

EDITORIAL



Critical Distance

In the context of any attempt to rethink the modalities, possibilities, conditions and limitations of critical thought, the otherwise sober and restrained notion of ‘critical distance’, with all its implications of unhurried reason and mastery, offers a compelling perspective on what may be at stake. The term itself can be understood in several ways. The familiar understanding still stands: it is the distance from an object or event needed for the appropriate sensitiveness, rigour and incisiveness in considering that object or event to be possible. This consideration might take the form of aesthetic appreciation, but more commonly notions of evaluation and judgement are intended. The implication in the case of the latter understanding is that for judgement or criticism to take place, a certain decisive distance is required. This distance need not necessarily be understood as excluding proximity, however. In some instances the *critical* distance might require closeness.

The term also carries other possible connotations that, in today’s world, might be considered no less significant: critical distance could be read as indicating that ‘distance’ is somehow threatened or in crisis – on the critical list, as it were. This interpretation would, in turn, have implications for the more familiar understanding of the expression: if distance is ‘critical’ in the latter sense, is ‘critical distance’ in the former sense also under threat? This invites further speculation on critical distance. For instance, when does distance become critical? A response to this question that is attentive to the different possible understandings of the term might be: ‘When it is most needed and least possible’. And what, in this context, of the various forms of radical disengagement – retreat, indifference and so on – that are increasingly being discussed as strategies for trying to safeguard or re-establish critical distance?

This special double issue of the *Journal for Cultural Research* sets out to explore the critical role distance can play in literature, art, culture, politics and life in general. In the first essay, ‘Skimming the Surface: Critiquing Anti-Critique’, Benjamin Noys traces the genealogy of anti-critique and its interest in surfaces and planes and its suspicion of negation and distance. Against this, he argues in favour of the ambiguity of negation, suggesting that it offers a return to critique, by means of a form of messy but desirable critical distance that eschews any assumption of mastery. Joël Madore, in his essay ‘Disembodied Politics: Commitment and Formal Distance in Rancière’, shows how distance continues to operate in contemporary political theory even when the avowed strategy is one of direct involvement in concrete particulars. This tends to be because of an overriding commitment to an abstract universalism.

Stefan Herbrechter’s essay, ‘Critical Proximity’, investigates the status of critical distance in an age of apparently relentless and ubiquitous proximity. By returning to some of the underlying ambiguities within notions of self-presence, familiarity and identity, Herbrechter attempts to work through the Heideggerian idea of *Ent-fernung* (dis-tancing) to reread Derrida’s own struggle with impossible critical distance and unbearable proximity. Andrea Rossi’s paper, ‘Foucault, Critique, Subjectivity’, focuses on Foucault’s intellectual project by analysing the relation between his understanding of critique and the political conditions of subjectivation out of which it emerged. Rossi’s analysis shows in what way Foucault’s articulation of critique represented an attempt to displace the forms of subjectivation that underpin anthropological thought and the government of the self in the modern age. Drawing on the work of Giorgio Agamben, William Watkin, in his paper, ‘Agamben and the Politics of Indifference’, explores the idea of the signature of poetry

subject to a form of critical distance that might best be characterised as suspensive indifference. In particular, Watkin's article focuses on the relation of indifference to poetic language as such, lineation and, finally, structural rhythm.

In 'Thinking Through Tragedy: Critical Distance and the Law of Genre', James Corby explores forms of distance and distantiating in the experience – classical and popular – of tragedy. Bringing together various theories of catharsis, he argues that the critical distance of tragedy can be understood as establishing the appropriate conditions for thinking. Drawing on ideas of distance and play, Giuliana Fenech, in her essay 'Intermezzo: Play Trajectories in Mixed Reality Worlds', explores the structures and paradigms of mixed reality worlds in order to try to establish how aesthetic illusion is negotiated in the shift from a culture of representation in which art is formed by a fixed perspective which audiences interpret privately, to a culture of participation that presents emergent narratives offering audiences multiple opportunities for interaction with the work and each other.

In 'Laughing Otherwise: Comic-Critical Approaches in Alternative Comedy', Krista Bonello Rutter Giappone looks at how 'altcom' seemed to mark a turning away from irony and ambiguity, in favour of more 'direct' political engagement. She argues, however, that this 'direct' approach does not cancel out critical distance, but rather seeks alternative routes to establish it – namely comic and parodic overstatement, and the problematisation of 'trust'. Concluding the special issue, Neil Badmington in 'The Bothersome Details of the World: Richard Byrd, Little America, and the Problem of Retreat' explores critical distance in the form of 'retreat', looking at Richard E. Byrd's reflections on his time spent alone on the Ross Ice Barrier in Antarctica. What emerges is a compelling perspective on the difficulties of retreating and maintaining critical distance from 'civilisation'.

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