

## Optimistic Criticism: An Ironic Study

*“In broaching the possibility of being, in some way, against self-criticism, we have to imagine a world in which celebration is less suspect than criticism.”<sup>1</sup>*

Ultimately, philosophy is always groundless.<sup>2</sup> At some point in history, someone had a thought. Later, someone else had a different thought, or the same thought (it doesn't matter which). This has repeated for a few thousand years and here we are. No wonder the saying goes: all it takes to be a philosopher is to strongly disagree with someone else. Must we continue this way? Revelling in the overabundant reliance on those before us? “There is no correct philosophy or correct reading of philosophy only more interesting interpolations and the emergence of new forms”.<sup>3</sup>

I saw a shirt with a fun, now forgotten, phrase written on it.

“It must be a reference to something,” my friend casually said to me.

I agreed.

But then, does it?

Am I so enthralled by Baudrillard and Lyotard so as to prove them right so readily? I do not believe so. I advocate a thought without reference. No more should we reach to long dead (mainly white male) writers to validate or confirm our own beliefs. We rely on what Berardi identifies as “Thanatopolitics”, a submission to the (literally) dead object. These thinkers long gone, who could not even begin to imagine our epistemic and techno-ontological state at all. There persist a deferral of expertise. As Les Back notes, everyone is an expert and no one is.<sup>4</sup> All humans are intellectuals, we simply need to unghettoise our definition of intellect. If one has a thought, then one has a thought. It is right, and wrong, and real. One need not call it Hegelian in its form, or colour it in analogies to Nietzsche. You can understand the world best through overinterpretation. That is, the refusal of the singular, single narrative, however compelling it may be.<sup>5</sup>

Criticism can become optimistic, forward-thinking, building on the shoulders of great minds, but no longer glancing back for their validation. If you disagree, disagree proudly and positively, not with a cynical unpicking of their view! Prove your possibility, not their impossibility. We can thus apply the unfixed multiplicity of life upon criticism itself; we can revel in compossibility while giving primacy to the new.

If we can do this, we can embrace the always-already retroactive nature of philosophy and propose positive futures. Philosophy need not be reactionary. We can critique with humanity, distancing criticism from Gaines' prognosis that it “idealises representation and consequently distances the viewer from actuality”.<sup>6</sup> Optimistic criticism offers work that is not parasitic upon its predecessors (or subject), but a separate object, a parallax partner to them. It is an affirmative, mutualistic space,

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<sup>1</sup> Adam Phillips, *Unforbidden Pleasures*,

<sup>2</sup> And will infinitely feed on this groundlessness, just as the processual universe or ourselves do. See the wonderfully concise *Object Oriented-Ontology* by Graham Harman (2017, p.9).

<sup>3</sup> <https://socialecologies.wordpress.com/2018/06/13/graham-harman-a-theory-of-everything/>.

<sup>4</sup> *The Art of Listening*, 9, 12.

<sup>5</sup> Phillips rears his head again, as does Freud's ambivalence to psychoanalysis...

<sup>6</sup> In Fred Moten's blistering *black and blur*, 260.

disturbing the critical distance of an idea or external reality. It is Thelonius Monk dancing.<sup>7</sup> Optimistic criticism is another way to rail against Lippitt's reading of leftist paraplegia, unable to think and critique in new forms and thus doomed to reaction and complaint.<sup>8</sup>

Can art be something other than society structured in dominance? Can we imagine an ante- and anti-aesthetic/political criticism in the interest of social and artistic insurgency?<sup>9</sup>

Dancing is movement at risk. Optimistic criticism is thought at risk, unreliant on technical linguistic obfuscation, unique terminologies or methodologies in a hope to seal its autonomy. It is vernacular; it is open; it is broad and thus again relevant philosophy to the information overloaded age.

It is time to credit the act of criticism with the complexity we credit to ourselves and the subjects of our study. It is time to reveal and celebrate a dialect/ic movement. To insist on the impossibility of critical distance; at least resist it. Or else, "critical distance" must be everywhere – in dance, in art, in poetry, in laughter, in love, in *response*. We cannot affirm it as and when we feel it fits.

*Idle talk, which everyone can snatch up, not only divests us of the task of genuine understanding, but develops an indifferent intelligibility for which nothing is closed off any longer.*<sup>10</sup>

What classifies "genuine understanding"?

*Idle talk is a closing off since it omits going back to the foundation of what is being talked about. ... This closing off is aggravated anew by the fact that idle talk ... holds any new questioning and discussion at a distance because it presumes it has understood.*<sup>11</sup>

Optimistic criticism is, then, an opposite to Heidegger's idle talk; a diffusal (defusal/diffuse) of the cult of "genuine understanding", which we take to be an impossibility.<sup>12</sup> OC's first step is *always* a going back to the foundation, it is a "telling" and thus a discovery, but an opening – of one's thought, and of the subject itself. OC is a strenuous effort – for it will never be easy – to de-distance. Nor do we subscribe to what has been called neo-optimism, a social and economic pressure that arguably led to the Iraq war and financial crisis of 2007-?.<sup>13</sup> There is no onus from the "Like" button; we do not direct debate in the direction of the blandly positive, and enforced, performative enjoyment. Foolish or vapid analyses still exist, but hold innate value in their vapidness. Now cherish this, because it happens so little, Reagan's Russian-based statement: "Trust, but verify" is the message.

Do I owe more to Ruskin than I first thought?

OC speaks its own language; it is a dialect/ic. *It is certainly not by using a minor language as a dialect, by regionalizing or ghettoizing, that one becomes revolutionary; rather by using a number of minority elements, by connecting, conjugating them, one invents a specific, unforeseen, autonomous becoming*<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> A far more exciting study of musical embodied cognition in piano players than Ingrid Monson puts forward with Bill Evans and Keith Jarrett...

<sup>8</sup> See Moten, 117.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 256.

<sup>10</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 163.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> In an OOO sense that each object and recursivity contains its own noumena.

<sup>13</sup> See Bryan Appleyard's dissection: <https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/2015/02/happiness-conspiracy-against-optimism-and-cult-positive-thinking>.

<sup>14</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus*, 106

The port in which your boat is built need not be its harbour. You may fly their flag, but your focus is on the horizon, and on the stars.