

(Re)Locating Pleasure in Media Studies: Toward an Erotics of Reading

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ab-stract, (n.) 1. a summary of points (as of a writing) usu. presented in skeletal form. (adj.) 1. difficult to understand: abstruse. (vt.) 1. dissociate, remove, separate. This essay concerns how language is, at once, structured (producing meaning) and infinite (destabilizing meaning). Both functions of language are tied to pleasure. Contemporary critical media studies, it is argued, has attacked the pleasure (plaisir) of language's structuring function while simultaneously repressing the pleasure (jouissance) of language's dismantling function. Is this to(o) abstract?

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We have no knowledge, that is, no general principles drawn from the contemplation of particular facts, but what has been built up by pleasure, and exists in us by pleasure alone. . . . However painful may be the objects with which the [critic's] knowledge is connected, he [sic] feels that his knowledge is pleasure; and where he has no pleasure he has no knowledge—William Wordsworth, 1802¹

As I sip my morning coffee (creamy hazelnut, black), I casually sift through the pile of mail on my office desk. I am still a good third of a cup away from being able to tell you what day of the week it is when I catch a glimpse of the phrase, “Nuclear Pornography,” on the cover of the latest issue of *Critical Studies in Media Communication*. I reach for my coffee cup, slightly more awake now than just a moment earlier. My mind races feverishly, imagining the disturbing possibilities suggested by the unlikely juxtaposition of those two words. I take a large swig of coffee and look

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at the journal again, only this time I look with purpose, a sense of anticipation as though something exciting is about to happen.² But upon closer inspection, I realize that the essay's title actually reads, "Nuclear Iconography."³ I am sure it is a wonderful article, but my excitement begins to wane. Not so much because I was itching to read an essay on nuclear pornography, but because the words held out the promise (the pleasure) of the unexpected, the unsettling. A sense of surprise and dislocation is something that I do not often experience with scholarship today. In fact, much of the time, I find myself bored with the scholarship in media studies, both with my own and with others'.

Despite its many variations, critical theory (which animates so much of the recent scholarship in media studies) has, I fear, become stagnant, sterile, even stereotypical. Too often, ideological criticism today feels like a bad 1970s situation comedy—its outcome simple, banal, predictable. With each successive critical essay, the latest film, television show, website, or musical artist is "revealed" as hegemonic, as a vehicle of White heterosexual capitalist patriarchy.⁴ An even more fashionable move, as of late, is to recognize the ideological contradictions in a media text, but then to dismiss them—to claim that "on balance," the text is "not progressive enough." At present, critical media studies, it would seem, can do little but repeat this inevitable conclusion again and again. This is the source of my boredom, and I suspect of others' boredom as well. But how did I/we get here? And where might we go from here? The answer to both of these questions is, I believe, closely tied to matters of pleasure. Thus, I begin this essay with one widely shared account of the connection between pleasure and media. Then, I explore how the assault on, and repression of, pleasure (from a largely Leftist ideology) has simultaneously eroded the *productive* potential of critical theory and contributed to a state of boredom, of ennui, in media studies. Finally, I turn to Roland Barthes, and in particular his notion of *jouissance*, in the hopes of suggesting how we may (re)locate pleasure and set critical theory going again.⁵

The Pleasure of Media Consumption

From watching films to listening to music, media texts are an undeniable source of pleasure (and displeasure).⁶ The rhetorical structures and strategies by which media generate pleasure are well known. Narrative and poetic forms, for instance, are linked to pleasure by the "creation of an appetite in the mind of the auditor, and the adequate satisfying of that appetite," or put more succinctly, "[by] an arousing and fulfillment of desires."⁷ As we listen to, read, and view media texts, we desire certain outcomes to narrative action and suspense, and we are variously pleased or displeased by the nature of those outcomes.⁸ Visual media also offer pleasure in *looking*. The cinema, for instance, satisfies voyeuristic and fetishistic desires through the Freudian process of scopophilia.⁹ Despite the differences between form and voyeurism, the pleasure associated with both is of a common type, as it reflects a particular mode of pleasure. In *The Pleasure of the Text*, Roland Barthes refers to this mode of pleasure as *plaisir*, adding that it "comes from culture and does not break

with it, is linked to a *comfortable* practice of reading.”¹⁰ Elsewhere, Barthes notes that *plaisir* “is linked to a consistence of the self, of the subject, which is assured in values of comfort, relaxation, ease.”¹¹ In the translator’s introduction to *Image, Music, Text*, Stephen Heath elaborates further on *plaisir*’s relation to subjectivity, noting that it is “linked to cultural enjoyment and identity, to the cultural enjoyment of identity, to a homogenizing movement of the ego.”¹² *Plaisir*, then, is the pleasure of identifying with, and submitting to, a text’s socially accepted (dominant) meanings, and as such, it involves “conforming to the dominant ideology and the subjectivity it proposes.”¹³

The Assault on Pleasure and Emergence of Ideological Criticism as Stereotype

In the preceding account, pleasure is a conservative force—a virtual guarantee of the status quo, of existing power relationships. It is a product of audience passivity and the acceptance of ready-made meanings (ideology). Little wonder, then, that during the ideological awakening of the 1960s, the pleasure associated with media *consumption* would come under attack from Marxists, feminists, and other segments of the Left.¹⁴ In his 1963 essay, “The Fate of Pleasure,” American literary critic Lionel Trilling wrote that, “We are [today] repelled by the idea of an art that is consumer-directed and comfortable.”¹⁵ Such repulsion was also evident in the writings of the Frankfurt School, which held a broadly disapproving view of pleasure. In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno claim that, “Pleasure always means not to think about anything. . . . Basically it is helplessness. It is flight; not, as is asserted, flight from a wretched reality, but from the last remaining thought of resistance.”¹⁶ Perhaps the most famous critique of the pleasures of media, though, is Laura Mulvey’s essay, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” originally published in the autumn 1975 issue of *Screen*.

Mulvey’s essay, which has been widely anthologized in feminist, film, and media readers since its initial publication, is important not simply because of its visibility, but because it explicitly takes up matters of pleasure. In a section titled, “Destruction of Pleasure as a Radical Weapon,” Mulvey argues that the visual pleasure afforded by Hollywood cinema works to create subjectivities that (re)affirm the dominant patriarchal order.¹⁷ Using psychoanalytic theory, she sets out to destroy the visual pleasure of mainstream cinema. Explains Mulvey, “It is said that analyzing pleasure, or beauty, destroys it. That is the intention of this article. The satisfaction and reinforcement of the ego that represent the high point of film history hitherto must be attacked.”¹⁸ A key point that is often overlooked in readings of Mulvey’s essay, however, is that she is not opposed to pleasure *qua* pleasure. What Mulvey opposes is the pleasure that serves to reinforce hegemony—what has been identified as *plaisir*. Indeed, she argues that there is a need to find a new space of pleasure, a space with which she continuously flirts in her essay.

To understand how Mulvey’s essay began to open a new space of pleasure (one that liberates the subject, rather than constrains it) and how that space has slowly been collapsed by the media scholarship since then, we need to consider another essay—one that appeared three years earlier, Stuart Hall’s “Encoding/Decoding.” At

the time of its initial publication in 1972, Hall's essay reflected a significant challenge to the orthodox views concerning meaning in media studies. It challenged the "transmission models," which privileged the message source, and introduced ideology into the equation. For Hall, audiences could decode messages in one of three ways (or from one of three positions): dominant, negotiated, or oppositional. Since both the dominant and negotiated positions acknowledge, according to Hall, "the legitimacy of the hegemonic definitions to make the grand significations," these reading positions are the ones likely to interpellate audiences as subjects and hence deliver *plaisir*.¹⁹ Oppositional reading, by contrast, recognizes and resists the ideological hail to subjectivity; it "detotalizes the message" and thus destroys *plaisir*.²⁰ But that de(con)struction of dominant meaning/ideology/pleasure is itself a mode of (re)construction, of production, and of pleasure. What Mulvey accomplishes, then, in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" is an oppositional reading of mainstream film. As a critic myself, I imagine that the *moment* Mulvey first produced that reading had to be almost unimaginably freeing and pleasurable. She was, at that very *moment*, rewriting the whole of film history, and even more fundamentally rewriting herself. In that *moment*, I imagine that Mulvey escaped the "control of culture and of meaning."²¹

Oppositional reading, it would seem, carried with it the promise of a new space of pleasure, one that was highly resistive, if intensely personal. But that promise was never fully realized. Just as the space for a new pleasure was opening, two forces converged to collapse it. First, subsequent media scholarship coded oppositional reading as "work" rather than "pleasure." Second, oppositional reading fell victim to method and, in many cases, succumbed to stereotype. It is worth considering each of these developments and their consequences in greater depth. Although there are numerous essays in media studies that use the language of "work" or "labor" to describe the activity of oppositional reading, I want to focus on one in particular that utilizes the "work" metaphor. Published as the lead essay in *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* in June 1989, Celeste Michelle Condit's "The Rhetorical Limits of Polysemy" is specifically addressed to assessing the potential of oppositional reading to function as a liberating pleasure. Toward this end, Condit studied the responses of two viewers to a *Cagney & Lacey* (1982–88) episode that concerned abortion; one viewer, Jill, "was positioned to give a reading of the text that was dominant or only slightly negotiated," and the other, Jack, "was required to provide a largely oppositional reading."²² Based on their verbal and nonverbal responses to open-ended questions about the episode, Condit contends there is a "disproportional pleasure for oppositional and dominant readers" in which oppositional reading imposes "oppressive quantities of work."²³ Condit concludes, therefore, that one of the key factors constraining audiences from shaping "their own readings, and hence their social life" is "the ratio between the work required and pleasure produced in decoding a text."²⁴

Condit's conclusion is flawed, however, because it is based on a one-dimensional conception of pleasure that devalues "the pleasure of oppositional reading" by coding it as "work." Condit observes a disproportional pleasure in her two viewers

because pleasure is conceptualized exclusively in terms of *plaisir*.²⁵ Given that *plaisir* is linked to a *comfortable* practice of reading, it comes as no surprise that, “Jill indicated she enjoyed the episode of *Cagney & Lacey* very much ... and her non-verbal responses indicated a restful, enjoyable experience.”²⁶ *Plaisir* is a conservative pleasure not because it always (re)produces a conservative ideology, but because it is comfortable and comforting. Jill experiences pleasure (specifically *plaisir*) because she is effectively interpellated by the (liberal) discourse of the episode. Jack, however, reads the episode oppositionally—a practice that destroys *plaisir*, as is evident in his response. “Jack’s interpretation require[d] more time and space, and visibly more effort (his nonverbal behavior was frequently tense and strained) ... [and] was more difficult than the accommodative response was for Jill.”²⁷ Although Jack’s reading clearly demonstrates a lack of *plaisir*, it is difficult to imagine that his struggle to argue against the text’s invited ideology was not its own mode of pleasure, as it is often the struggles that require the most effort, the most *strain*, that deliver the most intense pleasures.²⁸ But Condit has no vocabulary for describing or analyzing this mode of pleasure, so it is dismissed as “work.” The metaphor “oppositional reading is work” has been, I believe, a damaging one in media studies, particularly in terms of a critical pedagogy.

For years, I unreflectively used this language in my Critical Media Studies class. Over the course of the semester, I would present students with an array of oppositional codes and invite them to do the “work” of critical *consumption*. Every so often, a student would come to me and ask, “Do you still enjoy media?” The question always surprised me because I really do enjoy media *and* my critical engagement with it. So, I began to think about where the question comes from, and I realized that in teaching students to read oppositionally, I was destroying the only type of pleasure (*plaisir*) with media they had ever known, without furnishing them a language for the pleasure that derives from breaking with culture. Students skillfully and dutifully generated oppositional readings, but it always appeared to be more out of “duty” (to me and the class) than pleasure. And there was a second, related problem. One of the strengths and important insights of Condit’s essay is that oppositional reading is not always a Leftist discourse. But over time, it has come to be associated principally (if not exclusively) with the Left. Obviously, no single piece of scholarship is responsible for this, but it is helpful to examine in some detail a particular essay to understand *how* this discourse came to dominate the field. Thus, I turn to another lead essay from *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, Linda Steiner’s “Oppositional Decoding as an Act of Resistance” from the March 1988 issue. In this essay, Steiner argues that “when submitting insulting advertisements and clippings from various mass media for republication in [the “No Comment” section of] *Ms.*, readers are engaging in oppositional decoding”—an act that resists “dominant power structures.”²⁹

As the argument unfolds, however, Steiner silently elides two very different categories of reading practices. In the article’s abstract (quoted above), “readers” refers to those persons who *submit* and thus presumably *locate* insulting messages. When such messages are read from a feminist perspective in their original (patriar-

chal) contexts, the reading is, indeed, oppositional. But throughout the essay, Steiner repeatedly conflates these readers with the general readership of *Ms. magazine*. “As the expressive organ of a group dedicated to social change that is predicated on the basis of oppositional readings of dominant practices,” when *Ms. magazine* (re)publishes and thereby recodes those messages in its pages, a feminist reading is no longer oppositional, but in Hall’s terms “preferred” (dominant).³⁰ The readers of *Ms. magazine* who immediately understand the patriarchal character of the messages published in “No Comment” are not producing resistive readings. They may be participating broadly in some form of social resistance, but their readings are, in that context, neither resistive nor oppositional. This conflation of reading practices is problematic, as it perpetuates the misguided assumption that “oppositional readings continually contest the dominant ideology,” in which the “dominant ideology” is always understood to be conservative (patriarchal).³¹ But what is dominant ideology if not “precisely the idea *insofar as it dominates*: ideology can only be dominant.”³² In the local context of “No Comment,” patriarchy is not the prevailing ideology. What this essay fails to make clear is that oppositional reading is not resistive to a particular ideology, but of ideology in general. Oppositional reading is transgressive precisely because it is a break with, a momentary evasion of, ideology.

The repeated failure of critical media studies scholarship to highlight this distinction has had several consequences. Among the most pernicious is the reduction of ideological criticism today first to formula, then to repetition, and finally to stereotype. The danger of “language in a purely stereotyped manner,” writes Barthes, is that “it leaves the door wide open for ideology, because stereotype and ideology share an identity.”³³ Ideological criticism, or rather the language of ideological criticism, is stereotypical in at least two senses today: its object and approach. With few exceptions, ideological criticism of media still respects its object of study as an artistic whole, as the original creation of an Author.³⁴ Media scholars may speak of texts and textuality, but rarely study “Texts” (in the poststructuralist or Barthesian sense of this term). Their object of fascination continues to be the “work”—a finished, stable, classifiable object. Critics analyze “films” and “television shows” and then, more narrowly, “horror films,” “action-thrillers,” and “romantic comedies.” Critics respect, which is to say, they *naturalize* these mediums, these genres, these categories, which all come from culture, but act surprised when *Will and Grace* reinforces hegemony. The hegemony lies no more in the show, than in the critic who blindly accepts these categories. How can a critic who studies film and allows a particular ideology to establish all the parameters (i.e., medium, genre, form, author, message, audience) expect to find anything other than that ideology through and through?³⁵

When media critics and teachers read a film or television show oppositionally, beginning and ending with an unquestioned acceptance of what constitutes the discourse (the object of study), the practice of oppositional reading is transformed from an *attitude* of disruption and dissolution of subjectivity into a restrictive *method* and corresponding prescription of subjectivity. Say, for instance, I invite a student to undertake an oppositional reading of *The Man Show* on Comedy Central.

To the extent that the culture of the television industry is patriarchal, every television show that AOL/Time-Warner produces will, to great extent, embody that ideology. Since the very categories of “network television” and “entertainment variety show” were conceived of within a patriarchal discursive formation, each of the individual shows generated within those categories will bear traces of that ideology. An oppositional reading, therefore, will necessarily be one that diametrically *opposes* the ideology of patriarchy. This may appear liberating at first glance, but now the reading practice rather than the structure of the television show guarantees/authorizes the “preferred” subject position. Oppositional reading simply replaces *The Man Show* as the site of ideological constraint. The ideological critic who begins and ends with a “television show” as her/his object of study will find only the so-called “dominant” ideology. Moreover, this critic will produce a subjectivity as finished and as beyond question as that of the viewer who submits to the text and its pleasures (*plaisir*); it will simply be its ideological *opposite*. It is this state of opposites, of either/or, of closed and coherent subjectivities that fuels my boredom. But how do we rupture this structure without simply creating another in its place? In the hopes of finding an answer, I turn to Roland Barthes and the notion of *jouissance*.

Pleasure and the Poststructuralist Barthes

Roland Barthes is certainly no stranger to media studies. His work on myth is widely known and cited, and no graduate seminar in media studies would be complete without, at least, a gesture to his “Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives” and *Elements of Semiology* when discussing structuralism and semiotics.³⁶ “For many, to this day,” observes Mireille Ribière, “the name of Barthes is synonymous with structuralism.”³⁷ But this is not the Barthes that concerns us here. Sometime during the late 1960s and early 1970s, Barthes’s thinking and writing took a dramatic poststructuralist turn.³⁸ After some twenty years of revealing myths and uncovering the deep structures of meaning in messages, Barthes began to ask questions about readers, about how they take their pleasures, and about how they make, unmake, and remake their subjectivities. Barthes was himself acutely aware of this shift, which he reflected upon during an interview conducted in 1972:

For a long time I wrote mostly ideological criticism: *Mythologies*, for example, and *Critical Essays*. These days, the chores of ideological criticism have been taken up to a certain extent by everyone [in France]. It is not avant-gardist work; there is much redundancy and mere verbiage in ideological criticism, as it is practiced by students, for example. ... [The task of dissecting ideology] has already been taken up by a whole section of the French intelligentsia, while a theory of pleasure, on the contrary, is waiting for constructive, combative action. Why is this the case? ... Politicized language takes its terminological and phraseological models from a generally Marxist theoretical literature, which naturally excludes the problem of pleasure. Speaking frankly, it seems to me that in much of the counter-ideological work being done in France today, work that is indeed necessary, there is nevertheless a law, a censorship, a foreclosure of pleasure.³⁹

Although Barthes's comments concern the state of literary studies in France in the 1970s, they resonate, I argue, with an eerie poignancy for the current state of media studies in the US. Hence, it is worth attending closely to Barthes's writings on pleasure in the hopes of gleaned some insights for contemporary critical practice.

Barthes's theory of pleasure, and more specifically his notion of *criticism as pleasure*, is rooted in the Lacanian concept of *jouissance*. For Lacan, as well as for Barthes, "*Jouissance* goes beyond *plaisir*. ... *Jouissance* begins where pleasure [*plaisir*] ends."⁴⁰ The concept is an especially difficult one to explain, however, as the French word *jouissance* has no English equivalent. Typically, *jouissance* is translated into English as "bliss," but as Heath explains, "the success of this is dubious ... since not only does 'bliss' lack an effective verbal form (to render the French *jouir* [meaning 'to come']), it also brings with it connotations of religious and social contentment ('heavenly bliss', 'blissfully happy') which damagingly weaken the force of the original French term."⁴¹ *Jouissance* is an intense, orgasmic, and even violent form of pleasure,⁴² but unlike *plaisir*, which is merely a state, *jouissance* is also an action, a moment of production. It embodies the idea, offers Patrick Fuery, "that the critical moment should also be a point of ecstasy in which the idea has orgasmic force."⁴³

As with *plaisir*, *jouissance* is closely tied to matters of subjectivity. But whereas the pleasure that derives from consumption (*plaisir*) is gratifying in its "confirmation of existing identity," the pleasure of production (*jouissance*) results in "an ecstatic loss of previous being."⁴⁴ According to Barthes, "[*Jouissance*] unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his [sic] tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language; [it] is the system of reading, or utterance, through which the subject, instead of establishing itself, is lost."⁴⁵ It is the capacity of *jouissance* to radically disrupt the unity of subjectivity that associates the term with loss as well as with pleasure. But precisely how does *jouissance* affect this "mode of vanishing, of annulment of the subject,"⁴⁶ and how, in turn, does this loss of self open the space for what Robert L. Ivie has called "productive criticism"?⁴⁷ To answer these questions, it is necessary to examine Barthes's "Theory of the Text," for, as he notes, the Text "is bound to *jouissance*."⁴⁸

Approaching the Text

For Barthes, the Text is a metaphor—one that describes a particular attitude or perspective toward language. This perspective is quite distinct, he maintains, from the prevailing attitude toward language, which he refers to as the "work." Perhaps the greatest difference (in attitude) between Texts and works is in where they locate the *activity of writing*.⁴⁹ Works respect the sovereignty of the Author-God. They privilege the signified, and though they allow for the possibility of a plural signified, it is always a limited plural.⁵⁰ The work closes down writing, closes down textuality, by imposing limits on reading and by creating the *appearance* of a finished discourse. The work, in perpetuating the illusion that it is finished (i.e., produced by a singular voice), always directs the reader or critic toward a prescribed—already "scribed," already written—meaning or meanings. The reader and critic both arrive at the same

meaning for a work; they simply arrive there differently. The reader's path, unconscious, delivers *plaisir*; the critic's path, conscious, annihilates it. The reader's path reproduces myths and ideologies; the critic's path exposes them. But the "work" positions both readers and critics as relatively passive receivers.⁵¹ The phrase "passive receivers" is, of course, redundant since reception (consumption) can only be passive; it produces nothing. Even *critical* consumption (i.e., oppositional reading as practiced by contemporary ideological critics) is a form of passivity.⁵² Here, method merely replaces the work and its Author as the textual Father, as the guarantee of meaning, ideology, and subjectivity. In approaching television, film, and music as "works," contemporary critical media studies lacks both pleasure and productive (create[ive]) insight, not because it destroys *plaisir*, but because it represses *jouissance*.

The Text, in stark contrast to the work, begins with the "removal of the Author."⁵³ It conceptualizes discourse as "a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash ... as a tissue of quotations," and it locates the reader as "The space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost."⁵⁴ Thus, explains Vincent Leitch, "the text is opened out and set going—produced—by the reader in an act of collaboration, not consumption."⁵⁵ When discourse is no longer *received*, when the whole disciplining apparatus of the Author-God is disrupted, then and only then does Text production become "the primary task of audiences, readers, and critics."⁵⁶ Indeed, Barthes contends that "*the Text is experienced only in an activity of production.*"⁵⁷ The Text privileges the *infinity* of the signifier, which "is not simply to say that it has several meanings, but that it accomplishes the very plural of meaning: an *irreducible* (and not merely acceptable) plural."⁵⁸ As such, Michael Moriarty notes, "The Text, like the erotic, suspends our sense of ourselves as unified subjects: we have no secure identity as receivers of a message, for there is no message; we cannot relate to its discourse, for we do not know who is speaking and are confronted with bottomless possibilities of irony; the multiplicity of the voices we hear multiplies our response and divides our subjectivity."⁵⁹ The Text *is* production in the name of pleasure.

Toward an Erotics of Reading

But how does one read, which is to say *produce*, Texts? What are the contours of criticism as pleasure? "In short, can we legitimately speak," as an interviewer queried of Barthes in 1973, "of an 'erotics of reading?'"⁶⁰ Any attempt to answer these questions must proceed cautiously, must constantly guard against the temptation of method, for, as Barthes reminds us, "[there is] no surer way to kill a piece of research and send it to join the great scrap heap of abandoned projects than Method."⁶¹ This cautionary note is all the more important to Communication Studies and its various sub-disciplines, which have shown a long preoccupation with method.⁶² So, it is vital to affirm that an erotics of reading is a critical *practice*, a perspective, an attitude, not a critical methodology or technique.⁶³ In fact, it is a practice that eschews methodological rigor—a practice that "can produce only

theoreticians or practitioners, not specialists.”⁶⁴ To claim that an erotics of reading is not a critical methodology is not also to claim that it lacks identifiable impulses, instincts, or sensibilities, however. The aim of this section, therefore, is twofold, to chart those sensibilities and to begin to suggest their productive potential. In my reading/writing of Barthes, an erotics of reading is characterized by three intricately interwoven sensibilities—significance, cruising, and drifting.

Traditional modes of criticism have, regardless of their object of study (television show or literary text), been concerned with signification and with the meaning of messages (what Barthes terms “works”). As we have already seen, privileging the Author-God furnishes a work with a final signified and closes down writing (textuality), making the critic’s task an interpretive one—the recovery of meaning.⁶⁵ Although many contemporary critics are interested in questions of ideology, they nevertheless begin with the premises of interpretation and with the unquestioned assumption that the ideological workings of a discourse are decipherable (i.e., unified, static, and identifiable). When one begins speaking and thinking of language in terms of Texts rather than works, however, signification is displaced, for “the Text ... answers not to an interpretation, even a liberal one, but to an explosion, a dissemination.”⁶⁶ In this instance, “The critical activity,” explains Rylance, “is described not as interpretation (still less as explication) but as an ‘appreciation’ of the plurality of writing.”⁶⁷ For Barthes, such an appreciation for the “mobile play of signifiers, with no possible reference to one or several fixed signifieds” is known as *significance*.⁶⁸ To read a Text for *significance* is to read it intertextually, to disperse rather than to decipher its meaning.⁶⁹ “The critic,” clarifies Wasserman, “does not decipher a text—for him [sic], there is no single voice leading to a meaning. Criticism is the unraveling of the braided voices that traverse what is read.”⁷⁰

I witnessed a powerful public performance of intertextual reading, of dispersal of the Text, during a panel at a recent academic convention. The panel concerned “Questions of Pleasure and Identity in Cultural Studies” and comprised predominantly theoretical pieces, except for the third paper, which undertook an analysis of the diverse “camp gestures” in the music, style, and personae of Gwen Stefani and Macy Gray.⁷¹ The co-authors of this piece offered a careful and compelling analysis of Stefani’s and Gray’s many “references” to previous musical and fashion styles. But when they finished, and the floor was opened for discussion, an amazing and unexpected thing happened. Numerous hands excitedly thrust into the air, and with each turn, a new voice added to the list of “influences” on the two artists. At first, the authors of the paper seemed to be stunned (and perhaps even a bit defensive). They had, after all, done the “hard work” of *interpreting* the *true* influences on Stefani and Gray. But the audience’s tone was *playful*, and any resistance to the unexpected readings quickly subsided. Audience members, it appeared, were deriving great pleasure from being able to make their own sets of connections. For several minutes, *significance* superseded signification, and individual voices and pleasures were woven into a vast Textual tapestry. As we are about to see, this sort of *play* is key to Text production and to *jouissance*.⁷²

Barthes approaches the notion of Textual play through two concepts, *cruising* and

drifting. To understand what he means by these concepts, it is helpful to take a brief detour through childhood and, more specifically, theories of play. Although they share many commonalities, child and adult forms of play are nevertheless distinctive.⁷³ Child play, for instance, typically places greater emphasis on uninhibited freedom, individuality, creativity, pretending, enacting, and fantasy than does adult play. To children, objects and toys (especially those toys that they create) represent endless possibilities.⁷⁴ A box can be(come) a fort one moment and a truck the very next. As children grow into adulthood, however, they adopt/internalize cultural codes and norms—structures that impose limits on the meaning (and pleasure) of objects. Consequently, adults are more likely to use objects for their culturally intended or prescribed purposes. The freedom and creativity that children demonstrate with objects are also evident in the *structure* of their play. Whereas adults tend to *play by the rules*—rules that are preexisting and relatively fixed, children *create rules as a form of play*—rules that frequently change as quickly as do their desires. In short, children’s play values immediate gratification and personal inventiveness over inherited tradition and predetermined cultural meanings.⁷⁵

Anthropologist Victor Turner classifies such fleeting, fragmentary, and imaginative forms of play as “liminoid phenomena” because they exist in/at a threshold, “an interval, however brief, of *margin* or *limen*, when the past is momentarily negated, suspended or abrogated, and the future has not yet begun, an instant of pure potentiality when everything, as it were, trembles in the balance.”⁷⁶ Liminoid phenomena such as child play generate sites/moments of *jouissance*, then, because the subject participates simultaneously in culture and its destruction. Cruising is Barthes’s term for engaging language and discursive forms as children engage their social world. “Cruising is the voyage of desire,” writes Barthes. “The body is in a state of alert, on the lookout for its own desire. . . . Cruising is an act that repeats itself, but the catch is absolutely fresh.”⁷⁷ Rather than uncovering prescribed, culturally shared meanings, Barthes would have critics play imaginatively with a discourse, experiment and invent their own relationships with it, for when discourse is no longer received, no longer *consumed*, it becomes a resource for Text production, for pleasure.⁷⁸ “The pleasure of the text is that moment when my body pursues its own ideas—for my body does not have the same ideas I do.”⁷⁹

Most communication and media critics are, of course, not very skilled at reading/writing bodily desires, or even recognizing them when they occur.⁸⁰ They are interested in the text, only the text, which they then approach not as a Text at all, but as a work. So, how do critics open themselves to pleasure? One possibility is by appreciating drift. “My pleasure can very well take the form of a drift. *Drifting* occurs,” observes Barthes, “whenever *I do not respect the whole*.”⁸¹ Barthes is suggesting that all discourses be treated as unfinished and that critics attend to the abrasions and ruptures that readers impose upon their surfaces. In an essay tellingly titled, “Writing Reading,” he argues that drifting is a common (and frequently ignored) element in reading; “Has it never happened, as you were reading a book, that you kept stopping as you read, not because you weren’t interested, but because you were: because of a flow of ideas, stimuli, associations? In a word, haven’t you

ever happened *to read while looking up from your book?*⁸² Barthes recognizes that discourses create structures (limits), but he also recognizes that readers disrespect and disrupt those structures by “pausing,” “skipping,” and “looking up” as they read.⁸³ Michel de Certeau shares a similar view of readers, arguing that the “reader ... invents in texts something different from what they ‘intended.’ He [sic] detaches them from their (lost or accessory) origin. He combines their fragments and creates something un-known in the space organized by their capacity for allowing an indefinite plurality of meanings.”⁸⁴ Too often, critics give an account only of the system, the structure, and not how readers “wander through an imposed system”—how they write Texts.⁸⁵

Drifting (in Barthes’s terms) and wandering (in de Certeau’s terms) occurs in the space, the gap, the seam between language as structured and language as infinite, between the recognition of a final signified and an appreciation of the limitless signifier. This gap creates two surfaces, two edges—“one, a conformist edge, the language as culture decrees its use, the other, a subversive edge, the violation of convention.”⁸⁶ It is the fault that is created between these two edges that is erotic, that delivers *jouissance*.⁸⁷ “Is not the most erotic portion of the body,” Barthes inquires, “*where the garment gapes?*”⁸⁸ The pleasure of the Text “is not the pleasure of the corporeal striptease or of narrative suspense”—that pleasure is on the order of form (*plaisir*); rather, “it is intermittence,” explains Barthes, “which is erotic: the intermittence of skin flashing between two articles of clothing (trousers and sweater), between two edges ... it is this flash itself which seduces.”⁸⁹ It is also this flash that subverts, that destabilizes subjectivity. In that moment, the subject participates paradoxically (as in *paradoxa*, beyond *doxa*) in the inherited bourgeois culture and in the destruction of this inheritance; the subject is split, divided between the consistency of her/his selfhood and its collapse, its loss.⁹⁰ The subject becomes a living contradiction—a perversion. Such perversions may not exist outside of ideology, but they cut it up, break it up, fragment it, and fragments are atopic, asocial, scandalous, because they do not prefer one ideology to another.⁹¹

On Conclusions, Fragments, and the Future of Media Studies

There is a certain irony in writing a conclusion about the productive potential of *jouissance*. Most conclusions in academic writing, especially those that are deemed “effective” or “good,” summarize the argument, draw conclusions (preferably theoretical), and suggest several avenues for further research. Each of these maneuvers functions to celebrate the privileged position of the Author, to furnish a final signified, and to close down writing. If they are done particularly well, then an essay may even deliver *plaisir*. You see my dilemma. By “telling you” what I meant, I significantly limit the capacity of this writing to say anything more than what I meant. In fact, the “better” this conclusion (according to academic conventions), the more it contradicts the spirit of the Text. It is not the conclusion alone, however, that locates me in this paradoxical position. From the very outset, I have engaged in a *mode* of writing that does not lend itself well to Textual production. As a

metacritical essay, this study, like other studies of Barthes, “remain[s] a language *about* the Barthesian language, and such a metalanguage cannot be a ‘site’ of pleasure [*jouissance*],”⁹² for sites of *jouissance* are always sites of production. In reflecting on this matter, I have raised an interesting question, though; “can critics avoid this same paradox?”

Barthes suggests they can, but only on one condition. The Text is, he argues, “outside criticism, *unless it is reached through another text of bliss* [*jouissance*]: you cannot speak ‘on’ such a text, you can only speak ‘in’ it, *in its fashion*, enter into a desperate plagiarism, hysterically affirm the void of bliss (and no longer obsessively repeat the letter of pleasure [*plaisir*]).”⁹³ This principle explains Barthes’s own modes of writing in the poststructuralist portion of his life. In *S/Z*, Barthes undertakes an analysis of the short Balzac novella, *Sarrasine*, by “cutting up” the text into 561 “contiguous fragments” or *lexias*, which he admits “will be arbitrary in the extreme.”⁹⁴ He, then, further divides the essay into 93 units bearing brief, cryptic titles, such as “The Unformulated Enigma” and “And/Or.” The organization of Barthes’s analysis reflects a deliberate attempt to “remain attentive to the plural of a text.”⁹⁵ In *A Lover’s Discourse*, Barthes partitions his discussion of love into 80 fragments or “figures,” which he arranges alphabetically (i.e., randomly).⁹⁶ A similar approach is evident in *The Pleasure of the Text*, in which Barthes presents a succession of 46 short essays or “phylacteries,” which range in length from two lines to several paragraphs. In each book, Barthes aims to disrupt and deny the cohesion of the discourse being studied, to open meaning, to appreciate the endless play of the signifier.

In Barthes’s later books, there are no arguments, or at least no arguments in the traditional sense of argument.⁹⁷ Like composition, argument channels, directs, fixes meaning, shuts down textuality. So, instead, Barthes presents the reader with gaps, fissures, and ruptures. In doing so, he enacts, he *performs*, his argument. He disseminates rather than deciphers the discourse under study. And his perversion is doubly so, as his own writing offers fragments for future Textual production. One reads/writes Barthes precisely as he would have us read/write other discourses. Skipping and skimming different passages, reading fragments in new sequences, each reading of Barthes is a rewriting. What Barthes teaches us is that if criticism is going to be “productive,” it *must* be a performance. For, if criticism is not a performance (a Textual production), it is a merely (passive) consumption, regardless of how critical it is of the discourse being studied. To explicate, to interpret, to “make clear” a discourse is to accept it on its own terms, and to repress the productive potential of *jouissance*.

I have suggested that media studies generally, and ideological criticism of media in particular, has lost sight of this. It has consistently approached discourses as closed systems, finished structures. It has transformed the *practice* of oppositional reading into method and stereotype, which, rather than dispersing a discourse and creating possibilities, fixes it, and passes judgment on it. In passing such judgments; ideological criticism has replaced one doxa with another, and become the latest (if more fashionable) site of ideological constraint. In light of these trends, I am urging media critics to explore reading as Text production in addition to text consumption, to

experiment with a-positional reading in addition to oppositional reading, to perform discourse in addition to interpreting it, in short, to entertain an erotics of reading in addition to an aesthetics of reading. This will entail critics rethinking how they come to and write (about) media. Rather than doing a criticism of television shows and films, critics might construct media Texts from various fragments of our semiotic laden landscape. This would, no doubt, be closer to how many readers and audiences *today* actually interact with the endless mediascape. Rather than advancing highly focused arguments about Texts (which resist such closure/classification), perhaps media critics will enact their own voyages of pleasure and “invent social knowledge rather than discovering it.”⁹⁸ Though it is unfashionable to end an essay with a quotation, I have in spite of this (or perhaps because of it) chosen to do so. I close with the parable that begins *The Pleasure of the Text*:

Imagine someone ... who abolishes within himself [sic] all barriers, all classes, all exclusions, not by syncretism but by simple discard of that old specter: *logical contradiction*; who mixes every language, even those said to be incompatible; who silently accepts every charge of illogicality, of incongruity; who remains passive in the face of Socratic irony ... and legal terrorism. ... Such a man would be the mockery of our society: court, school, asylum, polite conversation would cast him out: who endures contradiction without shame? Now this anti-hero exists: he is the reader of the text at the moment he takes his pleasure.⁹⁹

Notes

- [1] William Wordsworth, “Appendix: Wordsworth’s Preface of 1800, with a Collation of the Enlarged Preface of 1802,” in *Wordsworth and Coleridge: Lyrical Ballads, 1798*, ed. W. J. B. Owen, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 167.
- [2] In reflecting upon my excitement (and arousal) over the phrase, “nuclear pornography,” I am attempting to demonstrate how language can be erotic. Erotic refers here not to the genital pleasure associated with sexual arousal, but to the intellectual stimulation associated with the brief and unexpected flash of the forbidden, to the sexuality of language. “A word, if it is sufficiently unexpected ... sets itself apart from its neighbors, and thus becomes ‘erotic.’ Nausea occurs whenever the liaison of two important words *follows of itself*” (George R. Wasserman, *Roland Barthes* [Boston: Twayne, 1981], 100).
- [3] Bryan C. Taylor, “‘Our Bruised Arms Hung Up as Monuments’: Nuclear Iconography in Post-Cold War Culture,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 20 (2003): 1–34.
- [4] As initial evidence for this claim, consider the (ideological) homogeneity of the following theses and summary statements compiled from articles published in *Critical Studies in Media Communication (CSMC)* during 2002. “[The] terministic screen of Whiteness represents the dominant reading of *Jump Start* and *The Boondocks* because this reading deflects issues that challenge dominant ideology about race” (Naomi R. Rockler, “Race, Whiteness, ‘Lightness,’ and Relevance: African American and European American Interpretations of *Jump Start* and *The Boondocks*,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 19 [2002]: 414); “In this study we focus on the film *The Siege* (1998), as an illustration of how mediated representations of terrorism serves as a vehicle for Orientalist discourse” (Karin Wilkins and John Downing, “Mediating Terrorism: Text and Protest in Interpretations of *The Siege*,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 19 [2002]: 419); “[Representations in children’s televised toy ads] serve to reiterate and reinforce certain dominant ideologies” (Fern L. Johnson and Karren Young, “Gendered Voices in Children’s Television Advertising,” *Critical Studies in Media*

Communication 19 [2002]: 463); “Television news treatments of stay-at-home fathers nudge nurturance ever closer to incorporation within an ideal of hegemonic masculinity” (Mary Douglas Vavrus, “Domesticating Patriarchy: Hegemonic Masculinity and Television’s ‘Mr. Mom’,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 19 [2002]: 368). “Our textual analysis finds that ... governmental web sites [of Sub-Saharan nations] often construct the nation as a brand (signified by slogans and logos) and its citizens as exotic Others who can be marketed to foreign investors. The discourse of these governmental web sites is one of response—a reflection of Western, especially U.S., American dominance” (Elfriede Fürsich and Melinda B. Robins, “Africa.com: The Self-Representation of Sub-Saharan Nations on the World Wide Web,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 19 [2002]: 191); “Throughout this essay we have argued that the ‘Wassup?!’ ad campaign is constitutive of an ambivalence in the white imagination regarding ‘authentic’ blackness” (Eric King Watts and Mark P. Orbe, “The Spectacular Consumption of ‘True’ African American Culture: ‘Whassup’ with the Budweiser Guys?” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 19 [2002]: 16); “We have argued that *Fight Club*’s narrative, coupled with the interpretation of it offered in the running commentaries, protects the film’s commercial appeal through dual forms of homosexual erasure” (Robert Alan Brookey and Robert Westerfelhaus, “Hiding Homoeroticism in Plain View: The *Fight Club* DVD as Digital Closet,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 19 [2002]: 38); “[We] will argue that by inviting viewers to read the program within familiar television frames, *Will and Grace* can be read as reinforcing heterosexism and, thus, can be seen as heteronormative” (Kathleen Battles and Wendy Hilton-Morrow, “Gay Characters in Conventional Spaces: *Will and Grace* and the Situation Comedy Genre,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 19 [2002]: 89). I selected CSMC to illustrate this point out of convenience, as the previously cited issues were all available in my office. But CSMC is clearly not alone in its preoccupation with the (White heterosexual capitalist patriarchal) hegemony of media if the panel and paper titles in recent conference programs are any indication. For a related critique, see Gilberto Perez, “In the Study of Film, Theory Must Work Hand in Hand with Criticism,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, November 6, 1998, sec. B6.

- [5] Although Barthes did not coin the term *jouissance*, it takes on a unique inflection in his writing, which is why I refer to it as “his notion.”
- [6] In terms of displeasure, I’m thinking specifically of the film *Glitter* (2001), but pretty much any film with a singer turned actor in it works.
- [7] Kenneth Burke, *Counter-Statement*, 2nd ed. (Los Altos, CA: Hermes Publications, 1953), 31, 124.
- [8] Christopher Butler, “The Pleasures of the Experimental Text,” in *Criticism and Critical Theory*, ed. Jeremy Hawthorn (Baltimore, MD: Edward Arnold, 1984), 129.
- [9] Sigmund Freud, “Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality,” in *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989), 251–58. See also Madan Sarup, *Modern Cultural Theorists: Jacques Lacan* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 159.
- [10] Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill & Wang, 1975), 14.
- [11] Roland Barthes, “Twenty Key Words for Roland Barthes,” in *The Grain of the Voice: Interviews 1962–1980*, trans. Linda Coverdale (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 206. Although he does not employ the French term *plaisir*, Lionel Trilling also describes a mode of pleasure associated with “the comfort of the consumer, or with the quite direct flattery of his ego” (Lionel Trilling, “The Fate of Pleasure,” in *Beyond Culture: Essays on Literature and Learning* [New York: The Viking Press, 1965], 69).
- [12] Stephen Heath, translator’s note to *Image, Music, Text*, by Roland Barthes (New York: Hill & Wang, 1977), 9. For further discussion of *plaisir* and its relation to subjectivity, see Jane Gallop, *Thinking through the Body* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 121.
- [13] John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 54. See also John

- Fiske, *Television Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1987), 228 and Sarup, *Modern Cultural Theorists*, 159.
- [14] While the attack on pleasure in media scholarship coincides roughly with the critical interpretive turn, the broader academic assault on pleasure has a much longer philosophical legacy. Friedrich Nietzsche, for instance, argues that the entire history of Western philosophy is characterized by the repression of the Dionysiac spirit of revelry, ecstasy, and pleasure in favor of the Apollonian spirit of order, rationality, and self-control. See Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Birth of Tragedy," in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Modern Library, 1992), 33–144. Trilling makes a similar observation, noting that it was because Bentham's moral philosophy regarded pleasure as "an essential and definitive energy of man's nature" that Carlyle called it "the Pig-philosophy" (Trilling, "The Fate of Pleasure," 60).
- [15] Trilling, "The Fate of Pleasure," 71. This essay was originally published in the *Partisan Review*, Summer 1963.
- [16] Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 2001), 144. Although the first edition was published by Querido of Amsterdam in 1947, the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* did not appear in English until 1972.
- [17] Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Feminism and Film Theory*, ed. Constance Penley (New York: Routledge, 1988), 59.
- [18] Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure," 59.
- [19] Stuart Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," in *Media and Cultural Studies: Key Works*, ed. Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas Kellner (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001), 175.
- [20] Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," 175.
- [21] Fiske, *Television Culture*, 229.
- [22] Celeste Michelle Condit, "The Rhetorical Limits of Polysemy," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 6 (1989): 108.
- [23] Condit, 110.
- [24] Condit, 103.
- [25] Although Condit does not use the term *plaisir*, I argue that her use of the word *pleasure* is consistent with a view of pleasure as *plaisir*.
- [26] Condit, 110.
- [27] Condit, 108–9.
- [28] I am quite taken with the word *strain* because it suggests a stretching and contorting of something beyond its boundaries, its limits, its normal(ized) form. Is not orgasm the intersection of strain and pleasure?
- [29] Linda Steiner, "Oppositional Decoding as an Act of Resistance," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 5 (1988): 1, 2.
- [30] Steiner, 4.
- [31] Steiner, 2.
- [32] Barthes, *Pleasure of the Text*, 32.
- [33] Roland Barthes, "The Adjective Is the 'Statement' of Desire," in *The Grain of the Voice*, 174.
- [34] The most notable exception in Communication Studies is McGee. See Michael Calvin McGee, "Text, Context, and the Fragmentation of Contemporary Culture," *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 54 (1990): 279–82.
- [35] A variation on this critique has been leveled by political-economists for some time now: "[Stuart] Hall's failure [to consider the ways that mass media function as 'ideological apparatuses' in relation to their position as large scale commercial enterprises in a capitalist economic system] leads him to explain the ideological effect in terms of ideologically predetermined communicators or encoders choosing from an ideologically predetermined set of codes. Hence there is a systematic tendency of the media to reproduce the ideological field of society in such a way as to reproduce also its structure of domination. That is to say, he offers the description of an ideological process, but not an explanation of why or how it takes

- place, except in tautological terms.” (Nicholas Garnham, *Capitalism and Communication: Global Culture and the Economics of Information* [New York: Sage, 1990], 28).
- [36] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill & Wang, 1972); Roland Barthes, “Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives,” in *Image, Music, Text*, 79–124; Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Hill & Wang, 1973).
- [37] Mireille Ribière, *Barthes: A Beginner’s Guide* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2002), 4.
- [38] Stephen Bonnycastle, “Barthes, Roland,” in *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Literary Theory: Approaches, Scholars, Terms*, ed. Irena R. Makaryk (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 246; Vincent B. Leitch, *Deconstructive Criticism: An Advanced Introduction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 102; Rick Rylance, *Modern Cultural Theorists: Roland Barthes* (New York: Harvester/Wheatsheaf, 1994), 66.
- [39] Roland Barthes, “Pleasure/Writing/Reading,” in *The Grain of the Voice*, 160–61. Barthes would make this case again a year later. “It seemed to me that the almost wild and uncontrolled development of ideological criticism called for a certain corrective adjustment, because it threatened to impose on the text, on textual theory, a kind of father-figure whose vigilant function would be to forbid blissful enjoyment. . . . I’m too Brechtian not to believe in the need to make criticism and pleasure coexist” (Barthes, “The Adjective,” 174).
- [40] Sarup, *Modern Cultural Theorists*, 99.
- [41] Heath, translator’s note, 9. See also Richard Howard, a note on the text to *The Pleasure of the Text*, v–vi.
- [42] Michael Moriarty, *Roland Barthes* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991), 149.
- [43] Patrick Fuery, *Theories of Desire* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1995), 6.
- [44] Rylance, *Modern Cultural Theorists*, 82. For a further discussion of *jouissance* and its relation to subjectivity, see Graham Allen, *Intertextuality* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 89–90; Karmen MacKendrick, *Counterpleasures* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 111; Fiske, *Television Culture*, 229; Leitch, *Deconstructive Criticism*, 114; Moriarty, *Roland Barthes*, 149.
- [45] Barthes, *Pleasure of the Text*, 14; Barthes, “Twenty Key Words,” 206.
- [46] Barthes, “The Adjective,” 173. See also Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture*, 50.
- [47] “Productive criticism, itself a rhetorical performance, is deliberately creative. It invents social knowledge instead of discovering it. It originates insight as opposed to apprehending actuality. It manufactures practical wisdom rather than deriving conclusions from observed phenomena. It’s active, not passive, intelligence” (Robert L. Ivie, “Productive Criticism,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 81, no. 1 [1995]: editor’s introduction).
- [48] Roland Barthes, “From Work to Text,” in *Image, Music, Text*, 164.
- [49] Because Texts and works are characterized by different attitudes/perspectives toward language, “It would be futile to try to separate out materially works from texts. In particular, the tendency must be avoided to say that the work is classic, the text avant-garde; it is not a question of drawing up a crude honours list in the name of modernity and declaring certain literary productions ‘in’ and others ‘out’ by virtue of their chronological situation” (Barthes, “From Work to Text,” 156).
- [50] Leitch, *Deconstructive Criticism*, 104; Allen, *Intertextuality*, 86.
- [51] Allen, *Intertextuality*, 79.
- [52] To *consume* a text “is to receive it from someone else without putting one’s own mark on it, without remaking it” (Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall [Berkeley: University of California, 1988], 169). Too often, critics treat readers as consumers rather than producers despite the fact that every reading modifies its object.
- [53] Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” in *Image, Music, Text*, 145.
- [54] Barthes, “Death of the Author,” 146, 148.
- [55] Leitch, *Deconstructive Criticism*, 107.
- [56] McGee, “Text, Context, and the Fragmentation,” 274.

- [57] Barthes, "From Work to Text," 157.
- [58] Barthes, "From Work to Text," 159.
- [59] Moriarty, *Roland Barthes*, 149.
- [60] Barthes, "The Adjective," 175.
- [61] Roland Barthes, "Writers, Intellectuals, Teachers," in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 318.
- [62] Michael Calvin McGee, "Another Philippic: Notes on the Ideological Turn in Criticism," *Central States Speech Journal* 35 (1984): 47.
- [63] Rylance, *Modern Cultural Theorists*, 85.
- [64] Barthes, *Pleasure of the Text*, 60. See also Allen, *Intertextuality*, 94; Wasserman, *Roland Barthes*, 103.
- [65] Leitch, *Deconstructive Criticism*, 104–5; Roland Barthes, "Writing Reading," *The Rustle of Language*, 30.
- [66] Barthes, "From Work to Text," 159.
- [67] Rylance, *Modern Cultural Theorists*, 77.
- [68] Moriarty, *Roland Barthes*, 145.
- [69] Julia Kristeva, a student of Barthes's, also employs the term *significance* to describe, "[an] unlimited and unbounded generating process, [an] unceasing operation of the drives toward, in, and through language. ... a structuring and de-structuring *practice*, a passage to the outer boundaries of the subject and society" that produces *jouissance* (Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller [New York: Columbia University Press, 1984], 17).
- [70] Wasserman, *Roland Barthes*, 93.
- [71] Helene A. Shugart and Catherine Egly Waggoner, "You go, girl!: Camp as Resistive Performance of Gender and Sexuality" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Western States Communication Association, Salt Lake City, UT, February 2002).
- [72] "The activity of 'Textual' analysis ... is a kind of play which is endlessly repeatable with different outcomes, partly depending on how much of the 'intertext' one decides to feed in" (Rylance, *Modern Cultural Theorists*, 80).
- [73] Brian Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 5. For an overview of the literature on children's play, see Sutton-Smith, *Ambiguity of Play*, 35–51.
- [74] Indeed, Jonathan Bignell has described childhood itself "as a postmodern state of possibility" (Jonathan Bignell, *Postmodern Media Culture* [Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000], 119).
- [75] Sutton-Smith, *Ambiguity of Play*, 50. From a psychoanalytic perspective, the transition from child to adult forms of play shares a certain homology with Freud's theories of pleasure. In "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," Freud contends that, at birth, human beings are governed by the *pleasure principle*—the pure, uninhibited, and immediate gratification of desire. But as they develop, the pleasure principle is superseded by the *reality principle* and the "ego's instincts of self-preservation" (Sigmund Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," in *The Freud Reader*, 595–97). The reality principle does not deny pleasure altogether, but modifies it, changes its very substance. Humans learn, Herbert Marcuse explains, "to give up momentary, uncertain, and destructive pleasure for delayed, restrained, but 'assured' pleasure" (Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* [Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1974], 13). In Lacanian terms, the body is steadily drained of *jouissance* in favor of *plaisir*.
- [76] Victor Turner, "Liminal and Liminoid," in *Performance Analysis: An Introductory Coursebook*, ed. Colin Counsell and Laurie Wolf (New York: Routledge, 2001), 206.
- [77] Barthes, "Twenty Key Words," 231.
- [78] See Sutton-Smith, *Ambiguity of Play*, 147.
- [79] Barthes, *Pleasure of the Text*, 17.
- [80] One notable exception to this in Communication Studies is "Sextext," which not by

coincidence begins, “I cruise theories” (Frederick C. Corey and Thomas K. Nakayama, “Sextext,” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 17 [1997]: 58). This essay is, in my estimation, a particularly clear example of “productive criticism.” The essay is both erotic and provocative in ways wholly unrelated to its subject matter.

- [81] Barthes, *Pleasure of the Text*, 18.
- [82] Barthes, “Writing Reading,” 29.
- [83] Barthes, *Pleasure of the Text*, 11–12. The duality of language is also evident in the work of Jacques Derrida: “Language is neither prohibition nor transgression, it couples the two endlessly” (Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak [Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976], 266).
- [84] de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday*, 169.
- [85] de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday*, 169.
- [86] Wasserman, *Roland Barthes*, 96. See also Barthes, *Pleasure of the Text*, 6.
- [87] See Barthes, *Pleasure of the Text*, 7; Moriarty, *Roland Barthes*, 152; Francis Zichy, “Pleasure/bliss” in *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Literary Theory*, 608.
- [88] Barthes, *Pleasure of the Text*, 9.
- [89] Barthes, *Pleasure of the Text*, 10.
- [90] Barthes, *Pleasure of the Text*, 14.
- [91] Barthes, *Pleasure of the Text*, 23, 29, 31.
- [92] Wasserman, *Roland Barthes*, preface. See also Moriarty, *Roland Barthes*, 144.
- [93] Barthes, *Pleasure of the Text*, 22.
- [94] Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill & Wang, 1974), 13.
- [95] Barthes, *S/Z*, 11.
- [96] Roland Barthes, *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill & Wang, 1978). “Barthes is fond of alphabetical order, because it enshrines the primacy of the signifier, whereas logical and rhetorical order depend on the signified” (Moriarty, *Roland Barthes*, 150).
- [97] Like Barthes, Friedrich Nietzsche also experimented with less traditional modes of argument. “In terms of presentation, Nietzsche’s early works took the form of sustained arguments, while his mature work tended rather towards collections of aphoristic or fragmentary forms” (Douglas Smith, introduction to *The Birth of Tragedy*, by Friedrich Nietzsche [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000], xxvi).
- [98] Ivie, “Productive Criticism,” editor’s introduction.
- [99] Barthes, *Pleasure of the Text*, 3.