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Rethinking the Thinkpiece: Art Versus Politics in the Sharing Economy

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The "thinkpiece" is a genre of cultural criticism that has become exceedingly popular online in the last several years. Although there is a certain shared, commonsense understanding of what thinkpieces are among the people who write, read, and share them, the term itself remains clouded in vagueness. We "know it when we see it," (and we also *share* it when we see it), yet exactly what "it" is remains undefined and undertheorized.

Its steep rise to popularity has been built on a framework of unstated assumptions about cultural objects and the way they work. In particular, although the thinkpiece frequently takes artistic (or, in philosophical terms, *aesthetic*) objects under consideration, it tends

to privilege the work's *political* content, to the degree that it becomes unclear whether any aesthetic content exists in the work at all. In fact, it is this privileging of the political over the aesthetic that is the thinkpiece's defining trait.

This is, to use one of the thinkpiece's favorite buzzwords, problematic— for theoretical, but also practical reasons. Most simply, the thinkpiece, as it is currently performed, is both *theoretically* deficient due to its lack of engagement with the aesthetic qualities of aesthetic objects, and also *practically* deficient because its easily consumable political messaging is untethered to the specificity of the objects it talks about. This means that thinkpieces are often shared but not read—in other words, they are subject to "coincidental consumption," a term recently developed by Robin James to describe the way content is circulated without engagement in the online sharing economy. A reintegration of the aesthetic into the thinkpiece wouldn't just create a more comprehensive mode of analysis, but will also actually increase its political efficacy by grounding it in the unique formal choices of the artwork and mitigating the sharing-without-reading so prevalent in the thinkpiece ecosystem.

To put it a different way: by ignoring the aesthetic, the thinkpiece neuters its own political aspirations.

I. What Is The Thinkpiece?

Though offering up a concrete definition for an amorphous concept

will always be a somewhat artificial task, it will be helpful here to offer one right off the bat, and develop it as we go: the thinkpiece is *a piece of writing on a cultural event or product that focuses on its social and political implications*. Though "cultural event or product" encompasses most of what we encounter in popular culture everyday, from commercials to sporting events to press conferences, I will here focus on the realm we call "popular art"—music, TV, movies, etc—a realm that serves as object for a substantial bulk of thinkpiece production.

In the last few years, the thinkpiece has become one of the most recognizable and shareable forms of written content online. As a form of writing it is critical by default, in the sense that it finds, analyzes, and critiques *problems* within the artistic product under consideration. The keyword of the thinkpiece is, in this respect, the word "problematic," a term which has become as buzzy and cliched as "thinkpiece" itself. [1] Usually what the thinkpiece finds problematic is the way that people are represented, or not represented, within the narrative world of a TV show, song, music video, or film. In this sense, the thinkpiece can be said to be largely centered around a "representational" politics. Race and gender are two of the biggest topics of the thinkpiece, and with good reason. In the seemingly homogeneous, uncritical, straight-white-male dominated world of mass entertainment, racial and sexual representations are often problematic indeed. Women, people of color, and other historically marginalized groups are frequently either depicted in ways that reinforce negative stereotypes, or are not depicted at all. The thinkpiece attempts to act as a bridge between art and society, treating these exclusionary

or problematizing aspects of a song or TV show as having real, social impact, and taking them seriously.

A few of the most thinkpiece-d cultural products of the last few years have been: HBO's hit TV show *Girls*, for its severe lack of diversity in casting, despite taking place in the diverse context of New York City [2]; Robin Thicke's hit song "Blurred Lines," for treating the issue of sexual consent as if it were ambiguous or blurry territory [3]; and Miley Cyrus's infamous performance at the 2013 MTV Video Music Awards for appropriating a historically black dance move, while also populating her stage with black dancers in a way that critics viewed as dehumanizing, some even calling it a form of modern minstrelsy. [4]

All of these examples share in the characteristic themes of the thinkpiece: a focus on the socio-political, with emphasis on representation and specific attention to race and gender. They point to problems in larger society—lack of diversity, misogyny, cultural appropriation—and explain how these issues are encapsulated and reinforced by cultural, artistic objects. From a political perspective, this all seems to be good, important work, offering little to bicker with in terms of the specific analysis and also the larger political project.

However, if we consider these political criticisms in the context of the works' aesthetic qualities, the picture becomes more complicated. It is easy enough for thinkpiece authors to trash Miley Cyrus and Robin Thicke because, in addition to being considered politically

retrograde, they're also considered *bad*, aesthetically speaking. Few critics popped up to defend Cyrus's VMA performance on political grounds, because it was near universally considered ghastly on *aesthetic* grounds. There is a kind of conflation going on here, between the political and the aesthetic; but as long as the object of consideration is bad in both categories, it doesn't become clear what consequences such a conflation might have.

This raises an important question: what happens when "good art" gets called problematic, and the political and aesthetic dimensions of the work are brought into conflict? Problems with the thinkpiece's mode of analysis quickly begin to emerge, and things get messy.

II. Politics Versus Art, or: The Thinkpiece Versus the Review

Take a more recent example than those listed above: HBO's recent smash hit *True Detective*, which was subject both to ecstatic critical accolades and severe thinkpiece chastisement. The thinkpiece position was that the show presented a problematic depiction of women; all the female characters were, critics argued, flattened and marginalized, lacking fundamental depth and agency, serving only as sexualized props. The major proponent of this view was the *New Yorker*'s TV critic Emily Nussbaum, who argued in a popular piece that while the compelling male leads sleuth about heroically, "every live woman they meet is paper thin. Wives and sluts and

daughters—none with any interior life." [5] That particular piece, striking because it was a voice of dissent amidst near ubiquitous praise, sparked a debate around the show which nicely encapsulated the confusions produced when thinkpiece logic is rigorously followed in our day-to-day experience of art. The most common response I saw was an acceptance of Nussbaum's critique, but paired with a "free pass" for the show's putative misogyny because it was just so damn good *as a TV show*. [6] *Slate*'s film critic Dana Stevens and *Seattle Times* arts critic Melissa Davis summed up this thought process precisely in a brief twitter exchange. Stevens basically agreed that the show's depiction of women was retrograde, and wondered aloud why she was sticking with it anyway: "Not sure why I'm letting this show slide on its misogyny when I've cut out on others for being less so." Davis responded, "I let this one slide…because I like it. It's for smart grownups. Rare these days." Stevens then replied, "Me too. It's unusual that a show captures my imagination enough to stick with it, and there are just two more episodes, so I'm in." [7]

Recast in the terms I've been using in this essay, we can say that Stevens and Davis stuck with *True Detective* despite its political flaws, because of its aesthetic excellence—its excellence qua artistic product. Remarkably, even Nussbaum began her piece with a concession to aesthetics: "Judged purely on style," she writes, "HBO's *True Detective* is a great show." "Judged purely on style"—for that, we can read, "aesthetically." It just turned out that, for Nussbaum, the political problems of the show outweighed its aesthetic merits.

We can see a strange scale emerging—call it The Scale for the Judgment of Popular Art—with "aesthetics" resting on one plate, and "politics" on the other. For the thinkpiece, politics weighs double, and aesthetics half, if it even weighs at all.

This weird aesthetic-political binary is concretized in an example that may prove helpful here: if the thinkpiece represents a thumb on the "politics" side of the scale, there is an equivalent mode of writing that favors the aesthetic side: the genre known as arts criticism, embodied in the *review*. Where the thinkpiece sees only the political, the traditional review sees only the aesthetic, as it exists in the formal properties of the artwork. Put generally, where the thinkpiece sees *content*, the review sees *form*. If the keyword of the thinkpiece is "problematic," then, the keyword of the review is just "bad." The review is primarily concerned with how *well-made*, or not, the album or TV episode is, usually not dwelling much on social implications. It cares about how the song sounds, how the film is acted and shot, how the book reads, etc. [8]

Put another way: the thinkpiece and the review both offer competing *logics* for understanding art, each with its own worldview attached: for the thinkpiece, the most important aspects of the artwork are political and social; for the review, art's most important features are formal. This is as deep a philosophical dispute as one can have in the realm of art theory, and it comes down to the way one conceptualizes how art functions politically, what its social obligations are, whether it is autonomous, etc. The discourse surrounding these ideas is nearly

as ancient as artistic practice itself, and one narrative in the history of arts criticism is just this history of picking one side or the other.

Yet is simply picking sides—choosing either thinkpiece logic or review logic—the most sophisticated way we can think through these two dimensions of the artwork? Indeed, does it seem even remotely sufficient? If breaking art down into the aesthetic-political binary doesn't quite make sense theoretically, it also obviously fails in practice: our constant struggle to reconcile art we like with our core political beliefs proves that the question is never so clean cut. Rather than an opposition, then, I want to argue that the political and the aesthetic exist in the artwork as a tension, one that criticism should seek to explore and understand. However, the logic of the thinkpiece, with its sights set squarely on the political, is incapable of fully grasping this tension.

So what kind of criticism *would* be capable of grasping this tension, rather than reducing it to the easy binary we've just described? Before we get to that, let's return to the context we began with: that of the thinkpiece as a kind of practical political project.

III. Sharing Without Reading, or: The Trouble with Coincidental Consumption

So far much of my argument may seem like theoretical nitpicking. Though a reintegration of the aesthetic into the thinkpiece (or, thought

of a different way, the creation of a hybrid between the thinkpiece and the review) might satisfy certain logical scruples, it doesn't seem to have much to do with the thinkpiece's central political mission: that is, increasing awareness of and criticizing representational problems in popular culture.

To address the specifically *practical* problems with the thinkpiece, it will be helpful to look at another formulation of the basic aesthetic-political split the thinkpiece performs, offered by Robin James, which considers the thinkpiece in the context of its native environment: the ecosystem of online content sharing. [9] Writing on the *Cyborgology* blog, James outlined the concept of "coincidental consumption," a term she and Nathan Jurgenson developed on Twitter to describe the way that the substance of online content often becomes "coincidental" to, or less important than, its "shareability" through social media. James gives the common example of sharing an article without really reading it first. Turning her attention to the thinkpiece-centered backlash to a racially problematic Lily Allen music video, James takes the notion of coincidental consumption one step further, to describe how the thinkpiece—itself a part of the sharing economy—makes certain elements of music and music videos coincidental to others. James writes:

> What I want to think about is the coincidental role of music in the contemporary music industry. It seems like music videos and/or performances are increasingly common fodder for so-called "thinkpieces" [...] But what's interesting to me is

that most of these thinkpieces discuss the social and political implications of [songs and videos] without talking about the actual music–as though the music was somehow separable from the social and political work these songs and videos accomplish. We need to think very carefully about what gets lost, what's obscured, when we focus exclusively on the visual and lyrical content of these music videos/performances. [10]

By now this line of thought will look quite familiar, but with the added conceptual equipment of the "coincidental." James's argument rested on the notion that within a sharing economy predicated on the coincidental consumption of content (sharing without reading), there was a further "coincidentalizing" taking place: in James's example, music made coincidental to imagery, or, in my terminology, the aesthetic made coincidental to the political.

I want to take James' observations one step further and suggest that these two coincidentalizing processes are not only related, but, further, mutually reinforcing. That is, I want to argue that thinkpieces which encourage the coincidental consumption of certain aspects of an artwork will tend to then themselves be coincidentally consumed— shared without being read.

Part of this problem has to do with the one-size-fits-all nature of representational politics. When it comes to diversity-oriented readings, for instance, the specific product or medium at hand doesn't make much difference: it could be a music video, but it could also be

a commercial (one might argue a less "aesthetic" form) or even the cover of a textbook (a traditional site for debate over representational diversity, and even less aesthetic as a form than a commercial). All one has to do is count the women, or people of color, or members of whichever marginalized group, and determine whether the depiction is proportionally satisfactory. (If the issue at hand isn't diversity but misogyny or stereotyping, the procedure is effectively the same, if requiring more work to make the argument.)

That is why when a piece called, say, "X's Diversity Problem" (a typical thinkpiece title format) is passed around, there isn't usually much need to actually read it. We can safely assume that the author has performed the headcount, and the movie, or TV show, or book series has come up lacking. Our job then is to simply pass the piece along and make others aware of the problem.

One could argue that this alone is important political work: consciousness-raising about diversity problems (or misogyny problems, or racism problems) in popular culture. The specifics of this or that film or TV show matter less than the general point that such problems are rampant and should be recognized.

But tying the general terms of political analysis (the tools of the thinkpiece) to the specificity of aesthetic analysis (the tools of the traditional review), several things happen. First, the understanding of the work simply becomes more robust. Though the net of political analysis can be cast wide, with no need to clearly distinguish between

the different kinds of flotsam caught in it, aesthetic analysis must always be predicated on the specifics of the object at hand. By looking at political implications in light of, rather than apart from, specific formal decisions, the political critique may either appear mistaken (because the narrative structure of the work was not sufficiently understood, as I would argue happens frequently with thinkpieces), [11] or in fact be reinforced (as is the case with the most sophisticated thinkpieces). [12] Second, after being made more attendant to the formal specifics of the work, the piece makes more of a demand on readers' attention, because the argument cannot necessarily be anticipated in advance. When a diversity headcount or Bechdel test [13] is carried out in light of the formal, aesthetic specificity of the work, it takes deeper root, as it also necessarily becomes more complex. By not treating any aspect of the artwork as coincidental to any other, the content of the writing becomes an object to be directly reckoned with, rather than just passively shared around. When the politics of art are treated as inseparable from the art itself, our written criticism will become stronger both as a tool for understanding the artworks that texture our world, and as a tool for changing that texture.

Notes

[1] For an excellent history and analysis of the term "problematic," see: King-Slutzsky, Johannah. (2014, September). The Internet Has a Problem(atic). *The Awl.* Retrieved from: http://www.theawl.com/2014/09/the-problem-with-problems

[2] See: Wortham, Jenna. (2012, April). Where (My) Girls At? *The Hairpin*. Retrieved from http://thehairpin.com/2012/04/where-my-girls-at

[3] See: Plank, Elizabeth. (2013, July). A Feminist Takedown of Robin Thicke. *Arts.Mic*. Retrieved from http://mic.com/articles/56069/a-feminist-takedown-of-robin-thicke-and-anyone-who-thinks-there-s-something-blurry-about-sexism

[4] See: Cottom, Tressie McMillan. (2013, August). Brown Body, White Wonderland. *Slate*. Retrieved from http://www.slate.com/articles/double_x/doublex/2013/08/miley_cyrus_vma_performance_white_appropriation_of_black_bodies.html

[5] Nussbaum, Emily. (2014, March). Cool Story, Bro. *The New Yorker.* Retrieved from http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/03/03/cool-story-bro

[6] It is interesting to note that only one critic I'm aware of, Molly Lambert, disagreed with Nussbaum's characterization entirely, arguing that its female characters were more complex than anyone was giving them credit for. Once an element of an artwork is identified as problematic by a major critic, such as Nussbaum, it tends to become a chestnut to bat one way or the other, while the initial "problematic" claim itself is rarely reevaluated. I personally found Lambert's position the most compelling, an example of an aesthetically-minded thinkpiece which I advocate for later in this essay. See: Lambert, Molly. (2014, February). Her Looming Shadow Grows: The Complex Women of 'True Detective.' *Grantland*. Retrieved from http://grantland.com/hollywood-prospectus/her-looming-shadow-grows-the-women-of-true-detective/

[7] The exchange can be found here: https://twitter.com/thehighsign/status/43797383951169265

[8] In practice, of course, this distinction is not always so clear-cut. Indeed, Nussbaum's *True Detective* piece, printed as it was in the *New Yorker*, was likely framed as a traditional review, even as it veered into thinkpiece territory. Especially online, more and more sites of traditional review are beginning to at least give nods to the political, even as the thinkpiece steers clear of the aesthetic entirely.

[9] I am deeply indebted to James for her work on this topic. It was after reading her blog post that I first realized it was even possible to untangle thinkpiece logic, and her language and terminology were instrumental for me in formulating the problem as I have.

[10] James, Robin. (2013, November). Coincidental Consumption & the Thinkpiece Economy. *Cyborgology*. Retrieved from http://thesocietypages.org/cyborgology/2013/11/15/coincidental-consumption-thinkpiece/

[11] This, in my view, was the case with the controversy over *Girls*. As the show developed, it became more and more clear that it was not constructed as the universally-relatable story that everyone thought it was, but as a portrait of four deeply narcissistic and insulated people, incapable of caring after their closest friends, much less anyone else. Looked at in the context of the narrative structure of the show, the lack of diversity isn't really a "problem;" it's a feature that is logically necessary. The four main characters just aren't the kinds of people who have any interest in maintaining diverse friend groups. In this light, *Girls'* lack of diversity can be seen as perhaps a more potent social critique of the milieu it depicts than a superficial fulfillment of diversity requirements would have been.

[12] Though I do not have space to better develop this more sophisticated kind of thinkpiece, two exemplary examples are: Jones, Eileen. (2013, January). Free Me From *Django Unchained. The ExileD*. Retrieved from http://exiledonline.com/free-me-from-django-unchained/; and, Corliss, Richard. (2013, December). *The Wolf of Wall Street*: Scorsese and DiCaprio Fall for the Big Con. *Time*. Retrieved from http://entertainment.time.com/2013/12/27/the-wolf-of-wall-street-scorsese-and-dicaprio-fall-for-the-big-con/

[13] The "Bechdel test" is a procedure for checking for sexism in films, named after cartoonist Allison Bechdel. In one of her comic strips, a character argues that a movie "passes" the test if it features two women who talk to each other about something other than a man. While extremely helpful for weeding out harmful stereotypes about women frequently featured in movies (and still frequently used for this purpose), the Bechdel test exemplifies the kind of thinkpiece logic I've criticized here as often stopping short of a more thorough understanding of the work.