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# The Turn towards New Criticalities in the Study of Media, Communication and Journalism

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## Abstract

Using Boltanski's (2011) idea that critique is the contestation of social and cultural orders, different ways of such contestations in the social sciences and the humanities and in media, communication and journalism research are mapped. Four overarching orientations towards doing critique are identified – *open, reforming, resonant* and *emerging*. The critical is seen to reside in a wide landscape covering many forms of critique articulating different *criticalities*. It is argued that these developments in different research fields, together with new ways of looking at and relating these fields, shows a *turn towards new criticalities*. A *communicative* critique is also advocated as an instrument for more dialogue across divides of ontology and epistemology, theories and methods, in the mapping of how the critical is articulated in the social sciences and the humanities as well as in the studies of media, communication and journalism. Thereby, the article is an invitation to consider the relevance of critique and criticality, also for the post-critical movement and scholars not labelling themselves critical.

## Keywords

criticality, critique, post-critique, media criticism, critical social theory

## I. Introduction and the problem

There seems to be a renewed interest in critique and critical perspectives in social sciences and the humanities (Berry & Fagerfjord, 2017; Fassin & Harcourt, 2019) and

the same seems to be true for media, communications, and journalism studies (Svensson, 2015; Kaun, 2016; Cheruiyot, 2019). Empirical studies of research also show the continued importance of critical research in communication journals from the 1970s onwards (Splichal & Mance, 2018), and a study by Lindell (2020) of the media and communication research field in Sweden shows that an enduring cleavage between a critical/cultural and administrative/behavioural research orientation is relevant for the present structure of the field.

The interest in critique is not only a continuation or return to classical Frankfurt School critical theory approaches, as it represents many different kinds of critical approaches besides or beyond this form of critical theorising and practice. It can also be argued that research practices with relevance in relation to critical intention and critical expressions are surfacing in ever more widening circles. This form of expansiveness of critical minds in analysing and theorising the media will in this article be interpreted as the emergence of a new era of critique in a *turn towards criticality*. In short – a focus on singular critiques is displaced by a focus on a variety of critiques and their different aims, traits, compositions, expressions and uses. In this article I will present, analyse and discuss signs of this transformation.

This article argues that the social sciences and the humanities, and thereby research in media, communication and journalism, should embrace diverse, both collaborative and competing, ways of doing critique and being critical. This diversity of critiques and critical practices is *critical* to my understanding of critique – and to the transformation in (media) scholarship that it tries to map out. The article aims to encourage dialogues between different critical approaches and pave the way for a deeper understanding of different forms of critique of the media (Svensson, 2015); a move from entrenched positions with a prescribed form of critique to spaces of more open communication about and discussion of different ways of doing critique and being critical (of the media).

In the first part of the article a provisional definition of critique and criticality is offered. This is done to guide the reader through the text, but also to develop a conceptual, but still temporary, tool to compare and assess different forms of critique and variants of doing critique. Since the basic idea with this paper is to widen and open how we approach and describe critique and criticism, it would not only be pointless,

but illogical, to offer a detailed and decisive operationalisation of the concepts. For this reason, the definitions will be general and point at different dimensions of critique and the connected criticalities.

In the second part of the article old and new forms of critique are surveyed by providing examples of how critique has survived and re-emerged in the social sciences and humanities in four different orientations – as *open*, *reforming*, *resonant* and *emerging* critique. Relevant and salient examples are offered but no comprehensive overview is made, since the field is so huge and multifaceted.

*Open critique* refers to critical approaches that are transparent with the intention to contest the social or cultural order, and though that emancipate or bring about social or cultural change. This orientation towards critique will be mapped in several areas. Critical theory inspired by the Frankfurt School and Marxism, which can be seen as the “classic” and most established version of critical theory, is obviously of importance, and so are post-structuralist critical theories, critical discourse studies and intersectional studies; and beyond that other theories that are openly declaring a critical intention. Critical approaches that are open can be articulated as combinations of different areas of open critique or as alternatives to other areas of open critique.

The second orientation is research and theory that tries to go beyond critique, its modes, vocabulary or forms of investigation, but still act in ways that are directly related to and close to critique, wanting to bring about similar outcomes – for instance better knowledge and understanding of the world and ourselves, emancipation or change for the better. One way of expressing this is through a critique of critique and the aim to develop new vistas of research. In this article such attempts to re-formulate critique will be termed *reforming critique*, insofar as the new alternatives to critique still resemble or align with critique. In this case the research sometimes aims to go beyond critique, but it can be discussed if it actually does so.

The third and fourth orientations are research and theory that does not declare itself as critical, nor relate itself to earlier critical research in an aim to reform it or distance itself from it. On the face of it we would say that this is research that is not critical, so in what sense could such research and theory be relevant for critique? The argument here is that this research in important ways can resemble critical research or adopt its

ideas in two ways and I will use the term *resonant critique* and *emerging critique* for these orientations.

In a lot of research areas and research issues we find alignments with critique in, for instance, research done on design. In this case researchers are carrying out research that aligns with critical research, but it is not spelled out or addressed as such. My argument is that in *resonant critique* there is an actual overlap with open critique or reforming critique, but it is not acknowledged or admitted. The research is not termed critique, but the way it is carried out shows resemblances to critical research. Here, the researchers are actually doing something that is like critique. In cases where the researcher is aware of the critical legacy, this can be seen as a kind of disguised critique, but since we do not know the intentions of the researcher we will stick to observations about resemblances to critical research and call it *resonant*.

Finally, *emerging critique* is modes of thinking, doing research and teaching that bring in totally new aspects in the investigation of social and cultural objects, worlds and processes in a way that not only resonate with established critical aims, ideas and practices, but also enrich them and create new ways of doing critique. Here the focus often moves beyond earlier ways of studying something, for instance the study of man/the human in more-than human studies.

*Open* and *resonant* critique are linked in that they both build upon earlier and established ways of doing critique and being critical. *Reforming* and *emerging* forms of critique instead establish new ways of doing critique and being critical, widening the scope of what the critical can be. In the first cases (open, reforming) there is a transparent relation towards critical traditions and in the second a non-transparent one (resonant, emerging).

The argument, that we are experiencing a turn towards new forms of criticality in social science and the humanities is developed in the third part of the article, based on the overview of the four orientations to critique. When seen as a field of varying criticalities, critique can gain steam again and there are possibilities to widen the limits of criticism. Both Latour (2004; 2010) and Felski (2015) contribute to such a vitalization of critical research, teaching, learning and scholarship through their ideas on closer relations and attachments between researcher and the researched.

I will also argue that critical research needs to adopt more of a *communicative critique* where the different criticalities are set in contact. A move from critique to criticality will open new possibilities of being critical and doing critique in fruitful ways. The third section ends with reflections on how to make room for this kind of dialogue to shape the new era of critique, so it evolves towards criticality in the plural. This article's primary argument is that there is a wide field of critical studies in the social sciences and humanities, and in the studies of media, communication and journalism, also covering orientations that we don't recognize as critical. The focus is further on the relevance of critique in multiple and new forms and how we as researchers relate to the idea of critique and the critical as complex and changing. The article thereby takes an internal view of critique and criticality – a view from within academia on academic cultures. How external actors (powers and stakeholders) look at critique and criticalities is another issue, even if there obviously are connections between internal and external ways of approaching the critical.

## **2. The concepts of critique and criticality**

### **2.1 Critique, criticism and criticality – a preliminary definition**

A peculiarity with critique, when doing research in a Swedish context, and in the Swedish language, is that the word *kritik* denotes both critique and criticism. This explains why the argument developed here does not make a sharp distinction between them – the critical comes to be expressed in both critique and criticism. Further, critique and criticism should not be seen as predefined and formatted; instead, they should be approached as created, expressed, and circulated (Svensson, 2015). This implies a performative dimension to critique and the importance of critical practices and how that practice is carried out. An important critical practice is asking questions, especially questions that question assumptions and values. But just asking questions is not enough, critique and criticism also entail finding answers to those questions and making evaluations.

In an earlier work (Svensson, 2015) I suggested that media critique and criticism could be mapped and analysed in three dimensions, which are generic and not specific to media: (1) a dimension that focuses on the agent of the critique and the intention of

the critic (communicative, strategic, or instrumental); (2) a dimension that focuses on the object of the critique and the forms of expression, the kind of technology, organization, or cultural form that is being criticized and how the critique is expressed, and (3) a dimension that focuses on the process of critique, the openness and responsiveness of the critic, through mapping the meaningful texts and actions and analysing the communicative processes and how actors relate to this process. Together, these three dimensions define a complex entity where critique is expressed in a text or action that is critical but also in the communicative process that it becomes part of. A fourth dimension, the context, could also be added for completeness and for framing the critique and the process.

Taken together, these three dimensions of critique and criticism – intentions of the critic, the expression of critique towards a specific object in a specific form, and the process of critique – establish different constellations of critique. Such constellations can be mapped and studied in terms of how they articulate the different dimensions of critique. Different kinds of critique can be grasped by the term *criticality* – the specific way that intentions, expressions/forms, and processes are articulated. Such *criticalities* can be found in the details or in the overall composition of a critical process/constellation that is studied. The way that elements are combined come to define the overall criticality.

This general description of different dimensions of critique that come to articulate specific forms and constellations of critique and criticalities is a first step towards finding out why and how critique matters and how it can have an impact on social and cultural life.

## **2.2 A socially situated definition - towards a sociology of emancipation**

The sociology of emancipation developed by Boltanski is the next step to situate critique in contemporary social life and its relevance for media and communication. According to Boltanski, the core of critique is to be found in the contestation of social order (2011). Boltanski's earlier work was mainly done from a pragmatic and micro-oriented perspective on critique, where he studied how critique works in the daily lives and practices of individuals (Boltanski, 2012). The central idea of this approach is that

individual actors have a capacity to make a difference through critique, a view that is contrasted to the more macro-oriented critical sociology of Pierre Bourdieu. In Bourdieu's sociology, individual action is fundamentally conditioned by social structures and social fields where actors are circumscribed by their position in the social structure and their movements in different fields. For Boltanski, critical sociology assumes controversy and conflict, whereas the sociology of critique studies how critique is enacted and works in different social and cultural settings. Of specific importance is the relation between institutions and critique, since institutions are articulations of social orders, but orders that are frail and contestable. According to Boltanski, social orders are always uncertain and under threat from critique and therefore needs to confirm its legitimacy – even before there is any critique. The tension between institutions and critique is also a result of an ontological divide between world and reality, where the world stands for state of affairs and reality for symbolic forms of representation. Boltanski's (2011) discussion and analysis of the relation between critical sociology and the sociology of critique results in the attempt to establish a new approach towards critique named *a sociology of emancipation* that mediates between the sociology of critique and critical sociology.

The concepts developed by Boltanski to describe the role of critique and its relation to institutions include world and reality, social order, action in pragmatic and metapragmatic registers, confirmation and critique as two metapragmatic registers, types and tokens of social action and tests of truth, reality and existence. Permeating all these conceptual intricacies are two very simple questions – what is and what is given value within a social order? In the pragmatic register we act in a non-reflective way in and on the world and take its rules and procedures for granted, but in the metapragmatic register there is a doubt or a contestation of what is and how that is given value. Institutional systems continuously act to confirm that they are what they are and that the values assigned are seen as legitimate. But every voice of contestation and critique counts and social order and institutions are in this way both the object and motor of critique. Critique is seen here as a vehicle for bringing about change by redescribing and revaluing what counts as reality.

Building from the idea that critique/criticism can be described in terms of its agent's intentions, its object and forms of expression and its process of communication, we

can now also add Boltanski's idea of the critical as contestation of the "whatness of what is" and the value assigned to that. It should also be mentioned that to contest must not be seen as a negative approach, but instead as a way of expressing that things can be in another way and that values can be ascribed differently. With this simple, yet powerful view on critique, a broad panorama of research and theory that is either explicitly or implicitly critical becomes visible – open critique, reforming critique, resonant critique and emerging critique.

The intention with the next section is not to give an in-depth description of different critical theories. Instead, the idea is to map out a landscape, and to show a panorama, of different ways of being critical and doing critique in media, communication and journalism studies.

### **3. Four orientations in a widening critical landscape**

#### **3.1 Open critique**

An open critique is transparent with its own criticality and states its critical ambitions and approach explicitly. I will briefly mention five such areas that are relevant in studies in media, communication and journalism studies.

The first area is critique with links to the critical theory of the Frankfurt School (Adorno/Horkheimer, Habermas) or to critical political economy (Mosco, 2009). I will point to a few examples from this area, well aware that there are many other examples that could be highlighted. Over the last decade, Christian Fuchs has advocated for a critical approach in media, information, and communication studies in several books (Fuchs, 2011; 2019; 2020; 2021). Natalie Fenton also takes inspiration from the Frankfurt School in her analysis of progressive politics in a digital age (2016). The relation between the public sphere and digital transformations is addressed by both Fuchs and Fenton in their work, but lately also by Habermas himself (2022).

A second area of open and transparent critique is associated with post-structuralist and postmodern approaches to social theory and the humanities. Focused on studying language, writing and discourses, these approaches introduce a multifaceted critical territory (see Agger, 2013; Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2021). The work of Foucault has been

especially influential in this area (see Dean, 2010). The critical approach in Discourse Theory developed by Laclau and Mouffe (1985) has been used by Nico Carpentier in media studies. Central to Carpentier's work is the concept of participation and he has developed a multidimensional model for how access, interaction, and participation are connected (2011). In later work, he addresses how discourse is related to materiality and develops a model for how to approach this relation (2019). Carpentier and De Cleen have also contributed to method and how to translate the general and abstract discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe into usable middle-range methods for doing discourse theoretical analysis, DTA (2007). The critical is also addressed head-on in the anthology *Critical Perspectives on Media, Power and Change* (Tomanić Trivundža et. al., 2018).

A third area is the critical study of discourse, a research field that covers approaches that can be influenced by both the first (Marxism, Frankfurt School) and second (post-structuralism) area of critical research. There has been a continuous interest in Critical Discourse Studies (CDS) within media studies since the early 1990s. In Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the work of Norman Fairclough stands out (1995a; 1995b), as well as the work of Ruth Wodak (1999; Wodak & Meyer, 2016), with the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) developed by her group. Language use in social contexts and its implication for power relations is central in this research field.

A fourth area, studies of crisis phenomena, social and economic, has also triggered investigations into critique and how it is connected to crisis. Anne Kaun (2016) analyses the historical role of media as a tool of critique and resistance in social and economic crises from the 1930s to the 2000s (e.g., The Great Depression, the Oil Crisis, and the 2007 recession). The main theoretical framework used is media archaeology (Parikka, 2012) and practice theory (Couldry, 2004; 2012; Schatzki, 1996), with the critique of protest movements studied archeologically as media practices. For the interpretation of the results, a wide range of literature from critical theory and cultural studies is used. Kaun defines critique, after Steven Maras (2007), as “a space of possibility” (2016: 26):

In that sense, media practices of protest movements can be understood as carving out this space of possibilities negotiating pre-established categories. Activists not only employ different media and communication

technologies as vehicles to spread their critique, but their media practices can and should be understood as critique as such (Kaun, 2016: 27).

Kaun also stresses that critique goes beyond an oral or written expression of judgment; it has an action and practice dimension and is therefore also performative.

Yet another area, or field of fields, where open critical perspectives are strong are studies of social recognition, identity, and representation as instances of inequality and dominance. These studies implicitly or explicitly assume that knowledge about the precarious or vulnerable situations of individuals or groups can contribute to changing their situation for the better, testifying to a critical element of the research. Studies of how gender, race, class, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality, ability and age intersect and produce systematic inequality align with earlier forms of critical theory, but also bring in new experiences and perspectives on critique (Hill Collins, 2019). Developing critical theory from the perspective of oppressed and struggling people introduces new ways of doing critical analysis and developing critical theory (ibid.).

Beyond these five areas, critical approaches are openly advocated for and appear across the humanities and social sciences. The examples offered above are just part of an even wider use of open critical approaches in different fields of studies. The open critical research orientation is to be found in almost any research area in the social sciences and humanities. Just in the study of business and organizations there is *critical management studies* (Alvesson and Wilmott, 1992), *critical organization studies* (Alvesson & Deetz, 2006), *critical organizational communication* (Mumby, 2014) and *critical entrepreneurship studies* (Essers, 2017; Örtenblad, 2020) or *critical innovation studies* (Godin & Vinck, 2017; Godin et al., 2021). In the recently emerging field of digital humanities there are attempts to formulate and shape *critical digital humanities* (Dobson, 2019). In the area of design there is a movement stemming back to the late 90s to invigorate *critical design* (Dunne, 1999) moving into explorations of how to design the future in speculative ways (Dunne and Raby, 2013). This open critical version of design also calls into question what (non-critical) design is and its relation to critique.

The examples offered so far testify that open critique is visible in several guises and that almost all research fields in the social sciences and humanities have their critical version or subspeciality. On the other hand, there has for a long time been a

contestation of the position and relevance of critical approaches in the social sciences and humanities. We will now turn to this critique of critique and two of the main critics.

### **3.2 Reforming critique – the critique of critique and beyond**

The renewed interest in open critique described above comes after a period of backlash against classical critical theory and critical literary practice. Bruno Latour and Rita Felski are two scholars who have strongly voiced a critique of critique, with many overlaps in character and object, both aiming at taking steps to move beyond critique.

In the article ‘Why has critique run out of steam?’, Bruno Latour (2004) expresses a concern that laypeople’s conspiracy theories and academic forms of critical theory have found common ground. Latour raises the following question: “What if explanations resorting automatically to power, society, discourse had outlived their usefulness and deteriorated to the point of now feeding the most gullible sort of critique?” (2004: 230). Latour is mainly concerned that critique is being used in new ways and by new groups in the contemporary public landscape: “What I am going to argue is that the critical mind, if it is to renew itself and be relevant again, is to be found in the cultivation of [...] a realism dealing with what I will call matters of concern, not matters of fact” (2004: 231).

Latour delivers an incisive critique of early 21<sup>st</sup> century critical approaches in general. Misuse of critique distances the critic and the object of critique, projecting the ideas of the critic onto the object of the critique. Therefore, the power relation between the critic and the object of the critique is imbalanced and unproductive in a way that Latour terms ‘critical barbarism’. To combat critical barbarism, Latour proposes a new mode or attitude for the critic:

The critic is not the one who debunks, but the one who assembles. The critic is not the one who lifts the rugs from under the feet of the naïve believers, but the one who offers the participants arenas in which to gather (2004: 246).

As an alternative to the critical way of doing social sciences and humanities, Latour advocates that the researcher approaches the studied object with *affirmation*. He uses

the expression ‘matter of concern’ to describe the kind of attitude and approach that the researcher will need to investigate the world in more productive ways, claiming that practitioners of critical theory are not concerned about specific issues, but only about their own predefined ways of approaching issues. In a later text (Latour, 2010) he develops what he calls ‘A Compositional Manifesto’ where the creative and constructive side of what can come after critique is presented. Here, he further underlines the idea that it is attachment rather than detachment, and matter of concern rather than matter of fact, that can pave the way for more fruitful ways of changing and modelling the composition of the social and the world.

Like Latour, Rita Felski argues for new ways of doing critique, going beyond the limits of literary critique. In “The Limits of Critique”, she analyses the shortcomings of critical reading as a principle of interpretation, widening the critique of critique beyond philosophical and social critique to hermeneutic and interpretational critique. Felski contests Ricœur’s notion of suspicious reading – i.e., to read a text against its grain to uncover its actual or real meaning as exemplified by Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud – as well as post-structuralists’ critical stances. Felski focuses on two strategies or “schemas of suspicious reading” (2015: 53): hermeneutics (to dig down) and post-structuralism (to stand back). Hermeneutics contends that the manifest does not tell the full story and that what is latent is discoverable by going below the surface and “digging for hidden meaning” (2015: 56). Post-structuralism attempts to defamiliarize an object of interpretation by reading its surface, “denaturalizing” it, exposing its social construction (ibid.: 54). Instead of more critique, Felski suggests a new approach and vocabulary in the study of literature and culture, which she calls *postcritical reading*. This kind of reading opts for a “language of addition rather than subtraction, translation rather than separation, connection rather than isolation, composition rather than critique” (2015: 182).

Reading, in this sense, is neither a matter of digging below resistant ground nor an equanimous tracing out of textual surfaces. Rather, it is a cocreation between actors that leaves neither party unchanged (2015: 84).

Furthermore, postcritical reading expands the moods and methods of academic studies and criticism:

Rather than looking behind the text [. . .] we might place ourselves in front of the text, reflecting on what it unfurls, calls forth, makes possible. [. . .] The wager, ultimately, is that we can expand our repertoire of critical moods while embracing a richer array of critical methods (2105: 12–13).

Using the term “critiqueness” (Castiglia, 2013), Felski describes the non-desirable aspect of critique that she would like to move beyond: “an unmistakable blend of suspicion, self-confidence, and indignation” (2015: 188). According to Castiglia, by creating distance between the critic and such elements of critique, a *hopeful critique* could be achieved. What Felski asks for is change, ending the book with an ambition to move on beyond critique:

Having clarified, to the best of my ability, the reasons for my dissatisfaction with critique, I want to move on: to try out different vocabularies and experiment with alternative ways of writing, to think in a more sustained and concentrated fashion about what other moods and methods might look like. The point, in the end, is not to redescribe or reinterpret critique but to change it (2015: 192–3).

Felski wants to show the limits of critical approaches towards the literary text and suggests that scholars develop new sensibilities and vocabularies to study literature. Like Latour, she sees critical approaches as a cul-de-sac that will require concentrated and strategic effort if one wants to climb out. There are several paths leading away from critique into more fruitful terrains of engaging with literature than the critical judgement. The critic becomes less of an inspector, the reading less of an interrogation of the text, and the writer is not seen as being guilty of something.

It is important to note that Felski’s argument is also relevant for parts of social science and media and communication studies. The subject of her book is “a specific genre of writing: the rhetoric of suspicious reading in literary studies and in the humanities and interpretative social sciences generally” (2015: 187), and she sees this kind of critique as “the hardening of disagreement into a given repertoire of argumentative moves and interpretative methods” (2015: 187).

In the anthology *Critique and Postcritique* (Anker & Felski, 2017), both the merits and shortcomings of critique are addressed, but the editors see a shift in the sensibility of how critique is approached.

It is no longer a matter of engaging in critiques of critique – thereby prolonging the very style of thinking that is at issue. Rather, influential arguments over the last two decades suggest that the language game of critique may have played itself out: that there is a need not just for different kinds of thinking but for an alternative ethos, mood or disposition (2017: 10).

In their presentation of what might come after critique, the editors attempt not to homogenize, and term all postcritique, instead they “emphasize the diverse range of arguments, attitudes and reservations that are at play” (2017: 10). The ambition to move beyond critique is also manifested in “Hooked” (Felski, 2020), where the idea of attachment to works of art and culture are developed and inspired by Latour’s ideas of ANT with close description that “slows down judgment in order to describe more carefully what aesthetic experiences are like and how they are made” (Felski, 2020: xi).

Both Latour and Felski argue that critical approaches and critique lock down perceptions into prescribed categories, ways of doing critique that are outdated, inefficient and not adequate for their time and setting. To move beyond critique, both Latour and Felski suggest that we step closer to the object under scrutiny or interpretation, as this proximity will allow the critic to see different and competing frames of conceptualization of the object being scrutinized. In addition, both Latour and Felski imply that such closeness creates affections and ties of loyalty. They are also embracing the idea of composition, looking into how things and processes are composed of relations between elements in creative and constructive ways.

With their critiques of critique and with their suggestions of new ways to approach literature or the social, they distance themselves from critique, but the question is how far removed from critique they are. Instead, both Latour and Felski might be seen as fruitful contributors to a widening field of *reforming* critical studies in media, communication and journalism, and different variants of postcritique can also be seen as examples of reforming critique. What makes it possible to see these contributions

as reforming critique rather than non-critical approaches to scholarship and research is that they are clearly oriented towards critique, as the *post*-term indicates, as well as the continued engagement with critique.

### **3.3 Resonant critique – the examples design and humanistic HCI**

So far, the examples given are approaches that openly state their critical intention or ambition by naming themselves critical or attempting to change, reinvent or activate new forms of research practice that go beyond established forms of critique – but still in rapport with it. All of these could and should, of course, be studied in detail to see to what extent and in what way they are critical. Turning this observation around we can also search for examples of research that come close to critical research but that are not using the term critical in their name or description. These forms of research will be called *resonant* critique. In these cases, the research done contains many of the elements that make up a critical approach and there is a resemblance to critical research and theory, but the researcher does not claim or acknowledge that the research has a critical dimension. *Design research* and *Humanistic HCI* (Human Computer Interaction) will be used as examples of this kind of resonant critique.

According to Vilém Flusser (1999), design is about creating something new and giving it a specific form. When design is seen as this kind of formative and creative process, it comes very close to Kaun's (2016) and Maras' (2007) definition of critique as a space of possibility.

The call to action, to bring about change, is central to many design studies (Krippendorff, 2006). Klaus Krippendorff's description of design echoes the ideas of critique understood in the abstract:

[Designers] consider possible futures [. . .] evaluate their desirability [. . .] and create and work out realistic paths from the present towards desirable futures and propose them to those that can bring a design to fruition (2006: 28–29).

Of course, motivations for interventions and actions differ, but at the core we find the same elements: to introduce change that makes a significant difference. Expressed a

bit more abstractly, these interventions and actions desire to make use of a space of possibilities. Sharing some essential elements with critique it is possible to see the design concept and design processes as *critique with resonant qualities*. Not all design research is critical, but it can share substantial parts of openly critical research. Escobar (2018) is an example where the design concept and processes of design are seen as essential for social, cultural and political transformation in times of environmental threats. Escobar develops his argument in relation to critical social theory, critical design and cultural and feminist critics, but his focus is on system theories and ecology. His visions for a social future that is plural and controlled from below clearly mirror concerns voiced also in open critique.

A similar approach is offered in *humanistic HCI* (Bardzell and Bardzell, 2014) where humanistic epistemologies, methods and forms of analysis are used for the study of human-computer interaction. Critical thinking, critical analysis and methods are deployed to explore user experiences and social change and emancipation connected to computer use. Ideas introduced include reflective approaches, Marxist inspired political ideas, feminism and queer theory, ideas of subjectivity and postcolonial theory (Bardzell and Bardzell, 2014: 125-139). In this case the connection to critical research is obvious when concepts, methods and theories of humanistic HCI are considered.

These examples illustrate that research not labelled as critical can to a large extent practice critique. Of course, they might label themselves so as to distance themselves from critique, but in the examples presented above there is obvious resonance with critical research approaches.

### **3.4 Emerging critique – paving the way for new critical sensibilities**

Finally, we will deal with a fourth orientation in which critique is articulated as *emerging* critique, where cutting-edge research on societal and human change and digitalization becomes relevant in terms of its critical implications. In these cases, the way that research is carried out does not reform critique or resonate with critical approaches, like the ones that have been mentioned in the overview so far. Their relevance for critical research rather lies in their consequences and implications, and in how they give new perspectives and meanings to phenomena earlier taken for granted, or

interpret what is truly new. This kind of research radically changes the way we perceive the world, social relations and ourselves. In this capacity, by offering new ways of defining and perceiving phenomena, the research paves the way for bringing about change and transformation. I will briefly point at two examples of this kind of transformative research that carries critical implications.

A first example is offered by the research area *existential media studies* that has been developed by Lagerkvist and colleagues (2017; 2022). Building upon existentialist and phenomenological studies of human life this research area aims at exploring digital media and their consequences for our life, experiences and social relations. Both of these traditions of philosophy, phenomenology and existentialism, and their deployment in social science are normally not seen as critical; rather the reverse. The focus on experience and how we are thrown into life and relations to the world and things is distancing this view from critique as we habitually perceive it: as more connected to social institutions and structures of domination. It is rather the peril and vulnerability of being a human person having to live a life in relation to new technology that is problematised in existential media studies and this raises fundamental questions of what it means to be human in the era of digital media and communication technologies. This also entails ethical issues and how to deal with the situations of digital everyday life and deep mediatized social orders (Lagerkvist et al, 2022). Existentialist media studies does not label itself critical, but it can surely be seen to be a research school where ways of understanding and evaluating world and reality are critically addressed.

A second example of new and explorative research is the *more-than-human-centred-design* (Poikolainen Rosén, 2022) that is developing in HCI. The focus in HCI has traditionally been on the relations between users and technology, people using computers. New research strands are now developing stretching the interest beyond the nexus between person and computers and looking into the wider context where human users are interacting with technology. One aspect of this is to uncover environmental aspects of the user activity and situate it with concerns of resilience and sustainability, but still from a human user perspective. In more-than-human-centred-design the human user is no longer the central object or subject of the research, these are displaced to elements that are beside or beyond the human actor. Widening the

scope of investigation and changing the main objects and subjects of the research field is done in order to find new knowledge and expand our capabilities to act in relation to computers and technological systems. It opens up for new ways of perceiving and acting in relation to computers and computerized systems, and in this sense it both changes the world and our way of approaching the world and how value is attached to it as an *emerging* critique.

## 4. Conclusion

To conclude, the examples presented above testify that an explicit critical orientation – *open critique* – is still strong in media, communication and journalism research. They also testify to the presence of several implicit orientations that also articulate critique – *reforming, resonant and emerging critiques*. The many ways of articulating critique should pave the way for a change of terms, focusing on *criticality* rather than critique. Still, the wider landscape of critique needs to be mapped and described more closely and scholars need to communicate across divides. This article covers many issues and the concepts – the critical, critique, criticism and criticality – can most certainly be defined more fully. How theories differ, and how they contribute to the invigoration of critique, can also be described more in detail, but my ambition here is to look for connections rather than divides.

The overview shows that the critical is articulated in research widely beyond what is normally termed critical theory or critical research. There are, as we have seen, still schools of critical theory and research that carry on doing the work of specific traditions, but there are also other schools and researchers that are relevant if we want to grasp how critique is done among scholars today. To see the full landscape of critique we therefore need to change both terms and perspective and that is what is suggested with the idea of *a turn towards new criticalities*. This is a turn that has three facets: (1) the turn towards a wider field of critique with explicit and implicit critical orientations that are (2) articulating the critical in a variety of criticalities, and (3) changing how we as researchers perceive, communicate and make meaning of what is going on in these fields.

The changes in the fields of research show signs that research that questions and contests social order and institutions is proliferating. Articulations of critique are now dispersed over a wide area, not focused on specific authors, theorists or schools of thought. These articulations of the critical are thereby not connected into a common research field, nor a common project, but are carried out in diverse ways and forms in different research areas and subjects. Tracking out and mapping these ways and forms, these criticalities, are essential for describing and understanding how the critical is articulated in social sciences and the humanities.

Researchers trying to make sense of what is going on will also have to address this with an open mind. There is an option to perceive this situation as the evaporation or decomposition of critique and a lack of common values and projects, but there is also an option to perceive the situation as a new beginning – a recomposition and emergence of new forms of being critical and doing critique.

The way we as researchers communicate about critique is also of importance. This article is not meant to be an interrogation of research that is not critical or that is critical in the “wrong” way; rather, it is to be seen as an ecumenical act, inviting actors for a dialogue from the standpoint of communicative critique. Johan Fornäs (2013) presents the communicative critique approach as one among five forms of critique (negative, aesthetic, philosophical, social, and communicative). Communicative critique is defined by the intention of the critic to be open and receptive and to enter into dialogue with others. Similarly, the actors that are being criticized or their representatives should relate to the critics, listen to them, and exchange views. There should also be an openness for dissenting views and a willingness to adapt to other perspectives.

What motivates this kind of bird’s-eye view of several fields of critique in different areas of research is the ambition to see how different parts of the critical landscape are dispersed and can be connected. As academia prefers distinction, detailed definitions, and disciplinarily specialization, it is impossible to see either the connections or resemblances between different areas of practice such as sociology, political science, business studies, pedagogy and education studies, literary studies, geography, and media studies. That is, the nature of academia makes it difficult to synthesize these aspects of the critical landscape and how they surface in these areas through the

epistemological lens of each discipline. This text attempts to circle the sky and connect different parts of a critical landscape that are dispersed in varying disciplines, schools, approaches, methods and theories.

The broad strokes used here to put different kinds of critical theory under the same umbrella will cause some commenters to dismiss the idea as fundamentally contradictory as it groups research approaches that they might see as unconnected to one another. To also include critique of critique, here called reforming, resonant and emerging critique in the overview, can be seen as even more troublesome. However, this project is not about equivalence among schools of thought but rather about equifinality of intentions, paths and consequences. As mentioned earlier, a communicative scholar, by definition, must invite others to a dialogue, so ecumenicalism is the order of the day as the approach searches for open rather than closed doors. In this vein, Latour and Felski are part of a wider critical landscape where their creative and compositional criticalities contribute.

The continuous but also renewed interest in critical research and theory that I have outlined above indicates that a new era of critique is emerging, an era with a strengthened interest in how critique is articulated in theories, research, thinking, and practice. To paraphrase Latour and Felski: we might say that critique is regaining steam and expanding its limits, pushing beyond classical approaches in productive and unexpected ways in a *turn towards new criticalities*. This is a turn where *open, reforming, resonant* and *emerging* critique enrich how researchers can be critical and do critique.

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