theories and methodologies

Critique and Critical Making

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IN *THE LIMITS OF CRITIQUE*, RITA FELSKI USES PAUL RICOUER'S PHRASE "HERMENEUTICS OF SUSPICION" TO FRAME AND REAPPRAISE "A DIverse range of practices that are often grouped under the rubric of critique: symptomatic reading, ideology critique, Foucauldian historicism, various techniques of scanning texts for signs of transgression or resistance" (2–3). Throughout the book, she argues that literary criticism has overvalued this approach, in part because of its many affordances and pleasures. Without rejecting critique altogether, Felski concludes that "it is one way of reading and thinking among others: finite, limited, and fallible" (192).

Particularly in the final pages of her book, Felski explores alternatives to a conventional mode of critique. She enumerates existing methods that continue to thrive in literary studies: "biographical criticism, textual editing, the recovery of lost or neglected works, New Critical–style close readings, narratological or rhetorical analyses, belle-lettrism, computer-generated quantitative scholarship, empirical cultural history, and so on" (26). Alongside these established approaches, Felski puts forward the rubric of "postcritical reading." She understands the term to emphasize reading practices that privilege augmentation and creation over what she sees as the underlying mechanics of critique: subtraction and separation (173). One method that belongs to postcritical reading is Felski's own version of "neophenomenology," developed more fully in her *Uses of Literature*. This mode focuses on historicized description while avoiding critique's cycle of suspicion, decoding, and revelation.[1]

I take seriously Felski's invitation to explore and expand alternatives to traditional humanistic critique. Yet even as I am sympathetic toward some of the book's positions, I would like to put additional pressure on the prefix *post-* in the term *postcritical* as unnecessarily divisive in its provocation.[2] Digital technology and computer networks produce a milieu different from that which gave rise to widespread critique in literary criticism. Though the "hermeneutics of suspicion" finds its earliest extensive elaborations in the work of

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Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, this approach, as Felski observes, entered the humanities in the 1960s and 1970s and was "revised and rewritten throughout the 1980s and '90s" through critical theory and postmodern culture (19). In the era of high theory, we see a pervasiveness of conspiracy theories and paranoid narratives that are central to novels such as Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) and theoretical texts such as Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism* (1991). By contrast, the era of digital media and networks introduces an increased transparency and proliferation of open secrets. In the early twentieth century, this scene was casually dubbed "information overload," a term that is no longer accurate (assuming that it once marked a resonant feeling) in the present affective atmosphere of "post-truth" that alters the circulation and significance of information. In the second decade of the twenty-first century, we see the new dramas of openly accessible information represented in novels such as Dave Eggers's *The Circle* (2013) and animated in the real world through the actions of whistleblowers such as Edward Snowden. If critique depends on suspicion and paranoia about hidden truths that must be exposed, how does an era of greater transparency (including the so-called oversharing on social media and the personal data available to corporations and governments) affect the project of critique?[3]

An approach that does not come up in *The Limits of Critique* but that may help us think about both the limits and futures of critique is critical making. As the modifier *critical* already suggests, critical making may not be a complete alternative to critique as much as it is a fresher way of building on decades of work in critical theory and cultural studies. The term refers to a diversity of practices, techniques, and collaborative projects that privilege experiences of making to acts of interpretation. As the historian David Staley explains, the "maker turn" introduces "an approach to the humanities that moves our performances off the page and the screen and onto the material world, a hermeneutic performance whereby humanists create non-textual physical objects." In academic discourse, critical making borrows from and intersects fields such as history of technoscience, human-computer interaction, digital humanities, and new media theory. Offering a broader context, Anne Balsamo explains that this scholarly mode also draws from DIY culture, the maker movement, the creation of handicrafts, and modes of tinkering, "modding," and hacking (177).

Putting critical making in conversation with Felski's reflection on humanities critique introduces productive tensions. On the one hand, at least at the surface, thought that is grounded in making seems more distant from established critical humanistic inquiry than the other approaches that Felski mentions. Processes such as cultural hacking, digital zine creation, or serious game design might appear, to some literary critics, as more closely aligned with art or technoscience than with the humanities. On the other hand, this approach shares features with the critical practices that Felski calls into question in the ways it promotes interrogation of foundational, often material, assumptions. This duality marks critical making as a useful case for thinking alongside Felski's reappraisal of critique and call for more diverse methods.

In this essay, I am particularly interested in forms of critical making that take up digital technologies in humanistic subfields such as the digital humanities and new media studies. In a much-discussed intervention, Stephen Ramsay describes the digital humanities as a movement from "reading and critiquing to building and making." Indeed, there are already numerous digital humanities projects that privilege making to critique, including open-access digital composition platforms such as *Scalar*, digital collections such as *The Walt Whitman Archive*, and GIS (geographic information system) mapping projects such as

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Alex Christie and Katie Tanigawa's use of the z-axis digital map platform to explore modernist texts (including their queering of Paris's geography in Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*). In the related field of new media studies, Matt Ratto describes "critical making projects" that undertake "scholarly research on critical social issues and design methodologies" and that further "critical knowledge through joint material production" (252). Instead of creating polished objects that can be monetized and broadly disseminated, critical making focuses on "the act of shared construction itself as an activity and a site for enhancing and extending conceptual understandings of critical sociotechnical issues" (254). In this category, one might include the University of Victoria's Maker Lab in the Humanities prototypes of nineteenth-century wearables and the early-twentieth-century optophone, William Gaver's design-led cultural probes that invite people to remake their environments, and Ian Bogost's video game poems and corresponding essay, *A Slow Year*.[4]

Making departs from critique in its blurring of the established distinction between theory and practice. This binary has been particularly entrenched in literary criticism, including in its separation from creative writing that is evident in the culture, if not always the curricula, of many English departments. This distinction is also central to Western thought dating back to Plato, who suggests repeatedly across his dialogues that knowledge is discovered, not made. As Julie Thompson Klein observes, "The boundary work of making is framed historically by distinctions in Greek philosophy between *epistemé*, understood as knowledge, and *technê*, understood as a craft, skill, or art." Theorists writing in the twentieth century also emphasize this binary, as when Hannah Arendt explores the distinction between spectators and actors. As she puts it, the idea that "only the spectator but never the actors knows what it is all about—is as old as the hills; it is, in fact, among the oldest, most decisive, notions of philosophy. The whole idea of the superiority of the contemplative way of life comes from this early insight that meaning (or truth) is revealed only to those who restrain themselves from acting" (55). Philosophy favors the critical theorist over the maker, Arendt observes, since the theorist gains "insight" precisely from "his disinterestedness, his nonparticipation, his noninvolvement" (54). This distinction reveals a hierarchy of value in the humanities that continues to be expressed, as Jentery Sayers notes, through boundaries between "thinking and doing, hacking and yacking, writing and building, scholarship and service, creating and critiquing, breaking and repairing, innovation and maintenance, and making and not making" ("'I Don't Know'").

Frequently, critics have made the quick move from an assumption of a hierarchal relation of critique over making to dismissive conclusions about making as an uncritical method. As Felski contends, "The idea of critique, we could say, contains the answer to its own question: as a highly normative concept, it knows itself to be exceptional, embattled, oppositional, and radical. Whatever is not critique, by contrast, must fall into the camp of the credulous, compliant, and co-opted" (50). Merely to appreciate, speculate about, or play with a text means to forgo the distance or depth afforded by critique. Indeed, making as a method in digital studies depends on both play with materials and often, in the realm of digital technologies, interplay among collaborators. This centrality of play may seem uncritical as well as complicit with dominant systems of power. Alexander Galloway expresses this point well when he argues that the contemporary socioeconomic world is characterized by "flexibility, play, creativity, and immaterial labor," which he dubs "ludic capitalism" (27). In a historical moment that emerges from a synthesis of Romanticism and cybernetics, a play economy encourages "new methodologies of scanning, playing,

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sampling, parsing, and recombining" that extend to scholarship (29).[5] Yet, for Galloway, these methods, however fashionable, are largely symptomatic of ludic capitalism—more appropriate to the ethos of Google and Facebook than to meaningful scholarship. As such, he admits that his own "methodology is not particularly rhizomatic or playful in spirit, for the spirit of play and rhizomatic revolution have been deflated in recent years" (29). Instead, he advocates a return to forms of suspicion derived from Marx and Freud, who, through depth models of interpretation, enable us to see "how and why something appears in the form of its opposite" (27).

Galloway's characterization of play-oriented methodologies, which include many of the processes that are central to maker culture and critical making, is thought-provoking and rightfully skeptical of the ways in which modes of play and "modding," for instance, can be perfectly compatible with the ideologies that undergird proprietary media, algorithmic technologies, and digital cultures. Yet even as Galloway prefers critical theory to "playing" or "recombining," he does not make a claim to be against critical making as such. In fact, he has participated in projects that could easily fit under the banner of critical making, including his creation of a computer game version of Guy Debord's *Kriegspiel* with the Radical Software Group. The complexity of Galloway's orientation, which combines critique and critical making, suggests the potential of making that is not merely postcritical.

If making carries with it a cultural cachet and (in Galloway's account) a deflated radicalism, it is worth emphasizing Felski's argument that critique is also a "thought style"—and one that has become dominant not only in literary criticism but across the humanities (2). For that reason, it may be more generative to think of critical making as a rich problematic of the historical present that we might more fully (and critically) engage rather than as a problem that we should circumvent. Critical making may not be radical, but it does unsettle the binary between practice and theory, the actor and the spectator. The version of this approach that is increasingly common to the digital humanities and new media studies does not merely reverse that binary by elevating processes of making over practices of critique. The most promising versions of it celebrate an integrated "thinking-through-practice"—a term coined by Anne Burdick, Johanna Drucker, Peter Lunenfeld, Todd Presner, and Jeffrey Schnapp to describe a method that embraces "a production-based endeavor in which theoretical issues get tested in the design of implementations, and implementations are loci of theoretical reflection and elaboration" (13).

Making, in its broadest sense, may indeed resonate with the ethos of participatory media and the culture of Silicon Valley. In some versions, it may also operate like a convenient mechanic for eliciting the free labor (often a euphemism for *exploited labor*) that drives the twenty-first-century digital economy.[6] These cautions are important to consider—in fact, unpacking them and infusing them with sufficient nuance should remain a central task of humanities scholarship in our time. Even so, when these observations are overgeneralized and elevated to categorical rejections of making, they exclude numerous scholarly articulations of making that thoughtfully differentiate themselves from forms of technological entrepreneurialism and ludic capitalism. Exemplary here, for instance, is the vision of making that Sayers offers: one that "does not sound as epic as innovation, as grand as big data, as impactful as disruption, or as concrete as tool-building" but seeks to interrogate "our everyday engagements with technologies and the physical reality of our materials." Here, too, Sayers encourages "critiques" of "the normative assumptions and effects of popular maker cultures—usually white, cisgender, straight, male, and able-bodied" while searching for alternative

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genealogies of making that begin not with white, heteronormative, or corporate cultures but instead with methods derived from the arts and cultural studies or spaces such as libraries and museums ("'I Don't Know'").

One such alternative genealogy to making would take us into the realm of feminist hacker spaces. Such maker spaces complicate any absolute distinction between making and critique. For instance, Sarah Fox, Rachel Rose Ulgado, and Daniela K. Rosner demonstrate the ways that "self-defined feminist hackers" use feminist theory to establish goals and guide collective making practices (3). In a study of maker spaces in the Pacific Northwest, they show how various critiques of virtual space, technological access, normative concepts of design, and questions of gender, race, sexuality, and class persist in the realm of hardware and software creation. Feminist and gender theory, including ideas about feminist technoscience developed by theorists such as Donna Haraway, come to inform both design processes and, in some cases, the technological objects that are created. Instead of sacrificing the type of hermeneutics of suspicion that animates literary criticism and cultural studies, feminist hacker spaces simultaneously promote project-based work while enabling conversations about ways that maker culture may exclude people of color and underprivileged participants.

There is a need for ongoing experimentation and research about how academic critique and critical making might relate to each other. At the broadest scale, humanities critique and digital culture are certainly not mutually exclusive. In 2017, one is as likely to come across a feminist or Marxist reading in a leading academic journal such as *PMLA* as in an online film or television review that might appear either in specialized publications such as *Jezebel* or *Jacobin* or on comparatively mainstream sources such as *Slate*, *Huffington Post*, or *BuzzFeed*. The increased porousness between cultural studies and popular culture, however, does not negate the entrepreneurial and neoliberal orientation of digital technologies and their effects on fields such as the digital humanities. Indeed, a number of critics have pointed out the limitations of early digital humanities work that privileged technological and methodological concerns to the lessons of the culture wars. In the title of her important essay about post–World War II computational culture and its relation to histories of race and racism in the United States, Tara McPherson asks, "Why are the digital humanities so white?" Similarly, Gary Hall notes, "After decades during which the humanities have been heavily marked by a variety of critical theories (Marxist, psychoanalytic, postcolonialist, post-Marxist), it is particularly noticeable that many instances of the turn to data-driven scholarship lack an awareness of computing and the digital as much more than a set of tools, techniques, and resources, and thus manifest as naive and lacking in meaningful critique" (788–89). Furthermore, critics such as Daniel Allington, Sarah Brouillette, and David Golumbia have gone even further to argue that the digital humanities engage in a process of aggressively "neutralizing critique of established power relations" (Allington et al.).

For all the critical shortcomings of early humanities engagements with digital culture, it is heartening that many of the critiques of the field have come from scholars who are also makers who think, theorize, and experiment through practice. In my experience, this kind of work offers perhaps the most compelling example of Felski's postcritical reading: "pragmatic and experimental modes of engagement that are not prefortified by general theories" (173). Her gloss perfectly describes the ethos of critical making. At the same time, critical making is, as the name suggests, rarely *post*critical. Theorist-practitioners in fields such as software studies, platform studies, science studies, game studies, new media studies, and the digital humanities regularly

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draw on existing critical theories and test them through hacking, modding, building, programming, prototyping, human-centered design, and other forms of experimentation.

Though the arguments, methods, and projects of critical making are not antithetical to critique, the moods of these practices are notably distinct. Felski describes "mood" as "an overall atmosphere or climate that causes the world to come into view in a certain way" (20). In fact, a central argument of *The Limits of Critique* is that critique, like any scholarly practice is a matter not just of content but also of prevailing moods. As she puts it, "critical detachment is not an absence of mood, but one manifestation of it," which may also involve "guardedness," "aggression," "irony," and "exposure" (21). From an external vantage point, it might be tempting to dismiss maker culture as promoting affects that are the problematic opposites of a critical mood: naive sincerity, immoral complicity, and uncritical positivism.

I have found, however, that critical making rarely produces such affects. In the maker labs that I cofounded and inhabit on a regular basis (the University of Chicago's Game Changer Chicago Design Lab and Transmedia Story Lab), the mood is commonly one of openness, flexible optimism, collaboration, and nonhierarchical learning. The labs encourage play, construction, testing, and the iteration of ideas, creating a mood that departs from atmospheres of critical demystification and unmasking. Certainly, the participating humanists and designers may discuss the critical work of Augusto Boal, Lauren Berlant, Kara Keeling, Ian Bogost, or Jack Halberstam. When we engage and test the ideas of such scholars, however, it is through methods of bricolage, remixing, modding, and design. The makers in these labs prefer atmospheres of modest experimentation and exploratory prototyping to orientations of critical distance or theoretical mastery that frequently attend a hermeneutics of suspicion.

As a scholar whose graduate training focused on critical theory and as a current coeditor of the journal *Critical Inquiry*, I have been steeped in critique as a hermeneutics of suspicion for many years. Even as I continue to believe in theory and critique, I take seriously Felski's reappraisal of this mode and its dominance as a thought style in literary criticism and across the humanities. I welcome *The Limits of Critique* as an occasion for thinking through alternatives not only to the content and methods of critique (many of which are compatible with critical making) but also to its moods, styles, and atmospheres (which are often distinct from those of maker cultures).

In our historical era, which depends on a digital and networked infrastructure, critique plays an important role. But as the emergent approach of critical making suggests, there may be different ways to undertake critique, which might yield new forms of knowledge. The difference of this knowledge becomes evident when we consider Felski's discussion of the two spatial metaphors that critics use most consistently to describe the practice of critique. First, invoking a depth model derived from theorists such as Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, the critic engages in "an act of digging down to arrive at a repressed or otherwise obscured reality" (53). Second, drawing from sources such as the Russian formalists and Foucault, the critic "stands back" to achieve a denaturalized, defamiliarized, and critical distance (54).

By contrast, the act of building a nineteenth-century communication technology, creating a GIS map, or designing a serious videogame brings different metaphors to mind. While critical making in the humanities does not have either the long history or the quantity of work that acts of critique have produced, we already see the proliferation of many of the metaphors and schemata that I have been using throughout this essay: tinkering, playing, hacking, experimenting, and so on. One thing that these metaphors have in common is that they do not rely on depth and

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distance; they instead foreground experiences that blur an otherwise sharp separation between critic and text. Making introduces the possibility, if never the promise, of changing the maker not only at an intellectual plane but also at affective, material, and communal levels. In his discussion of critical making, Ratto emphasizes "the role of investment in connecting lived experience to critical perspectives" (258).

One could prematurely dismiss *experience* as a cliché of hands-on educational curricula that promote a neoliberal concern with skills over the liberal arts. Or else one might flag this concept as yet another symptom of the inward-facing narcissism exacerbated by social media. In certain contexts, such characterizations are warranted. Yet I would like to conclude by suggesting that experience might also entail a deeply ethical approach to knowledge. As the architect Christopher Alexander observes, there is a difference between an architect "designing" and "making" a building. In this case, "design" implies a more abstract, specialized, and distant contribution. By contrast, "When I *make* something . . . I am deeply involved with it and responsible for it. And not only I. Whether I am head of some project, or a person making some small part of it, the feeling of total responsibility is on my shoulders. In a good process, each person working on the building is—and feels—responsible for everything. For design, schedule, structure, flowers, feeling—everything" (13). In this way, making—particularly the type of collaborative making that is encouraged in the digital humanities and new media studies—foregrounds our responsibility to and interdependence with others. As opposed to the mastery that sometimes accompanies critique—a stance that encourages maintaining a distance and burrowing into great depths—making brings with it materiality and all its creative possibilities and reminders of finitude. Processes of thinking through making ground us by promoting feelings of modesty and partiality but also clear some ground for new forms of knowledge.

Notes

1. Instead of demystifying ideology, neophenomenology bears resemblance to certain varieties of affect theory, as it pays "sustained attention to the sheer range and complexity of aesthetic experiences, including moments of recognition, enchantment, shock, and knowledge" (Felski 191).

2. Although Felski observes that she is also "a little weary of 'post' words," she nonetheless finds that "no fitter or more suitable phrase comes to mind for the orientation I propose" (12). Here I elaborate on Felski's "orientation," if not on the "phrase" itself.

3. Alongside greater transparency, there are forms of deception such as fake news, proprietary algorithms, and myriad surveillance practices. My argument is merely that paranoia and suspicion are no longer sufficient (even if they are still necessary) affective modes for encountering digital culture.

4. Across the digital humanities and new media studies, such humanities projects engage digital technologies in at least five ways highlighted by Patrik Svensson—"as a tool, as a study object, as an expressive medium, as an experimental laboratory and as an activist venue." Of these categories, "study object" maps most closely onto the established orientation of critique, while the other four correspond more closely with critical making. At the same time, in several of the projects I mention, these uses of digital technologies are far from mutually exclusive.

5. The concept of play that animates the early twenty-first century has, for Galloway, two primary influences: the legacy of Romanticism and cybernetics. First, theories of play stretch from the eighteenth-century Romanticist writing of Friedrich Schiller to twentieth-century theory that includes the influential work of Johan Huizinga and Roger Caillois, as well as poststructuralism and deconstruction. Second, a concept of play comes from the cybernetic idea that "the world's entities are no longer contained and contextless but are forever operating within ecosystems of interplay and correspondence" (28).

6. On an overview of digital labor, see Terranova. Also, for an extended case that explores the relation of digital making and exploited labor of women of color, see Nakamura.

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