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Critical Thought, Media and Practice: Introduction

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This conversation originated in a roundtable discussion at the London Conference in Critical Thought (LCCT) in 2016, part of a stream addressing questions around media and the production of critical research in the academy and elsewhere. The discussion attempted to address the question or problem of what is *critical* about critical thought, via a discussion of the media in which we presented work specifically designated as 'critical'.[1] At the time, I expressed the problem as follows: Under what conditions can we call thought 'critical', and what does the defining of thought as critical actually do? As the pieces included below illustrate, to address this question it is necessary to go beyond a simple binary between 'criticality' and 'complicity' and engage with forms of work often subordinated to criticality: namely, exaggeration and experimentation.

As a result of my involvement in LCCT, I came to consider the condition under which work comes to be called 'critical' to be an increasingly vital question. Over time the conference has aggregated a huge body of work under the rubric of 'critical thought'. We have never been prescriptive in defining it, and naturally the idea of criticality is invoked very often in abstracts submitted to the conference. Often it serves as an empty signifier – or maybe as what

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[1] I would like to thank the anonymous reviews for their important contributions to this collection. I am also grateful to London Critical, the panellists and all the attendees who contributed to the discussion, both in the session and afterwards by other means. Special thanks go to Lee Mackinnon, who drew on the work of Karen Barad and Hal Foster, among others, to ask what qualities can be recuperated from and resistant to the privileging of datafication and quantity; and to Alice Corble for her account of "how libraries, both historically and today, are crucial levers for bridging, intersecting and evolving the lines that demarcate the (often illusory) binaries of critical/not critical, form/content, digital/analogue, physical/virtual." Corble, Alice and Mackinnon, Lee. 24 June 2016. Papers presented in the "Publishing Critical Thought" roundtable panel at the London Conference in Critical Thought.

McKenzie Wark might call 'a familiar way of describing something that destroys what is familiar'.[2]

I am not aiming here to assert the banality of claims to criticality. Instead I suggest that we should be interested in the conditions under which work that is called 'critical thought' is produced. How do those conditions produce the effect of criticality? And what forms of criticality are privileged if we don't attend to the conditions of their production?

These are very general questions – to shed any light on them, it is necessary to bring in factors more granular than 'conditions of production' in such a broad sense. So 'conditions of production' need to be considered (at least) in terms of the human and technical infrastructure that underpin the creation of critical work, the specific economic situation of the institution in which that thought is produced, the prevailing political winds and a host of other factors, material or otherwise. Those can be considered the parts of the *assemblage* of criticality – to put it in Deleuzean terms, they are its material components, its content[3] – but we should also consider the parts that may seem harder to apprehend, but which cut across the assemblage all the more sharply for that: the expressions of criticality as they appear in specific disciplinary formations, and the moralising dimension of the term 'critical'.

To illustrate what I think is at stake in this discussion, I examine a controversy that began in 2016 in relation to the discipline of Digital Humanities, which concerned its place in the neoliberal university and the idea of (post)criticality. I use this example to describe how the notion of critical research can be mobilised in the interests of an assemblage of interrelated concepts: disciplinarity, morality and complicity; and I suggest experimentation is a more productive terrain on which to address these questions in light of the digital. I also propose that the focus on those concepts over the consideration of infrastructure and economy can itself privilege a narrow idea of criticality.

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[2] Mackenzie Wark, 'The Sublime Language of My Century', Public Seminar blog, 2016, accessed December 13, 2016, http://www.publicseminar.org/2016/05/the-sublime-language-of-my-century/.

[3] Gilles Deleuze and Feliz Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 88. See Paul Patton, *Deleuze and the Political* (London: Routledge, 2000), 44.

Following this, Ian Rothwell presents an example of a different practice which may help to go beyond criticality in its simple form. Rothwell uses the example of Ian Bogost's online game Cow Clicker to show the value of exaggeration in marking out the limits of traditional forms of criticality online, using the work of Baudrillard and Latour to suggest that questions of failure highlight the limits of our understanding of criticality. Read together, these two articles can help us move towards an understanding of criticality, and its relation to the medium of its production, which suggest an engagement with the critical that is more attentive to the conditions in which it appears and the functions it performs.