Affording Criticism: Form and the Dialectics of Academic Critical Thought

My paper will address itself to difficult dialects of the critical affordances of forms. With reference to Adorno's arguments about the utility of the essay, but also contemporary economic thinking around the very pairable ideas of enshittification and sludge, it will try to outline a minor theory of why it's so hard to make things better. It will suggest that it is difficult to imagine the possibility of critical academic thought outside of recognized forms even as the necessity of forms constrains the possibility of criticality-especially of radical critical thought. Form enables the consensual far more than the critical, especially so when we consider the various institutional and professional pressures which are reified in it. But at the same time, we potentially rightfully discount criticism which does not take form, in the very literal sense of being recognizably a form and thus a credentialed intervention into the discourse, an artifact which it is possible not just to take seriously but in fact to even see amongst all the other things we encounter every day. We might go so far so to say: formless thought is not critical thought. Form, here, is not mediated, but is inevitably the mediator, of all critical thought-alas, to the detriment of criticality; and this view of academic forms (potentially illustrated by work on the book review) has wider applications in critical thought elsewhere.

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Good afternoon, and thanks for having me! I want to preface my short talk with a few comments. The first is that I come to the question of critical thought maintenance from the perspective of an academic, but not necessarily with the full toolkit of the academic. So this paper will take more of the shape of an impulse. The second is that my interest derives from a larger interest in academic forms, and part of the work of a research group that you can find at the address behind me if you're interested in participating.

What I want to talk about today is critical thought in academic $-\infty t$ it is offerded by forms. practice, as it is mediated in and through form. And I want to start with an observation offered by Theodor Adorno, the Frankfurt School critical theorist. His essay "The Essay as Form," which appears in *Notes to Literature*, is a rumination on the centuries-old form of the essay. It is both a complaint about the current state of writing and a call for its renewal. It is a complaint in so far as it bemoans the impossibility of the essay and everything that it entails in 1950s German academic writing. Adorno writes: "to praise someone as an *écrivain* (and here Adorno means someone who is at ease with the pen, a good, stylish writer) is enough to keep him out of academia" (3). The essay is a call for renewal insofar as it ends on the idea that in the form of the essay's innermost formal law is

heresy. Through violations of the orthodoxy of thought, something about the object becomes visible which it is orthodoxy's secret and objective aim to keep invisible" (24).

The invisible made visible. That is, simply put, the goal of all Critical Theory—the very specific version of critical thought that Adorno had part in founding. And what'll be key to me here is that Adorno appears to tie, here, the possibility of being critical to anti-formalization, to essayistic freedom. Adorno wrote this essay in the 1950s, before a process of professionalization, expansion, and formalization of the university, especially its critical, which is to say humanities departments. And since the 1950s, we've basically witnessed a contraction of the essential freedom of aformality. My question, in a nutshell, is this: have we also witnessed a contraction of critical thought? And what should we do about it, if we have?

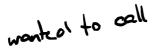
I draw from Cory Doctorow, the American science fiction writer, the idea of "enshittification," a slightly less dignified idea than Adorno's thinking about heretic non-forms. In Doctorow's original conception, the term described a phenomenon of digital platforms. Originally providing useful services at reasonable rates to satisfied users, these platforms would be caught in a profit-making loop that would gradually see their services become less useful, more prone to extract profit, and ultimately unviable. As Doctorow put it on *Wired*:

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First, they are good to their users; then they abuse their users to make things better for their business customers; finally, they abuse those business customers to claw back all the value for themselves. Then, they die.

A third notion for today, that sits somewhere in this cosmos: the idea of "sludge," coined by the economist Richard Thaler. With Cass Sunstein, Thaler wrote the book Nudge. You will have heard this: it's a book that suggest the benefits of "improving the environment in which people choose" for policy and behavioral outcomes. "Good signage, text reminders of appointments, and thoughtfully chosen default options are all nudges." "Sludge" is the name which Thaler gives to the observe: "nudging for evil," as Thaler has it. Sludge is the name for impendences to agential human activity, obstacles and friction introduced to any system to delay action or make such action less effective. If you've ever attempted to cancel a newspaper subscription, for instance, you surely know what sludge is: it's easy to subscribe at a click, but to cancel, you will have to physically post a letter in duplicate, answer a reply, and spend ten minutes explaining your reason to cancel--sludae.

I'd like to draw on both of these ideas over the rest of my time to, essentially, complement Adorno. I'll suggest two fairly simple things: that formalization is a necessary precondition for the mass production of "knowledge;" but that it renders the things being formalized vulnerable to enshittification and sludge.



Grandiosely, I may have called this the dialectic of formalization in my proposal. And I'll acknowledge that I'm using both enshittification and sludge unorthodoxly, but I hope, at least, suggestively...

Perhaps it's sensible to spell out what I mean when I say "formalization" here, especially in academic production, and more especially in humanities production. For the purposes of this short impulse, I want to stick with the descendant of the essay here, the journal article. If you submit a journal articles boric these days, it's usually not enough to submit that article. The article has to adhere to certain formal standards: for one journal, it must be between 7000 and 9000 words, for another, more than 8000, it must be formatted in MLA style or Chicago, and so on. These formalizations are so basic that we tend not to understand them as formalizations in the first place: they are, rather, what an article is. But increasingly, with that correctlysized article, you must also submit, at least, an abstract, basically a condensation of the entirety of your, say, 8000 word argument in just 250; and very often also key words, a further summation of the abstract to the tune of five or so words that situate your research. The purpose of these moves is explicitly reductive on a number of levels: it makes judging articles against one another easier; it makes it possible to "easily tell" if an article is of interest; it makes it possible to search the sheer

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mass of articles. In easy terms, it makes it possible to consider

each article not on its own merits, but on the merits imposed by a larger system: a simple consequence of there being too much to read.

Once you've submitted your article, it goes to peer review. And like the submission itself, peer review tends towards formalization. I'll give you an example from a recent peer-review process I was involved in as an editor, not a writer or reviewer. That review process didn't simply involve readers being told to say what they think: rather, they were given both concrete categories in which to think about the text and concrete prompts to prestructure their thinking in the categories. Behind me are the categories and the prompts:

Ideas: Are the examples and/or arguments in the paper compelling, well-reasoned, and/or true, given your understanding of the topic?

Accessibility: Is the structure of the paper easy to follow? Does the writing style provide knowledge that is accessible to non-specialist audiences across the humanities?

Research: Is the paper accountable to previous scholarship on the topic? This does not necessarily need to be cited in the article, but can be mentioned here if it might strengthen the piece.

Impact: Is the paper likely to catalyze conversations on a key topic in the humanities?

Consider the impact of some of the review prompts for radical criticism. In the fairly empty terms of "key topic," "true," and "accountable," while space for criticism exists, so does considerable leeway for rejection of anything too radical, depending on the personal interpretation of these terms by the reviewer. And from the perspective of a critic such as Adorno, it's also clear that most of everything about this militates against critical thought, against what Adorno holds to be the crucial connection between "luck and play" and "the new as something genuinely new, as something not translatable back into the staleness of already existing forms" (169).

I want to suggest here, also, the appropriateness of the ideas of enshittification and sludge—with a significant caveat or two. Formalization is enshittification in so far as it is a consequence of market logics, I think; and it is not enshittification in so far as it is not *only* the consequence of market logics. That is to say: in so far as more outputs are, generally speaking, desirable across the board, whether it is for Elsevier's bottom line or an academic's CV, it's generally good to have done a lot. Whether you are on the job market, out for promotion, or simply trying to sell more journals, an increase of output is helped by formalization. It is not only a market logic in so far as

formalization, as I have noted, also appears as a necessary consequence of greater participation, of more people writing. It's fair to note that you cannot judge every text you receive on its own merits: you must consider it on its merits *as an article*. You must limit its freedom of expression, its essayistic qualities, **Nonc** of for the sake of passing it through the system in a timely way. But the price paid is still a limiting of the capacity of the new, Refler, of and I would venture of criticism.

Similarly, the process of submission of a journal article is sludgy: it's a barrier to have to reformat to resubmit, to revise to adhere to the often arbitrary desires of a reviewer, to come up with key words and abstracts, and so on, barriers that have nothing to do with the value of the article as such; and the entirety of the processes contrasts with the idea of getting new things out.

To call these aspects of formalization enshittification and sludge does at least some work: it suggests not just the boundedness of our criticality in times of near-total commodification, including of academic work, but also the quasi-entropic way in which sensible formalization can devolve into problematic sludge, without requiring malevolent agents.

So what now? Recall Adorno's point about the essay. Towards the end of his own discussion, Adorno notes of the essay-asform that it "is ground to pieces" in the contemporary university,

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"between an organized system of science and scholarship on the one side, in which everyone presumes to control everyone and everything and where everything not tailored to the current consensus is excluded while being praise hypocritically as 'intuitive' or 'stimulating,' and on the other side a philosophy that has to make do with the empty and abstract remnants of what the scientific enterprise has not yet taken over and which thereby become the object of second-order operations on its part" (23).

I'll let you imagine what Adorno would have thought of the contemporary humanities journal article. But I want to end on a more utopian note. Recent aesthetic philosophy has reframed the possibility of artistic autonomy as a consequence of working through the constraints of artistic forms. In the thinking of Nicholas Brown, for instance, graphic art is what happens when artists explore to the fullest extent the contraints, say, of the flat, rectangular canvas in their sociohistorical moment. Picking up from this and the notion that you cannot have art without formal constraint, perhaps the constraints of its own formalization.