

Criticizing Kritiks: Textual Analysis Re-examined

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INTRODUCTION

Textual analysis is and seemingly will remain an analytical quagmire. To illustrate some of the weaknesses of textual studies, I have chosen to examine kritiks as argumentative strategies in interscholastic and intercollegiate debating. I conclude they not only yield little, if any useful understanding, but also they confound and obscure meaning as well.

"A kritik is an argument that has a special disposition. Presumably, a kritik is resolved prior to any substantive issues in a debate (*a priori*)" (Berube, 1996, 13). In other words, they are pre-fiat arguments. In practice, kritiks can be experienced on at least three, sometimes overlapping, levels.

A language kritik blames the advocate for misuse of language. Whether an ethnic slur or a politically incorrect reference using unspeakable symbology (e.g., using the word "holocaust" to amplify a concept which is removed from the extermination of Jews and others during World War II), the critic is asked to vacate the advocate's substantive claims regardless of merit. Presumably, the blameworthy advocate's claims become so tainted, they become warrantless.

An ideational kritik blames the advocate for wrongheadedness. The substantive claims are premised on concepts which are valueless and fundamentally flawed (e.g., using the hierarchies of capitalism or patriarchy to manage plan solvency).

A thinking kritik blames the advocate for methodological incommensurableness. The substantive claims are built with a proverbial house of cards (e.g., legalism or scientific objectivism are self-referential systems of reasoning, hence silencing all voices but their own). Using this thinking crowds out truth seeking.

As such, this essay is a metakritik for it argues the kritik is nearly worthless and has little, if any, truthvalue in academic debating. Of course, this problem is hardly unique to debating. Indeed, it is the basis of one of the most serious criticisms of postmodern deconstruction.

Conflicts in interpretation typically seek to resolve themselves by appealing to texts. But, we are told, the best one can get from a text is a reading, one among others. This relativism with regard to interpretation follows with logical rigor from the premises of

semiological reductionism: if signifiers refer always and only to other signifiers, then there is no ground against which the truth of the interpretations can be measured. Defending a position becomes more a matter of stamina than truth or relevance (Dillon, 1995, 167).

The kritik, as an argument form, will need to meet the fundamental standards of good argument. The following criteria are minimal to all argument, but they may be especially important to arguments introduced into academic debating since debating serves many functions: teaching oral communication skills, organization and critical reasoning, all forms of research skills, perseverance, determination, and discipline. In sum, the criteria would include four factors:

1. explication
2. corroboration
3. falsifiability, and
4. ability to enhance truthvalue.

All good arguments should be explainable, especially good oral argument. Deference to tomes of literature is a scoundrelous retreat for an advocate unwilling or unable to articulate warrants for an argument. All good arguments should be corroborated by proof. Whether deduced, induced, or even abduced, the reasoning should be discernible such that even the most profoundly new concepts can be evaluated. As first suggested by Popper (1972), arguments must be falsifiable. Without the opportunity to challenge claims, the relative validity of the claims becomes asserted. These first three standards generally avoid the appeal to authority.

The fourth standard is different. We must ask ourselves: does the argument improve the truthvalue of a plan without resolution (parametrics) or the resolution itself? Too often arguments are shrouded in complex language and generally obfuscate the truthvalue function of the debating process. While we cannot discover truth in an academic debate, we can approach truthfinding, and that search is fundamentally valuable. With this latter point in mind, let us consider this question: Are we better able to make truth claims with the kritik?

INTERPRETATION - THE PROCESS

Denzin outlines several steps in the interpretive process. These four steps are foundational to any interpretation. Denzin distinguishes between thick and thin description. While thick description builds on multiple, triangulated methods, is contextual, historical, and interactional, captures the actual flow of an experience of individuals or collectivities in a

situation, captures meanings that are present in a sequence of experiences, and allows readers to experience vicariously the essential features of the experiences that have been described and are being interpreted (Denzin, 1989, 102), a thinner interpretative methodology might prove most useful to decide appropriate questions. The steps:

1. **CAPTURING** (locating and situating what is to be studied in the natural world).
2. **BRACKETING** (removing what is studied out of the world in which it occurs whereat it is dissected, its elements and essential structures uncovered, defined, and analyzed).
3. **CONSTRUCTION** (classifying, ordering, and reassembling the phenomenon into a coherent whole).
4. **CONTEXTUALIZATION** (interpreting structures and giving them meaning by locating them back in the natural social world) (Denzin, 1989, 54-60).

For our purposes, the natural world is the debating environment, its setting. It begins as the first phrase is uttered and ends when the participants cease to speak. In some situations, the defining limits have more to do with some point when the critic begins listening and ends when she stops; this may have little, if anything, to do with the sweep of the minute hand or the cascade of digits on a chronometer, or even the speaking of the advocate.

The unnatural world occurs within the critic. Whether individually or collectively, it is a spoken or unspoken dialogue. Working within the general parameters of resolving claims made to postulate a resolution, the critic attempts to dispose of claims and counterclaims until an overall disposition of the debate itself becomes warranted.

For purposes of illustration only, consider the ideational kritik of militarism. In this kritik, an advocate maintains that a "military" paradigm must be unmasked for what it is: violence. Hence, if an affirmative cleans up military waste, they sanitize the "military." Furthermore, by engaging the civilian world in the process, they convert civil society into complicitous agents, if not co-conspirators.

CAPTURING. The context is forsaken and the kernel of the idea is scrutinized. It is examined, statically, hence it is shielded from counterfactualized events: past, present and future. "Meaning deactivates the object, renders it intransitive, assigns it a *frozen* place in what we might call a *tableau vivant* of the human image repertoire" (1988, 1964, 189). Hence, textual analysis must remove a sign from time and space, arresting its potential mutability. However, freezing the text does not divest it of its time and space variables. These variables establish a first level context. Moreover, when the text is frozen again, maybe by a different reader, it is a different and sometimes a very different text. Trying to validate a mutable text

by referring to other mutable texts demonstrates a foundational problem in textual analysis. In our example, this happens when military commentators addressing one phenomenon about the military are transposed as warrants for a similar, yet unintended, claim. Furthermore, the advocates of the military kritik may employ a force or power unintended by the original commentator. Indeed, a military commentator might find the application of some of her conclusions used to delegitimize a paltry plan act as nearly inconsequential or trivial.

Better than other concepts **BRACKETING** explains why advocates of the kritik claim it is impervious to a post-fiat, case-derived, substantive rebuttal. Moreover, it explains the basis for the pre-fiat versus the post-fiat disposition of kritiks.

Isolated from its grander context (the case), the kritik sheds its catalyst, until the ultimate subtext of the idea isolated by the kritik is revealed. By bracketing the subject of the kritik, the deconstruction becomes manageable.

For example, the advocate of the military kritik extricates the realm of the affirmative remediation from its socio-politico-cultural setting or context and demands the merits of the kritik be evaluated exclusive of any issues which may occur post-fiat. Hence, long-term impacts which might expose military conspiracy are moot. Problematically, the bracketing might further distance the kritik from intrinsicness assaults in the form of hypothetical counter-counterplans or permutations.

CONSTRUCTION. Once interpretation has stopped and the critic lists, orders, and relates interpretations, she attempts to bind together her observations. Attempts to resolve a kritik involve collecting the warrants supporting the kritik and packaging them into a conclusion. Responses are packaged as well.

In the military kritik, the critic would ask any or all of the following questions.

- Is the critic situated to resolve the kritik? Since the disposition of kritiks is generally premised on the existence of fiat, a paradigm without fiat would complicate the disposition (see Berube, 1994, 222-241).
- Is the evidence bolstering the kritik contextually valid? For example, if the sources to support the kritik would never advocate rejecting the plan, using their texts to win the debate may be unacceptable.
- Is the kritik more important than the plan? While evidence supporting a decision rule may have been introduced by the advocate of the kritik, the evidence may not justify rejection of the plan. For example, but for the plan, the kritik might not have even surfaced. By provoking the kritik, the plan might be equally powerful in engendering similar ideas beyond the debate itself.

- Which sources are better? The authoritative warrants for the kritik may be less valid than those of the rebuttalists. For example, Heidegger, Hume, Kant and their ideas have rebuttalists.

- Can the plan be adopted outside or beyond the kritik? This involves a "permutation" of the kritik. In other words, if the affirmative plan is justifiable beyond the realm of the kritik, it denies the essential or necessary character of the kritik.

- Can the kritik be offset? Much like the exclusion permutation against counterplans, the affirmative can choose to argue for embracing the post-fiat implications of the plan while unmasking military ideas elsewhere. Wholly dependent on the quality of the decision rule, evidence embodied in the kritik and the apparent seemingly intrinsicness nature of this approach, the tactic is highly problematic, but still remains a potential step in the construction process.

- Is the kritik criticized or kritiked? Beyond the incommensurableness of some kritiks, advocates often choose to argue the kritik is meaningless in the context of a debate. This is examined elsewhere, above and below.

In practice, most of the post-fiat substantive claims tend to be discounted. For a justification of this procedure, see Berube (1996, 16-17). Once the critic decides a conclusion is achievable, she moves into the final step.

CONTEXTUALIZATION. This step involves resetting the kritik text within the text of the debate. At this point, the question of blame becomes pertinent and problematic. The critic must conclude that the advocate against whom the kritik has been argued is blameworthy or sufficiently responsible for the alleged abuse. For example, the critic examines the text of the affirmative debate and asks whether the affirmative is sufficiently guilty of military ideation to trigger the decision rule embodied in the kritik. The critic asks herself: does the affirmative text sufficiently link to the kritik text such that the substantive issues should become moot?

This process is further complicated once we examine the theory behind deep textual analysis and the kritik.

INTERPRETANT ANALYSIS - THEORY

What is a text?

A text is a device conceived in order to produce its model reader. I repeat that this reader is not the one who makes the 'only right' conjecture. A text can foresee the model reader entitled to try infinite conjectures. The empirical reader is only an actor

who makes conjectures about the kind of model reader postulated by the text. Since the intention of the text is basically to produce a model reader to make conjectures about it, the initiative of the model reader consists in figuring out a model author that is not the empirical one and that, in the end, coincides with the intention of the text. Thus, more than a parameter to use in order to validate the interpretation, the text is an object that the interpretation builds up in the course of the circular effort of validating itself on the basis of what it makes up as a result. I am not ashamed to admit that I am so defining the old and still valid 'hermeneutic circle' (Eco, 1992, 64).

All texts are made for a model reader. That is true of the secondary sources advocates use for evidence as well as the text the advocates make in a given debate. When texts are deconstructed and rearranged with bits from other deconstructed texts, the result is constructed for a different model reader. Experts whose writings are strung together to form a narrative might be appalled to learn their bits of information have been used as blocks of information drawing claims very unlike those they attempted to communicate to their model readers.

C. S. Peirce found even more difficulties with textual analysis and turned to semiotics to explain them. He struggled with the concept of *interpretant*. An interpretant is the idea given rise by the meaning of a sign. He claimed it is "essential to the function of a sign that it should determine an *Interpretant*, or a second correlate related to the object of the sign as a sign is itself related to the object; and this interpretant may be regarded as the sign represents it to be, as it is in its pure secondness to the object and as it is in its firstness" (Ms 914, 1904, 3).

He attempted to distinguish between logical interpretants. Peirce defined the *logical interpretant* as the "intellectual apprehension of the meaning of a sign" (Ms 318, 1907, 176). A *first* logical interpretant consists of conjecture called up by the sign suggesting them. The *second* logical interpretant may be *higher* or *lower*. A slight modification of the conjectures make them more carefully defined; this is the process by which we reach *lower* second logical interpretants. *Higher* second logical interpretants occur as forms of conjectures are abstracted with ensuing generalizations. When external experimentation or quasi-experimentation on conjecturing about the sign occurs, we reach *third* logical interpretants. Peirce admits a resulting logical interpretant may itself create a logical interpretant, ad infinitum.

If a sign is calculated to produce meaning, we must ask not only when interpretant analysis moots the power of the signer, but also at what level of analysis a deepening of meaning is unproductive. At one level, the answers lie within the dynamic of the communication event. For example, in a debate, arguments may be judged as signs made by the arguers. Overstanding the signs may simply distance the arguments from the signers such that the interpretant being evaluated might be quite unlike that intended to be made by the arguers. Additionally, the time constraints on the arguer compels her to make choices, sacrificing the potential of an

interpretant simply because thickening the analysis makes interpretation more difficult. For example, signing any meaning about the complexities of governmental regulatory policies in five (5) minutes or within five (5) pages produces a dynamic which trades potential off against reality.

A. OVERINTERPRETATION AND OVERSTANDING

Peirce found an inherent fallibilism in every interpretative conclusion. Though he tried to construct a minimal paradigm of acceptability for interpretation, he was less than successful. Not unlike Gadamer's idea of an interpretative tradition, Peirce suggested community consensus. While community consensus has proven useful as a guide to living, it is much less useful when it becomes nearly impossible to identify the intended community. Unless the model reader(s) can be identified and are willing and able to communicate her consensus, Peirce's paradigm is hopelessly mired in supposition and regressive overinterpretation.

One might imagine *overinterpretation* to be like *overeating*: there is proper eating or interpreting, but some people don't stop when they should. They go on eating or interpreting in excess, with bad results (Culler, 1992, 111).

Overinterpretation can be undesirable. Culler hypothesizes such, though he defends the obverse.

Moreover, if our interest is not so much in the receiving of intended messages but in understanding, say, the mechanisms of linguistic and social interaction, then it is useful from time to time to stand back and ask why someone said some perfectly straightforward thing such as, "Lovely day, isn't it?" What does it mean that *this* should be a casual form of greeting? What does that tell us about this culture as opposed to others that might have different phatic forms or habits? What Eco calls *overinterpretation* may in fact be a practice of asking precisely those questions which are *not* necessary for normal communication but which enable us to reflect on its functioning... Understanding is asking the questions and finding the answers that the text insists on. "Once upon a time there were three little pigs" demands that we ask "So what happened?" and not "Why three?" or "What is the concrete historical context?", for instance (Culler, 1992, 113-114).

Culler had a second reservation: too little understanding from overinterpretation.

Overstanding, by contrast, consists of pursuing questions that the text does not pose to its model reader (Culler, 1992, 114).

Eco's overinterpretation may be compared to Booth's concept of *overstanding*.

What do you have to say, you seemingly innocent child's tale of three little pigs and a wicked wolf, about the culture that preserves and responds to you? About the unconscious dreams of the author or folk that created you? About the history of narrative suspense? About the relations of the lighter and the darker races? About big people and little people, hairy and bald, lean and fat? About triadic patterns in human history? About the Trinity? About laziness and industry, family structure, domestic architecture, dietary practice, standards of justice and revenge? About the history of manipulations of narrative point of view for the creation of sympathy? Is it good for a child to read you or hear you recited, night after night? Will stories like you—*should* stories like you—be allowed when we have produced our ideal socialist state? What are the sexual implications of that chimney—or of this strictly male world in which sex is never mentioned? What about all that huffing and puffing (Booth, 1979, 243)?

B. TALKING TEXTS

Booth insists we must first determine what texts want of us. The questions a text may ask can be exceedingly narrow and simple or expansive and complex. What kinds of questions are essential, proper or even appropriate shift from text to text. *Boundaries of appropriateness* are set by the text as it moves in us. As examples, Booth considers two of the most open or ambiguous texts ever written: Beckett's *The Unnamable* (1958) and Derrida's *Glas* (1974).

However indeterminate the work, it will still ask us to rule out certain inappropriate questions. *Glas*, for example, which is difficult to classify according to any traditional literary or philosophical category, insists that we *not* ask it to answer the Three Little Pigs kind of question ("Who will do what to whom?"). It also insists that we finally reject such questions as "In what traditional literary genre shall I place you?" It is important to underline the universality of this kind of demand. It is true that different readers will infer different boundaries (or "horizons") of appropriate questions, depending on their previous experiences and their critical presuppositions. But about what we might call the text's central preoccupations there is an astonishing agreement among us all; that is what makes it possible for us to use generic terms without total confusion (Booth, 1979, 241).

Do different texts appropriate different questions?

Some texts will try to set a single direction of questioning, and some will not. But *all* texts try to present boundary conditions which all experienced readers will recognize (Booth, 1979).

Is criticism outside some hermeneutic circle of appropriate questions justified? Booth continues.

I will no more accede to all the demands of *Mein Kampf* or *Justine* than to the demands of the con man's text when it insistently rules out the question "Are you lying?" That question is totally "inappropriate" to overt forgery; yet, if I do not insist of asking it, I shall be gulled (1979, 242).

Misreading a text in order to overstand it is not valueless, but the misreading must be justified by the text. Booth draws this very same conclusion.

Yet obviously no one will, except perhaps in theory, embrace *all* such improper questions as valid or even interesting. It is thus useful to distinguish improprieties according to what is violated and according to the source of validation that the critic offers for the violation (Booth, 1979, 244).

C. WEAK VERSUS STRONG READERS

"The best one can get from a text is a reading, one among others" (Dillon, 1995, 167). (Repetition intended.) The reading is both a function of the text and its reader. While some texts are undoubtedly better than others, so are some readers. If some readers are strong and others are weak, the meaning derived from reading an identical text may differ appreciably. While any judgement detailing interpretative merit may be inappropriate to conclude, it is enough to say variable, if not outrightly incompatible, interpretations can be fabricated from different readings of the same text.

A second level of elusiveness rests with the ephemeral quality of texts. The same readers, strong or weak, never read the same text the same way. The virginal interpretation is immediately lost. Subsequent readings do not only differ appreciably, the texts themselves change as well. Consider the literary text, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. On first glance, it can be interpreted as a classic horror novel, and that label adroitly characterizes most readers' first experience at interpreting that text. A second reading of the same text may lead to interpreting the story as a critique of hubris. A third time, it might be a study on humanity or an evaluation of scientific ethics. The novel reads differently at each subsequent reading.

The apparently thick character of textual analysis challenges readers, and different readers read differently. Seemingly, identical texts are never actually identical. The elusiveness of fixed textual validation demonstrates the futility of turning to other texts to validate, especially affirm, later interpretations.

Furthermore, overstanding via deepening interpretant analysis outside the parameters regulating advocates' choices divests the signers of their power to make actual arguments. By investigating the potential of interpretants through retextualizing, the debate engages second level logical interpretant analysis. Though a defensibly productive exercise, this overstanding textual construction places the critic in a thicker dialogical reality than actually occurred in the debate. What is being evaluated is not the actual debate but rather the potential debate.

Peirce called this communicational event a search for final interpretant. It is clear what occurs in a debate is not that search, rather it is a search (if that) for an immediate interpretant which Peirce articulated as a much lower grade of meaning.

[A definition:] the interpretant in the intention of the utterer, i.e., the state of information the utterer intends to result from the semiosis, including the purpose of the communicative act as it is conceived by him (sic) and the information for which he (sic) will assume responsibility (Johansen, 1993, 172).

It is intentional, intended, objective, naive, and rogate.

Finally, there is the *contract of dialogue*. Peirce argues the parties participating in symbolic action are not exterior to the analysis of meaning per se.

As a logician Peirce is mainly interested in the act of affirmation (or assertion), and his favorite way of analysis is by comparing it to the legal act of going before a notary public and making an affidavit to the content of a proposition. This action has penalties attached to it; swearing to the truth of something may move an interpreter to act accordingly and at his expense because he believes in it. The only difference between swearing to a proposition and merely affirming it is that the commitment and the penalties in the latter case are less (Johansen, 1993, 198-199).

D. RHETORICAL TRUTHVALUE AND SPACE

A reconstruction is nearly never the same as its source texts, hence the grounds for comparison and validation are seldom useful per se.

At its best, this process might be utilized to discredit a claim but not for affirming one.

[W]e can accept a sort of Popperian principle according to which if there are no rules that help to ascertain which interpretations are the "best" ones, there is at least a rule for ascertaining which ones are "bad". We cannot say if the Keplerian hypotheses are definitely the best ones but we can say that the Ptolemaic explanation of the solar system was wrong because the notion of epicycle as defended violated certain criteria of economy and simplicity, and could not coexist with other hypotheses that proved to be reliable in order to explain phenomena that Ptolemy did not explore (Eco, 1992, 52).

The major problem surfaces when a reader asks whether an interpretation is affirmed. This process is moderated by a series of rules. For example, "the relationship between utterer and interpreter ... depends on the right understanding of the utterer's intentions by the interpreter. Without this understanding it would be impossible for the interpreter to analyze the utterance as a deed or action even if he (sic) understands the text's propositional content" (Johansen, 1995, 201).

Intentions are especially difficult to decode in a debating situation. We read differently. We interpret texts differently. We construct texts differently. And, maybe most important, we advocate texts for many different reasons. Unfortunately, these variables are very important factors in calculating the relationship between utterer and interpreter. Unable to fathom the basis of this relationship mitigates textual analysis as an affirming construct.

THE CONTRACT

The role of penalty needs to be detailed at this point. Though the penalty may be less in a debate situation, it still exists.

[An] affirmation is an act of an utterer of a proposition to an interpreter, and consists, in the first place, in the deliberate exercise, in uttering the proposition, of a force tending to determine a belief in it in the mind of the interpreter. Perhaps that is a sufficient definition of it; but it involves also a voluntary self-subjection to penalties in the event of the interpreter's mind (and still more the general mind of society) subsequently becoming decidedly determined to the belief at once in the falsity of the proposition and in the additional proposition that the utterer believed it to be false at the time he uttered it. (Peirce, NEM 1976, IV: 249-250).

The penalty is not a negative phenomenon but rather an essential part of the contract between utterer and interpreter, a ground for a formative relationship. The basis of the relationship is the deictic structure of the utterance.

...[T]he utterer, besides being responsible for the consequences bound up with the mode of utterance that he (sic) selects, is also determining the *deixis*, or deictic system, of the utterance. Consequently the interpreter has to follow the directions of the utterer to be able to identify the topic of the discourse (Johansen, 1993, 199).

The utterer designs the parameters of the dialogue between the utterer and the interpreter.

...[B]y using the universal selective (e.g., *all* men (sic) sin) the utterer transfers the right of selecting an instance to falsify the proposition to the interpreter. Using the particular selective (e.g. *some* men (sic) sin), the utterer reserves the right of choosing an instance, which proves his (sic) argument, for himself (sic). In the use of a proposition with a singular selective (*this* man sins), neither the utterer nor the interpreter has freedom of choice. Since the utterer chooses the mode of the utterance, gives the directions for identifying the topic of discourse, and decides the range of the utterance's applicability, what is then left to the interpreter? First, the interpreter plays an important role in the capacity of being the addressee in the intention of the utterer (Johansen, 1993, 199).

Hence the formative role of the interpreter as addressee has a strong parallel in debate. The constructive role of the critic as addressee involves simply constructing the meaning of the utterance. This constructing is not fortified by exiting the dynamic relationship even to consider the kritik.

CONCLUSION

Kritiks are not good arguments because they fail the fourth criterion of good argument: they do not enhance truthvalue in the debate. While there are ideal settings for discussing kritiks, interscholastic and intercollegiate debate does not qualify. Kritiks are best disposed in seminars and in the banter of advocates and respondents in scholarly journals. Deep textual analysis, especially the sort associated with kritiks in academic debating, produces overstanding and overinterpretation, marginalizes textual voices, fails to discriminate between different readers, devalues rhetorical truthvalue and space, and invalidates the dialogic contract in an academic debate.

Too much academic debate theory is based on power rather than reason. Kritiks are used as big sticks to avoid one of the duties closely associated with debating--research. Advocates argue their kritiks almost irrespective of their opponents' positions. By using highly

overtotalizing rhetoric, they engage mini-max extended arguments and overclaim the power of their criticism. In other instances, they use kritiks to batter less experienced readers.

If it is indeed true that theory follows practice, it is my hope this essay will raise some serious questions about kritiks and their application in competitive debating. None of the above statements directly attributable to me should be used as evidence in a debate round.

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