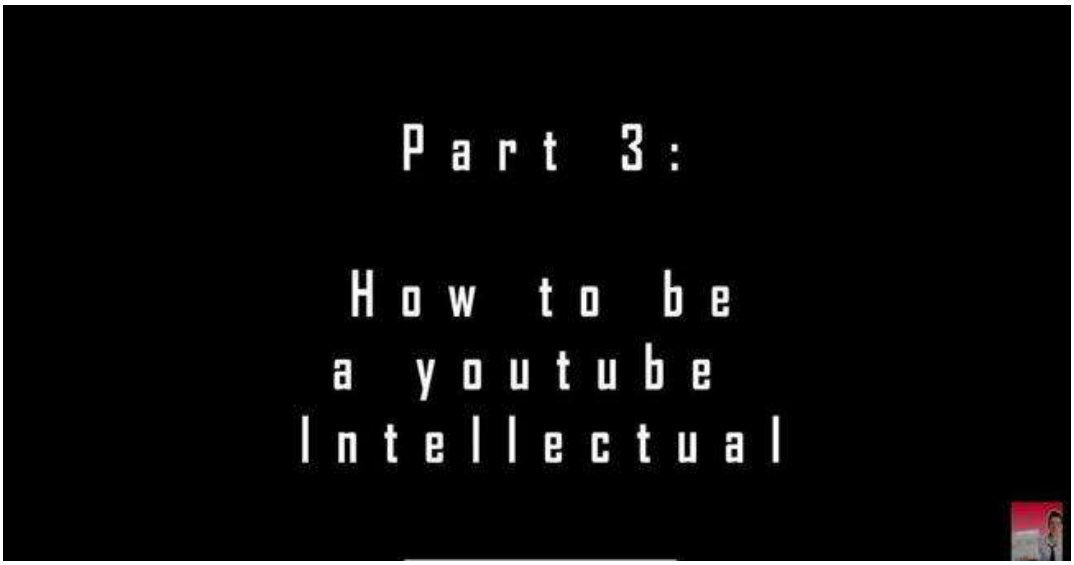


Fig. 4.4 Part 3 of Duncan's video essay that raises the question of YouTube intellectuals (35:32)

In Duncan's view, while YouTube economy is based on commodification of content, which ultimately drives the platform's monetary success (37:40–38:09), the contemporary video essayists simultaneously participate in organizing their "field of cultural production", through which they "learn how to interact with other creators" (38:45–38:58). Thus, he somewhat oxymoronically asserts that "the enmeshment of YouTubers into the hypercompetitive content mill might be making us into very specifically bourgeois organic intellectuals. We become experts in how to organize the production of content, [and] it is often individualistic and personal form of productive organization" (38:28–38:45). As he continues outlining his stance, Duncan expresses his ambivalent treatment of promoting self-interested digital content while striving to make a difference in the public domain: "…to be honest, I am proud of a lot of work I do here, but I don't know how much that work can effectively escape from the clawing hands of commodification. And it's not just on YouTube, as the academy becomes ever increasingly a realm of commodification and competition, …[becoming] ever more enmeshed" "within Capital Logics" (42:47–43:12). Thus, since he deems academia inadequate for the goal of political organizing, Duncan altogether argues for "the abolition of the university as an institution" and

moving "education over to the intellectuals who are less public and less platformed" (54:22–54:43). Simultaneously, he ambiguously asserts: "…I think it's inescapable that I play some form of public intellectual role, and far from being some sort of sniveling, self-congratulatory label, I think this might be something worth criticizing and I don't think we can just hide behind the labels of entertainment or edutainment to absolve ourselves of responsibility" (55:15–55:39).

Duncan's case is particularly instructive in terms of providing a glimpse into the contemporary functioning of the digital left-leaning authorship on YouTube. First, defining himself and other digital authors as the experts in content organization which ultimately amounts to a whole field of online cultural production, Duncan astutely expresses the implicit intent behind much of today's digital post-scholarly authorship. Indeed, by generating post-scholarly content, the video essayists participate in their own digital field of cultural production, however communally uniform or fractured it may be. While this kind of content production is also negatively associated with the specifically bourgeois organic intellectual work by Duncan, the fact of the existence and proliferation of such left-leaning content at the same time testifies to the authors' desire to produce and spread the intellectual post-scholarly sentiment. Second, despite Duncan's direct personal involvement in the academic institution, he simultaneously strives to denounce his professional background by both entering the public video essay sphere and advocating against the idea of the university as a space for communal solidarity. In this sense, even though he directly compares the hegemonic structures underlying both academic and online environments, Duncan utilizes the video essay genre — thereby addressing the post-scholarly digital community —, as his *public platform* that may potentially lead to a meaningful political conversation and organizing. Third, Duncan's video essay perfectly illustrates the tendency of left-leaning digital author-critics towards critiquing digital social platforms in terms of their

capital accumulation as well as their own complicity as entrepreneurial creators. Thus, acknowledging their involuntary support of these online corporations through content production, author-critics often explicitly muse on the tension between their unacceptance of the social platform economy and self-recognized complicity as digital creators.

Ultimately, I would like to suggest that much of the post-scholarly left-leaning digital authorship today tacitly follows the specific Hallsian definition of intellectual organicism. As previously stated, Hall, in evaluating the importance of the directive function of new organic intellectuals, holds the role of university education in high esteem. To conquer the hegemony of the traditional academic class, Hall's ultimate suggestion is to absorb the required specialized knowledge produced by professionals and make it accessible to the wider publics. Finding mere theoretical knowledge deficient, his culturally political project articulated the potential alternative to the traditionally bourgeois specialized education: to conquer it from within and spread it further by making it 'directive'. Therefore, arguably, today's digital author-critics follow a similar cultural political imperative for making academic scholarship more directive (rather than specialized) and public-facing. As my next example will show, post-scholarly intellectual work of this kind can occasionally acquire a form of a distinctively artistic expression, which is integrally tied to spectacular explorations of performative audiovisuality already briefly addressed in the third chapter. In turn, the interweaving of the popular cultural contexts with academic concepts in such artistic expressions emphasizes the salient characteristic of much of the digital video essay work — its post-scholarly 'directive' dimension.

Post-Scholarly Video Essay as an Organic Artistic Manifesto: "The Work of Art in the Age of Surveillance Capitalism"

It is crucial to stress that, irrespective of the professional context of film studies, the essay form itself has been historically considered as a markedly non-academic mode of expression. Thus, as Habermas' work also implies, the essay form's historically public direction altogether places it outside the professional boundaries that would later characterize much of specialized and scholarly writing. As Jonathan Kramnick has aptly put it, "public criticism can have an essayistic, first-person address typically lacking in ordinary academic prose, with comparisons drawn between characters and events in literary texts and the experience of the critic herself" (2023: 88). More generally, the essay form offers a distinctively non-systemic approach to an object of contemplation, underscored by its general historical tendency towards "intellectual freedom" (Adorno 1991: 3). As Theodor Adorno argues, in contradistinction to the "conditions of formal freedom", which has been commonly assumed as a token of professional academic writing, the essay form "does not let its domain be prescribed for it" in the first place (Ibid. 4). Thus, if "the general positivist tendency" sets "every possible object, as an object of research, in stark opposition to the subject" through its proclaimed neutral gaze, an "expressive impulse in the presentation" witnessed in the ideal essay form concerns its tendency towards resembling its own subject matter (Ibid. 5)[42]. Therefore, for Adorno, "the essay invests experience with as much substance as traditional theory does mere categories" (Ibid. 10), which is why the more "it strives to consolidate itself as theory and to act as though it held the philosopher's stone in its

[42] Undeniably, Adorno's essay on the essay form quoted here has much to do with his paradigmatic dialectical understanding of philosophical interpretation. It is well-known that Adorno's overarching philosophical concept of constellation (*Darstellung*) understood as a mode of critical writing and interpretation springs out of Benjamin and Asja Lācis' essay, "Neapel" (1925). While recently deemed controversial from the perspective of transnational studies (Smith 2021), Benjamin and Lācis' essay advances an important concept of porosity which is meant to equally depict the Italian city, Naples, and the process of critical writing itself, which is why "the organization and syntax of the essay are as porous as its portrait of the city" (Ibid. 245). The direct intellectual link between the concepts of porosity and constellation has been extensively elaborated in Martin Mittelmeier's work, *Adorno in Neapel* (2013). In Adorno's own "theory of reading", "constellations [in critical writing] draw attention to the *discursive production* of objects of knowledge, [and] work with constellations exposes a self-reflective dimension" (Krauß 2011: 439–440).

hands, the more [its] intellectual experience courts disaster" (Ibid. 18). Importantly, as Adorno adds, the essay form historically relates to rhetoric "in its adaptation to communicative language" through thought it directs to gratifying its listeners, thereby escaping purely scientific and scholarly "order of ideas" (Ibid. 20–21).

However, while some of Adorno's characterizations of the essay form clearly apply to the contemporary digital video essay, including its expressive impulse in the presentation, rhetorical public intent as well as self-expression reflecting its own subject-matter, its post-scholarly impulse endows this genre with a unique form of expression. Thus, as my next example will show, the digital video essay often balances its theoretical dimension — its scholarly order of ideas — with intellectual and creative freedom, aimed at publicly expressing one's social, cultural, and political concerns, which also helps its authors to at least symbolically escape the domain of professional academic scholarship. Or, put differently, the following video essay may, in Hall's fashion, be described as an organically 'directive' rather than merely 'specialized' artistic-intellectual manifesto.

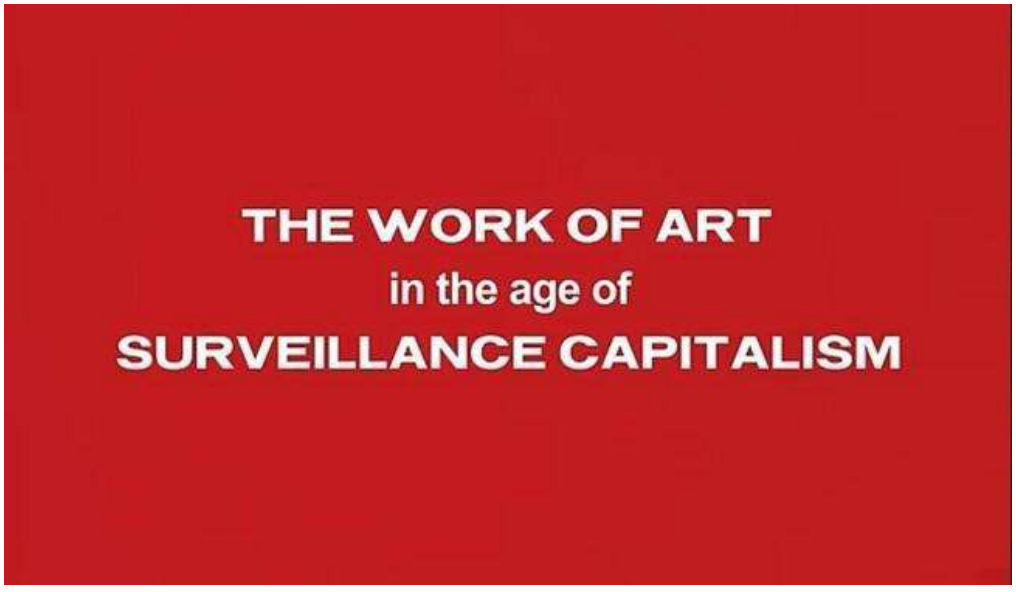


Fig. 4.5 The title of Brendan Morris' digital video essay, strategically positioned at the end of the piece (14:16)

In his aesthetically radical video essay titled "The Work of Art in the Age of Surveillance Capitalism", an Irish author-critic, Brendan Morris, meditates on the Benjamin's famous essay as well as Foucault's concept of panopticon in respect to social media content production. Elaborating on the thought process that went into crafting his video essay in description placed under it, Morris self-reflexively states:

> I was attracted to making art that lived on social media because it boasted an emancipation of the means of production and as a result, a totally uninhibited method of expression. However, after I started posting, I realised the technologies which appeared as laboratory had their own inherent techniques of exercising control.
>
> In this video, I attempt to articulate what might be called 'a critique of the political economy of content creation' wherein I examine the base of social media as profit-generating for private and corporate owners, and how that shapes the super-structural panoptic algorithm which in turn maintains the base of cultural production (Sep 13, 2024).

Characteristically, in the spirit of Adorno, Morris' video essay both critically reflects on the idea of an audiovisual work of art in the digital era *and* represents a work of art itself. The uniqueness of Morris' post-scholarly piece is also explicitly acknowledged by one of the commentators, who states that "…for anyone who thinks this is meant to be a tell-all video essay, you'll be disappointed — it poses a lot [of] interesting points in a gloriously, visually energising way and should be used as a springboard into your own continued research" (@ossiepattinson7944). In this sense, while there exists no data on Morris' own academic credentials or status, his video essay is still automatically perceived by some viewers in the comment section as a semi-

scholarly type of content, once popularized by BreadTube. Clearly, the goal of articulating a critique of content creation proclaimed by Morris himself also unmistakenly endows this video essay with its unique post-scholarly status.

On the structural visual level, Morris' unconventional essay represents a fast-paced sequence of moving images, elaborately crafted collages with quotations taken from the works of Marx, Foucault, Benjamin, and others, as well as shifting depictions of famous artworks, cinema characters, and real people superimposed on each other through a deliberate use of montage and filmic cuts. The central artwork that acts as the binding metaphor in Morris' essay is Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), which is meant to generally illustrate the ideas of coercive brainwashing and surveillance in the age of digital capitalism. The most distinctive feature of Morris' piece concerns the video essay's engagement with the figures and theoretical concepts of Foucault and Benjamin, visually intertwined with the depictions of the scenes from Kubrick's film, which are elaborately montaged into its sequence.



Fig. 4.6 The image of Foucault integrated with the creative depiction of the scene from *A Clockwork Orange* (2:38).



Fig. 4.7 The image of Benjamin superimposed on the scene from *A Clockwork Orange* (9:27).

On the conceptual level, Morris first utilizes Foucault's definition of "panopticon" as a guiding master-concept, which represents "the diagram of a mechanism of power reduced to its ideal form. Whenever one is dealing with a multiplicity of individuals on whom a task or a particular form of behavior must be imposed, the panoptic schema must be used" (Foucault quoted in Morris, 2:12–2:25). Characteristically, Morris' recombinatory creative exploration of Foucault's quotation illustrated below abounds with visual references from the already mentioned Kubrick's film to Van Gogh's famous painting, "Prisoners Exercising" (1890), superimposed on the depictions of the physical book pages taken from *Discipline and Punish* (1977):



Fig. 4.8-13 The partial illustrations of Foucault’s definition of the panopticon creatively recombined in Morris’ video essay (2:04–2:27).

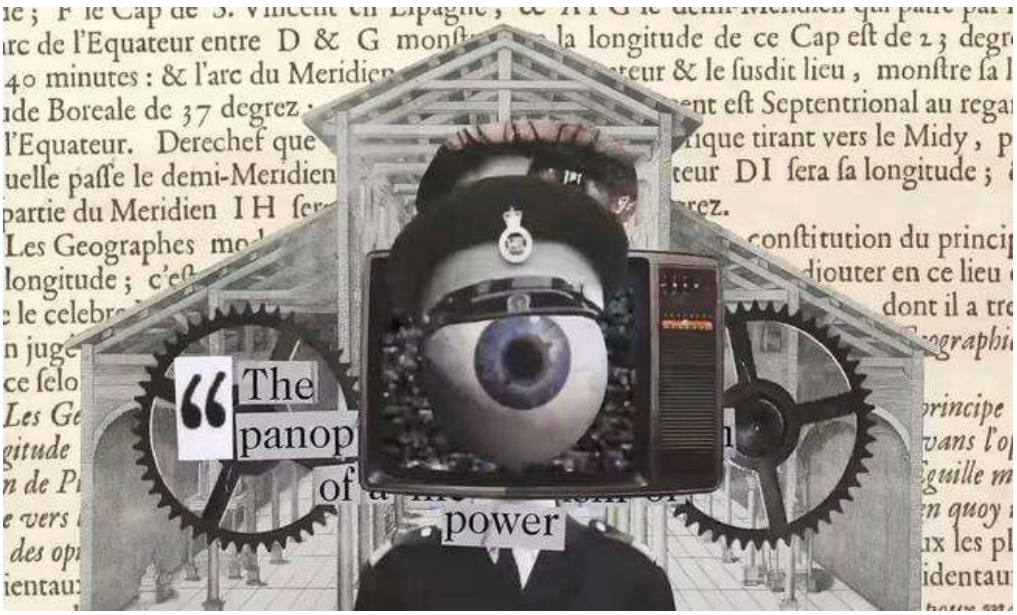


Fig. 4.8-13 The partial illustrations of Foucault’s definition of the panopticon creatively recombined in Morris’ video essay (2:04–2:27).



Fig. 4.8-13 The partial illustrations of Foucault's definition of the panopticon creatively recombined in Morris' video essay (2:04–2:27).



Fig. 4.8-13. The partial illustrations of Foucault's definition of the panopticon creatively recombined in Morris' video essay (2:04–2:27).



Fig. 4.8-13 The partial illustrations of Foucault's definition of the panopticon creatively recombined in Morris' video essay (2:04–2:27).



Fig. 4.8-13 The partial illustrations of Foucault's definition of the panopticon creatively recombined in Morris' video essay 2:04–2:27).

Importantly, the use of Foucault's concept guides the author-critic's contemplation of social media and content creation that stands for "a method of power which employs design and technology as instruments which facilitate behavioral modification", contained in "the architecture of the algorithm" (4:10–4:21). Thus, as Morris suggests, "the [social media] algorithm is to content creators what the panopticon is to prisoners — an omnipresent Watcher, which is just as alien as it is ubiquitous, obsessively consuming every shred of data it can get its hands on" (4:26–4:38). Similar to Duncan's essay analyzed earlier, Morris arrives at the tension between the conditions of digital economy and individual artistic content creation, employing the concept of panopticon to ground his claim that "there is no denying that, for artist, sharing their work with the world of social media is [done in] an unprecedented medium; but the technology which is allowed for that is also a technology of power. Just as the panopticon transcends its physicality to embed itself within the minds of the prisoner, so too the algorithm functions as a self-policing mechanism to transform the artist to fall in line with its desired behavior" (4:57–5:17).

To ruminate on the emancipatory potential of digital media technology uses today, Morris returns to a dialogue with Benjamin's famous essay, reflecting on "the question [of] what would Benjamin's Marxist analysis say about art in our age of digital production" (0:40–0:43). As Morris narrates, Benjamin "lived in a time similar to ours, in an age where rapid changes in production technology promised a new access for the masses to the world of art" (9:31–9:38). At the same time, as Morris adds, Benjamin "was pessimistic that a liberated production technology would necessarily bring about a liberated art world", predicting instead the encroachment of political power on "these new means of production", which, for him, ultimately "meant fascism" (9:38–10:00). Therefore, today's "panopticon of social media's algorithm and its capitalist base",

for Morris, may well be "the digital equivalent to what Benjamin saw in fascist politics": "by disguising itself as liberatory, this new medium…has instead been weaponized as a technology of capital power, or, as Benjamin might say if he were around today, 'social media seeks to give the masses a voice while retaining that structure of ownership unaltered'" (11:10–11:39).



Fig. 4.14 Morris' creative adaptation of Benjamin's famous statement to the digital age (11:40).

Thus, with all of its initial promise of democratization and liberation, social media today merely seem to play on an emancipatory promise, a thesis Morris illustrates by recombining the images of older and newer technology along with Delacroix' revolutionary painting, "Liberty Leading the People" (1830), collaged with the depictions of Benjamin and a famous YouTube vlogger and personality, Casey Neistat:



Fig. 4.15 The creative depiction of Benjamin contemplating the radical emancipatory potential of technology and social political organization (9:42).



Fig. 4.16 The depiction of a vlogger Casey Neistat appearing holding a camera and ironically 'leading' the pseudo-emancipatory digital revolution (7:49).

However, in concluding his video essay, Morris draws on Benjamin's contention that "new technology could still realize its revolutionary potential in giving the masses a voice" (12:09–12:15). In Marxist fashion, Morris thus sees in the contemporary economy of content creation an appeal to "aestheticized liberation of creative expression" because "surveillance capitalism has

planted the seed of its own mind by alienating creators via a technology" (13:25–13:38). Therefore, for Morris, if digital creators actively voice their alienation as content producers, they "can take back the expressive purpose of art" by *politicizing* it, which is why today's digital technology can still be emancipatory, empowering, and democratizing (13:40–14:06).

In sum, aside from its unique artistic and creative properties, I would argue that Morris' video essay implicitly articulates the 'organic' program once envisioned by Hall: to conceive of specialized theory as a mode of directive political practice. Arguably, in the spirit of Hall, Morris' video essay articulates what the unity of knowledge and practice can look like in today's digital social platform environment. First, by disseminating artistic work which recombines recognizable cultural artworks with Marxist theory in the digital public realm, the contemporary video essayists transform the professional task of criticism into a socially relevant creative practice with a concrete political incentive. Deinstitutionalizing scholarly criticism allows left-leaning video essayists to create unique content in the digital social realm and thus suggest alternative political strategies for active social media participation, which may apply to other contemporary digital creators. In this way, Morris' video essay represents an example of a genuine cultural *and* critical practice, deemed by Hall as an organic intellectual work. Second, digital author-critics like Morris clearly uphold the responsibility of transmitting the ideas and knowledge conventionally linked with professional academic scholarship to wider audiences. Crucially, by situating these ideas and knowledge in a creative audiovisual and performative genre of a video essay, they are likely to resonate with social media viewers and users who do not necessarily belong to a professional intellectual class but are still invested in the offerings that intellectual work encapsulates. Thus, arguably, the knowledge transmitted through the

digital video essay format — however spectacular its presentation may be — appears to be more accessible to larger publics than conventional intellectual scholarship.

Overall, as previously stressed, most video essayists espouse left-leaning views and base their criticism around those. Importantly, since not every digital author-critic engages with post-scholarly criticism, it appears useful to approach video essays on YouTube as a larger communal counter-cultural discursive form. Considering this observation, I therefore argue that it is important to address this digital genre from the general perspective of counterpublicity, which has a direct link to Habermas' theory of the public sphere.

4.2 Against Institutions: The Examples of the Counterpublic Consensus in the Digital Video Essay Genre

Before proceeding with the subject of counterpublicity, it needs to be first acknowledged that many digital communities, otherwise described as "knowledge cultures", possess a markedly voluntary, temporary, and flexible status (Jenkins 2006b: 57). Drawing on Peter Walsh's notion of "the expert paradigm", "transformed by the more open-ended processes of communication in cyberspace", Jenkins argues that the new forms of "a collective intelligence" are largely "disorderly, undisciplined, and unruly" (Ibid. 52–53). Thus, for Jenkins, "there are no fixed procedures for what you do with knowledge" online (Ibid. 53). When it comes to identifiable digital fan cultures, Jenkins fairly points out that they often are "tactical" in nature and therefore "tend not to last beyond the tasks that set them in motion": "[i]nsofar…being a fan is a lifestyle, fans may shift between one…[artifact] and another many times in the history of their affiliation" (Ibid.). Thus, upon the exhaustion of the communal goals initially set by its members, fans may seek out "new spaces to apply their skills and new openings for their speculations, and in the process those skills spread to new communities and get applied to new tasks" (Ibid.).

In alignment with Jenkins' observations, I would similarly assert that the video essay form of communication is correlative to communal tactical interests characterizing this digital genre. However, while the digital video essay culture on YouTube gained popularity as a reactive left-leaning communal response to the alt-right uses of digital media, propelled by the conditions of the Covid-19 lockdown, it has gradually exhausted itself as a distinctive communal form. That is, as soon as prior incentives have lost their tactical communal value, this left-leaning knowledge culture has dissipated as a narrow (sub)culture and reemerged into a larger form of individual digital authorship. Moreover, as Nicole Sankofa has pointed out, "there is little public discussion by or among creators about the boundaries of who is or is not a LeftTube video essayist and the standards of scholarship in that space" (2023: 437), which is why it appears difficult to categorize the video essay phenomenon as a consistent cultural community.

In terms of the social stratification, national and cultural background, occupation, and experience of these digital individual authors it should be generally stated that there is a large degree of variability. Crucially, while many digital critics directly associate themselves with some educational experience, it may be simultaneously added that some of them do not fill a homogenous occupational niche, have equal access to educational or professional resources, or report any ties to academic learning. Similarly, in terms of the racial, gender, or class representation, privileged individuals may be said to cohabitate with the under-represented social minorities in this digital space. The substantial presence of the marginal and working-class voices on the platform also seems to acquire a specific salience in this digital public environment.

Despite the tactical changes characterizing the current left-wing YouTube community, the general left-leaning direction of the original and post-BreadTube authorship remains intact.

Thus, I argue that it is appropriate to consider the latter from the perspective of counterpublicity. Describing Habermas' "literary public sphere (*literarische Öffentlichkeit*)" (Gak 2016: 14) as "a sphere of discourse emerging as the *locus of contestation* of a dispersed variety of interpretative authorities" (Ibid. 15), Martin Gak asserts that "it must be built around a common normative locus, namely, the element contested and vied for" (Ibid. 19). In elaborating on this formula, Gak stresses that "what makes [public] contestation possible is the common locus from which ultimately these demands can be enforced, and that is the state" (Ibid.). In other words, the public sphere cannot come into existence without the presumed intuitive collective consensus that deems the foundational principles of the state legitimate; the deliberative contestation occurs only on the ground commonly agreed upon. For Fraser, whose conception of counterpublics Gak disputes in his work, the notion of "*subaltern counterpublics*" (Fraser 1990: 67), contrastingly, attempts to problematize Habermas' understanding of the normative consensus. Namely, Fraser asserts that a priori, "subaltern counterpublics stand in a contestatory relationship to dominant publics" (Ibid. 70) since the former are comprised of "members of subordinated social groups — women, workers, peoples of color, and gays and lesbians" (Ibid. 67). These counterpublics, as Fraser's influential work asserts, "emerge in response to exclusions within dominant publics" through formulating and spreading "counterdiscourses", which are alternative to the dominant status quo (Ibid.). In turn, the notion of a common concern that is situated around the idea of the common good will be different for social "minorities" than for the dominant groups (Ibid. 71). The "discursive contestation" (Ibid.) transpiring from the former source, therefore, is necessary for challenging the systemic contexts permeating the latter. Similarly, as Eagleton observes it in terms of the English historical context of the public sphere, "[t]he nation — society as a whole — is effectively identical with the ruling class; only those wielding a title to speak rationally, and

thus only the propertied, are in a true sense members of society" (Eagleton [1984] 2005: 35)[43]. He remarks that "[t]he interests of the propertied classes are in a real sense all that politically exists" (Ibid.), and that the English historical counterpublic sphere, for instance, emerges swiftly at the crossroad of the late eighteenth–early nineteenth centuries to challenge "the dominant consensus" (Ibid. 36). Thus, the counterpublic sphere existed on the pages of the radical press of the time, wherein "feminism and the dissenting churches, a whole oppositional network of journals, clubs, pamphlets, debates and institutions invades the dominant consensus, threatening to fragment it from within" (Ibid.).

In overcoming the universalistic sense of singularity embedded in the notion of the public sphere, Fraser stresses the normative importance of equality and diversity for multi-cultural societies and suggests accounting for "a plurality of public arenas in which groups with diverse values and rhetorics participate" (Ibid. 69). In fact, for her, "a plurality of competing publics" has "always" marked the existence of the bourgeois public sphere (Ibid. 61). The "contestation among a plurality of competing publics", in sum, is seen by Fraser as the normative condition for the existence of a public sphere (Ibid. 66). However, in Habermas' view, the *episteme* of the competing public spheres precludes the universalist sense of a shared consensus altogether. Thus, in the political realm, the public sphere comprised of self-interested private individuals is bound to disintegrate without the commonly shared agreement on the basic civic principles. In the digital realm of communication, the trajectory towards individually competing public spheres equally affects the perceived sense of universalist communal consensus historically channeled through traditional professional media. Hence, in today's digital context,

[43] As both Habermas and Eagleton acknowledge, the social stratums historically deprived of constituting a part of the public sphere were a majority, rather than a minority of European populations. Therefore, it should be presumed that the counterdiscursive challenge to the dominant consensus could only arise from these exclusive social groupings that had access to education and the public means of expression in the first place.

the trend towards promoting individual self-interest minding the conception of the common good is illustrated through the proliferation of individual fragmented filter-bubbles, whose identity-preserving horizons delineate the boundaries of their self-sustaining public spheres. The 'privatist' tendency towards individual competition that Habermas identifies, therefore, ensures the disintegration of the tension between *self-interest* and the *common good*, which, for him, is foundational in terms of maintaining the western liberal democratic public sphere.

Despite these observations, however, I suggest that the overarching counterpublic sentiment that may frequently be witnessed in the digital video essay genre concerns tacitly shared consensus of its authors and publics towards institutions and industry. I argue that it is crucial to understand the counterpublic sentiment expressed in the digital video essay form in terms of the normative institutional locus and the counter-institutional consensus. Importantly, it is vital to analyze this constellation vis-à-vis the sphere of cultural expression rather than that of rational and qualitative political deliberation, especially since the latter is becoming less and less common in contemporary digital spaces. As I demonstrate it further, the digital author-critics account for the normative loci of higher educational institutions and professional cultural industries in composing their individually authored pieces. Simultaneously, these normative loci are openly contested by the individual author-critics through their expressions of counter-institutional consensus. That is, the video essayists' general charge directed against legitimate cultural institutions refers to the latter's cultural elitism, the adjacent access to superior cultural status, etc. Therefore, by tacitly contesting the legitimacy and credibility of official cultural institutions and industry, these digital creators stake their individual and private claims to public authority. The access of the digital author-critics to economic and cultural capital via public

social platforms, in turn, allows them to compete with the authority of professional cultural institutions and industry on a seemingly equal or even superior ground.

The individual digital critics undeniably argue over the institutionalized contexts that have shaped their individual perceptions and public identities. From the cultural perspective, it may be asserted that the normative locus that the contemporary digital video essays rely on, whether directly or indirectly, pertains to the institutionalized fields of knowledge production and the art industry. Critically, however, the expressions of this digital public are directed towards the internal virtual public itself that equally deems normative cultural institutions exclusionary, capitalist, or imposing. Fraser's definition of the *counterpublics*[44], or "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses" (1990: 67), therefore, may at least partially describe the current generation of the digital critics. Thus, first, by generating and expressing the anti-academic sentiments through their individual audiovisual content, these digital authors formulate their individual publicly expressed resistance against *cultural elitism* that they deem to be part of institutional education more generally. As Shanspeare observes, "video essays...[are] becoming almost better than academia —…more accessible and attracting so many people" because "we are young, we talk like young people and

[44] It is important to stress that the digital counterpublic this chapter addresses operates within the English-speaking framework and is predominantly situated in the Western cultural context. This means that the subaltern counterpublics are a legitimate actor within this assembled culture only in respect to the public discussion generated by the video essayists themselves. In other words, the digital individual author-critics themselves are the assembled 'center' around which the vast digital responses are accumulated and gathered. Such unevenly distributed global landscape prompts recognizing the binary of 'center' and 'periphery' permeating digital social networks more generally. While this deserves acknowledging, however, the question of exclusivity based on language and cultural acquisition remains outside of the scope of this chapter. Thus, I will not address here the inclusivity aspect in terms of these parameters that was suggested by Habermas and later developed by Fraser more in depth. This comment also concerns Fraser's stance on subjugation as the particular element of the subaltern counterpublic response. Further, the existence of the conservative, and alt-right counterpublic sentiment on digital social platforms equally deserves a substantial scholarly analysis, which is outside of the present dissertation's scope.

come from backgrounds as well that aren't too elitist" (15:48–16:08), which overall, for them, speaks for this genre's "relatability" (16:19).

Shanspeare's meta-video essay, which explores the subject of video essays on YouTube and this genre's immense popularity, gathered an assembly of comments that particularly share the former's views on academic elitism. Thus, @therealgowon remarks that "elitism" is "just another case of ageism" where older people "look down" on the young; @annw7843 observes that video essays "are open access, and [that] everyone knows old academics scoff[] at anything which can be accessed by anyone and not just people paying access to journals"; @ava.catherine links "the rise of video essays" "to people turning away from traditional academia because it feels unattainable" and suggests that this genre is "attractive" "because the people making them seem more accessible than a 'professor'" and "seem like…peers"; @naomi.cannibal suggests that "[n]ot everyone has the money to buy a book or enroll in a class"; @bisexual_disaster2795 points out that they had previously assumed "anyone with knowledge can be a scholar"; @moelblackx stresses the presence of "the new age academia" in the digital world; @flowersandperfume355 asserts that "video essays…are just as good as those fancy academic journal articles" and even suggests that "if a well-made video essay had a netflix release…it would be a documentary"; @hllurban244 states that "this sort of discourse around the video essay being low brow or not worthy of an academic title reflects how academics and elite people" once reacted to how "the printing press" "worked to democratize publishing", etc. In sum, these examples showcase the assembled counterpublic response to institutionalized academic culture whereby its exclusionary environment is paralleled with the more democratic digital scholarship.



Fig. 4.17 The thumbnail from Shanspeare's video essay, "The Era of the Critic: Why are Video Essays so Popular (and Hated)?", Aug 13, 2022.

Another form of a counterpublic expression in the video essay genre concerns the tension between culturally and institutionally approved context and marginalized individual expression / interpretation. For example, in her video essay exploring the ideas of nihilism, absurdism, and hope in contemporary digital discourse, Mbowe addresses the concept of black nihilism taken from Cornell West's famous work, *Race Matters* (1993) (Jul 12, 2022). Poignantly, during her monologue on the value of considering nihilism from a racial perspective, Mbowe expresses her own attitude towards the western philosophy on nihilism, stressing that she never personally resonated with much of it while others may understand "this kind of theorizing [as] second nature" (27:02–27:20). Thus, Mbowe reports on receiving comments from her viewers explaining what theories or theorists she actually addresses: "The amount of times I'll say something or analyze something and get comments…like, 'oh, that's actually known as X philosophy', 'or X theory', and I'm not saying that I know everything. [But] there's a lot I've had to learn the hard way because of the body that I'm in, that folks…[with] a certain advantage

or a certain privilege don't [have to,] and [who instead] get the privilege of learning that through a book or through theorizing about it in a classroom" (27:20–27:46). As pointed out in the first chapter, Mbowe reported her own academic background in one of the video essays, which is why the distinction between an embodied experience and the world of academic learning suggested by her contains the degree of her conscious counter-institutional sentiment. Thus, as opposed to the privileged university environment where people get to theorize philosophy, one's personal marginalized experience can show the real value of theory as practice: "…[while] there are so many other people who are trying to survive and don't even have the free time to contemplate these sorts of things", it is important to remember about "practical action" when "theorizing" (28:19–28:25).



Fig. 4.18 The screenshot with the self-recorded image of Mbowe exploring the idea of nihilism (5:20).

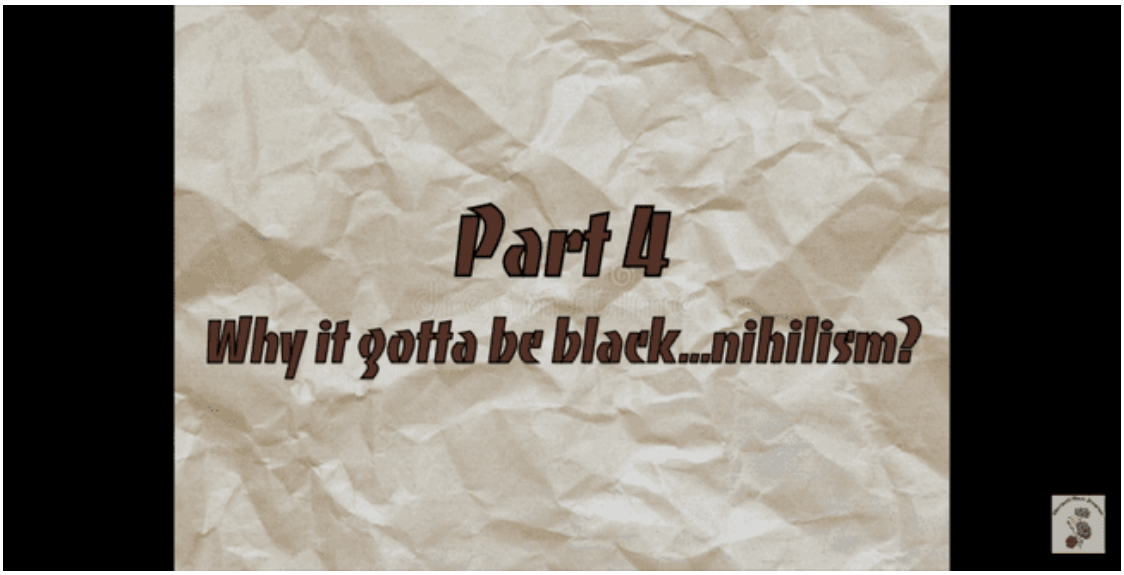


Fig. 4.19 The opening of Part 4 of Mbowe's essay exploring the notion of black nihilism as a matter of practical rather than theoretical concern (22:32).

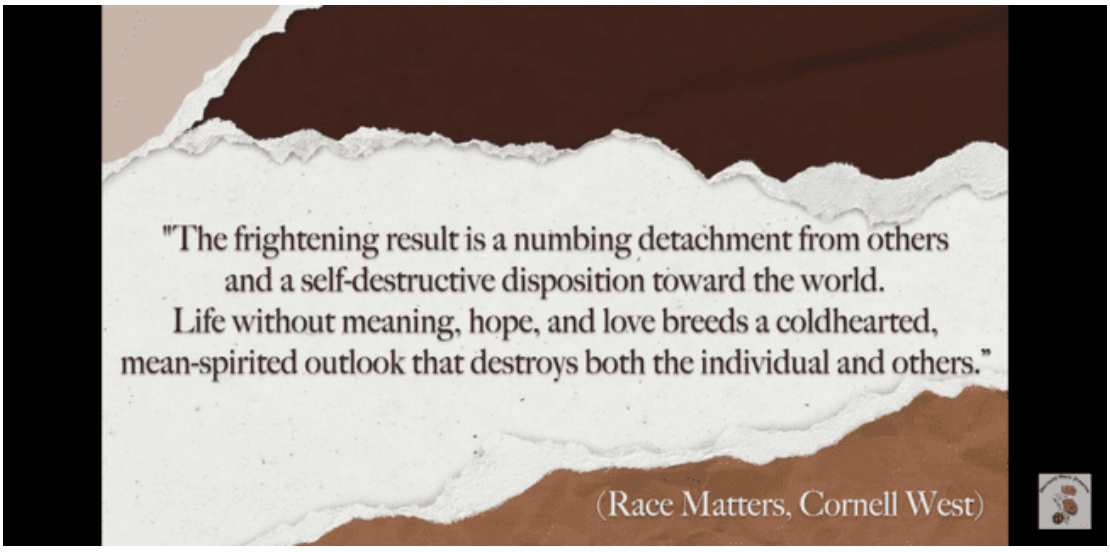


Fig. 4.20 The quotation taken from West's *Race Matters* elaborating on the notion of black nihilism incorporated in Mbowe's video essay (22:43).

Unsurprisingly, some of the users commenting under Mbowe's video essay recognize the tension between academic / institutional restrictions and individual experience: thus, the user @frauleinzuckerguss1906 asserts that the idea of "referring to other theories is based on the way academia functions[:] [a]t university you have to cite your sources and if you think about

something for yourself that someone else has also thought of and categorized, you will most likely be judged for not doing your research properly, which is a shame"; and similarly, @monimuppet6132 states that "Just because someone decided to codify…[human philosophy and thought], doesn't mean they are universal laws and I must subscribe purely to one or another…I'm human, upright and breathing, so therefore I am qualified to philosophize about life I'm living without always deferring to others." Thus, the counter-institutional sentiment expressed in Mbowe's essay through the idea of black nihilism finds general positive response from her viewers who are likewise invested in the general tension between what is considered to be legitimate intellectual scholarship and individual expression.

In a similar vein, the following video essay juxtaposes marginalized reading perspectives with institutionally approved ways of engaging with the literary canon. Thus, for instance, the digital video essay by the author Princess Weekes, which addresses the subject of recent popular adaptations of the ancient classical works, argues that "…there are still boundaries that exist and need to be broken in terms of who gets the ability to shape the way we view the classics, the way we view canon" (Jun 24, 2023, 31:07-31:18). Implying that authoritative readings of classical texts may have something to do with the world of higher learning, Weekes argues that it is necessary "to think about your own gender identity and racial identity while working in the classics [, especially since] …men transpose their ideas onto the Greeks all the time" (32:04–32:12). However, the source of Weekes' counterpublicity expressed here seems to be a specific response to the conservative anti-left stance within academia. Thus, while, in her view, men still hold an institutional monopoly on literary interpretation of the classics, an "empathetic" or "playful" perspective on a fictional text coming from "a woman or a person of color" is commonly discarded as "woke" (32:12–32:31).



Fig. 4.21 The thumbnail from Princess Weekes' video essay titled "Why We Needed To Relearn The Classics" (Jun 24, 2023).

Therefore, by drawing on popular cultural adaptations of the ancient classics, Weekes attempts to tacitly subvert more conventional renditions and interpretations of the Greek myths and literature by relying on a broad left-leaning perspective of identity critique.

Along with the explicitly academic context, the digital author-critics shape their left-leaning counterpublic responses to multiple institutions and cultural industries, from professional journalism to book publishing. The England-based digital author-critic under the pseudonym According to Alina, for instance, states in the description for one of her video essays that "maybe we should let women and girls do whatever they like every now and then" ("The READING AESTHETIC: 'book girls'", Mar 18, 2023). Building on this premise, her video essay explores the phenomenon of BookTok, a book culture on TikTok, where women post their "latest favorite read[s]" (0:22–0:24) online and thrive on a particular "reading aesthetic" (0:59). Addressing "the so-called reading as aesthetic" and the criticism it received from "the GQ article", Alina points at the fact that this article, while criticizing this online trend, fails to mention that it is primarily

"women and girls" who engage with such aesthetic (11:14–11:24). Thus, agreeing with another TikTok user, who "rightfully pointed" at the "gender aspect" embedded in the "critique" of BookTok reading culture in institutionalized press, Alina states that "many of the creators on BookTok are young women" (11:26–11:36). Therefore, for Alina, "a familiar combination of elitism and misogyny" (11:16–11:22) paints the common criticism of this cultural trend from the social media. She also suggests that "women posting book content" online are often accused of performativity by men, while women "rarely accuse men of being performative except about feminism" (15:04–15:11).

Critically, this video essay consistently explores institutionalized ideological contexts that are deemed anti-popular. Along with the GQ article that, for Alina, speaks for misrepresentation, elitism, and misogyny toward this digital book reading trend, she mentions other instances where the popular practices of reading are looked down on. Thus, first, defending "a more casual type of reading" that the users of TikTok enjoy, she notes that "most of the books on the platform fall in the romance, fantasy, mystery genres, which most people who think of themselves as academic or seriously bookish would say are not literary genres" (12:46–13:01). Despite this, it is argued that "BookTok has actually helped people return to a more casual type of reading" (12:44–12:48). Secondly, Alina mentions "this Guardian columnist who tried to make an edgy point about how home libraries are a marker of class, without realizing that she's insinuating that working class people don't collect books" (15:50–16:02). Immediately after making this observation, Alina states that she "grew up working class", and that working class people "can have nice things" too, including "having a modest home library" (16:02–16:11).

The assembly of over five-hundred comments generated by Alina's video essay may be roughly distributed according to two major points: first, that the digital commodity culture is

harmful and superficial, and second, that masculine criticism of female reading practices — particularly in its academic form —, is elitist and misogynistic. The second line of argument is specifically telling in terms of its counterpublic sentiment towards male interpretation. As @ioankou asserts, for instance, it is tiring to see "people shame women for enjoying literally anything", and "addressing the writer of the article and anyone sharing his thoughts", the user suggests that they "grow up, [and] let people be happy". The user @zeetuslupeedus stresses that "BOOKS ARE ALSO ENTERTAINMENT", proposing that "[p]eople (pretentious readers and men) need to understand that", and that "[a] lot of people don't read dense or heavy books" or "'intellectual' stuff". @MaximusStetich agrees with Alina that "[i]t is very fair to criticize commercialization and superficiality within…conversations especially pertaining to literature" and concedes that "there is a thread of misogynist belittlement running throughout this conversation", which they "haven't realized until now". @julesanderson5802 argues that the literary genre of romance has become more acceptable and that "a lot of these academic men just can't accept that romance is those trashy books grandma picked up at the store that everyone made fun of (cause ageing woman can't do anything without it being diminished or villainized)". @Diana-mu7pc asserts that women take pictures and post "about what they're reading" because "they feel so passionate about it", which prompts them to pose a series of questions: "Why does this all become inauthentic just because we post it for other people to see? Is everything we do on social media ultimately inauthentic and performative?". In general, in questioning masculine rejection of the female digital reading practices and literary preferences, this digital author-critic raises the issue of systemic intellectual elitism and misogyny and incentivizes public responses with the shared counterpublic perspective.

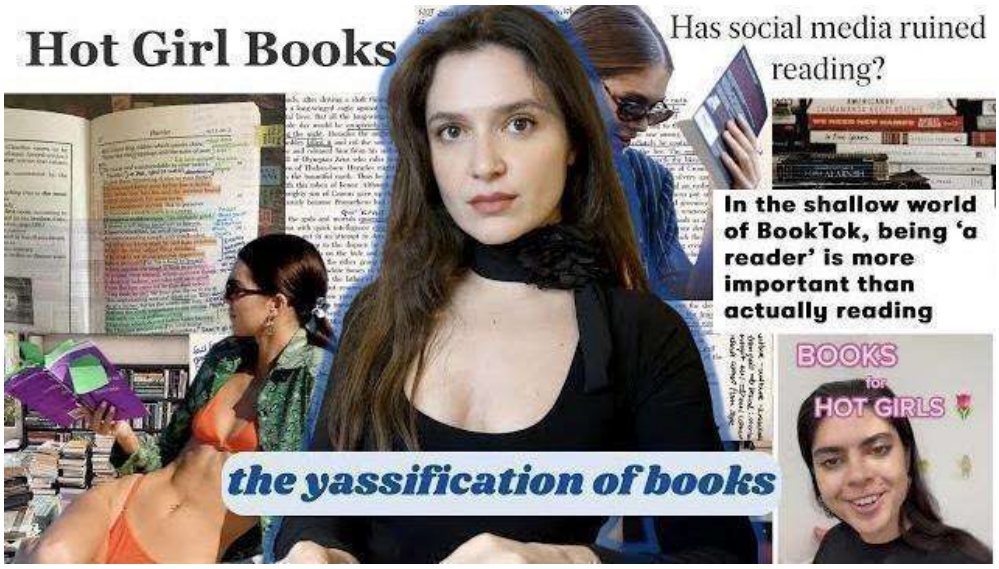


Fig. 4.22 Thumbnail from the video essay titled "The READING AESTHETIC is ruining literature (apparently)" (Mar 18, 2023) by According to Alina.

Importantly, the video essay work is also commonly interpreted by the digital authors as a means of genuine and creative — albeit problematic — self-expression, perceived as the site of struggle against the corporate digital economy of social platforms and systemic ideologies. For the digital author-critic Lily Alexandre, whose video essay echoes Duncan's sentiment analyzed earlier in this chapter, "in the same way that a school curriculum is guided by a government with ideological goals, everything that takes place publicly online is mediated by tech companies", which is why people often feel like they "have to spend time on their platforms to be engaged citizens" ("Art Can't Save Us", 6:52–7:16). Speaking more generally about the core issue with grassroot political self-expression in contemporary liberal democratic societies, Alexandre asserts that there is little "we can actually change because in so many political battles, public opinion is not the bottleneck; the bottleneck is the interests of the powerful" (7:23–7:35). And, while the governments do not completely discard genuine public expression by "keep[ing] on good terms with the media", they still are likely to make the decisions that will benefit the ruling class rather than the people (7:48–7:59). More specifically, Alexandre, who creates artistic

content on YouTube, is forced to exist "in a world that manipulates basically all media to carry water for the rich and powerful, [threatening] to turn every last artwork into an interchangeable piece" of commodity (10:36–10:48).

Simultaneously, Alexandre admits to the beneficial aspects of this social platform for disseminating creative content publicly. Reflecting on her video essay work, Alexandre points out that if she were to write one of her most viewed pieces as a book, no one "would have published it, but on YouTube they didn't need to" (20:49–20:55). Alexandre also notes that she loves the video essay genre for its salient "recurrent themes and motives [which] explain many events" and the fact that "we can find little bits of ourselves all over the world", which she ultimately assesses as "the key to expressing a point of view without just becoming another voice in the crowd" (21:21–21:34).



Fig. 4.23 One of the performative setups figuring in Alexandre's video essay: the unnamed local artists are silently doing a mural painting behind the author's back, reflecting Alexandre's main thesis on the problems of doing artistic work today (5:54).



Fig. 4.24 Alexandre's setup for her speech on the video essay genre and the problem of grassroot art in contemporary times: the unnamed person sitting next to her is doing pottery, which is meant to underscore the hard work that goes into making art as well as its tangible and yet invisible connection to local artistic communities in the age of capitalism (13:16).

Thus, what Alexandre's example seems to demonstrate is the left-leaning sentiment that critiques the capitalist system of production as a whole, inclusive of the digital social platform economy. Simultaneously, the counterpublic response to the neoliberal ideology expressed in her video essay concerns Alexandre's belief that creating digital critical artworks is beneficial for building communal connections online, however problematic the digital video essay genre itself may be in terms of propelling YouTube's platform economy.

'Literature Has Always Been Political': YouTube's Case Against Theory

Aside from questioning the social platform economy and its detrimental effects for digital content creation, the post-scholarly video essay often focuses on critiquing the university as a capitalist enterprise. In turn, somewhat paradoxically, digital author-critics also directly compare and juxtapose the latter with content creation on YouTube, which some of them deem as a worthy substitute for an academic career particularly in the realm of the humanities. Therefore,

despite the general discontent with the conditions of late capitalism commonly expressed through the digital video essay, the central comparison between academic and online careers is at the same time posed by video essayists in terms of their unequal financial sustainability as prospective careers, with the preference given to the latter.

As my next example will illustrate, the subject of direct transferability of knowledge acquired in the academic setting to the digital domain of YouTube is sometimes openly addressed in the video essay form. Thus, the already mentioned digital author-critic, Alina, stresses in her recent essay that individuals with the humanities and social sciences' background and a "passion for research" often find themselves unable to pursue careers in the university, realizing that a sounder entrepreneurial option today "is to start a YouTube channel" ("Is literature useful?" Dec 8, 2024, 15:25–15:46). Alina specifically reflects on her personal decision of transferring her academically professional profile onto this digital platform, suggesting that the university environment is "still extremely elitist" and hardly conducive to financial success: as "somebody who's also from a working class background and an immigrant, who was relatively successful in academia for a while, [I] realized that if I wanted to make any serious money, I had to do other things" (15:50–16:29). At the same time, she praises the value of the degrees she acquired in the English discipline: "I think that if I didn't study what I studied, I wouldn't feel so confident expressing myself on a public platform like YouTube" (28:47–28:55).

Therefore, by acknowledging the value of the humanities as a degree received in the academic setting, author-critics like Alina simultaneously express their conscious move away from the university environment in order to pursue a more financially viable career as an online public intellectual. Importantly, the humanities' disciplines are questioned by this digital author-critic on the level of theoretical engagement, which is why she places the subject of *institutional*

politicization of literature at the centre of her video essay. In such a way, the present example also illustrates a case against institutional theory, understood by Alina as an ideological and performative tool since, in her view, literary forms and reading have always already been political.



Fig. 4.25 The thumbnail from the video essay titled "Is literature useful? Unemployment, elitism, and BookTok and politics", Dec 8, 2024.

As I have argued in the first chapter of this dissertation, the overarching incentive for promoting scholarly ideas in the digital realm often springs from the perceived deficiency of the contemporary university more generally and the humanities disciplines specifically. Thus, in her recent video essay, Alina directly addresses central issues she associates with contemporary academia. First, in her view, the major concern with today's liberal arts and humanities disciplines is tied to the general conditions of capitalism, which she considers to be the main "thing actually ruining universities" (14:40–14:49). Due to the nature of capitalism, she argues, "universities have rapidly become businesses that seek to sell students experiences" (14:52–14:58), serving as "a huge corporation, the purpose of which is no longer to expand upon human

knowledge and disseminate it to new generations but rather [to bring] the most possible money into the university" (15:12–15:27). Second, when it comes to pursuing English degrees specifically, she draws on the recently published article from *the New Yorker* under the title "The End of the English Major", stressing that "concerns around salary expectations and employability" are "the main reason[s] why students choose not to study English literature at undergraduate level anymore" (10:16-10:34). Third, on the level of the symbolic cultural capital, Alina deems academic enterprise "extremely elitist" (16:08), noting earlier that "historically, an English degree has always held a certain level of status, especially if pursued at a prestigious university" — "a noble pursuit", which gave its entrants "a certain air of moral superiority" (8:40–9:06). Finally, Alina engages with the concern that she also directly ties to contemporary online discussions: the commonly expressed charge against academic "wokeness" and the perceived functioning of the university as a place of ideological "indoctrination" (14:31, 13:57).

More specifically, to elaborate on her fourth point, Alina addresses "the so-called politicization of literature" (11:30–11:32), historically linked with "the introduction of critical theory into academia" (11:40–11:44). In such a way, as she reports, "a number of academics particularly in the US, but some of them in the UK as well" deem "that feminist, Marxist, and race theory-based readings of literary texts have done away with pure literary analysis and replaced them with ideological analysis" (11:32–12:01). Reflecting on her own learning experience at the University of Oxford and UCLA, Alina partially concedes to the argument that deems the implications of academic theory problematic, considering some of the students upholding its political message to be "mostly performative":

> I've done quite a bit of critical theory at the university […and] I feel like anyone who has done a literature module or a literature degree over the past

> decade will have crossed paths with somebody in their course who stood up in a seminar and proudly confessed that they refused to read books by any man as some form of rebellion against the patriarchy. And while I have my own frustrations with the literary canon and the way that some classics are revered for no particular reason […], I also see this statement as mostly performative (12:04–12:47).

In similar vein, Alina notes that "there are also a lot of people online and off who have a very superficial understanding of what feminism, Marxism, race theory actually are, and who are more than happy to be able to use enough academic language to [...] have the last word in a Twitter argument" (14:11–14:29). Therefore, she seems to make a claim that there is a certain predisposition of institutional theory and academic language more generally towards the advancement of superficial argumentation, often used as an online or offline tool for introducing performative statements regardless of one's political allegiances.

Moreover, in Alina's view, the superficiality of institutionalized theory is corroborated by the fact that literature had already been political long before the emergence of critical theory as a professional and self-legitimating ethos: "I feel like nowadays especially online people complain about literature being political, but what they actually mean is they don't want literature to be associated with social justice movements. What they mean is they don't want to hear about racism and misogyny anymore, but the thing is literature was already political when the only people writing were old white guys" (17:02–17:22). In other words, Alina argues that "literature and politics […] were never separate" (18:10–18:13); "that books have always been political" (16:33–16:35), thus implying that academic theory has largely usurped what is already inherently contained in the works of literature: its innately political, and thus non-

institutional or *non-theoretical* dimension. Symptomatically, the examples of 'already political' literature Alina brings up encapsulate literary practice existing prior to its professionalization, stating that "Goethe was a politician", "Voltaire was constantly advocating for freedom of speech and the abolition of slavery", "and before writing *The Social Contract* Rousseau was writing plays and essays about modern music" (17:32–17:49).

Overall, Alina's video essay illustrates a twofold sentiment implicitly or explicitly expressed in many digital video essays: the perceived deficiency of academic enterprise in the realm of the humanities on the one hand, and the incentive to spread the concerns that once belonged to this exclusively professional realm to larger audiences on the other. What is even more important for the subject at hand, however, are the connections that Alina draws in her essay between online discussions of reading fictional literature and political discussions happening in response to political events. Thus, she states, for example, that, in response to the recent elections in the US, some content creators of the loose cultural community dubbed BookTok urged its members to stay away from political commentary and to keep it as a social space where everyone has "fun" (18:15–19:04). Aside from the specifics of political argumentation surrounding the issue, it appears crucial that a direct correlation between discussions of reading fiction and political self-expression online is posed both by Alina and BookTokers. This development, along with Alina's own piece arguing in favor of seeing literature in terms of politics, proves the relevance of the historical functioning of public literary forms, such as the essay and critical commentary, as the distinctive mode of *political* communication. However, I would argue that the specific post-scholarly sentiment that may be witnessed on social platforms today adds a *contestatory* dimension to today's popular intellectual work.

Namely, on the post-scholarly spectrum, the hesitation towards academic theory expressed by Alina in her video essay coexists with the discussion of literature and reading as a form of immediate cultural practice and political communication rather than a merely institutional theoretical affair. In such a way, since the discussion of political implications of reading literature and literary fiction is happening alongside the expressed discontent with academic theorizing, it may be stated that there is a certain mode of counterpublicity being relied upon. I would argue that the counterpublic sentiment tacitly expressed here concerns the ongoing conquest of intellectual autonomy of knowledge produced in academia. Crucially, such an intellectual contest necessarily involves the aspiration expressed by most of the video essayists — to gain monetary rewards and celebrity status promised by today's digital social platform economy. As I will suggest in the next section, such a conquest for cultural autonomy is specifically underscored with a heretically autodidact ethos, which is tacitly assumed by contemporary digital author-critics producing popular intellectual work.

In sum, I argue that the examples illustrated in this section suggest that these digital authors attempt to subvert the legitimized and codified cultural contexts familiar to them through offering counter-contexts, discourses, and cultural resonances affirmed by the virtual public. Composing and displaying video essays online allows these authors to publicly critique what is largely perceived by them as *inauthentic* institutionalized culture(s). In this sense, the counterpublic sphere Fraser offered as a corrective to Habermas' idealistic public sphere operates in this digital culture within the logic of authenticity. In other words, if cultural production advanced in institutionalized contexts may be seen as ideologically or corporately complicit and thus inauthentic, the counter-institutional public response instead attempts to locate itself in what it deems to be authentic. In terms of the digital engagements with culture-as-the-arts (Eagleton

2000), it could be similarly argued that cultural objects are perceived by these critics as more authentic than the institutionalized contexts surrounding them, since the latter are either alienated from everyday private experience or are altogether representative of the policing / systemic function[45].

In turn, it appears clear that this counterculture also borrows its forms of expression from the dominant modes of cultural production, including academia, professional filmmaking or the publishing industry, as well as conventional subcultural tactics and fan practices. These digital individual critics ultimately seem to gravitate towards reproducing the dominant intellectual left-leaning ideology by partaking in the virtual public mode of self-expression. Acknowledging this development does not, however, negate the presence of the specific counterpublic consensus shared among many video essayists. Finally, while it may be stated, for instance, that the video essay on YouTube has itself acquired a systemic status of a separate genre within the respective assembled communities, it remains significant that these individual digital authors construct their distinct parallel modes of virtual counterculture based on the model of the dominant ideologies and culture. To theorize the tension between specifically academic cultural capital and the demand for popular publicity on the digital social platforms that the digital author-critics rely on, the next section employs Pierre Bourdieu's conceptual optic involving the question of the 'heretical' conquest of cultural autonomy through the digital video essay genre. At the same time, I briefly address Bourdieu's notions of autodidactism and the double bind, which may also apply to the digital video essay mode of cultural production. Arguably, to adequately theorize this ongoing conquest, it is essential to account for "the sociological struggles over position,

[45] I overall suspect that cultural objects are associated with power and inauthenticity by this digital community only in respect to institutionalized contexts that underlie them. What makes them authentic, on the other hand, seems to be the extent to which the authors are able to individually subvert such institutionalized contexts through discussing authentically 'real' experiences along with the fictional works.

power and prestige that underpin the production of textual forms and reputations, and how the specific networks of power relations orient the strategies of artists" (Negus 2006: 205).

4.3 The Double Bind: Theorizing Digital Entrepreneurial Authorship as the Heretical Cultural Mode

When it comes to the question of asserting individual and communal authority in the digital realm, the overarching contemporary divide between experts and non-experts, official or non-official spreading of information, as well as objective and subjective knowledge must be placed at the center of the discussion. The emergence of "citizen journalism" bolstered by the expansion of Web 2.0, "whereby non-professionals were able to participate in pursuing news stories of interest", allowed them to bypass traditionally elite gatekeeping mechanisms and thus have "more access to elites and additional channels of information beyond the 'mass media' of the previous century" (Massanari 2015: 8). Consequently, today's "social news" can be equally delivered and spread by the official informational channels as well as "'unofficial' sources such as blogs, social networking sites, and the like" (Ibid. 26). Thus, on the post-scholarly spectrum, the removal of authority embedded in traditional gatekeeper mechanisms can be argued to visibly enhance the digital creators' subjective approach to and transmission of information. As Mark Carrigan acknowledges, "[t]he authority of established gatekeepers to knowledge erodes" in the digital environment "as increasing proximity to experts (journalists, scientists, policy makers) facilitated by social platforms foregrounds subjective aspects of their conduct that lingered in the background through older forms of mediation" (2022: 201). Since digital social platforms are also characterized by the mechanism of communicative "immediacy" in producing and distributing expert knowledge, "[e]ven for those who sustain a committed objectivity [to the subject at hand], there is an inevitable insertion of provisional thoughts, gut hunches and

erroneous inferences" into the digital public content (Ibid. 200). The proximity to the expert or semi-professional digital public figures and the immediacy of information distributed by these, therefore, highlight the central importance of the subjective approach ingrained in such digital content production. This, undeniably, also links post-scholarly digital creators both to celebrity figures and 'public intellectuals', whose personae are especially significant to the extent that their individual work is popular and recognized by others. Critically, whether the proximity to expert figures or the factor of immediacy challenge the traditional authority of knowledge gatekeepers online, the contemporary digital author-critics in question do not as a rule overemphasize their authoritative expert status, nor do they affirm their striving for a committed objectivity to the subject at hand. Conversely, while relying on the cultural capital and professional profile acquired in the academic setting, they fit into a larger digital ecosystem with its prioritization of personal expression and openness towards building individual success via social platforms.

On the digital medium spectrum, the striving for individual recognition through public self-broadcasting has always characterized active online presence. In the late 2000s, Burgess and Green spoke of the proliferation of "the mainstream media discourse around amateur video, usually invoking individual success stories that appear to realize this promise", pointing out the gradual mythologization of YouTube as a pathway to individual success (2009: 21–22). Thus, over time, "[a]s recording labels and talent scouts increasingly turn their attention to online publishing opportunities (Bruno, 2007), YouTube has been mythologized as literally a way to 'broadcast yourself' into fame and fortune" (Ibid. 22). Whether this initial 'myth' has been envisioned and launched by the representatives of creative or business industries, the fact of the current digital authors-critics relying on the promise of fame and celebrity status through

producing and disseminating their audiovisual content is indisputable. If formerly, "the marker of success" for the digital video content creators, apart from "their online popularity", was considered "their subsequent ability to pass through the gate-keeping mechanisms of old media — the recording contract, the film festival, the television pilot, the advertising deal" (Ibid. 24), today's functioning of digital entrepreneurship primarily relies on the economic parameters — the modes of external advertising and sponsorship. Analyzing the functioning of authorship in the digital age, Simone Murray identifies a trend, whereby "(would-be) authors" have the ability "to publish, publicize, and sell their work without the gatekeeper approval of mainstream media arbiters (agents, publishers, marketers, publicists, and retailers)", which she terms "disintermediation" (2018: 29). The striving for individual success achieved through the mode of self-broadcasted publicity is simultaneously reflected in the digital creators' adherence to cultural capital generated in academic institutions which they deem to be symbolically valuable and thus marketable among their like-minded digital audiences. In sum, while the waning of the gatekeeper mechanisms associated with the economic support and dividends provided by traditional or mainstream media is clearly visible in today's digital context, nevertheless, the reliance on the 'dominant' modes of cultural production and the symbolic goods associated with those remain intact on digital platforms.

Arguably, the autodidactic disposition frequently espoused by digital author-critics, through which they markedly separate themselves from institutionalized contexts, may provide a theoretical insight into the video essay mode of cultural production. Bourdieu describes autodidacts "as *products of the educational system*" and asserts that, due to their petit bourgeois origins, they are "condemned endlessly to amass disparate, often devalued information" in "antithesis" to legitimate culture (1996[1984]: 328–330). Since they are the products of

legitimate culture, Bourdieu assesses autodidacts as victims "of the effects of educational entitlement" (Ibid. 329). Thus, resembling the bourgeoisie and aristocracy in terms of the acquisition of cultural capital, the petit bourgeois, for Bourdieu, pursue similar goals as the former did during their "rising" phases: the drive towards "accumulation of culture", "self-assurance" verging on insecurity, overt "seriousness" in relation to culture, etc. (Ibid. 330). Bourdieu specifically suggests that the habitus of the petit bourgeois expresses itself *in relation* to the legitimate culture without, however, recognizing "how to play the game of culture as a game", mistakenly "[i]dentifying culture with knowledge" (Ibid.). In this respect, by failing to recognize culture as the mode of cultural distinction, autodidacts constitute "the antithesis of the legitimate relation to culture" (Ibid.). Curiously, Bourdieu specifically aligns autodidacts with fans through the notion of class. In his view, figures that could now be described as conventional fans — "the jazz-freak or cinema buff," for instance — represent an "absurd" and "perverse" petit-bourgeois side of "the legitimate…cultivated contemplation", since they merely bring aristocratic-bourgeois "accumulation of culture" to "stockpiling" excess (Ibid. 330). The results of this petit bourgeois stockpiling, for Bourdieu, illustrate its "symbolic class struggle with the certified holders of cultural competence", with "consumption of circumstantial information (credits, exact composition of the band, recording dates etc.)" being merely one example of its compensatory challenge to legitimate culture (Ibid.). In short, Bourdieu's autodidact fans are part and parcel of petit bourgeois class that understands culture all too sincerely and literally, but in a deep link with legitimized culture.

Clearly, Bourdieu's notion of the autodidact may only partially apply to the digital author-critics in question. His conception is not only nation- and class-specific, but it also involves markedly pessimistic assessment of this broad social grouping in class terms. The main

characteristic that arguably aligns the digital author-critics with Bourdieu's concept concerns the emphasis on autodidacts approaching culture as "inexhaustible" knowledge repository (Ibid.). While, for Bourdieu, the autodidacts' pursuits of "inexhaustible knowledge" represent the overcompensation of petit-bourgeois class for not being culturally recognized and legitimized (Ibid.), the contemporary digital autodidacts pursue knowledge production and transmission as inexhaustible means of acquiring individual cultural and economic capital. In this respect, their pathway to cultural legitimation relies on continuous production of intellectual content that resonates within their digital environment *outside* official cultural institutions. Since the digital environment itself does not provide or legitimize cultural capital, the digital authors must compensate for this intrinsic lack of official cultural legitimation through establishing their individual intellectual and creative authority online. Simultaneously, their individual attempts at acquiring digital cultural legitimacy runs in relation to their knowledge received and accumulated in official cultural institutions, academia in particular.

As Bourdieu observes, by the first half of the nineteenth century, France witnessed "the inflow of a substantial population of young people without fortunes, issuing from the middle or popular classes of the capital and especially the provinces, […] to Paris trying for careers as writers and artists — careers which until then had been more strictly reserved for the nobility or the Parisian bourgeoisie" (1996[1992]: 54). Describing this new ascendent social group, Bourdieu states that

> [t]hese newcomers, nourished in the humanities and in rhetoric but deprived of the financial means and the social protection indispensable for taking advantage of their degrees, find themselves pushed towards literary professions, which are surrounded with every prestige of romantic triumph

> and which, in contrast to the more bureaucratized professions, do not require any qualification guaranteed by scholarity, or else pushed towards the artistic professions exalted by the success of the Salon (Ibid. 54–55).

Thus, "[w]ith the assemblage of a very numerous population of young people aspiring to live by art, and separated from all other social categories by the art of living they are in the course of inventing, a genuine society within society makes its appearance" (Ibid. 55).

Arguably, the digital video essay culture structurally resembles the striving for autonomy Bourdieu identifies in application to the mid nineteenth-century French bohemia. The separation from the institutionalized and corporate academic culture, in this context, is happening alongside the aspiring conquest of the art industry. If the latter guarantees prosperity through achieved recognition or, put simply, celebrity status, the former fosters intellectual competition with minimal rewards in terms of publicity or status. Critically, positioning oneself as "a freelance scholar", whether implicitly or explicitly, and regardless of "the quality of one's scholarship" means "to be excluded from the system of rewards" (Guillory 2022: 40). Thus, the loss of "intangible good of institutional prestige" (Ibid.) can be identified as one of the results of transferring academic knowledge or 'professional profile' to the digital domain. Simultaneously, the academic institutions provide symbolic dividends that conventional art industry does not necessarily afford. Therefore, relying on the cultural capital of academic institutions, which, in this case, perform the role of legitimate knowledge repository, allows some of these digital authors to tacitly assert their exceptional cultural status alongside their individual striving for popular publicity. As the result of this blending, some of the digital authors acquire full-fledged celebrity status and recognition both within and beyond their national digital culture.

As Burgess and Green sum up Graeme Turner's apt observation, "[e]ven when ordinary people become celebrities through their own creative efforts, there is no necessary transfer of media power: they remain within the *system* of celebrity native to, and controlled by, the mass media" (2009: 23). Moreover, achieving the form of recognition that can effectively rival or parallel the cultural prestige and dividends afforded due to successful participation in the art industry requires consistent and continuous economical support from the external sources of funding. Since digital authorship is not properly institutionalized, it is forced to rely on continuous support of the sponsors and the acclamation of the audience, which cannot be consistently guaranteed outside institutional support. Ensuring the ongoing approval from relevant audiences, in turn, requires consistent individual production of the authorial content that will continue to attract and gather followers. Therefore, the volatility and precariousness of this type of individual autonomy, which fully relies on the unpredictable rules of digital entrepreneurship, place this digital culture in the 'dominated' category vis-a-vis institutionalized 'dominant' spheres of cultural production. The 'double bind' thus produced positions digital assemblages in a relatively precarious situation where individual digital authors strive to perpetually conquer their market and cultural autonomy in respect to the dominant producers of intellectual and artistic goods. Thus, even if individual success or public virality is achieved through this mode of digital entrepreneurial authorship, it is still largely bound to "be adjusted in advance, in their double or divided habitus" (Ibid. 57). As Bourdieu sums it up further, "the position of a double bind…[is] that of being the dominated among the dominants, which destines them to a sort of objective indetermination, hence a subjective one, never as visible as in the simultaneous or successive fluctuations of their relationship with the powerful" (Ibid.).

Further, without requiring official qualifications or following prescriptive formats that are integral for educational and professional institutions, the digital authors' approach to cultural criticism may be contrastingly described as non-systemic. Crucially, however, the non-systemic nature of digital criticism also peculiarly aligns with the counter-institutional intent that characterizes the digital public consensus at hand. On the one hand, today's author-critics either prefer not to emphasize or distance themselves from the official institutional cultural capital they may have acquired. The 'autodidact' aspect showcased by these authors-critics correlates, in some cases, with their conscious abandonment of higher education, and, most commonly, with the nature of digital environment itself that frequently requires possessing unofficial 'inside' knowledge. In other words, to form communal bonds, acquire capital, and gather significant online following, author-critics in question must be aware of the popular cultural and digital communal contexts and often be included in the discussions that shape their local digital 'talk of the town'. Being exposed to and participating in these popular cultural and communal contexts, as well as studying them, therefore requires self-education that goes beyond and often against official educational cultural capital. On the other hand, and most vitally, the author-critics seemingly reflect a larger counter-institutional trend online. In this context, at least on the level of individual expression, the author-critics tend to demonstrate their autodidact cultural status. This allows them to symbolically promote their self-directed learning conducted outside the official cultural institutions in order to emphasize personal (rather than institutional) investment in the subject at hand and thus demonstrate individual originality. Distancing from the official cultural capital also enables them to express their counter-institutional intent and thereby to formulate the popular consensus within their digital publics. While they may continue to be students in the institutional environment, the importance of visible distancing from the official

cultural capital online amounts to better credibility among their publics who deem legitimate cultural institutions elitist and exclusionary. In short, the autodidact quality within digital post-scholarly criticism seemingly involves specific "heretical mode of [knowledge] acquisition" (1996[1974]: 328) and transmission particularly on the level of *individual expression*.

To conclude this section, it appears clear that a certain heretical and autodidactical mode and disposition respectively characterize the digital video essay genre. However it may develop in the future, the current chapter has provided at least three conceptual-theoretical schemas with which to approach this digital genre's specific modes of expression and cultural production. Lastly, I would argue that it is crucial to return to the institutionalized context of academia in order to ask the final question: Is it possible to distinguish the intra-academic modes of expression from the non-academic ones? By attempting to ask and answer this question, I arrive at the subject of the future for disciplinary humanities and the potential scholarly alternatives that may be formulated in distinction to the digital mode of cultural production such as the contemporary video essay.

Conclusion: Against Professional Appreciation / Towards Articulations of Relationality

Lately, it has been fairly observed that, in the context of the professional academic environment, "[m]uch of the recent interest in public criticism…has emerged as a response to the sharply felt labor crisis and the sense that graduate education as currently structured cannot be sustained" (Kramnick 2023: 87). What my case study explored in the present dissertation partly aimed to show is precisely the implicitly and explicitly voiced public demand for diversifying and deinstitutionalizing academic inquiry, deemed too specialized, elitist, and divorced from the external concerns by digital author-critics. Simultaneously, despite the common contention expressed in the academic setting that the professional humanities have been in the permanent state of crisis at least since the age of modernity (Reitter and Wellmon 2021), which has recently converted into the tangible decline in the popularity of such disciplines, the current case study also offers much reason for reevaluating this stance. Put simply, if the post-scholarly video essay should tell us anything at all it is precisely the fact that the professional humanities have been perceived by many former and ongoing students as an extremely fruitful, topical, and valuable area of both personal and collective inquiry.

Arguably, the following example alone persuasively demonstrates my thesis. In the video essay titled "Critique Culture: Why Can't We Enjoy Anything Anymore?", the video essayist Robin Waldun raises the question of whether literary critique has produced an overwhelming influence on the digital culture of critique (Jul 16, 2024). Waldun, who has recently received an undergraduate degree from the literary department at the University of Melbourne[46], suggests a parallel "between literary theory and what's happening in mainstream social media" (Ibid.). As Waldun argues in his semi-professional video essay, the negative tone that may be witnessed

[46] See https://rcwaldun.com/.

online today “parallels the 20th century attitude in literary criticism and, as Rita Felski pointed out, critique” (11:38–11:47). In turn, Waldun peculiarly transposes Felski’s famous diagnosis against scholarly critique directly onto the video essay genre, suggesting that the latter “can’t help but to take on oppositional tendencies” thereby illustrating “professional pessimism” (11:53–12:04). Thus, by purporting to do “real culture criticism”, “hard-nosed critique”, and “unveiling propaganda”, the contemporary video essayists, in Waldun’s view, indulge in the critically suspicious procedure denounced by Felski in application to professional literary scholarship (12:12–12:19). Waldun specifically argues that video essays tackle “the same problems and of course a lot of themes…that’s already been theorized in the 20th century”, finding the affinity between this digital genre and academic criticism in terms of their shared “undercurrent of being oppositional against something, without realizing that…in reality things are a lot more complicated” (15:00–15:15). Moreover, beyond the video essay genre, Waldun announces the general “resurgence of social critics on Substack, on Instagram, on TikTok”, proclaiming the return of “this age of critique” in the online form (12:50–12:58).

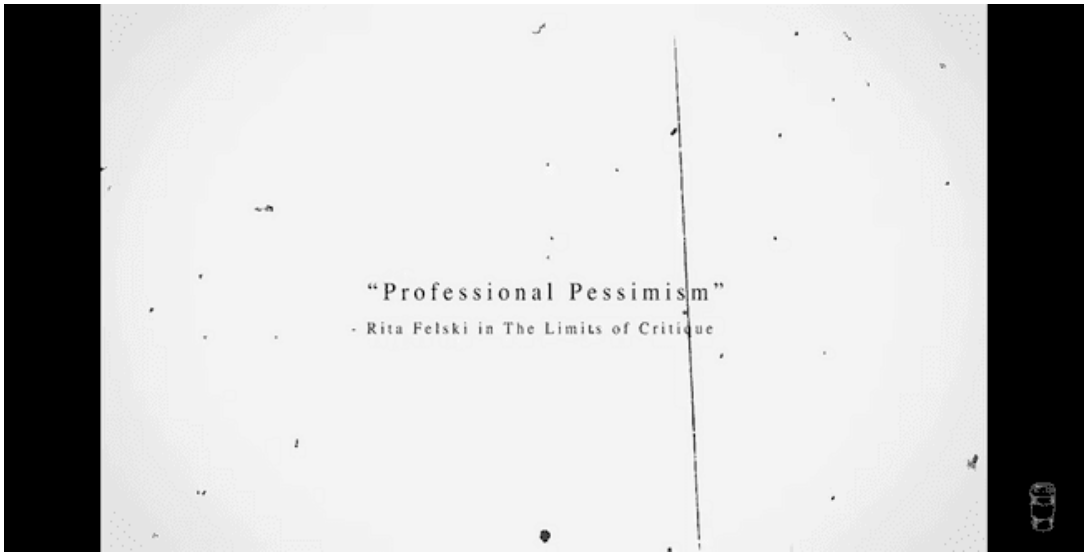


Fig. 4.26 Felski’s notion used in Waldun’s video essay critiquing the digital video essay genre (12:05).



Fig. 4.27 The image of Felski presented in Waldun's video essay (11:48).

While I have already suggested the direct link between cultural studies and digital video essay criticism by terming the latter post-scholarly in this dissertation, Waldun's example is crucial in one particular respect: he does not exactly distinguish academic criticism from the digital video essay form. The reason why this lack of distinction is especially substantial, in my view, relates to the tendency of some young academics who produce digital public content to deprofessionalize scholarly inquiry by making it subservient to the issues surrounding the digital environment. Thus, in Waldun's interpretation, the disciplinary subject of the method wars is directly transposed onto digital communication, which is supposed to 'take on oppositional tendencies' already 'theorized in the 20th century'. As the result, Waldun, by upholding Felski's stance on the negative critique, suggests "to step back and realize that reading and engaging with a piece of content is…a complicated relationship", and that "sometimes a film just simply grips you, even though it's problematic": i.e., "sometimes, affects come first before critique" (18:56–19:22). In short, while Felski wrangles with the limits of professional critique in her works, Waldun denounces negative digital communication proper, advising his public viewers to focus more on passion and enjoyment in consuming and *producing* digital content.



Fig. 4.28 The thumbnail from Waldun's video essay depicting the lineage between professional criticism of the 1980s (embodied in the image of Susan Sontag; on the left) and contemporary video essay represented by digital critics like himself (as seen in the image on the right) ("Critique Culture: Why Can't We Enjoy Anything Anymore?", Jul 16, 2024).

Following this preamble, I would like to argue that the first step of professional scholars towards understanding the future of humanities and their disciplinary fields should be to acknowledge the immense successfulness and popularity of (post-)scholarly inquiry *outside* the academic domain. Such popularity unambiguously indicates the enormous influence of the university on contemporary author-critics, whose explorations of aesthetic works, cultural movements, lifestyles and ideologies have become firmly engrained in the public digital platform environment. In this sense, many academic scholars today seem to severely underestimate — rather than overestimate — the exceptionally high value of the humanities and their specific disciplines for contemporary society. To illustrate just one example of this perceived value, in

the digital video essay devoted to the 'Sokal affair'[47], the post-graduate student and scientist Dr. Fatima explores the interdisciplinary relationship between STEM disciplines and the humanities. In it, Fatima defends the "discipline" of cultural studies against Sokal's attack on the humanities by suggesting to separate his "publicity stunt" from the general academic "ostensible lack of rigor" (16:53–16:58). Importantly, Dr. Fatima's video essay argues in opposition to Sokal that not every 'postmodernist' debate lacks rigor or constructive dialogue, which she exemplifies through referring to Noam Chomsky and Foucault's debate on human nature from the 1970s. Thus, advising her viewers to engage with Chomsky and Foucault's public debate, Dr. Fatima emphasizes the importance of "the dedication to a common goal of advancing humanity" without "intellectual posturing" or "desire to humiliate or discredit or even defeat the other" (47:26–48:14). Overall, Dr. Fatima's video essay is directed at wider public audiences, for whom general themes such as fake news, public interviews, and digital debates constitute the crux of their concern of being a part of the online environment. In such a way, by extensively responding to Dr. Fatima's example that references Chomsky and Foucault's debate, many commentators affirm the importance of meaningful public debates today, particularly those arising in the realm of the humanities.

[47] The Sokal affar was a famous intra-academic hoax conducted by a scientist, Alan Sokal, directed against postmodernist theory and cultural studies, where he started the trend towards crafting 'fake' essay publications in the humanities' disciplines since 1996.



Fig. 4.29 Dr. Fatima's reference to Chomsky and Foucault's debate in her video essay (47:33).

Along with acknowledging the importance of public intellectual conversations, some commentators under Dr. Fatima's video essay even request adapting this format to a more comprehensive format modelled on conventional academic scholarship: thus, the user @jmchristoph suggests that video essays on YouTube should "have abstracts like journal articles, so that…[they] could [be] preview[ed]", lamenting that so far, "video essays are [too] constrained by their publishing platforms". In short, both the recognition of the video essay form as an important new source of digital knowledge and its direct relationship with the world of the university may place this relatively new public communicative genre at the center of the public humanities, which is becoming an emergent academic discipline today.

At the same time, along with acknowledging the success and popularity of academic inquiry in the public realm, it is arguably as crucial to distinguish professional scholarship from conversational public criticism. Clearly, the recognition of the differences between the two is as substantial as identifying the ways in which they intersect. Thus, second, I would like to argue that so far, partly due to the immense successfulness of the academic cultural turn, it appears surprisingly difficult to articulate the *qualitative* distinctions between scholarly and post-

scholarly critical inquiry. As I have attempted to partially illustrate in my second chapter of the current project, while the historical intellectual striving towards democratizing traditional academic scholarship was largely a liberating critical phase, one of the detrimental results of such democratization became the *fanification* of professional criticism. Thus, despite the proclaimed move away from appreciation as a valid professional metric in the English discipline (Felski 2015), much of the contemporary humanities have been operating under the presumption that, in the end, what scholars do is study what they love. Characteristically, Waldun's video essay mentioned earlier perfectly reflects this affective and appreciative disposition. Overall, articulated this way, the distinction between being a fan of what you love as a private individual and what you analyze as a professional is bound to disappear.

While one's individual investments and personal attachments tend to define the areas of study they end up pursuing professionally (and which, perhaps, even must define these in the first place), the current developments speak for the urgent need to revise the metric of individual appreciation as the pathway to professionalism. The reasoning behind such a proposed revision is simple: since today's examples of post-scholarly digital public criticism illustrate the perceived *integral* relationship between private interests and public criticism, it becomes nearly impossible to differentiate the new public forms of critical expression from the modes of professional interpretation. In other words, if people outside the academic domain perceive the digital essay form as both a means to personal self-expression and potential public conversation on larger collective issues, it appears unclear why today's author-critics should exactly confine themselves to the academic realm and invest themselves in similar creative projects but in a more restrictive environment.

To proceed further, it is crucial to define the two major aspects of scholarly fanification as an epistemology in more detail. First, as stated previously, professional fanification deems the metric of individual appreciation and attachment as foundational for its discipline. Thus, the engrained presumption that the idea of professionalism is directly linked to being a fan of what — and *how* — you study (something), characterizes the key issue at hand. I argue that this is problematic specifically because being in love with an object or a method does not yet automatically convert into a meaningful professional expertise. And second, scholarly fanification, partially in response to the structural advancement of the entrepreneurial university in the late twentieth century, seems to have held the idea of positivist knowledge accumulation in especially high esteem. In this way, mirroring the collector drive characterizing many historical fan communities, much of the contemporary humanities seem to have excessively valorized the quantitative striving towards a superior knowledge acquisition, underscored with one's individual attachment to the subject/mode of inquiry. Therefore, if Bourdieu's vision of fandom as a form of 'stockpiling excess' is hardly nuanced, uncomplimentary, and, perhaps, inaccurate, it is nevertheless worth acknowledging the problematic of knowledge collectorship embraced as the metric of professional distinction in the academic setting.

In my view, the chief danger of knowledge collectorship as the key professional *episteme* in the humanities concerns the transference of cultural artifacts and intellectual ideas into the rank of fetishized commodities, which thereby become detached from their genuine relationship with the world that they are part of. And, as the western history has shown, the commodification of the bourgeois reading culture, aesthetics, and intellectual value in the nineteenth century is precisely what firmly divorced the exclusionary idea of Culture from lived human experience. Arguably, the contemporary public-facing digital author-critics, by discussing the realms of

artworks, arguments, culture, and politics in their video essays, implicitly address the deficiency of professional humanities in terms of relating ideas, histories, theories, or aesthetics to the pressing issues and experiences that constitute parts of their everyday lives. By divorcing aesthetic objects or cultural phenomena from the lens of mere professional appreciation or knowledge collectorship, these author-critics instead muse on the former in terms of their *direct relationship* to their private experiences and perceptions. In turn, being placed outside the professionalized constraints, digital video essayists are able to communicate their interpretations and self-expressions to digital publics, thus reaffirming the historical value of criticism as a conversational and public mode. And even while their own video essays may be commodified through the digital platform economy, the established relationship between imaginative and creative works, philosophical or political arguments (etc.), and one's private experiences witnessed in many of these pieces still implies the importance of the humanities serving as the binding mechanism between conceptual self-articulation and a larger social world, of which everyone is part.

Considering these observations, I propose to move away from the *epistemes* of professional appreciation and knowledge collectorship toward the project of articulating the relationship between the objects and methods of the humanities and their *direct applicability* to the pressing social, cultural, and collective demands being formulated today. In this respect, it seems that merely affirming the use-value of theoretical and intellectual scholarship to newer generations of students, however they may be appreciated personally, can no longer serve as a persuasive enough rationale for promoting university education in the humanities. I would argue that the goal at hand is not the incentive for making the humanities publicly relevant and enticing, since they already, to a significant extent, are; it is rather about providing some tangible connections

between professional intellectual scholarship and its relevance to the most pressing cultural, political, and civic concerns. If better cultural, political, and civic alternatives for the humanities are not formulated as a new kind of broad cooperative intellectual project, to which many prospective students can directly relate, then these disciplines will remain in the realm of strict professionalization, which merely unites select few expert individuals guided by self-interest. In an age in which the liberal democratic states are in the real danger of encroaching conservative anti-intellectualism and rhetorical populism, the professional luxury of mere intellectual, theoretical, or aesthetic appreciation seems to be an exceptionally cavalier offer to younger generations of students, who will eventually be forced to formulate their alternative conceptions of solidarity, cooperation, and collective freedom outside of the university establishment.

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