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The Limits of Critique

Rita Felski

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Did Critique Become a Thing?

George Porter Thomas

As Slavoj Žižek has pointed out, John Carpenter's 1986 science-fiction film *They Live* is about ideology.¹ The premise is simple: a drifter arrives in a mildly dystopian near future Los Angeles and gradually discovers that the world is secretly run by a cabal of monstrous aliens, disguised as people, who control the population through television and advertising. The film's hero, played by wrestling star Roddy Piper, is only able to see what is really going on through the aid of particular technology for revealing the evil truth behind things: a special type of x-ray sunglasses produced by the beleaguered resistance. These glasses allow him to see who is really an alien monster, and, most importantly, the subliminal messages through which they maintain a distinctly familiar hegemony: "CONFORM", "OBEY", "CONSUME", "STAY ASLEEP" intone this world's magazines, billboards, and television shows in a secret language of control. Of course, in the wake of Adorno, Althusser, and Foucault, et. al., we know that ideology is in fact much more sophisticated than this, but what about those x-ray sunglasses? Don't we still believe we have a pair? Don't we preserve the idea that underneath, inside, or behind power lurks the script of its operation, just waiting to be exposed?

These x-ray specs are the subject of Rita Felski's *The Limits of Critique*. By "critique" Felski has in mind a broad paradigm of textual interpretation: symptomatic reading, reading against the grain, ideology critique, the new historicism, and the various political and identitarian schools, which she brings together under the mantle of Paul Ricoeur's "hermeneutics of suspicion." With this term, Ricoeur is thinking about the big guns: Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud; Felski is thinking about their heirs, especially in the humanities and soft social sciences, where critique has reigned since the rise of

theory in the 1970s. Critique's debt to its continental forebears is clear: it must upend the facile epistemology of common sense; it must be suspicious because its objects of study are inevitably caught up in repression, obfuscation, and power. The text — like the world — must be interrogated, exposed, and overturned.

For Felski, critique is not so much a unified school (à la Harold Bloom's "school of resentment") but a style. Indeed, it is the *only* style: critique is "virtually synonymous with intellectual rigor, theoretical sophistication, and intransigent opposition to the status quo" says Felski (7). "For many scholars in the humanities, it is not one good thing but the only imaginable thing" (8). Pretty much the worst thing you can be is uncritical (9). Critique, described in terms of its actual operation in the world and not its own lofty ambitions, is how academic work is done, a *de rigueur* method which graduate students must learn as part of their professionalization. It is a know-how, a "critical mood" (20), a rhetoric, even a rubric: a set of gestures, gambits, moves, and payoffs we make over and over again. Critique, suggests Felski stingingly, is "less a matter of *taking a stand* than of *assuming a stance*" (132) — a pose, even. As scholars, we are detached, skeptical, vigilant, wary, investigating, self-reflexive, and ironic. Our work is penetrating, iconoclastic, and radical; it speaks truth to power by unraveling power's own inner workings. Critique deconstructs, demystifies, denaturalizes, de-essentializes; it defeats again and again its great enemy: the commonsense world of widespread beliefs about what is obvious or normal or natural, the strangely reusable Trojan horse through which bad power rules the world. The texts we read are either complicit, unwitting dupe-puppets of ideology or heroically subversive, resistant, complexly self-aware take-downs of the system. Either way, as critics, we see through power and reveal it to the world. We make revolutions on the page. By interpreting, we intervene.

Felski largely sets aside the fact that our win-loss record as revolutionaries is not great. Neither is she interested in "the critique of critique" (190) — the circular move of reading between the lines of critique to discover its own contradictions and scandalous complicities with power, thus producing more critique. Instead, she is interested in describing the extent to which critique, which she, of course, grants has been over the course of its reign a paradigm of exceptionally fruitful scholarly endeavor, has "run out of steam," as Bruno Latour (a familiar figure in this book) puts it.² This matters because our sticking to the script is preventing other kinds of interpretation: better attention to affect, to circulation, to the complex networks and entanglements in which texts actually operate across time, to what makes us read in the first place. In proposing what she calls "postcritical reading," Felski thus joins the chorus of recent thinkers who have put pressure on our standard mode of doing business: Eve Sedgwick's work on "paranoid" and "reparative" reading, Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus' controversial "surface reading," the New Formalists and the New Ethicists, Dipesh Chakrabarty's, Wai-Chee Dimock's, and Jennifer Fleissner's forays against historicism, and of course Latour himself, whose skepticism toward

what he calls “the critique” as a paradigm in Western thought goes all the way back to René Descartes himself.

Felski’s take is certainly a bold one.³ Marxist scholars, in particular, will feel attached to critique and defensive of it; many would argue that Marxism simply is critique. The biggest question such readers will ask of Felski’s book is whether we can be Marxist (or socialist, or even political) readers without some form of critique. We are, in short, not used to thinking of critique as a problem. We are used to demanding, like a twenty-six year old Karl Marx once did in a furious letter to the editor of an obscure Parisian periodical, “a ruthless criticism of everything existing.” In a certain view of what it means to be a political intellectual, it is hard to imagine anything more heroic than that. So: what is so bad about critique?

For one thing, it has become trite. Critique has become an “auto-pilot argument” (9); it is played out, kind of boring. In an ironic twist, critique comes quite *naturally* to us now—critique is commonsensical. You know the drill: 1) map out an object against its historical context. 2) Argue that the text is complicit with, resistant to, or subversive of a bad “ism.” Texts are always getting tangled up with bad “isms.” “Isms,” as Ferris Bueller once pointed out, “are not good.” Sexism. Capitalism. Racism. Phallogocentrism. Heteronormativism. Anthropomorphism. Ableism. Critique fights back against “isms.” In critique, writes Felski, “both aesthetic and social worth...can only be cashed out in terms of *againstness*” (17). There are moral stakes involved. In one chapter, Felski compares the critiquing intellectual to a detective, probing the text, like the scene, for clues of the crime. Something is always already fishy: “As a style of academic reading ... the hermeneutics of suspicion knows its vigilance to be justified. Something, somewhere—a text, an author, a reader, a genre, a discourse, a discipline, is always already guilty of a crime” (39). There are all kinds of hidden things that can only be brought to the surface by assiduous interpretation of the clues at hand, and “for the practitioner of critique ... there *are* no coincidences” (88). Close reading has meant interrogation for so long we don’t even think about that metaphor. Is the only way to read texts to see them, under a furrowed Sherlockian brow, as indices of criminality?

Of course not. You can open up any recent issue of *American Literature* or *Critical Inquiry* and see authors revering texts for their complexity and political engagement. But it turns out that this is critique, too: some texts subvert bad “isms” themselves. So, in certain cases, we need not be “suspicious of the text...because it [is] already doing the work of suspicion for us. Critic and work [are] wound together in an alliance of mutual mistrust vis-à-vis everyday forms of language and thought,” says Felski (16). Such texts “fight back” themselves; they too are heroic acts of suspicious reading. In this more nuanced iteration of critique, texts can be both the objects and subjects of critique; they can be shown to be caught up in ideology but rescued by fine-grained ideology critique, all in one deft reading: “Rather than simply being condemned for its sexist or racist beliefs, for example, a film or novel [is] now hailed

as a contradictory knot of ideological tensions, allowing its more ambiguous or even progressive elements to be highlighted” (63). Sure, John Ford’s *The Searchers* is pretty openly racist, but it also involves us in a powerful critique of racism. Sure, *Jane Eyre* is at times a bit rocky in the gender department, but read in a certain way, it is basically *Gender Trouble, avant la lettre*. The circularity is clear: “as critical thinkers, we value literature because it engages in critique!” Felski points out (5). The problem with this approach is a familiar one: it leaves a substantial amount of what makes literature literary by the wayside — we are so busy searching for crimes that we no longer notice what drew us to literature in the first place. Even though we long ago nominally rejected notions of literary value as fusty elitism, a clear hierarchy of value has re-emerged: Toni Morrison is worth reading not because of the way the supple cadence of her prose evokes the overlapping resonance of different registers of time, or the way she tries to create in her dialogue autonomous black vernaculars, but because her novels critique race the way we do — *Beloved* is, as Walter Benn Michaels once put it, a “historicist novel.”⁴ The irony of historicism’s ubiquity is that what we want, most of all, is texts that can be made to endorse (or at least justify) the politics of the English department, circa today. Literary texts give us myriad worlds and times, but what we tend to want from them is an endorsement of our own politics, right now. To use an adjective from our politics, right now, critique is rigged.

I think the heart of the problem with critique has to do with the frame shift involved in moving from analyzing social systems to cultural texts: what worked really well for Marx with the commodity form or Foucault with prison design might not work exactly the same way with lyric poetry or hip-hop. In teaching (rarely a topic that comes up when we talk about theory), modeling critique usually takes the form of telling your students that the way they have been reading — that is, what brought them to your class — is politically heinous. They really identify with the characters in Jane Austen, but that’s a bad way to read, and of course as Edward Said has shown, *Mansfield Park* is compromised by colonialism. They read *On the Road* four times when they were fifteen, carried away into its vision of freedom, but you point out that it is among the most misogynistic books in the canon.

Felski, I am sure, would grant that such critiques have more than a grain of truth to them, but she is focused in the mode of thinking involved in the act of pulling naïve wanderers *out* of the rabbit hole, a mode which we re-enact not only in journal articles, but in seminars, too. As she puts it, with her characteristic whiff of droll irony, “the smartest thing you can do is see through the deep-seated convictions and heartfelt attachments of others” (16). In a time of declining humanities enrollments, perhaps we should occasionally let our students remain entranced by Dickens or, perish the thought, Kerouac. Sure, books take us in, but isn’t that a big part of why we read, to be taken in? Striking through the mask sounds heroic when you are talking about political economy, but a little vicious when you are talking about *Little Women*.

But vicious is probably the wrong word. I am here beginning to critique critique,

beginning to assert that it has become a corrupt thought-system that must be replaced by a new system, one that is not vicious. But this is a temptation Felski urges us to resist. “The danger that shadows suspicious interpretation” she argues, “is less its murderous brutality than its potential banality ... It no longer tells us what we do not know; it singularly fails to surprise” (116). Indeed, critique, which paints itself as the iconoclastic arch-nemesis of common sense, now ironically tends to tell us exactly what we already believe: if a text is transnational, it is good; if it is exceptionalist, it is bad. If a text is heteronormative, it is bad; if it is queer, it is good. The problem here is not so much the politics (queer is good) but the immense temporal arrogance involved in presuming texts or people from other times and places must always be made to conform to the politics of the contemporary English Department. This is a serious problem for critique’s key ally, historicism: it claims most of all historical rigor and ends up telling the stories we, in the present, want it to tell. One of the greatest pleasures of doing historical work is the confrontation with alterity it offers us, but we have become absolutely convinced that we always know better now (that is: in making the past our kind of queer, we actually *un*queer it). Why should this be? As Felski asks: “why... are we so sure that we know more than the texts that precede us?” (159). For that matter, why are we always so sure we know more than was known the past?

Students of Marxism will be particularly interested in Felski’s critique of contextualism, usually seen as part and parcel of the historicist method in literary studies. This is one of the points at which Felski offers suggestions that might be useful to those not entirely convinced by her takedown of critique writ large. History is of course the one thing that usually stands outside of critique, or at least astride it. History is the concrete against which ideas must always be measured, a process of temporal situation whose own temporal situation is usually ignored, a universal prescription about always being particular. Context is the idea that historical change can always be measured the same way: the rendering of history into static “moments” which never actually existed: nobody ever lived in a context.

Felski is quite clear what she thinks about context: “[C]ontext stinks,” she says (151). Again, the problem is that texts are confined to an interpretive duopoly: “conventional” texts reflect their historical moment while “exceptional” texts transcend it — complicity or resistance, yet again (153). The complicity/resistance diptych is particularly damaging in this temporal iteration: context becomes “a kind of historical container in which the individual texts are encased” (155), a set of givens against which the text reacts. Very few literary historicists (a group that includes almost everyone) will entirely accept this claim, but Felski has a point: in the last instance, the Althusserian notion of the “last instance” is in fact a very friendly form of reflection theory, and one which lives on in our need to imagine a text as neatly relating to an often arbitrarily designated context. “History is not a box” declares Felski, intoning against how periodization obscures the very things we look for in a literary text: the ability to transcend, to speak beyond a parochial moment in order

to create something new (154). As Martin Jay has recently written, discussing the work of the philosopher Claude Romano, one of the biggest problems with contextual analysis is that it rarely contains accounts of how *newness* emerges historically; what is interesting about cultural forms is ultimately not the degree to which they stem from their world but the degree to which they change it.⁵ The point is to change it. Does critique still care about that aspect of its objects, or has it claimed all of the radicalness for itself?

The New Historicist blending of text and context — certainly in English departments the dominant vein of critique since the 1990s — does little to reform the problems of contextualism for Felski: in the wake of the end of historical metanarrative, of politically tainted stories about history's broad sweep, we learned to quarantine the past in an effort to keep it untainted. The past becomes a set of amusing (even inspiring) curios locked into airtight boxes: "we are inculcated, in the name of history, into a remarkably static view of meaning, where texts are corralled amidst long-gone contexts and obsolete intertexts, incarcerated in the past, with no hope of parole" (157). Contextualization means that every text is surrounded from the start. As in the favored metaphors of Foucault, this incarceration is complex and sophisticated; it masquerades as a kind of progress, but History is always watching, ordering, determining. The freeze-frame, slice-of-time mode of much contextualist analysis (what Wai-Chee Dimock calls, perfectly, "synchronic historicism") is of course antithetical to what Marx was actually on about: the reproduction of the conditions of production does not happen on its own, and historical materialism is at its most fundamental level about *change*, driven by human activity.⁶ Context, finally, is a fantasy that we can see what really matters about history by freezing it still, when what really matters is how it moves. History, usually appealed to when we try to dereify things, can be reified, too.

Felski cuts a broad swath here, so the next question is pretty obvious: what is the alternative to critique? What else should we do?

As I've already mentioned, critiquing critique is not the answer. Critiquing critique, after all, is what all critique does. It analyzes an anterior regime, resolving its internal contradictions to propose a new, more effective regime. The issue, then, is always the same: "the problem with critique, it turns out, is that *it is not yet critical enough*" (148). In a self-generative manner, a particular critique is married to an exposition of its own inadequacies to create a new, deeper iteration: critique conceives its own critique. Felski's explication of this process reminds me of what Gilles Deleuze calls "buggering":

I saw myself as taking an author from behind and giving him a child that would be his own offspring, yet monstrous. It was really important for it to be his own child, because the author had to actually say all I had him saying. But the child was bound to be monstrous, too, because it resulted

from all sorts of shifting, slipping, dislocations, and hidden emissions that I really enjoyed.⁷

Marx buggers Hegel; Levi-Strauss buggers Saussure; Derrida buggers Rousseau and Plato; Lacan buggers Freud; Althusser buggers Marx; Deleuze buggers Bergson; de Man buggers Derrida. Critique, to return to my opening metaphor, excepts itself at precisely the moments when it purports to use the x-ray specs to look in the mirror. The critique of critique comes not to denaturalize critique (the thing) but to essentialize critique (the act). To bugger Adorno, immanence is transcendence.

One response to critique's self-propagation has been the occasional, almost cyclical, return to local form: the New Criticism (itself a response, we forget, to the "old" historicism), Walter Benn Michaels and Steven Knapp's "Against Theory" (or even, to really push the issue, Paul Feyerabend's *Against Method*) and the more recent New Formalism are examples of this eternal return.⁸ Felski's argues, however, that we need a way of doing literary studies that is neither "ideological" (critique) nor "theological" (formalist or anti-methodological); we need to move past "a reduction of texts to political tools or instruments, on the one hand, and a cult of reverence for their sheer ineffability, on the other" (29). It is the crutch of dichotomized thinking that we most need to move past. Alterity or Power. Form or ideology. Defamiliarization or essentialism. Complicity or resistance. Here the book reaches its most convincing pitch: who hasn't felt pinned in by the infinite reductions of this paradigm, where we must, over and over again, line up texts in to two opposing camps: the camp of reaction versus radicalism, or the camp of textual fetishism, where you are always in danger of being branded with the Scarlet "F" of Cleanthbrooksianism? As if we have only two options: to reify critique or to reify the text.

Felski proposes a third option, what she calls "postcritical reading." This is emphatically not to abandon critique, but, to re-purpose one of its favorite words, to supplement it: "We do not need to throw out interpretation but to revitalize and reimagine it" (10). Felski argues that "there is no one-size fits-all form of thinking that can fulfill all...aims simultaneously" (9). The recipe for postcritical reading thus involves pinches of pragmatism, phenomenology, affect theory, and Actor-Network Theory (ANT).⁹ But at the heart of the idea is a shift in tone, a shift in the rhetoric of textual interpretation: "*We shortchange the significance of art by focusing on the "de" prefix (its power to demystify, destabilize, denaturalize) at the expense of the "re" prefix: its ability to recontextualize, reconfigure, or recharge perception*" (17, italics in original). "Rather than looking behind the text—for its hidden causes, determining conditions, and noxious motives—we might place ourselves in front of the text, reflecting on what it unfurls, calls forth, makes possible" (12). This can sound vague, but it could also be the start of something: could critical theory finally become something *positive*?

The figure of Bruno Latour hovers in the margins of this book like the cavalry in a Western, and he is called in, usually near the end of chapters, in order to drive home

the point that ANT is the solution to whatever problems have been outlined.¹⁰ Given that Felski is such a theoretical polymath, the simplicity of this payoff may surprise some, but its influence will largely depend on the extent to which people buy what Latour and Felski are suggesting: first, is ANT really as different from critique as they claim it is? And second, much more importantly, does ANT offers us a new way to interpret that is actually useful? There is one (rather convincing) version of Felski's use of Latour in which she sounds a lot like a Raymond Williams:

Society does not stand behind and steer human practices, as if it were outside of an ontologically distinct from these practices, akin to a shadowy, all-seeing, puppet master. Rather, what Latour calls the social is just the act and the fact of association, the coming together of phenomena to create assemblages, affinities, and networks. It exists only in its instantiations, in the sometimes foreseeable, sometimes unpredictable ways in which ideas, texts, images, people, and objects couple and uncouple, attach and break apart. (157)

To do ANT, to read postcritically, is to be social again, social in a properly historicist way, social without society, historical without context.

But there is a second, harder register in which Felski, again following Latour, describes texts as “nonhuman actors,” things that make a difference, things that change the world (163). This version of “materialism” is a problem, because ANT, like the rest of the current vogue for things, always runs a substantial risk of sliding into reification. So long as the point is always to consider texts within networks of editors, reviewers, marketers, professors, and readers, the focus on human activity in and through texts is vital. But the moment that texts become actors is the camera obscura moment, when the world is, as Marx said, turned on its head. Uncle Tom, remember, was “the man who became a thing.” It is never good to be a thing, and it usually takes some political unsavoriness in order for a thing to begin to be seen as “acting.” Historical materialism is about processes, not things.

Since we are talking about things, actors, networks, and the material world, there is one more frame of reference that is relevant here: the contemporary university. In a practical sense, critique's failure is its greatest success — as long as English departments fail to actually change the world (a safe bet), critique will never actually “run out of steam.” Perhaps this is the paradox at the heart of critique, the living embodiment of its highly market-driven scorn for the market: the more critique fails, the more need there is for more of it. This might not be accidental or benign. Indeed, critique might ultimately be a kind of substitute for the political action it always dreams it is. Hence the strange line currently walked in most English departments between utopian theory and dystopian practice, wherein a discipline increasingly organized as a brutal neoliberal learning factory staffed by impoverished adjuncts

and graduate students is justified via an enforced focus on the simulacrum of radical politics. In a double irony, the dereification we think we are practicing in our work (a process which is already itself reified) occludes our own increasingly hopeless status as cogs in a machine, as things ourselves.

In this context, the current critical vogue for things, objects, vibrant matter, even something like animism, is hardly surprising. And this paradigm could gel well with Felski's postcritical reading, with its emphasis on non-human actors acting through transtemporal social networks. But the most powerful thing about *The Limits of Critique* is Felski's stinging diagnosis of diagnosis itself. She is right: critique *has* become reified. Everyone from Althusser to our current New Materialists would criticize the following as saccharine nostalgia for a Marxist humanism that never cohered, but whatever: critique is (was?) at its best when it enables us to see that the world is made of sensuous *human* activity. This is not to dismiss the environment or animals or objects, but to insist that the matrix through which we access and interact with those things is a social one, formed of and by human action through time. The missing word is, as always, labor. Labor is the actor *and* the network. Move away from things, from reification, and focus on their making, distribution, framing, and use by people and you will never be too far off the mark. Critique, accordingly, works best, works at all, when we realize that *it is not a thing*; it is not a pair of magical x-ray specs that allows us to diagnose through the symptoms some disease. There is no such pathology, no such thing. The etiology is never unknown: it is always us.

Notes

1. John Carpenter, *They Live*. Universal Pictures, 1987. And Slavoj Žižek. *The Pervert's Guide to Ideology*. Zeitgeist Films, 2012.
2. Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?" *Critical Inquiry* 30 (Winter 2004): 225-248.
3. Because this book is so vulnerable to charges of reductionism and political reaction, it is worth remembering the critical stature and political bonafides of its author. Before we sharpen our knives, we ought to note that the bravest thing about Felski's admittedly sketchy proposals is that they reach not for apolitical interpretation, but for new ways to be political, ways that we need.
4. Walter Benn Michaels, "You Who Never Was There: Slavery and the New Historicism, Deconstruction and the Holocaust," *Narrative* 4:1 (Jan. 1996) 6.
5. Martin Jay, "Historical Explanation and the Event," *New Literary History* 42:4, (Autumn 2011): 557-571.
6. Wai-Chee Dimock, "A Theory of Resonance," *PMLA* 112:5 (Oct. 1997): 1061.
7. Gilles Deleuze. *Negotiations*. Translated by Martin Joughin. (New York: Columbia UP, 1990) 6.
8. Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels. "Against Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 8:4 (Summer 1982): 723-742, and Paul Feyerabend. *Against Method*. New Left Books, 1975.
9. Actor-Network Theory, or ANT, has its roots in Science and Technology Studies, and conjoins the semiotic work of post-structuralism with a focus on materiality and empiricism. As a method in fields from Sociology to Feminism, ANT is distinguished by a preference for description over explanation or evaluation, and by its emphasis on nonhuman actors. ANT sees meanings as arising from complex and ever-changing networks of actors both human and otherwise, instead of from deterministic discourses, paradigms, or structures behind the world.
10. *The Limits of Critique* is itself a model of an ANT method: Felski sets out not to critique critique, not to explain it, but to describe it — "let us look squarely at it," she says, "viewing it as a reality rather than a symptom, a many-sided object rather than a beguiling façade. Let us treat it, in short, as a major rhetorical-cultural actor in its own right" (121).