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The Mythology of Capitalism in Criticism:
Patriarchal not artistic standards rule when analysis
becomes performance art

By Richard Leader

“Hey, you’ve got to check out this CD review; it’s brutal, I mean, just brutal.”

It was brutal. It was the kind of review that pop-critics attach to their résumés and like to take out on rainy days to read slowly, with a sly grin after each line, confident that for one brief moment they were absolutely able to expose someone else as the fraud that we all are, kicking them down the basement steps, slamming the door shut and tossing away the key. As much as they make for good clippings and treasured reading—I received the above invitation long after it was initially published—such reviews often write themselves, the content less a critical revelation than a reflection of the obvious human condition, saying far more about the person penning them than the subject at hand.

The review in question was of *Dying in Stereo*, the full length debut of Northern State, a trio of white women from Long Island, NY who dared to make a rap album. Sure, they draw from feminism, the easy going kind that is unable see left of Al Gore, and if you would like to contact them you had better address the letter to the “Ladies,” a message not in the least subdued by the fact that their press is managed by a company named Girlie Action, itself a supposedly ironic turn on some pornographic expression. But just as I, very much male for my part, was able to put myself above them in some sort of feminist hierarchy within the space of one mere sentence, the platoon of hip white-guys reviewing their album took it upon

themselves to become the arbiters of all that is black, with only some of them wise enough to play it safe and couch their brand of criticism in the ethic of “urban,” using a bit of low-rent Marxism of their own to dodge any potential bullets aimed at their own privilege.

Northern State’s identity as spoiled academics was largely invented by the same critics who would later decry it: having read *Fast Food Nation* once has never conferred a Ph. D. on anyone, after all, but low standards (not for rap artists in general, males of all colors are desperate for each other’s approval, but for women as a class) allowed critics to inflate the group’s citation of the book and other trappings of popular liberalism into some sort of Ivory Tower pomposity, even though the majority of the album is rather apolitical by conventional terms given that neither the Democrats nor the Republicans have, as of yet, adopted hedonism as an official platform. For most contemporary Americans politics begin and end with that two party system—one that they are increasingly loath to talk or hear about further, the word “political” itself becoming the most undesirable of epithets.

Anyone aware of that dynamic can have an easy time cashing in on that knee-jerk reaction to the political, exhibited most strongly by those same white males who actually have the best representation under the current system, and that is precisely what happened in the case of Northern State: critics covering *Dying in Stereo* saw the group’s politics as a convenient red-herring to introduce into their own text. They did this in order to disguise the fact that none of their reviews were really about Northern State but were concerned with other conflicts, from the fact that the most brutal writer was jealous that the group’s career got an early boost from a doddering mega-critic who has been famously writing for *Rolling Stone* longer than he himself has been alive, to the guy who thinks that Northern State is all right by him, being feminism (the fun

kind), as opposed to the more established competing act, Le Tigre (to him, not so much).

The review, as an art-form, was simply a tool to fry bigger fish. It at once provides convenience and distance, features that serve both writer and publisher equally in that the genre is self-mitigating, the implicit brevity allowing for personal attacks that could not be made under other circumstances, while at the same time muting responsibility on the part of the claimants. In other words, when lacking a proper or appropriate thesis of one’s own, capitalism is waiting in the bullpen, ready to justify whatever performance a writer is willing to deliver for the sake of performance, ego being subsumed in the very tradition of criticism: a review exists or must exist because a work-slash-product exists from which consumers can potentially partake. No reason beyond that is assumed or required, something ontologically justified further by the fact that most publications assume by default a certain amount of page allocation to criticism, a space that has to be filled and will be filled. Writing is typically viewed as an enterprise of ego and the texts we create must pass a test of relevance to our readers and be deemed as useful to them as the act of creation was to our own person, lest it be judged narcissistic; criticism as a genre allows for the suspension of that rule, which is why so little of it these days is about the subjects allegedly on the chopping block and is more often an excuse for writers to launch into their own pet projects with impunity.

I learned about this utility of criticism rather late in life. As the editor of the undergraduate magazine at SUNY Buffalo, I always questioned (and yet sadly never vetoed) the reasoning behind our publishing highly negative reviews of records by obscure musicians that no one was ever in any danger of purchasing on accident. Later, as a videogame journalist, hearing my peers at press junkets gush—between sips of their margaritas—about how sadistically they once tore apart some low

budget game created in some downtrodden ex-Soviet republic boggled my mind: I just could not see the capitalistic utility of such actions. A negative review of a major product can benefit a readership, allowing them to save their money as they are preemptively steered away from it, while a strategically negative review of something popular and well loved can actually benefit a publication, where rancor against cultural icons by so-called “contrarians” is less daring these days than opportunistic, especially on the internet where readership can spike to immense levels from one day to the next. A thesis on the inferiority of something of no importance does neither of those things, and the significance of such writing must be sought elsewhere.

Given how little our culture generally values virtuosity in the arts, it is a strange paradox that it is now most commonly found in a genre regarded as possessing so little artistic worth—men these days, their confidence flagging, refuse to put much stock into anything so femininely subjective as a critical review, frothing at the possibility that a mere “opinion” could ever stand toe to toe with a more masculine “fact,” or more likely, their own opinion—where florid turns of phrases are now greeted with acclaim, treasured, and passed around with headings like “you’ve got to check out this review, it’s brutal!” Indeed, that very brutality is the greater share of the appeal, the injection of it into a text being enough to rehabilitate an ill-favored genre of writing amongst men: film, music and videogame reviews, no matter how fashionable it has become to ridicule them for “bias” (FOX’s “Fair and Balanced” campaign certainly contributing to this ethos of mock-objectivity), are just about the only thing that men actually bother reading these days. It is no coincidence that short critical litanies, always having the background of capitalism to prop them up when they falter, support concentrations of invective that more serious forms of literature reject, that would most often collapse under the weight of such malice.

It was my own mental-investment in the idea of capitalism that kept me from realizing this aspect of criticism. After all, outside the domain of academic literary criticism—which has its own sundry of traditions that, for better or worse, often militate against the physical aspect of texts except for certain occasions when doing so has some measure of quaint appeal; viz. contemporary reactions to dada—reviews are done for products, material things that are bought and sold, and any amateur critic, which includes everyone who ever comes into contact with material culture, sees the idea of criticism in exactly those terms: Is this product, defined by capitalism first and content second, worth my money or that of my friends, family, or co-workers? Professional critics of popular culture sometimes allude to that paradigm, often in terms of “time,” at once being equal to and synonymous with money, as per the aphorism, but at the same moment indicating that there is some deeper, indelible, and more meaningful value to an experience, a meaning that professionals are more equipped to recognize and comment upon. No matter how true all of that might be it only serves to drive capitalism into the background, a position that capitalism will only submit to when it finds it advantageous to its own goals or those of larger phenomenon to which it currently serves fealty—such as patriarchy.

While most will gladly accede that nearly everything in life is political in one way or another—hence my assertion here that criticism has far more to do with ideology than the marketplace, will, at least initially, fail to impress—the myth that capitalism is the defining feature of our material and social culture serves to hide exactly how divorced most criticism is from commercial reality: *The New York Times*’ all-important Best Seller list was fragmented into several sections in 2000 to not-so-secretly thrust J.K. Rowling and her passel of Harry Potters into a children’s book ghetto, saving the fiction column for men and their real works of art, at least by popular stan-

dards that appreciate a little bit of pontification with their pabulum, Mitch Albom (*The Five People You Meet in Heaven*) serving as a patron saint. While wrangling one's way onto the Best Seller list is often the best way to sell even more copies, a fact of life that the *Times* most certainly enjoys for the sake of its own prestige, a book's presence on that list is no guarantee that it will ever receive a review by the *Times*, even if writers are lining up in droves to pen their own: all of that is up to the whims of editors, who follow their own politics (still very much in line with patriarchy despite any accusations of a Leftist-slant), rather than those of the marketplace that they hold in high ambivalence, both adoring it for making their publication relevant and despising it for having plebian tastes, guided far too often by the likes of Oprah Winfrey.

Fortunately for Potter fans, the novelist Stephen King stepped up to the plate, appraising the fourth book in the series for the *Times*. This review proved so popular—a famous and successful man helping adult women justify their own love for the Potter mythos by placing his masculine stamp of approval on it proved to be a plum—that it won King a position on staff at *Entertainment Weekly*, where he went on to evaluate Rowling's fifth book. Heaping praise on her in gushing yet supercilious ways, he took on the role of the archetypical schoolmarm when criticizing her overuse of adverbs, only to suddenly declare that same fault cute and “endearing” in a bit of sexist condescension; this he perhaps tried to mitigate by releasing a hand-written version of the review, scrawled on wide-ruled paper, giving the surface impression that *he* was the precocious student, even though his text implied the contrary.

Shortly thereafter, King and Rowling both received a kick in the pants by the crotchety literary icon, Harold Bloom, who called them out in his *Los Angeles Times* piece, “Dumbing down American readers.” While Bloom was primarily upset

that King had won a National Book Foundation award, most of his acrimony was directed towards Rowling for corrupting our youth with the senseless repetition of common speech patterns such as “stretches his legs” (an accusation ironically similar to the one King himself leveled), intoning how much of a shame it is that hacks win awards and acclaim just because they cater to the caprice of the mob. Turning his wrath towards King again, Bloom asserted that there are only four living American novelists worth praising, all of whom are coincidentally white, male geriatrics like he himself. Bloom's own polemic is intensely political in its own breed of apoliticism—where good writing is simply good on its own, possessing some sort of Gnostic spark of life, apart from social theories such as Marxism or feminism that are then rendered as irrelevant as to any New Critic, hence his unapologetic tone in defense of the Western Canon—and one can certainly remain sympathetic to his “dumbing down” platform without subscribing to his other points, but the real political issue is that he was permitted to say what he did in a genuine editorial, straight to the point, without being forced to turn to the medium of the book review to serve as an intermediary.

It has gotten to the point where only men of Harold Bloom's stature are allowed to be true and authentic critics without having to resort to surreptitiously bandying such commentary onto the back of a commercial product review: he did not review the Potter book, he commented on it without the necessity of fitting his words into a framework dictated by the marketplace, nor did he have to go full-throttle in the other direction and gussy up his argument into some sort of academic treatise that would inevitably limit the scope of his audience; he just spoke his mind freely and without pause, not having to even pretend to care about factors that did not interest or appeal to him. That is a luxury that not even his equally privileged Generation X equivalents possess, who now exist in

a world where they are often forced to do a whole lot of pretending. Consider Bloom's fellow Yale graduate, Stephen Burt, who reviewed a memoir of the poet William Matthews for *The New York Times*. Written by Matthews' son, Sebastian, *In My Father's Footsteps* is a tale of his own journey into the world of poetry, his father sitting at the right hand of many of its luminaries, and the depredations that went with it. Burt includes a laundry list of sins in his review: the elder Matthews not only slept with his own students with near impunity ("sexual misconduct" did cost him a job at the University of Washington, though it hardly diminished his future opportunities in academia), but he once held class at his home and was so sure that any of his female graduate students would do anything to please him that he allowed Sebastian, then in eleventh grade, to have his pick among them—and he did.

Stephen Burt describes these instances as mere factoids, happenstances that add spice and pizzazz to the review but are permitted to remain virtually meaningless apart from whatever biases the reader brings to them, whether they inspire mirth or outrage. Even when he describes these historical events as a product of systemic male entitlement at the institutional level, a bad thing he dryly points out, he does so wearing a mask of gray: there is not a hint of jealousy, disdain, revulsion, or anything so emotional that might impel a reader to ask the obvious political question of why Matthews' memoir is deserving of a review in the *Times* when thousands of other memoirs do not receive such treatment and how that attention itself might also be product of male entitlement. The necessity of criticism as an *a priori* obviates against such questions of entitlement, an artifact that Burt can then comfortably locate chronologically in the past, rather than admitting the continuation of the process into the present—his present—and how his own use of criticism as a genre might serve as a vehicle for its transmission. Nor does it allow anyone to ask why Burt himself was awarded the right to compose the review

rather than a myriad of equally qualified poets, many of them women, and perhaps whether it was his very ability to wear that blasé mask of patriarchal objectivity that resulted in his appointment to the task. "Entitlement" is merely a word that learned men are now supposed to know and using it is proof of that learning (the term was even applied to Northern State by their brutal critic, who for all of their jejune faults now somehow exist on the same plane as a William Matthews; though only in terms of peccancy and not their enduring value in spite of it!) even if there is no understanding of what privilege means on a more visceral level, a dishonesty from which the older generation of Harold Blooms was exempt.

Conversely, the utility of women lies precisely in their bias and lack of objectivity, emotionalism which is valued not only for its ability to make men look stoically rigid by way of comparison, but for its own moments of expediency, as when Florence King evaluated Carolyn Heilbrun's biography of Gloria Steinem for the *National Review* in 1996. Capitalism was irrelevant: few if any of the conservative journal's readers would ever express interest in purchasing the book, no matter its quality, and only *three sentences* were employed in actual criticism of Heilbrun's text. Neither capitalistic nor artistic standards were applied. Instead, the review was merely an excuse to strip-mine the biography for damning quotations in order to paint Steinem as a simpering idiot whose so-called feminist empire was built upon her being a whore to one scion of industry after another—never mind that hatchet jobs are an infinitely more valuable service to the patriarchy than blow jobs. While Florence King might have enjoyed having a bit of sport at her rival's expense, the true benefactor of her words was the *National Review*, now allowed to effectively call Steinem a "stupid slut" with not just King's own status as a woman insulating them from responsibility but also the artifice of the book review as a genre, where it is possible to say something without *really* saying it.

The same piece was reprinted eight years later in July of 2004, still as fresh and useful as ever, preceded by a brief editorial note (very likely composed by a man) inviting people to “enjoy the carnage,” much in the same way that I was sadistically invited by an acquaintance to enjoy the brutalization of Northern State. While criticism is enjoyed for its often implicit violence, the political underpinnings of that aggression are made all the more sinister by the mythologized assumption of capitalism on the part of writers and readers alike, allowing even more dominant ideologies to remain hidden. Our training in capitalism, that requires us to see it as the pivotal aspect of our culture (regardless of whether we approve of it or not), hamstringing our ability to see such patriarchal minded criticism for what it is.

While antifeminist writers have many occasions to promote their craft, it takes a fair amount of effort to mangle facts sufficiently enough to make their screeds stand on their own as compelling arguments: genres such as the book review, and to a lesser extent, obituaries (such was the case after the death of Andrea Dworkin), serve as *occasion*—summoning some sense of obligation—that lesson the standards applied to the very necessity of a writer’s commentary: that ego test pitting the reader’s benefit against the creator’s narcissism. Only an expert amongst experts would dare to write a book explicitly challenging Catharine MacKinnon’s views on law; only someone with an impeccably strong résumé and heaps of popularity would bother to attack her in an article for a major magazine and hope to get it past editors; and yet upon the publication of her latest book, *Women’s Lives, Men’s Laws*, every male who lived in New York and fancied himself a writer was clamoring to get his own take—not on the book itself, of course, but on how the feminist movement has gone astray due to women like her—published in every form of media available to him, from magazines to the blog. For the most part they succeeded in this and came out unscathed; even when feminists objected,

the male writers themselves received attention that often outstripped their talents or was disproportionate to their status in the marketplace, ensuring that they will continue their exploitation of this phenomenon in the future. The effigy of capitalism, planted firmly in our minds whenever we approach the subject of criticism, serves to disguise attacks on women’s persons (and not texts-slash-products) that would otherwise be seen as the attacks that they incontrovertibly are.

This support for entrenched social structures, to the detraction of more progressive agents who would work against the status quo, happens not just in the sneak-attacks that are launched under the auspice of critical reviews but in more cunning and obtuse ways: it often serves as an escape valve, allowing the anger and resentment of people in the arts to be shunted off in directions that are harmless to the presiding hierarchy—a hierarchy which wishes to be seen as anything but a hierarchy, and would rather pretend that success and failure is the result of a fickle market guided by an Invisible Hand, rather than the social prerogatives of a ruling elite governing the arts. Few industries have mechanisms for critiquing those same industries, after all, but as long as young people working at entry-level publications can complain about the dirty old men at institutions such as *Rolling Stone* with off-hand remarks shoehorned into their own music reviews—or worse, so-called “rants” in ephemeral blogs, which serve similarly as escape valves for expression in the publishing business—pressure that might eventually threaten to topple such hierarchies is relieved, the process of dissipation done by the disaffected themselves. Rather than combating these hierarchies in a deliberate, sophisticated, and thoughtful ways, young writers today are taking the easy way out, a smooth road called “criticism” nicely paved for them (not to mention widened into abject meaningless) by their elders in order to mollify them.

Criticism has also taken odd turns in more sophisticated venues: the inaugural issue of the 1978 poetics magazine, *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, featured book reviews that functioned as performance art before anything else, leading to a letters-page squabble in the two subsequent issues. One writer, John Taggart, complained that it would be more accurate to describe the reviews as “variations on a theme suggested by X” which did a disservice to small-press poets who rarely receive reviews or any coverage at all, only to have their work used as a launch pad for such self-promotional theatrics by others. Loris Essary later responded with an accusation of ‘capitalism’ on the part of Taggart, arguing that he was treating text as a commodity by allowing it to be colored by whatever printer happens to distribute it, when the text itself should remain central and absolute. Taggart was a bit prescient in suggesting a comparison between these performance-critics and the New Critics in his initial letter; indeed, while not completely unpersuasive, Essary was rather staid in his accusation and perhaps self-negating in that he did not make it an occasion to give a bit of a performance of his own. While the reviews in the magazine struck a balance for the rest of its two year run, the difference between it and the examples given above are manifest in its parochialism, the smaller field of participants and readers (almost all of whom were male; a charge long leveled against this branch of poetry) enforced a certain amount of human responsibility. Patriarchy is always hard at work against the humane: hence critics had little incentive to honor that of Northern State, Rowling, or Steinem, while even in death William Matthews was somehow redeemed as a feminist, *The Atlantic* reprinting an interview he gave only a month before, his penultimate words stating what a “scandal” it was that the voices of women have not been heard over the past few decades, never mind what his generation valued and continues to value most in female poets.

Just as the centrality of capitalism is a distortion of the truth, other mythologies work in conjunction to downplay precisely how important criticism is as a vehicle for expressing the dominant ideologies of our society, not just in men’s massive turn away from the subjective in the wake of September 11th and our religious spin into a bizarre form of neo-Platonism, but in the frequent debasement of critics themselves, the adage “those who can, do; those who can’t, criticize” supposedly haunting them at every step. Never mind how many books Stephen King sold before his invitation to *Entertainment Weekly*, Roger Ebert’s early stint as Russ Meyer’s enabler, or the now legendary and envied exploits of Cameron Crowe: all men without female equivalents. Across nearly every industry those who serve as critics have a better chance at “doing” than those who do not, a fact that proves advantageous to males who not only score those positions as reviewers in greater numbers across every form of media, compared to their female associates, but also for their training in masculine bluster to believe they have the right to cut someone else, often much more successful than themselves, down to a more manageable size or to even go the extra mile and shred them to ribbons. Even if they never make that allegedly all-important step from criticizing to doing, and no matter how ignominious a life of such stasis might be to accept by any red-blooded male—in keeping with the politics of our times—it just might take a spoon full of brutality to help that medicine go down.