

Communicating Criticality

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This essay explores communicating criticality as a problem in how we conceive of and speak about critical practice. This focus is distinct from “communicating critically,” which we can view as a performance or intervention in accordance with a particular sense of critique or critical urgency. Pedagogically, the notion of communicating criticality is linked to the assumption that as well as informing students and others about traditions of critique, and giving them a sense of its political importance, we should seek to foster the ability to evaluate different forms and styles of critique beyond an assessment of counter-arguments. In order to achieve this, we need to think about criticality, forms of critical practice, and reflect on the nexus between communication, critical theory and performance. This essay begins with a discussion of the state of “being critical” and then goes on to develop and elaborate a concept of criticality. Criticality relates to the way a critical perspective defines or figures its own ground of intervention, or the way it sets up and constructs the problem to which it seeks to respond. Being attuned to criticality is about being aware of the way different approaches figure critical theory and practice, and what it means to be critical. In this sense the concept of criticality underpins a highly relational notion of the politics and ethics of criticism and critique.

As though making a criticism or critique is not hard enough, one of the most challenging tasks faced by communications scholars and educators is communicating ideas *about* being critical. They are not alone in this challenge, which is shared by others across the humanities and social sciences. But I would suggest that it is experienced more harshly in this discipline area due to the diverse and interdisciplinary nature of the various inter-fields of communication, a tendency to demarcate and segment it (including the separating out of issues of teaching from that of research), and its particular focus on communication. Although a challenge, it is one frequently met with conviction, as the aim is to change and hopefully improve the world in some way.

Critical theory and practice often make harsh demands on communication. But the moment one attempts to place a question mark besides the notion of critical theory or practice at hand, things become even more demanding in terms of the communicability of what is said. Frames begin to shift. Perceptions of doubt or uncertainty can cloud matters. The question mark is important, however, because it represents a gesture of reflection on the identity of critique. It provides a way of not fully closing the space of the critical. It also allows us to explore the constitutive aspect of critique: the way every approach constructs and frames its object and its purpose, and imagines a field of criticism.

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Date submitted: 2006-07-11

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In what follows I purposefully do not define media and communications practice per se, nor judge what is or isn't a properly media and communications practice. This is a task that would take me far from my main topic. Perhaps against scholarly expectations I won't begin this piece by delineating an object (a history of critical media practice in the arts, for example), or overview of a body of literature (the latest critical theories). I purposefully resist distinguishing between "mediated" communication, "mass media" communication, or "interpersonal communication" and seek a notion of criticality applicable in relation to all of them. While "media" is a term more conventionally understood in terms of broadcast and electronic media, "communications" in this paper remains a term that is open to activation and actualization in a number of different ways, depending on the approach taken, which might range from the study of communication and meaning, to convergent digital media, to strategic communication. The reasoning behind such disclaimers is that this essay seeks to define a notion of criticality that is not dependent on any particular disciplinary context or base. This is not an appeal to transcendence or neutrality, but more a recognition that critique is always topographically related, and should in this sense have an "open" relation to the conceptual and disciplinary terrain surrounding it.

My starting point is the very state of "being critical." "Being critical" can be conceived in numerous ways: in relation to competency in a core skill, adeptness in an approach, or political commitment. It can be imagined in different dimensions (spatially, temporally, self-reflexive), on planes that intersect those dimensions (aesthetic, textual, subjective, disciplinary), and situated in a variety of discourses (public sphere, classroom). Being critical is an articulated state, constituted through the drawing together of presuppositions, statements, positions, organizations, bodies, technologies, practices, and the perceptions of others. There are numerous ways of being critical, but a certain kind of singularity or actualization is achieved through performance. Over time, through a process of normalization, particular forms of critical practice emerge, achieve stability and become institutionalized. Being critical has its cultural aspects. In some cultures it is sanctioned by tradition, in others constrained by convention and policed, and as a result cross-cultural misunderstandings around critical traditions and gestures are not uncommon.

Numerous pedagogical practices support the effort of institutionalizing critique across broad domains of cultural and social analysis, race theory, postcolonial theory, queer theory and gender studies. I cannot focus on all of these critical and disciplinary positions here, but to take my own teaching area of "media and communications" as an illustration – and I am aware that this entity can mean different things in various national contexts, let alone across departments – this effort might involve introducing students to a particular body of critical theoretical literature (Birch, 1989), the task of philosophizing or theorizing more broadly, a process of critical reading, or undertaking what Jansen calls speaking "truth to power" (2002, p. 1). It might involve inviting students to reflect on the nature of video "practice" (Wayne, 1997). In accordance with this educational task different scholars attempt to elaborate on the nature of "critical communications research" (Lazarsfeld, 1941), foster self-reflexive questioning, promote a "media-literate critical perspective" through the study of how the mass-communication process works (Campbell, Martin &

Fabos, 2004, p. 10), and investigate the dominant paradigms or traditions that make up critical communications studies (Gitlin, 1978; Hardt, 1992; Schiller, 1996).¹

All of this creates an issue for any study of critical theory, or analysis of the "space" of criticality. Critical theory is not singular and the space of criticality is itself not uniform. It is plural and topologically complex. In terms of the task of communicating critically, this multiplicity does not represent any special difficulty. Acknowledging the diversity of positions and plurality of theories is in one sense a hallmark of good scholarly/critical work. But our focus here is on "communicating criticality." And this focus does present a difficulty, as it names a complex problem for those who wish to talk about the foundations of critical work without laying down fixed foundations. Or for those who wish to "speak with many tongues" and discuss critical theory, and the communication of critical approaches, including critical approaches to communication, at the same time (if indeed these things can be separated out).

Pedagogically speaking, this discussion of critical practice is linked to the assumption that as well as informing students about traditions of critique, and giving them a sense of its political importance, we should seek to foster the ability to read and evaluate different forms or styles of critique beyond an assessment of counter-arguments. This involves a shift in what we might term learning outcome. Within some approaches, the learning outcome might be a normative or prescriptive notion of critical understanding. In others, it might be a broad ideal of self-reflexivity. The concept of criticality opens up a different requirement, however, of encouraging students to question the received frame within which critical practice is presented, and to explore the links between different ideas of critique, the performance of those critiques, and ways of being critical. In order to meet this requirement, I suggest that we need to think about criticality, and ways of communicating criticality. If, for Latour (2004, p. 246), the critic is "not the one who debunks, but the one who assembles ... the one who offers the participants arenas in which to gather," then the conjoining of communication and criticality becomes a significant concern. Thinking about communication and critical education through this framework introduces its own challenges. Whereas critical education can take the form of training in a particular critical philosophical approach or method, or raising awareness of the politics of different cultural shifts and trends, this framework encourages us to see criticality as a "content" with historical and performative dimensions, which we interact with in different ways. Or alternately, as a space of possibility, generated through different forms of discursive, rhetorical, conceptual and political work, that supports different kinds of actions.

This essay is not intended as an up-to-date survey of critical theory, the latest developments, or to provide an overview of the state of criticism in any particular country. Our interest is in communicating criticality as an intellectual problem. The concept of criticality allows us to focus on a performative aspect of critical practice. While I acknowledge the importance of particular critical formations such as feminism, critical race theory or queer theory or postcolonial theory, my primary aim is to develop a broad concept

¹ For Hardt, the "critical" relates to the "rise of social criticism as it emerged from the nineteenth century with the advancement of science and the effects of industrialization" (1992, p. x). But as well as seeing the critical in terms of a "scientific approach to solving social problems," Hardt posits a notion of critique "inherent in the idea of democracy" which he defines as "thinking about freedom and responsibility and the contribution that intellectual pursuits can make to the welfare of society" (p. xi).

of criticality rather than elaborate it in relation to a particular critical position. Nor does this essay seek to situate critical theory within a particular area or sub-segment of the field of communications such as the “philosophy of communications” (see Anderson & Baym, 2004) – which could be done but which would potentially leave criticality “boxed in” by a logic of segmentation that often impacts on our understanding the field. My aim is to open up a space for consideration of a concept of criticality that underpins a highly relational notion of the politics and ethics of criticism and critique. Criticality is multi-faceted. It relates to the way a critical perspective defines its own ground of intervention, or the way it sets up and constructs the problem to which it seeks to respond. Being attuned to criticality is about being aware of the way different approaches figure critical theory, and what it means to be critical.

This essay does not directly seek, either through a critique of theory or a more optimistic gesture, to find new directions or vocations for critique. Indeed, this today forms something of a minor literature in itself, backed up by symposia and conferences debating the future of “Theory.”² Nor does this essay set up critique as a philosophical mantle to which different theories aspire. In this essay, as part of an exploration not only of “the critical” but how we construct it, I want to take up the broad task of exploring this concept, criticality.

We can take up this task in a number of ways, and I shall mention two before outlining the approach adopted below. Firstly, we can examine how the problem of communicating criticality requires some analysis of what we mean by “communication,” the extent to which – in breach of the classic idea/sign distinction (Derrida, 1986) – “messages” are transformed by their mode of “carriage”. In this essay, modes of critique are not held separate from concepts of communication. There is, rather, an interplay between notions of communication and modes of critique (we shall explore this interplay in more detail below). While some writers have sought to rethink critique around notions of communication and informationalization, the approach taken here is not grounded in a notion of the communication age or “information society” or information order (see Lash, 2002). Noting vibrant developments in philosophizing about communication my approach focuses on critique as a practice of communication, involving norms of communicability, techniques of persuasion, and pedagogies.

Secondly, we can explore how the concept of criticality involves developing and expanding a notion of critical practice. Here, “critical practice” is conceived of as a strategic operationalization of a broad understanding of critical theory (“broad” in the sense that it is not restricted to post-structuralist, Frankfurt School, or pragmatic approaches, queer theory, post-colonial theory).³ While critical practice can be discussed solely in terms of theoretical practice (see the discussion of Belsey’s work below) or, in Butler’s formulation, a “critical approach to language” (Butler, 2003, p. 199), we should mention two other senses of the term. In the first, critical practice is part of a broader examination of what we can call, after Bourdieu, the “logic of practice” which organizes fields and activities (see Bourdieu, 1990). In the second, critical practice is not restricted to the academic domain, and can arise from bringing theoretical and philosophical ideas into proximity to media practice. This media practice might be performed by others (an artist, activists, students, or members of “the media”), or ourselves. It might involve the production of

² See for example the collection of papers in the Winter 2004 issue of *Critical Inquiry*.

³ This is not to discount the potential for operationalization going in the opposite direction.

academic/scholarly texts, artistic objects, commercial/industrial texts, products, or programs, or hybrids of these.⁴

Dwelling on this critical media practice further, one way of characterizing this kind of this practice is in terms of the translation of particular insights from critical theory into situation-specific insights about critical practice (conceived as a critically-inflected or informed approach to media or communications practice). If indeed it is possible to distinguish between critical theory and practice in this way, it becomes possible to speak of a process of translation from critical theory *into* practice (and importantly vice versa). Defined against the background of this “process” of translation, critical practice can be viewed as the site of localized, pragmatic negotiations between philosophical positions and social, professional, industrial, commercial, or medium-oriented commitments. As a strategic operationalization, critical practice can be seen as a fragile construct; fragile because it depends on particular norms, conditions, and relations, demanding in itself an approach attentive to criticality, and different ways of being critical. This essay leaves the task of fully exploring the criticality of critical media practice for another occasion. Although, in the final section I will explore in a preliminary way how one prominent idea of critical practice relates to media practice.

The preferred manner in which the concept of criticality will be pursued in this essay is by examining selected examples that either explore the institutional conditions of critical practice, or illustrate different figurations of critical practice and what it means to be critical. The examples are: Jonathan Culler’s essay “Literary Criticism and the American University” (1988), Nancy Fraser’s essay “What’s Critical about Critical Theory” (1989), Judith Butler’s essay “Values of Difficulty” (2003), and Catherine Belsey’s *Critical Practice* (1980). Any selection of texts can be criticized on the basis of disciplinary affiliation or fidelity, datedness, or representativeness of the state of a particular debate or field of endeavor – and this selection is no exception. The examples span social, literary, cultural and communication theory. Furthermore, they are works of commentary on other primary works. My criteria of choice here are that each of these works of commentary both figure and analyze the figuring of critical practice and criticism as a communicative act. As such, they open up a space in which criticality can be considered from different viewpoints. That three of my texts come from the 1980s is a sign of the intense interest in critical practice in that period and which resulted in a program for critical practice best exemplified in Belsey’s work. Returning to this work today provides an opportunity to learn from it, and rethink criticality either away from or alongside this program. And here, guiding my choice of texts, is a desire to illustrate the way a particular idea of critical practice can become dominant, one that views critical practice as a practice within/of criticism. Culler’s essay in particular is useful in showing where this idea comes from and where it leads, and how it is part of a professional/industrial system fuelling critical work.

⁴ Here, the definition of media practice is intentionally broad, since I am aware that used only to refer to electronic media, the term can obscure the point that all expression, including orthodox scholarship, relies on some medium. Rather than pursue a full discussion of criticality in media practice and media texts in this essay, media practice will be acknowledged as a broader topic, but used chiefly as a limit term in our discussion of criticality and critical practice.

The Institution of Criticism

A preliminary task in the discussion of critical practice is to delineate it. Is it the practice of critical theorists? The elaboration of a political program? Or the practice of criticism as defined by a particular conjunction of theory, critics and literary texts? How do disciplinary contexts influence our ideas of criticism and critique? While this task of delineation is carried out throughout this essay we can begin by drawing attention to the institutional forms of criticism/critical practice. These give some guide to the horizon of expectations within which we might begin to construct our ideas about critical practice, and the relationship between critical theory and critical practice. Jonathan Culler's "Literary Criticism and the American University" (1988), serves as an exemplary text for this kind of approach.⁵ It also has special relevance here in that it highlights the centrality of literary studies to particular, and for some now dated, forms of critical practice (which is not to deny the significance of non-literary forms of critique). Culler's work helps us appreciate historically important forms of "Theory" and critical practice still in circulation. While literary criticism and communications may diverge in departmental trajectories – although this divergence takes different forms in different countries – they also converge in some respects around "interpretive" traditions and techniques.

Any focus on the institutionalization of criticism needs to remain attentive to differences in national context. In this sense, Culler's text offers a map of the institution of criticism specific to the United States up to the 1980s. Culler charts a range of shifts in the institution of criticism and the institutions in which criticism can be found in the American context. These include, from the 1920s, "the displacement of public criticism by academic literary criticism," resulting in a professional impetus behind criticism, leading to the displacement of historical scholarship ("once the main form of professorial writing about literature") by interpretive criticism (1988, p. 3).

Building on these changes was the rise between 1930 and 1950 of a "New Criticism" that treated literary texts as unified aesthetic structure – characterized by the interplay of image, connotation, irony, ambiguity and paradox – rather than historical objects. For Culler, the New Criticism gained a central place in general aesthetic education due to its emphasis on reading as the construction of perfect "intrinsic" interpretations of works, and the fact that it did not involve heavy historical, contextual, "extrinsic" knowledge. While variations in the way New Criticism was practiced exist, its emphasis on the act of reading was well aligned with the creation of certain kinds of aesthetic subjects/citizens. The focus on reading and interpretation also meant that it was a useful seeding bed for the development of "theory," supported by "extended reflection on language and meaning" and "richer conceptual frameworks than ... New Criticism for expounding the complexity of literary signification" (Culler, 1988, p. 15). Culler sums up the relations between the two developments in the following:

[Theory's] ... engagement with irreducible complexities of language provides a link with the New Criticism that has facilitated the American reception of these interdisciplinary theoretical discourses, even though they challenge the specificity of the aesthetic and

⁵ Of course, Culler's is not the only approach possible (see Eagleton, 1976, p. 20).

eschew the New Critical project of demonstrating the organic unity of individual works.
(Culler, 1988, p. 16)⁶

Within "theoretical criticism" itself Culler distinguishes between several strains of the enterprise: narratology, reader response theory, feminist theory, psychoanalysis, Marxist analysis with a psychoanalytic/structuralist inflection, deconstruction, and new historicism.

Symposia, visiting professorships, conferences, associations, and new journals, all crucially underpin these developments in the space of criticism. At the same time, dynamic changes to higher education form a key economic support. Here, "the extension of university education to a higher percentage of the population and the enormous growth in student numbers" is important (Culler, 1988, p. 25), leading to an expansion in the number of departments, and also demand for more teachers of literature. What Culler sees as an over-expansion in the graduate area further stimulated the production of critical writing (1988, p. 27). It also led to a more intense focus on particular aspects of criticism, issues of critical or scholarly method.

In Culler's account, this institutionalization of criticism has a decisive link to an impulse towards professionalization. The focus on criticism, on research and publication, on expertise in criticism, becomes distanced from the work of administration and teaching. Demands for serious publication increase, especially as a requirement for hiring. "Critical writing, which is the medium of exchange in this system, thus becomes central to the professional situation and identity of teachers of literature" (Culler, 1988, p. 30). And in Culler's account it is a system, one that interacts with department structures to forge new areas of interest (film, women's studies, cultural studies). As the university becomes seen as a producer of knowledge rather than just a transmitter of cultural heritage (Culler, 1988, p. 33), this system takes on industrial aspects (supported by publishers), but also generates its own sense of innovation. The "now dominant model of the university as a site for the production of knowledge ... [alters] the function of criticism and the role of critical invention" (Culler, 1988, p. 36).

The institutionalization of criticism gives critical work a particular character. Two aspects discussed by Culler are worth highlighting here, mainly because they raise issues to do with the communication of criticism.

⁶ Although there is not the space to elaborate fully on it here, Culler's observations about theory give rise to a distinct idea of what we might term the criticality of theoretical work. "Indeed, theory should be understood not as a prescription of methods of interpretation but as the discourse that results when conceptions of the nature and meaning of texts and their relations to other discourses, social practices and human subjects become the object of general reflection. Theory does not give one an interpretive method which one then applies to a literary work so as to infer from it meanings of some other order. On the contrary, what literary works have to tell us often bears crucially on theoretical questions" (Culler, 1988, p. 22). And in this sense, Culler posits a dynamic, productive relationship between the work (which offers a contribution to the process) and the criticality of theory.

The first has to do with pedagogy. While the professionalization of criticism leaves it in a distanced position in relation to teaching, Culler argues that criticism has adopted a focus on interpretation suited to a “mass” higher education system catering to large number of students, especially those forms of criticism focusing on reading, the reader’s experience of the literary work (Culler, 1988, pp. 36-37). “The pedagogical context in which criticism is produced has encouraged theories and methods that help generate interpretations, for, ever since the New Criticism, discussion of the meaning of a work is the form that literary instruction most commonly takes” (Culler, 1988, p. 37). Between New Criticism and theoretical criticism, the focus shifts from a single reading sanctioned by the canon to a plurality of readings contesting the canon. At the same time, in a development of significance for the area of media and communications, the kinds of texts considered valuable to criticism diversified, extending out to film, television and popular media – at times leading to border disputes between departments or disciplines over who should speak about particular media, forms and formats.

The second aspect has to do with criticism as a site of innovation. Culler notes a lack of connection between contemporary criticism and a recognized literary avant-garde. Criticism is no longer simply the practice of elucidating a modernist avant-garde but a discourse of “innovation and defamiliarization” in its own right (Culler, 1988, p. 39). Such a discourse places unique demands on communication, especially for critical work, which in one of its identities begins to assume the standing of an quasi-experimental practice: critical practice as a practice of invention within/of criticism.

Figuring Critical Theory

For Kant, “Our age is, in especial degree, the age of criticism, and to criticism everything must submit.” Kant’s reflection on the powers of reason, his analysis of the sources and conditions of critique, loom large in any discussion of this kind. Significant here is Kant’s concept of “pure” reason: focusing on critique of the faculty of reason, and the question of “what and how much can the understanding and reason know apart from all experience,” or independently of all experience. Also important is the sense that his work was a *propaedeutic*, a preparatory study or instruction, to the system of pure reason that sought to clarify and correct our mode of knowledge. In this sense critique is a pathway to transcendental philosophy (1963, pp. 9-12, 59). But “the critical” is also a diverse area, encompassing a range of sites of contest such as race, gender, sexuality, cultural identity (see Jansen, 2002). “Criticism” can have diverse disciplinary affiliations, from philosophy, to literature, to social thought. Alongside criticism, in its diversity of institutional forms, we can situate the Marxist critical theoretical tradition, including (but not restricted to) the Frankfurt School, as well as that of the Chicago School and the work of figures such as John Dewey and Robert Park.⁷ Starting points are important here, as a particular notion of critical theory can condition the field of critique in particular ways (that is, make some issues urgent (critical) and others not, as well as determine which writers are key thinkers). As a starting point in examining criticality, we should be attuned to the variety of ways that different approaches figure the critical, take it as a vocation, or

⁷ For Hardt, pragmatism offers a critique of society. “In this sense, critique was to be understood as the flowing from expert deliberations, providing guidance through knowledge for an informed public” (1992, p. 34).

starting point.⁸ Indeed, the possible variation in approaches can be quite substantial. Take two articulations or figurings of the critical, one by Nancy Fraser and the other by Judith Butler.

In an essay "What's Critical about Critical Theory" (1989), Fraser looks at gender as a blind-spot in critical theory (specifically the critical theory of Habermas). She begins with a definition of the critical. Fraser outlines a precise vocation and role for critical theory. She makes a claim for a link to history, an epistemic link to the "struggle and wishes of the age":

To my mind, no one has yet improved on Marx's 1843 definition of critical theory as 'the self-clarification of the struggles and wishes of the age.' What is so appealing about this definition is its straightforwardly political character. It makes no claim to any special epistemological status but, rather, supposes that with respect to justification there is no philosophically interesting difference between a critical theory of society and an uncritical one. However, there is, according to this definition, an important political difference. A critical social theory frames its research program and its conceptual framework with an eye to the aims and activities of those oppositional social movements with which it has a partisan, though not uncritical, identification. The questions it asks and the models it designs are informed by that identification and interest. Thus, for example, if struggles contesting the subordination of women figured among the most significant of a given age, then a critical social theory for that time would aim, among other things, to shed light on the character and bases of such subordination. It would employ categories and explanatory models that revealed rather than occluded relations of male dominance and female subordination. And it would demystify as ideological any rival approaches that obfuscated or rationalized those relations. (Fraser, 1989, p. 113).

Note the layers of critical theory here, from Marx through to Habermas and Fraser. In this passage, Fraser returns to Marx in order to link critical theory explicitly to the "aims and activities of oppositional social movements." To protect against a form of intellectual political capture she details a "partisan, though not uncritical, identification." And in doing so, even though she explains that "the questions it asks and the models its designs are informed by that identification and interest," Fraser draws on an important figuring of the critical, a negative notion of the "not uncritical," an approach that can look beyond identifications and particular framings of a research program. Finally, she details particular performative gestures of critical theory: acts of revelation rather than occlusion, demystification as opposed to obfuscation or rationalization.

Turning to the example from Butler, in an essay "Values of Difficulty" (2003), published in a collection that looks at the standing of academic writing in the public arena, she explicitly explores the meaning of the critical. Butler's essay is of interest to us here because of the way it considers the link between language, and thinking about communication to critical theory. She writes, "But is it not part of a critical practice, a critical approach to language and, indeed, to rhetoric, to ask what constitutes the norms

⁸ Lash, for example, is very active in distinguishing between *ideologiekritik* and informationcritique as well as aporetic and dialectic traditions (Lash, 2002, pp. 8-9).

of communicability, and what challenges them ...?" (2003, p. 199). If Fraser's approach to critical theory is primarily socio-political, focusing on relations, Butler's is epistemological, discursive or linguistic, focusing on norms; although clearly there is significant overlap between the two. Interestingly, both approaches draw on critical theorists for whom communication and media are important. Indeed, a challenge for any educator interested in communicating criticality is to highlight the importance given in much critical theory (from Derrida to Habermas) to a critique of communication. For Butler in particular, critical theory is inseparable from a criticism that thinks about language and norms of communicability.

Having highlighted the place of thinking about communicability in critical theory, Butler addresses different figurations of the critical, different ways of thinking about communication and the critical. She highlights a perspective for which critical theory should speak the language of the popular, and be intelligible. At the same time, there is an alternate view, which she associates with Theodore Adorno, that has a "deep distrust of communicability," a suspicion of received and common understandings of language.

Within literary modernism the point of undoing conventional forms of communication was to produce the new, and the new had a value, since it seemed to signify cultural progress and the possibility of renewing a sense of experience out from under the shackles of technology. Part of what critical theory did in its pre-Habermasian phase was to transpose this insight of literary modernism into social theory. Thus, the question of language became central to the rethinking of social reality. Language not only communicates to us about a ready-made world but gives us a world, and gives it to us or, indeed, withholds it from us by virtue of the terms it uses. Then the critical question emerges: what world is given to us through language... (Butler, 2003, p. 202).

Based on this view, ways of speaking need to be disturbed to "make people think critically" and disturb "the resource of language." This perspective worries that "the language of the popular is that of an uncritical consumerism" (Butler, 2003, p. 201). Critical work "must actively trouble the received conventions of language, risking a certain 'isolation' from common-held standards of linguistic satisfaction" (Butler, 2003, p. 202).

Butler acknowledges that there exist a number of viewpoints that fall between the positions she outlines. She is also careful to distance herself from Adorno's elitism, and the way he downplays the subversive potential of popular culture. From this base, however, Butler finds a different figuration of the critical in Adorno's work.

But is he also making another point about criticality that might be separated from his claim about consumer culture? Is he telling us that the moment in which understanding is challenged and risked is the one in which a critical perspective emerges? Is this not the moment, the occasion, when I come to recognize that it is my ignorance, and my tenacious hold on ignorance, that dictates what I will come to call communicable knowledge? What does it say about me when I insist that the only knowledge I will validate is one that appears in a form that is familiar to me, that answers my need for

familiarity, that does not make me pass through what is isolating, estranging, difficult and demanding? (Butler, 2003, p. 203).

What Butler highlights here is not difficulty for difficulty's sake, but the relationship between truth and the presentation or articulation of truth, and the conditions of communicability under which we assume it possible to convey truth. "If I call 'communicability' that moment in which I already know the convention by which communication takes place, what risk of difference do I foreclose, and what form of cultural parochialism do I protect?" (Butler, 2003, p. 204). There are two key points underpinning her discussion here. Firstly, that language, communication, is never fully our own, that ideas don't pre-exist signs or writing – a familiar insight of post-structuralist work (see Derrida, 1986, pp. 309-318). Secondly, she raises the issue of how truths are communicated from one context to the next, the dangers of assuming universal translatability of statements when communication brings us into proximity "with the limits of our own epistemological horizon, a limit that challenges what we know to be knowable, a limit that can always and only function as the radically unfamiliar within the domain of ordinary language, plain speaking, common sense" (Butler, 2003, p. 206).

Evaluating Criticality

In another part of her essay, Butler examines an exchange between Adorno and Walter Benjamin in relation to the latter's manuscript on Baudelaire. Having identified a distinctive form of criticality in Adorno's work where understanding is challenged, and the familiar gives way, Butler shows how Adorno's review of the manuscript castigates Benjamin, insisting that he conform to precepts of critical theory, and a particular conception of theoretical work.

We do see him [Adorno] laying out the stakes of dialectical materialism, however, that takes the process of mediation to be central, that thinks the truly theoretical operation is the one that relates the particular to the social totality through this mediation, fully conceptualized, according to the norms of conceptualization according to which Adorno subscribes. (Butler, 2003, p. 211).

Here, the questioning of norms of conceptualization and conditions of communicability give way to critical theory as program and model. A gap between criticality as an epistemologically uncertain state and critical theory as a regime for epistemological certainty emerges. In other words, a disjuncture opens up between critique as a bearer of norms and truth and criticality.

Incorporated into the task of tracing how different approaches figure critical theory, giving it form and function, there is I would argue the task of locating and evaluating criticality. Criticality is that aspect of any approach or theory that imagines the work of critique, or sets out what it means to be critical in relation to an object, problem, or competing approach. Criticality has to do with imagining the limits of what is or is not critical. It relates to how critical approaches imagine acts of "critical" reading and writing, and the way critical approaches take up politics in some ways and not others. Criticality is not so much the task of critiquing the critique, as teasing out the presuppositions of a critical/intellectual performance, and its identity conditions. So criticality has to do with the specific identity conditions of what a particular

approach regards as critical, but also the broader way in which acts of criticism arrange discourse around them (set up opponents, imagine conflict or violence, think about the past or future, etc.).

A central aspect of criticality has to do with how a critical approach relates to the world. This includes its conditions of communicability and norms of conceptualization as explored by Butler. Criticality is an evaluative term through which to judge or measure intellectual/critical performance, but is also an analytical concept through which to open up the conditions of communicability and ethics of a critical approach. The overlapping of these two functions goes some way toward explaining why criticality is such a difficult concept to deploy in communication education. It forces us to think in terms of the figuring of the field and discourse, as well as the conditions of performance and communicability. The focus on communicability interjects, over and over again, into any judgments or conclusions made and the expression of those judgments.⁹ This dynamic perhaps provides the basis of a distinction between “communicating critically,” a phrase we might use to indicate a certain competence in the use of critical concepts in communication, and “communicating criticality,” a formulation that puts itself at the limits of how we comprehend the critical activity, that questions the norms of communicability and the identity of “critical” work, that involves turning critical work back onto itself, but which also can inform our sense of that work.

Criticality, to the extent that it is a concept directed at the identity conditions of critique, exists on the edge of epistemological certainty in relation to “the critical.” Using the example of Adorno and Benjamin, one can speak of forms of criticality that evade the grasp of modes of critique, or are dominated by the latter. This liminality does not mean that criticality is worthless as an evaluative term. It leads one to appreciate the nuanced and contingent way in which critical approaches adopt positions and perform critical work. In some respects, the concept highlights an integral aspect of the critical, which is the way it conceives of itself as a particular act, and presents itself at a particular time. Here, the etymological link between critique and crisis is instructive. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*), the Latin “crisis” is linked to the Greek word for “discrimination, decision.” Thus the “critical” is often linked to the crisis or turning point, or decision point, in some phenomenon (such as an illness or war). Critique gives priority and urgency to particular, necessary concerns. But this necessity, the time of critique, is also constructed. Critical approaches are often “critical,” or in other words “crucial” in the sense they frame crisis in a particular way: they determine key turning points, pathways, timeframes and operations, moments and styles of intervention. For the *OED*, one meaning of the critical relates to “the nature of, or constituting, a crisis ... Of decisive importance in relation to the issue.” Criticality, here, relates to the way intervention is framed as urgent.

⁹ In the case of forms of critical media practice, communicating criticality in a media and communications pedagogic context involves pluralizing the relationship between concepts and practices, and questioning the nature of critical practice itself. And of course, in this epistemologically unstable world, the norms and conditions under which we can define criticality are themselves elusive. For there is the immediate difficulty of choosing one’s interpretive position, an interpretive position that is by definition caught up in the terms of translation and communication.

Critical Practice

What we have found so far is that critical practice – what some people term criticism and others critique or critical theory – today takes particular institutional forms. Within these institutional spaces, critical theory itself is figured in different ways by different approaches. Once we become attuned to the conditions of communicability and norms of conceptualization characteristic of different forms of “critique,” it becomes possible to explore and evaluate different styles or modes of criticality. From here we can begin to consider received understandings of “critical practice,” and how they are shaped by different discourses.

A particularly relevant and well-developed idea of critical practice can be found in Catherine Belsey's, *Critical Practice* (1980), released in a second edition in 2002. This is an interesting text to return to in an essay about communicating criticality for several reasons. Firstly, it is emphatic in its vision and statement of critical practice. Despite being primarily about the reading/interpretive process it makes strong claims about a broad notion of critical practice. Secondly, it is about reading and as communicating criticality makes special demands on interpretation this forms a point of interest. Against the background of what we have said about communicability and criticality Belsey's work can be used as a case study in how one forms a discourse around critical practice. Thirdly, Belsey's work is also intriguing from the viewpoint of critical media practice. On the one hand, Belsey's vision of critical practice is specific to literary analysis. But in another sense it is a form that spans across several spaces of criticism. Our aim in examining this particular idea of critical practice is to examine its unique criticality, but in so doing open up room for other approaches. The intention is, through close engagement with this idea of critical practice, to create space for new possibilities.

What becomes apparent in reading Belsey's work in its form circa 1980 is that her conception of critical practice is an exercise conducted in reaction to a dominant, orthodox, position (what she calls “expressive realism”), and under the auspices of “post-Saussurean” theoretical influences that pick up on the more radical aspects of Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistics. Under expressive realism, “Common sense assumes that valuable literary texts, those which are in a special way worth reading, tell truths – about the period which produced them, about the world in general, or about human nature – and that in doing so they express the particular perceptions, the individual insights, of their authors” (Belsey, 1980, p. 2). By contrast, post-Saussurean theory

proposes that common sense itself is ideologically and discursively constructed, rooted in a specific historical situation and operating in conjunction with a particular social formation. In other words, it is argued that what seems obvious and natural is not necessarily so, but that on the contrary the ‘obvious’ and the ‘natural’ are not *given* but *produced* in a specific society by the ways in which that society talks and thinks about itself and its experience. (Belsey, 1980, p. 3).

Armed with a notion of discourses as continually produced and reproduced, as constructed, Belsey's approach remains highly critical of any simplistic process of expression that conveys truths. In this sense here approach contests the communicability of “truth.”

On the surface, Belsey's account of critical practice appears to be extremely circumscribed and limited to the theoretical realm. Its fusion of an emphasis on the arbitrariness of the sign with its critique of common sense sets criticism up as a space of "innovation and defamiliarization" as Culler puts it.¹⁰ It draws on a concept of critical theory closely linked to the institution of literary criticism. Furthermore, this idea of critical practice is figured in particular ways, through a set of proper names and their projects.

Post-Saussurean work on language has challenged the whole concept of realism; Roland Barthes has specifically proclaimed the death of the author; and Jacques Lacan, Louis Althusser and Jacques Derrida have all from various positions questioned the humanist assumption that subjectivity, the individual mind or inner being, is the source of meaning and of action. (Belsey, 1980, p. 3).

From one perspective then, it is possible to suggest that Belsey's idea of critical practice is based on a putting into practice of a particular theoretical position. Interestingly, she acknowledges some incompatibilities between these authors, but regards these as less important than the production of a "productive critical practice" (1980, p. 55). This practice is comprised largely acts of reading that track down the limitations of realist modes. The focus on realism signals an important disciplinary affiliation to literature in her work (even if the approach to discourse she promotes can be explored in relation to say advertising). This results in an image of critical activity based on identifying "the effects of the limitation which confines 'correct' reading to an acceptance of the position from which the text is most 'obviously' intelligible" (1980, p. 55) and then a gesture to "refuse this limitation, to liberate the plurality of the text, to reject the 'obvious' and to produce meaning."

The criticality of this position is typified by an oppositional stance towards expressive realism, and an alternative view of the relationship between truth and discourse within a social formation, as illustrated in this passage:

In this context the notion of a text which tells a (or the) truth, as perceived by an individual subject (the author), whose insights are the source of the text's single and authoritative meaning, is not only untenable but literally unthinkable, because the framework which supported it, a framework of assumptions and discourses, ways of thinking and talking, no longer stands. (Belsey, 1980, p. 3).

As exemplified by terms such as "untenable" and "unthinkable" this is a critical mode with a strongly defined sense of the limits of discourse, conceived as a "domain of language-use, a particular way of talking (and writing and thinking)." (Belsey, 1980, p. 5).

One task achieved by Belsey's book is that it makes critical practice generalizable. If critical practice relies on quite specific and pragmatic forms of synthesis, the problem becomes how do we make these translations transportable? If it is possible (and desirable) to move beyond translation, and make it generalizable, what are the necessary conditions for that to happen? Looking at Belsey's work, although it

¹⁰ Although the wider applicability of Culler's approach to the UK context needs further discussion.

poses a limit to the transportability of truth and discourse, it invests sufficiently in a view of the arbitrariness of the sign, and a meta-theory of the way truth and discourse go together, to allow it to become an enduring form of "critical practice." Thus, even though Belsey bases her book on a critique of expressive realism it works towards a "productive critical practice," and endures beyond a dependence on "expressive realism." For Belsey, post-Saussurean linguistics "undermines commonsense in a more radical way and provides a theoretical framework which permits the development of a genuinely radical critical practice" (Belsey, 1980, p. 36). This theoretical framework is extremely durable and makes her approach teachable and communicable in certain ways. It is worth noting that Belsey's book is itself a textbook in the area. It operates as a primer in theories of language, of the subject, text and deconstruction.

Earlier, I made the point that a full treatment of criticality and critical media practice will be left for another occasion. But it is worth mentioning briefly in the context of Belsey's work, although I am aware that raising critical media practice through a discussion of critical practice could itself be a concern to some readers. It could be argued that I should have started with media practice or critical arts practice itself, and then developed what Jansen might call a "media-critical" version that begins with the issue of media freedom (2002, p. 16). However, this is precisely what I have sought to avoid, since it would/could involve taking critical theory or critical practice (as well as a particular role for the media¹¹) as a given. And it is this "given-ness" of critical practice that I want to open up to questioning. In this section my discussion on critical media practice is focused on the identity of "critical practice." The idea of critical media practice provides away to question the criticality of "critical practice." The concept of criticality becomes useful here to loosen the links between different concepts, theories, and practices, and approach the performance of critique from a different direction.

From our reading of both Culler and Belsey, a dominant idea of critical practice as a practice within/of criticism emerges where critical practice becomes a space of innovation and defamiliarization. The issue arises in our encounter with Belsey's work of the link between this formal concept of critical practice and media practice. We could say that that Belsey's post-Saussurean notion of critical practice has limited applicability to a broader conception of critical media practice, and that its practice is very criticism-oriented, rather than directed to say media industries or practice. Her work does not seem to be dependent on any particular synthesis of critical theory and media practice. One reason for this may well be that assumes a particular account of medium in her work. "Post-Saussurean theory, therefore, starts from an analysis of language, proposing that language is not transparent, not merely the *medium* in which autonomous individuals transmit messages to each other about an independently constituted world of things" (Belsey, 1980, p. 4). In this passage, Belsey draws on a conception of a medium very much akin to a channel, and autonomous from the content which it transmits. This idea of medium, used as a departure point, leaves little room for engagement with other understandings of the medium.

¹¹ This is not to suggest that an account of criticality should ignore theories of media and social systems. In some respect, it is parasitic on the space opened up by such theories. But the differences and diversities between different accounts of the system lead me to be more cautious about giving up criticality in favor of a theory of the system at this point.

But, even with this understanding of medium in mind, to say that Belsey's notion of critical practice is without value to a broader conception of critical media practice would be to overlook interesting aspects of her work. This is because her theory of discourse, meaning and ideology, promotes attention to "signifying practices," "discourses, myths, presentations and re-presentations of the way 'things' 'are'" (Belsey, 1980, p. 42). Aligned with a concept of ideology and social formation, her analysis of signifying practice allows her to explore the role of language in naturalizing and articulating experience and meaning. Belsey would no doubt argue that a theory of meaning would be an important factor in any critical media practice.

Beyond this focus on signifying practice, Belsey's work holds additional potential for a critical media practice. There are two aspects of her work worth highlighting here. Firstly, although it initially appears as an approach to the analysis of texts, her account of "productive critical practice" ultimately seeks to wrest the literary from a particular commodity form, an image of the "finished product whose value resides above all in its status as an embodiment of the author's genius" (Belsey, 1980, p. 127). While many critics have turned away from a critique of production towards information and consumption, as a counter to a traditional "consumerist" approach to the work Belsey proposes a renewed interest in the work, and notions of "work" and "production." Belsey writes, "as readers and critics we can choose actively to seek out the process of production of the text: the organization of the discourses that constitute it and the strategies by which smoothes over the incoherences and contradictions of the ideology inscribed in it" (Belsey, 1980, p. 129).

Secondly, while Belsey's own notion of critical practice is strongly intertwined with the practice of criticism, and interested in the work of literature, there is a broader account of practice informing her position. She writes:

But there is no practice without theory, however much that theory is suppressed, unformulated or perceived as 'obvious'. What we do when we read, however 'natural' it seems, presupposes a whole theoretical discourse, even if unspoken, about language and about meaning, about the relationships between meaning and the world, meaning and people, and finally about themselves and their place in the world. (Belsey, 1980, p. 4).

It is here that we can perhaps find the seeds of an account of critical media practice within Belsey's notion of critical practice. But this is also where an account of criticality as presented above can be useful in teasing out her account of practice from within the specific figuration of critical theory she presents in her work, which is in turn dependent on a particular institutionalization of criticism. Belsey's notion of critical practice "gathers" (to use Latour's term) a range of critical concepts together to oppose a notion of expressive realism and common sense, but also to form into a more durable notion of critical practice. But, applying her insight that there is "no practice without theory" to critical practice itself, other configurations of critical practice based around other signifying practices become possible, and this notion of critical practice should not be regarded as immutable.

Conclusion

In our discussion of the institutionalization of criticism, and the figuration of different ideas of critical theory and critical practice, a close relationship between thinking about communication and thinking about critical theory has become apparent. It is this relationship, I would argue, that underpins both the difficulty, but also the most intriguing aspect of communicating criticality.

The link between critical theory and thinking about communication gives rise to an understanding of critique and critical practice as a performance. The figuring of critical theory is an important aspect of this performance. Part of this figuring involves negotiating traditions of critical thought, but also includes delineating particular "objects," "regimes" or "orders" that will come in for attention.¹² These entities might define the limits of that critique, condition that performance, become part of a field of dependency: in other words, shape criticality. For example, if an approach consistently sees itself in opposition to another approach, or scapegoats a particular approach, then these gestures are defining aspects of the criticality of an approach. In this context, some appreciation of criticality is an important aspect of critical thinking, primarily as a safeguard to the tendency for critical approaches to become dogmatic, orthodoxies in themselves.

Earlier I raised the specific issue of communicating criticality to students. This poses the question, what of the performance of teaching itself? Linking communication and criticality as we have, teaching cannot remain a term immune from consideration. Certainly, in relation to media "competencies," teaching is a site for linking methods, practices and ideas. It is a practice that itself lays down certain norms of communication that construct the learning environment and the place of critical work within it. For Giroux, "we need a new language of educational and cultural criticism that provides the basis for understanding how different social formations are structured in dominance with specific pedagogical and cultural practices" (Giroux, 1992, p. 200). Here, criticism is basic to understanding the way social formations are structured by pedagogical and cultural practices. However, not disputing the need for a new language of criticism, should not critical practice also be considered a practice (both pedagogic and cultural) constitutive of such formations?

Re-thinking communication education through a notion of communicating criticality is a task that we can only gesture towards here. On one conception, teaching criticality can take the form of reproducing a pre-articulated or pre-packaged set of positions. This (to an extent unavoidable) approach can form a useful introduction to a broader field of critical/political engagement. However, there is a risk of an overly naturalized critical program or landscape emerging. Subverting this naturalization of critical practice, reintroducing the question mark, seems an important aspect of communicating criticality. In this conception of teaching critical values, we are involved in the ethical work of maintaining awareness of different scholarly traditions and possibilities of critical practice, and also an awareness of the variability in and between critical dispositions on the performative level, as well as nurture in students a sense of critical practice as invention.

¹² Here, we can mention Belsey's notion of expressive reality, but also Lash's "communications order" (Lash, 2002, p. xii).

Against a tendency to see theory as the sole "critical" element in critical practice, this essay follows Belsey in suggesting that, like other practices, critical practice has its theories. This essay serves as a preliminary exploration of a concept of criticality through which we can think about and evaluate intellectual/critical performance, or how we "do" critical theory and practice. This is a preliminary study of criticality only, which could usefully be extended to talk about the way different critical approaches adopt a particular (epistemological) relationship to time, to the event, to breaks and ruptures, to revolution, or constitute the link between theory and practice (see Serres and Latour, 1995, pp. 48-49). This essay has also gestured to the importance of a criticality that belongs not to critical theories and theorists, but to texts, and forms of writing and speech, that enact critique in popular media or journalistic contexts.¹³ My main focus here has, however, been on issues of communicating criticality. Criticality is an elusive concept. In the very act of delineating the criticality of one (object) approach, and communicating its sense, the criticality of your own (subject) approach is drawn into the field of inquiry. As Latour notes, "There is no sure ground even for criticism" (2004, p. 227). Self-awareness and self-reflexivity, in this sense, are not guaranteed ways of making criticality transparent. Perhaps it is the case that, while we can trace the outlines of the concept, criticality is incommunicable in certain respects, in the sense that it resides at the limit of communicability of what we do. However, given the extent to which many critical approaches delve into observations about criticality, and the limits of different positions (particularly that of their opponents!)¹⁴, we should perhaps resist framing this incommunicability as a point of failure or futility; but instead see it as a space rich in possibilities in which students evaluate the aspirations of different critical approaches, and interact with the "doing" of critique.

Acknowledgment: I am grateful to Kate Crawford, Chris Fleming and John O'Carroll for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this essay.

¹³ An exemplary text in this respect would be the Australian television series *Frontline*, a satire on news and current affairs, which McKee suggests "has challenged the distinctions between the work of scholarly research and the creation of popular culture to such a degree that it might have rendered obsolete the teaching of university media studies courses about current affairs television" (McKee, 2001, pp. 291, 294-297). In relation to texts, an interesting aspect of Belsey's work is her account of what she calls the "interrogative text," texts which probe issues and social relations, and invite spectators to "reflect on fiction as a discursive practice and the ways in which discourse allows them to grasp their relation to the real relations in which they live" (1980, p. 102). It could be argued that through the notion of the interrogative text Belsey identifies a form of criticality that sits on a different register to the mode of critical practice she develops in the rest of her book.

¹⁴ In "Why has Critique Run Out of Steam" (2004), Latour traces several different gestures of critique.

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