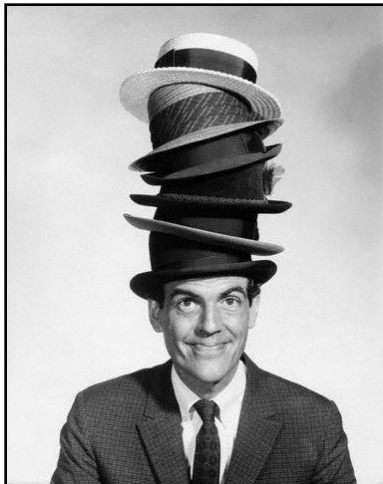Kathryn Bullerdick

Clifford Siskin

Introduction to Advanced Study

01 December 2008

On Criticism and Form–Style and Technology

In an interview with National Public Radio's *Talk of the Nation*, the chief film critic for *The New York Times,* A.O. Scott, muses on the variety of roles a critic must play. He reflects upon some wisdom passed down by his predecessor, Vincent Canby, by referencing the phrase, "C*ritics never wear hats. And would never throw them in the air*" (*Talk*). Scott employs the idiom: "to wear many hats" or "to wear a lot of different hats at once" to describe a balancing act, implying that the professional critic is often asked to embody the "everyman" while touting the wisdom of an expert—thus working as both a "fan" and "the elite." He explains, "it's always my own experience that I'm writing about and my own enjoyment or frustration or lack of enjoyment that I'm trying to explain in a way that's just a little bit more than subjective, because I don't think it's useful for a critic just to say 'I like that.'" Scott continues, "You have to [create] some kind of argument or something that communicates not just how you felt […] but what you thought about it, and what might be interesting for viewers to think about and what they might encounter when they're there" (*Talk*). Employing A.O. Scott's definition of criticism and using "hats" as a metaphor, this essay examines the role of the literary critic, the many ways that the Internet and journalism can influence and affect change in the academy's approach to

"C*ritics never wear hats*. **And would never throw them in the air**"

– Vincent Canby

criticism and the disguises critics commonly wear. This essay argues that critics should wear many

hats—all to different functions—and often throw them in the air (or toss them to the ground in

irritation). This display should, of course, always be followed by a candid investigation of the critic's

subjective reaction, thus moving the reader beyond their emotional reaction and including them in the

critical experience. Further, this essay will argue for electronic publication as a form of branding and a

new awareness of the Internet's relationship with the humanities. We will discuss the *form* of

criticism—the shape and structure and manner in which critical ideas are conveyed. Although form and

substance are inseparable, always working in tandem, we will assess form independently, pondering the

manner or style in which critical content is conveyed.

It was not by accident that we began this essay by citing a newspaperman. Journalism, and

more specifically the work of newspaper critics like A.O. Scott, has much to offer the academy. Literary

critics can make use of the continuous feedback given to journalists. The nature of the reporter's

profession—the prompt turnaround and constant deadlines, often under difficult conditions—

commonly results in rapid reader response and reaction. In a September 2002 exchange at the

University of California-Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism, Meg Hourihan, the co-founder of Pyra

Labs, the company that launched the *Blogger* personal blogging software that was acquired by Google,

argued that journalism, especially in the age of the self-publishing or blogging journalist, "provides an

opportunity to get more information about stories, to create a more direct dialogue between people

who are reading the information and people writing the information" (Lasica). Many news websites,

including *wsj.com* (*The Wall Street Journal*), *nytimes.com* (*The New York Times*), *washingtonpost.com*

(*The Washington Post*), *foxnews.com* (*Fox News*) , *cnn.com* (*Cable News Network*), and *msnbc.com* (*The*

Microsoft Network and *The National Broadcasting Company*) allow readers to comment, recommend, e-

mail and share content and to review the comments others post on a discussion board. There is a new

visibility to audience feedback and to interaction between authors and readers, along with the way

members of the readership interact with one another by passing information between news sites and

networking sites such as *Linkedin*, *Digg*, *Facebook*, *MySpace*, *Mixx*, *Yahoo!Buzz*, *newsvine* and *Permalink*.

The user-response features available in this new network of information online, allow users to inform

and be informed, to reply and be replied to.

For the academy to employ the lessons gained through the rapid-fire audience response in the

genre of journalism, universities would need to redefine useable space, expanding the conventional

campus from a definite physical space, such as the traditional English department, to the virtual realm of

the Internet. Just as journalism has transitioned from print to digital media, the influence of the

Internet should pervade academia if only to promote readership and response. While some professors

have opted to created individual webpages, and some students have begun to publish their work online,

this trend is far from the phenomenon needed to revitalize the field of academic literary study.

Despite the benefits of rapid reader response and reaction, the Internet has impaired the

traditional business of Newspaper companies.

> *Earlier this month, the Times announced it was planning to borrow as much as $225 million against its new Manhattan headquarters because of a cash flow squeeze. In September, it said it would close its wholesale newspaper and periodical distributor, City & Suburban, which delivered the* Times *and more than 200 other publications to newsstands and other locations in the New York area. And the* Times *newspaper has consolidated some print sections, such as mashing its sports section into its business section [...] Non-union employees at both the newspaper and the Web site will receive no raises in 2009.* (Forbes)

This newspaper industry faces economic struggles similar to the challenges faced by cost-conscious

academic publishers and universities. Due to the recent recession, universities and colleges nationwide

are undergoing salary and spending freezes while adding greater scrutiny to faculty searches or

suspending hiring all together. In the humanities, these problems began much earlier and run much

deeper than the recent economic turmoil, as the deterioration of the academic publishing industry

occurred simultaneously with an increase in departmental expectations for promotion and tenure. In a

report produced by the *Modern Language Association* (MLA), The Ad Hoc Committee on the Future of

Scholarly Publishing examined the current state of academic publishing and found that an

"overproduction of book-length scholarly manuscripts in the humanities has lead to widespread feelings

of frustration among academics who are attempting to place their work with a publisher" (MLA).

 Librarians, editors, faculty and students are suffering as universities reevaluate their relationship with

the printing press.

> *Library budgets for monographs in the humanities have declined steadily, in relative and sometimes in absolute terms, leading to proportional reductions in the number of scholarly books sold. Subsidies for university presses have also declined as operational costs have risen, often placing the publishers under great pressure to make profit-based decisions. Even as they face growing economic problems, university presses are receiving ever more submissions as a result of increased expectations for promotion and tenure in our disciplines and at our institutions of higher learning.* (MLA)

You'll notice that the problems documented, both in the newspaper industry and the academy, have

been thoroughly identified. The Committee on the Future of Scholarly Publishing was established in

1999 and reported their findings in 2002. Noting that there was "no ready or simple solution to the

current crisis," the MLA pondered only one possible solution: electronic publishing. Instead of

recommending that academics become acquainted with electronic media, including the networking

services, databases and online discussion boards we discussed earlier, the MLA provided a list of

recommendations for departments, libraries, administrations and publishers asking them to reconsider

internal guidelines and expectations. No case was made for integrating the Internet into the

department (or the department into the Internet). Because "[m]embers of the committee expressed

different degrees of enthusiasm about the prospects offered by electronic journals and had different

perceptions about whether such journals may come to replace print journals in the humanities" the MLA

simply acknowledged "the importance of the phenomenon and the need to examine it carefully" (MLA).

Academics are uncomfortable with any complete transition between print and digital media. Luckily, we

don't live in an all-or-nothing world. There is a place for both print and digital media within the

university setting. We must accept both the musty smell of the stacks and the whir of the busy

computer workstations where database research takes place. In order to mediate the *form* of

criticism—the shape and structure and manner in which critical ideas are conveyed—we must decide

our value scheme and begin placing works within the online and print communities accordingly.

In a paper produced by Clifford Siskin, a professor of English and American literature at New

York University and founder of The Re:Enlightenment Project*,* entitled "What is--or should be--our

business?" we are asked to assess what is done in the business of literary study. Siskin quotes an article

from *The New Yorker*, published June 10, 1996. In "Behind the Times" Ken Auletta describes the

company that owns *The New York Times*:

> *Like the railroads, which earlier in this century thought that they were in*
> *the railroad rather than the transportation business, or like the*
> *networks, which thought they were in the single-channel rather than the*
> *program business and ignored or fought cable, the Times Company was*
> *late to realize that it is in the information rather than the newspaper*
> *business. (New Yorker)*

Since this realization, however, the newspaper industry has come to reconcile its relationship with the

Internet, despite being battered by poor economic conditions. In a December 8th interview with

National Public Radio's *Morning Edition,* Bill Keller, *The New York Times* executive editor, says "his

company's stock price was sliding even before the economic crisis hit. But his newspaper is still

profitable—and when asked to write the headline for his institution at this moment in time, he says it

would be this: *We will survive*" (*Morning Edition*). Though his "core business" is being "nibbled away"

his "audience is growing" (*id.*). There are problems within the fundamentals of the industry or "the

fundamentals of the business they're in" as it is difficult to be a newspaper in an Internet age (*id*). "But,"

he continues, "the brand promise of the *New York Times* is strong" (*id.*). Brand promise within the

academy is rarely discussed. Though Siskin asks what we do, we haven't yet pondered what we do

consistently and well and how that differs from all the other things that we do.

While an English Ph.D. commonly takes seven or more years to complete, most journalist are

able to practice their craft with an undergraduate education. Many bloggers are able to promote their

work without any credentials at all. Due to the special training required of literary critics within the

academy, most students are unable to publish and promote their work until they complete their

dissertation and earn their elite credentials. This means that academic critics are in training for seven or

more years longer than journalists, and that during that time they rarely produce work that is responded

to outside of the academy and that can be used to promote their unique prospective. In a November

17th interview with Clifford Siskin, I discussed the length of graduate programs in the United States.

Siskin argued that it is a tragedy that American graduate degrees are so lengthy and that departments

should rethink the time commitment. Until departments reevaluate the duration of the degree

program, many young scholars must publish on their own. These scholars should make use of the tools

of the online age in order to self-publish and promote their work prior to gaining recognition in

academic journals. Just as *The New York Times* depends upon its "brand promise," young academics

must invest in the promotion of their own work and the development of a personal brand that

demonstrates to any hiring department their desire to create. Moreover, the development of a brand

promises that a young academic student is aware of his field and his place in it. One cannot establish a

brand without considering their place in the greater market of ideas.

James Rolfe is a successful online critic of the "YouTube generation." Under the pseudonym "The Angry Video Game Nerd" (AVGN), Rolfe has published, branded and promoted his own video game and film criticism. The AVGN franchise has evolved into a bi-monthly show including guest characters, an original theme song and the use of fan art. He uses a simple

Angry Video Game Nerd Fan Art

"nerd" disguise (a white dress shirt with a pocket full of pens) instead of credentials, to transparently cloak his reviews in the authority of an expert. Though Rolfe attended film school, his authority comes from his unique ability to describe the viewer or player experience. Rolfe is candid, often admitting and highlighting his individual frustrations in order to provide a subjective analysis of what other viewers or players might encounter. While his candor often devolves into repeated explicatives (on a recent episode, "CD-i: Part 3," animated bombs labeled with the letter "F" dropped from the sky as he shouted the corresponding curse word at his television), his use of language is authentic to fans and appropriate given his topic: the emotions surrounding the play of vintage video games. His reviews are about the personal experiences gamers share. Though outside of the academy, Rolfe's success should be a model for young academics working to publish, promote and brand their work.

What do I mean by success? Rolfe's audience is vast and can certainly be used as a way to measure his success. The content from his website, CineMassacre.com, is featured on MTV's GameTrailers.com, Spike.com and YouTube.com. He's been interviewed by XM Radio, CNN Headline News and MTV. CineMassacre has had 4,125,000 page views

James Rolfe's "Nerd" Persona

(1,600,000 visits) and his YouTube videos have 200,000+ subscribers or 11,670,443 channel views

(Advertise). Rolfe also boasts 4300 Facebook friends and maintains the official Angry Video Game Nerd

Facebook Group with 7,200+ members (Facebook).   He is a master at using the Internet for marketing

and "Nerd" promotion and publicizes his reach in order to promote advertising revenue on his website.

Rolfe's success, however, extends beyond the numbers, and lies in his ability to brand his product and

develop his character.

The first documented nerd appearance was in May 2004, when Rolfe published his first

videogame review, "Castlevania 2: Simon's Quest," on YouTube. His character was a joke and the hoax

"was how in-depth [he] picked apart flaws and how mortally obsessed and angry [he] was over a game

that was nearly 20 years old. Then [he] made a second video for the game Dr. Jekyl and Mr. Hyde where

[he] took the joke a step further by actually appearing on screen in [his] 'nerd' persona" (FAQ). Thus the

Nerd was born. Instead of using elite credentials to tout the validity of his criticism, Rolfe's use of the

term "nerd" is far reaching, yet humble, allowing him to speak to a vast audience. "Nerd" is a term that

bears a derogatory connotation and is often employed as a stereotype referring to an individual who

fervently pursues academic interests and obscure or technical knowledge therefore becoming

inappropriately matched with others in his age group (American Heritage). Rolfe's use of the "nerd"

stereotype shows that he knows how to wear the right "hat" to the right function. The derogatory

connotation of the stereotype renders him approachable while maintaining the authority of an expert

who passionately pursues the esoteric knowledge of video games, game consoles and related films.

If we expand our use of Wikipedia, using the site as a tool for the storage and organization of

knowledge similar to other academic databases, like JSTOR (Journal Storage), we find that the term

"nerd" fits into several categories. These categories are available to help users browse through articles

organized by topic, similar to the way an individual would browse the stacks at their local library. The

topics relating to "nerd" are what you might expect given the definition we formulated: "Stereotypes,"

"Slang expression," "Academic culture." Other topics include: "Stock characters," "Computing culture,"

and "Internet culture." Moving beyond our definition, we find that the cultural implications of the term

"nerd" also relate to Rolfe's use of technology, specifically his dedicated discussion in an electronic

medium of video games and game consoles. His use of YouTube and his personal website fit his "nerd"

persona, as does his obsession with gaming. Because the viewer imagines that Rolfe's AVGN character

tapes and posts each video online as a serious endeavor, an outlet for expressing the Nerd's thoughts,

Rolfe breaks through the computer screen, thus coming to embody his character in a real, relatable way.

Through his performance of the nerd Rolfe is able to speak more directly to his audience. This

straightforward manner of Rolfe's criticism could account for his wide success. Despite layering himself

in a character who can better express his views, Rolfe's emphasis on the individual experience shines

through, thus proving that relatable, approachable criticism matched with the marketing power of the

Internet and sensitivity to branding is an unstoppable critical force.

In a November 20th interview with S.S. Sandhu, a Professor of English Literature at New York

University and chief film critic for *The Daily Telegraph*, I discussed less conventional forms of criticism

being produced by the academy. On journalism, Sandu noted that many professors "moonlight from

academia" and "work between both realms." At the time of my interview, Sandhu was polishing a

submission to *Condé Nast Traveler*. He told me that it is "natural and acceptable to write for academic

journals or book reviews," however, criticism of the "pop genre" such as common journalism is "inferior

and carries an intended slur" implying that each academic must evaluate their relationship with less

traditional forms of criticism. As a member of the academy, Sandhu urged younger members to

question what they have to "say to their field, ask whether your field is your audience and whether your

field determines what you can create." Young critics should also ask which form, traditional or

unconventional, best conveys their ideas and then begin an internal discussion on how to incorporate

technology. Young critics committed to electronic publication are better able to publish their work in a

way that guarantees reader response and the development of a brand as more material is published in one location over time. Often, critics acquire more readers with online publications. These critics can then compile a larger work based on the electronic publican for print at a later date or reserve select material for print publication.

Academic critics working in the field of literary study could make use of Rolfe's model to promote their own criticism and redefine their approach. The development of a character that brands your product in a recognizable way helps to create an immediate rapport between the critic and the audience and promotes transparency and approachability. Because Rolfe admittedly enjoys retro gaming, he has not simply created a lampoon character. He has instead extracted a portion of his personality and styled his criticism in order to find a form that best conveys his message, thereby using the "nerd" to say more than he could say without the cloak of his character. For decades now, academics have picked up the cultural hammer to batter the final nails into their own criticism. Critics relay their authentic personal experiences as if they're pledging "scouts honor" to the validity of their argument. We have spent countless hours imagining the life of "the other" as we attempt to comment on the diversity of our individual experiences. Moreover, academic critics are working within fragmented specializations where critics of one era don't connect with those in the next. We associate ourselves so fully with our area of study that we no longer speak the same language and can't imagine a new way to communicate. There is no way for the contemporary critic to get out of their own way, so that we might find a new, more imaginative and effective approach. What I'm advocating is a form of "Gonzo" criticism, with reckless creative abandon, that allows critics to become what serves their topic best, thus enacting new styles or disguises and forms or technologies. Instead of hiding within one's field, we must wrap ourselves in the topic at hand and become "nerds" stylized within our unique brand of criticism. Then, through discourse of these distortions and misconceptions will be isolated and discussed.

Sacha Baron Cohen and Stephen Colbert are two examples of critics who employ characters in the performance of their critical work. Cohen is best known for his characters Ali G (a journalist from England), Brüno (a flamboyantly gay Austrian fashion reporter) and Borat (a reporter from Kazakhstan) from the film "Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan" (2006) and HBO's "Da Ali G Show" (2003-2004). Cohen also gave Harvard University's 2004 Commencement Speech in the persona of "bad boy rapper Ali G" (Harvard). His work underlines the hypocrisy of the fashion industry, anti-Semitism, politics, the American culture war, American culture

Sacha Baron Cohen as Borat, a reporter from Kazakhstan

from a foreign prospective, among others topics. Stephen Colbert developed a persona in order to satirize journalists of the "who is loudest is rightest" crowd (Rose). His character, Stephen Colbert (silent "T") of the Colbert Report (double silent "T") is a caricature of his "favorite person, Bill O'Reilly" or "Papa

Stephen Colbert's Character

Bear," as he is fondly referred to on the program (Colbert). The "Report" is a spinoff of Comedy Central's "Daily Show with Jon Stewart." While the "Daily Show" has always promoted transparency (Jon Stewart is very candid when it comes to his personal voting record), Colbert has evolved the form to a new level, where his willful misunderstandings and distortions of the facts shed a critical light on topics such as politics and religion. Whereas Stewart is "detached" and his show works to "point out" or "deconstruct" the news, "ironically" and "honestly mocking" the hypocrisy, Colbert works to "falsely construct" his news. He is "ironically attached" and unnecessarily "passionate" about the stories on which he reports (Rose). In an interview with Charlie Rose, Colbert comments, "There's no status I won't give up for a joke. The Spartans had to come back with their shield or on it. I have to come back

with my joke or on it" (*id.*). One would only need to rent a copy of Cohen's film or search the Internet

for images of Borat in a bathing suit to see that he too has no respectability to protect. Instead both

men are advocating their message by "surrendering [their] need for importance, surrendering [their]

need for status for the sheer joy of letting people laugh at what [they] did" (*id.*). The laugh is the brunt

of the message always leading back to their disguise or stylized approach. That disguise is their critical

commentary.

I understand that the examples I just provided are comics rather than academics and that most

professional scholars wouldn't feel comfortable disguising themselves in such cartoonish, clown-like

characters. Cohen and Colbert are extreme examples, provided because of their striking attention to

detail, creativity, and ability to get out of the way of their own work in order to stay on message. They

are self-aware enough to stylize their work by becoming what serves their topic best and accordingly

don't find themselves trapped within the marketing problems faced by other professional critics and

academics. Their audience is vast and their work is in demand. By turning parody into professionalism,

they've set the new standard for approachable criticism.

In the documentary film "CineMassacre 200" James Rolfe describes who he is and what he does.

He describes himself as "a regular guy, a movie buff, indy filmmaker and retro video game fan" (FAQ).

He admits that his "nerd" character keeps him busy producing episodes and that his AVGN series is a

distraction from his first love, filmmaking. AVGN has launched into a franchise and is the "first time [he]

got paid to do what [he] does." Though it "slows down [his] other projects, it brings more attention to

[his] other work." His website has allowed him to brand his work by better defining his "style, taste and

craft" (*id.*). Prior to its conception he "lacked was a way to show [his] work. After blindly sending out to

film festivals without any idea of what they are looking for [he] started hosting his movies on [his] own

website, *cinemassacre.com*, and as a result [he] proved that the Internet is the best place to get seen

and the ultimate form of exposure" (CineMassacre 200). He explains that CineMassacre refers to an

"independent, do-it-yourself attitude," and continues, "making movies is not easy, and today more and more people are doing it. It's not something you can do and expect to be rewarded. You can't have any superficial goals with it. It's something you have to have a natural passion for" (*id.*). Criticism, too, is something you have to have a passion for. Both in the field of journalism and within the academy, there are fewer and fewer paid critics. The influence of the Internet is great, but at its core, digital media is a way to show your work, thus creating brand promise and audience response.   Rolfe, like Cohen and Colbert, has analyzed what he wants to say to his field. Though his audience is vast, it enables, rather than determines what he can create. Young critics should also ask which form—traditional or unconventional—best conveys their ideas, and then begin an internal discussion on how to incorporate technology by employing "an independent, do it yourself attitude" (*id.*).

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