Social Media and the New Commons of TV Criticism

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Article

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Abstract

This article investigates the way that social media have given a renewed impetus to TV criticism. Websites like Entertainment Weekly or TVline.com not only offer TV criticism by TV critics but also offer ample opportunity for fans to debate their favorite TV shows, part of what Graeme Turner has called "the demotic turn" in contemporary media. Whereas academic scrutiny of this demotic turn has tended to focus on the issue of democratization and the valorization of subjugated knowledges, relatively little attention has been given to how this has created a "commonification" of TV criticism. An analysis of audience reactions to *The Walking Dead* shows a protoprofessionalization of TV criticism, with audience members offering increasingly sophisticated analyses of TV shows, informed by standards set by the culture industry. The paper ends with a discussion on what type of cultural knowledge these new televisual commons produce and circulate.

William Boddy (1983, 1) opens his 1983 article on the state of American TV criticism with the observation that "popular literature on television seems as ubiquitous as the medium. Publicity images, newspaper reviews, trade magazines, star biographies, profiles of popular programs, coffee-table nostalgia books and popular accounts of the industry crowd the newsstand and bookshelf." But he is quick to add that this popular writing on TV is characterized by "parochialism and triviality" (Boddy 1983), and the remainder of his article tries to give a historical explanation for this sorry state of TV

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criticism. Writing roughly at the same time on the other side of the Atlantic, Mike Poole (1984, 42) similarly lambasts TV criticism for having failed to take TV "seriously enough to provide the kind of supportive criticism necessary for the development of a genuinely and self-confidentially televisual culture."

Although their geographic focus differs, we find in both Boddy and Poole's essays a number of similar complaints. First, TV critics understood TV as they would previous cultural forms like literature, film, or theater, and they were thus unable to capture TV's specificity. Second, academics writing on TV often failed to connect their analyses to the broader public, and hence did not contribute to the creation of a popular criticism serviceable for ordinary viewers. Third, the TV critic was too close to the industry's interests, making the former the ventriloquist of the latter.

Reading both essays in the second decade of the next millennium, with TV having moved from the broadcast era into the post-network era (Lotz 2007), clearly much has changed. The already vast amount of popular talk on TV during the 1980s seems only to have increased in volume. But the contemporary media landscape is dramatically different from the one Poole and Boddy were describing. The TV critics they castigated for not taking up their proper role were invariably *professional* TV critics, employed by newspapers to write reviews. Moreover, such critics were writing in the late broadcasting era of the 1980s, in a multi-channel environment that appears rather limited from a more contemporary perspective. The current media landscape is profoundly different, in that one-way communication has given way to interactive two-way communication, and that the web has enabled what could be called *amateur TV criticism* to flourish, and both changes have had an impact on the type of television criticism we encounter (Rixon 2013, 397–98).

The Recap, and the Rise of Commentary

The arrival of the Internet has made it easier for *aficionados* and professional TV critics alike to find venues for their analyses. And given the almost unlimited publication space as well as the possibility of recurring posts that most websites provide, TV critics are not confined to reviewing a show just once but they can do weekly follow-ups, in which shortly after going public that night's episode is analyzed in detail and situated within the overall development of the show—a critical genre which goes by the name of the *recap*.

Recaps as well as more sustained criticism of an entire series have given rise to a veritable cottage industry of television criticism, with an endless number of outlets, sometimes single-purpose websites like Television without Pity and its successor previously.tv, Entertainment Weekly (EW), or TVline.com; sometimes more established mainstream outlets like *The Nation* or *The Wall Street Journal* offer bloggers space for television criticism, as in the latter's *Speakeasy* blog; sometimes individual blogs carry out television criticism in a single blogpost. Writers include professional freelancers but also academics, enthusiasts, and aficionados who do not get paid for their work. Some writers have become well known, with a sizable following, but many are operating under the radar and write in quasi-anonymity. The forms of television criticism vary

wildly, from a focus on plot and character development, to snarky commentary on production decisions, to more sociological analysis where television becomes a means to analyze the way class, gender, and race interact in contemporary society.[1]

In this article, however, I want to focus less on this burgeoning cottage industry of semi-professional television criticism, and more on the rise of commentary by viewers on recaps. All of the outlets mentioned above invite readers to react to these critical pieces, be it in the form of a comments section or a forum, giving rise to "a meta-conversation [that] has grown deeper and more public" and where "each episode is scrutinized and annotated with an intensity usually reserved for Talmudic scholars" (Johnson 2005, 168). If professional television critics have always played "a central role in the interpretation of cultural forms, objects and productions" (Bielby et al. 2005, 1), in these comments sections we find a heightened and intensified state of cultural and aesthetic interpretative work. This article will explore the latter through a case study of user comments on *The Walking Dead* recaps on TVline.com and EW. I follow discussions on many popular TV series, and *The Walking Dead* commentary offers exemplary material for discussions found around other popular TV series. The commentary on *The Walking Dead* is, in short, an illustrative condensation of the type of arguments one finds on TV websites in general.

The user comments under these recaps offer scholars an insight into how viewers with a specific interest in TV (characterizing them as fans might be an overstatement) react to, reflect up, and discuss TV. More specifically, close analysis of this vortex of television commentary yields insights into the taste and knowledge hierarchies through which these viewers approach television. Just as Ien Ang (1985) invited viewers to write letters about *Dallas*, and used these letters to discern viewers' attitudes and taste/knowledge hierarchies in regard to the show (and popular culture more generally), these comments sections offer us insights into contemporary attitudes toward television. In fact, throughout this article Ang's study will serve a double function: as a historical point of comparison—a benchmark to compare how interested viewers' talk has changed in the last thirty years—and as a methodological inspiration to reveal taste hierarchies and critical repertoires among viewers.

The Demotic Turn as the Creation of a New Commons

The term *post-network era* coined by Amanda Lotz works well to describe the contemporary media landscape, but for reasons that will become clear, Graeme Turner's (2010) *the demotic turn* better captures the changes to television criticism that this article describes. The term denotes at once a change in production and distribution technology, business models, the respective roles of producers and consumers, celebrity culture, and the type of cultural identities proffered by the media. The wide scope of the term is indicative of the extent to which the media landscape has changed in the last twenty years. The core of Turner's argument is that media are no longer passively consumed but instead have become spaces for active audience participation. Or, in the words of Trine Syvertsen (2001, 319), "the media increasingly is becoming 'something to do' rather than just something to watch." Audiences no longer merely "watch

television," but they participate in it (in the case of Reality TV), they tweet about it, write blogs about it, and indeed write commentary under recaps.

As a consequence of the demotic turn, the once quasi-impermeable boundaries between production and consumption have gradually been eroded. In his book, Turner studies reality TV, "Talk Radio," blogs, and user-generated content as instances of the media's demotic turn, and links these up to core theoretical concerns like access, participation, and populism.

There is much scholarly debate on how to evaluate the demotic turn. Whereas the industry as well as some commentators was initially inclined to stress the democratizing potential of the demotic turn because of increased access and emancipation of hitherto repressed voices, a certain backlash against a too optimistic assessment can be observed. Turner's own book, for example, is relatively critical as a phenomenon such as "Talk Radio" offers little progressive content; others have argued that the opening up of the media has happened under very controlled circumstances, with production teams not relinquishing actual control (Teurlings 2001; Ytreberg 2004); still others have stressed that these new forms of audience participation are actually new forms of work that are moreover offered for free to broadcasters (Andrejevic 2004, 2008).

Questions of access, democratization, and exploitation are important to address, but with this article I want to focus on another consequence of the demotic turn that has received far less scholarly attention, namely, that television criticism has become a "common" practice, and that knowledge about TV has in the process become a new "commons" in a sense that will shortly be defined below. Put simply, critical activities that were in the broadcast era limited to a group of professionals linked to the industry, have now in the post-network era become a common, shared activity. This goes beyond the more usual claim that TV, perhaps more than any other medium, is self-reflexive, which "ensures that even casual viewers can remain fluent in their understandings" (Ellis 2004, 275), although the medium's self-reflexivity does help in popularizing knowledge about TV, making it a common currency.

In Hardt and Negri's (2009) *Commonwealth*, the commons is a category between the private (individual ownership) and the public (collective ownership, usually through the state form). Whereas a common good is closer to a public good in that both forms privilege the collective at the expense of the private, it differs from the latter in that commons are not managed and regulated by an authority (usually the state) but are "open to [the] access of all and developed through active participation" (Hardt and Negri 2009, ix). A public park is governed by the local authorities in the name of the collective; a common park is not governed through state authorities but *collectively*, and hence accessible to all. In fact, the commons can be seen as the negation of ownership in toto. The best spatial metaphor to capture the commons is to think of it as a circulating entity, whereas both the private and the public work through the logic of the enclosure.

Hardt and Negri (2009, viii) distinguish between the common wealth of the material world (shared resources like water or air) and the commons as a result of social production. It is the latter form that is of interest to us here. Hardt and Negri give language as an example of the socially produced commons. As they point out, the notion

of a private language is absurd, as a language is necessarily social/shared. But neither can a language be "publicly" owned—there is no state or regulating instance that can legislate a language into being. Language, then, is a commons in the sense that it emerges out of a collective (and is thus human-made as opposed to belonging to nature), is necessarily social (and hence needs circulation and dissemination in order to survive), and escapes attempts at regulation or ownership (despite efforts by institutions like L'Académie Française and their ilk to police and preserve language).

This article argues that contemporary television criticism is a form of shared knowledge that functions like language, that is, as a socially produced commons. Nobel-prize winner Elinor Ostrom, together with Charlotte Hess, has argued that knowledge is a commons that is cumulative, that is, it is a shared resource as well as a productive force (Hess and Ostrom 2007). When applied to television, knowledge of and about it spreads through the social body and becomes a shared resource that is not owned by a singular instance nor can it be regulated, and the more it circulates the more productive it is, as illustrated by phenomena like zines, fan vids, remixes and recaps—all of which are based on a certain degree of "commonified" television criticism.[2] One does not need to wholly subscribe to the Californian ideology (Barbrook and Cameron 1996) to see that the slogan "information wants to be free" contained some valuable insights into the productivity of shared knowledge; more importantly, it is productive precisely when it circulates rather than when it remains locked in proprietary enclaves.

Drawing on the slightly different but compatible intellectual tradition of collective intelligence, Henry Jenkins explains how "commonified" televisual criticism's productivity works, for example, when fan knowledge is pooled:

> The fan community pools its knowledge because no single fan can know everything necessary to fully appreciate the series . . . Collective intelligence expands a community's productive capacity because it frees individual members from the limitations of their memory and enables the group to act upon a broader range of expertise. (Jenkins 2006, 139)

In sum, in the last fifteen years or so, we have not only seen a proliferation of television critique, but we have also witnessed its *commonification*, or its relocation in the sphere of the commons. Social media have played an important role in this, through the interactive technologies that web 2.0 enabled. One needs to be precise, though. My claim is not that prior to the advent of the Internet there was no "common TV criticism"—that is far from the case. The proverbial water cooler conversation and a slew of reception studies on media literacy are testimony to a long tradition of popular talk about TV. But I hope the analysis below will make clear that websites on which TV is debated have also changed the *nature* of common TV criticism, as it has entered the sphere of mediation rather than mere circulation.

To substantiate this claim, this article will analyze two *loci* of common textual criticism. It uses as a case study the comments section of *EW* and of *TVline.com*, two of the most popular television sites on the web. The case study will take as its object the discussion among viewers on AMC's hit series *The Walking Dead* (2010–). To keep

the amount of data manageable, the analysis focuses on the discussion of the season finale of the fourth season. *EW* accounted for 1,565 comments, whereas *TV Line* gathered 370 comments at the time of writing.[3] In the sections "*De Gustibus Non Est Disputandum*" and "Aesthetic Criticism" of this article, an inventory and categorization of viewer's comments is offered. These sections are very descriptive in nature, but I hope the reader bears with me. The section "Protoprofessionalization of Television Criticism" moves into hopefully more exciting terrain by situating the analysis within the contemporary media landscape, while trying to explain how different forms of "commonified" television criticism came into being.

Before proceeding, there is an important caveat regarding the choice of *The Walking Dead*. Although coming from "low" cultural origins as a comic series, the television series is nevertheless characterized as "Quality TV," albeit uneasily so (Hassler-Forest 2014). For television as a medium, the advent of quality TV has brought newfound respectability, partly because of the genre's narrative complexity. But this narrative complexity shapes to a certain extent the critical register with which viewers and commenters engage in the series, even though there is no direct link between the complexity of the text and the level of criticism it invites, as soap opera criticism during the 1980s illustrates; nevertheless, the specificity of the chosen case study is important here. The analysis of "commonified" TV criticism presented in these pages is likely to take very different forms for other genres, like the sitcom or reality TV. Although the latter genres are also thoroughly critiqued on the web, the tone and critical register used differ substantially. The conclusion will return to this important caveat.

De Gustibus Non Est Disputandum

One of the first ways to categorize commenters' talk on *The Walking Dead* is to distinguish between aesthetic and taste arguments. The former focuses on character development, storytelling, and so on, and will be discussed later. Taste arguments are easier to define. They are arguments that, after all other arguments have failed, ultimately fall back on the comfortable sofa of value pluralism: everybody has the right to their own tastes and opinions. *De gustibus non est disputandum*—in matters of taste there's no arguing, since taste is a question of personal preference. Take for instance the quotes below, which come after a lengthy discussion on the merits of the Seasons 4's finale *qua* season finale, and which all couch their assessment in terms of individual preference:

> Bianca Cardial: In my opinion, the finale was perfect! (EW)
> Vickie: I agree with you Joe. It was a great ending. . . . (TVline)

These kind of taste arguments, in their various forms, are often reactive in kind, and emerge at the end of a chain of comments. They are powerful rhetorical devices that put an end to the preceding discussion. Even if the latter is much more analytically sophisticated, taste arguments are invoked to wrap up the analysis. Take, for instance,

the following quote, which combines analysis of narrative and character development with an eventual grounding in taste:

> Steph: Major deaths do not guarantee a great finale. The whole episode was rife with action and tension, beautiful character moments and a turning point for the main character and a set up for another great storyline. I think that constitutes a great finale, rather than just having a character be killed. (TVline)

In *Watching Dallas*, Ien Ang (1985) had noticed a similar phenomenon, namely, that people defending that series eventually fell back on a "taste cannot be argued" argument. She situated this type of argument as an articulation of *the ideology of populism*, which in turn was a defensive reaction against and in many ways the opposite of *the ideology of mass culture*: the view that mass culture is inferior and deceptive, as it aims at the lowest common denominator. Against this, the ideology of populism holds that viewers cannot be forced to watch a show they do not like, and viewers can "vote with their feet." On the message boards studied here, the ideology of mass culture seems far less present than in the letters written to Ang, though the discourse occasionally makes a reappearance. What is striking, though, is that when the ideology of mass culture surfaces, it is often expressed through *aesthetic categories*, as in the following exchange between commenters where they discuss if the episode maintained sufficient narrative tension:

> Kermit: I can't believe there were people who thought this episode was boring.
> Beth: I know! Rick ripped a guy's throat out with his damn teeth, if that's boring than I don't know what people want.
> Kermit: They want all gore and no character development, apparently.
> Mary: They want everyone except their favorite character to die a horrible death while their favorite character becomes a hero and saves the world while riding off into the sunset with his or her love interest. I pretty much think that's the ONLY thing that will make these people happy. (TV line)

What is striking about this interchange is that the ideology of mass culture is not only externalized on "certain viewers" who "want all gore and no character development" (externalization has always been part of the ideology of mass culture), but this is also expressed through aesthetic categories first and foremost, rather than a generalized critique of mass culture in toto (as was the case in Ang's letters). In the interchange above, as well as on the boards in general, the commenters do not seem to mind mass culture. In fact, no disparaging remarks about "mass culture," or "popular entertainment" in general are found at all on these boards. But the commenters *do* distinguish very sharply between the different products of the culture industry, and they do so on the basis of aesthetic categories like character development, originality of plotline, or resistance to romantic or narrative closure. This represents a shift away from the kind of viewer reactions we find in Ang's analysis. With Ang, aesthetic categories served the purpose of a wholesale rejection of mass culture ("*Dallas*, just like all mass

culture, is mindless pulp"). In the contemporary comments section, mass culture is no longer rejected in its entirety, but the distinction between "good" cultural products versus "bad" ones remains intact, be it that the distinction is based on aesthetic qualities rather than on principle. As a consequence, taste arguments have somehow been "lifted out" of the logic of populism, an idea we will return to in the conclusion.

Aesthetic Criticism

We have seen already that even when taste evaluations are formulated, aesthetic arguments come up very regularly. In fact, the aesthetic is the dominant form of reflection we find on these forums.[4] Taken collectively, the commenters demonstrate an astounding level of sophistication in regard to television's aesthetics. We can distinguish between a focus on *character development*, *narrative development*, *narrative promise*, and *the insider's view*.

Character Development

The arguments that were most advanced in the comments section had to do with the extent to which characters in *The Walking Dead* were adequately developed throughout the season. This seems to be a particular preoccupation with regard to Season 4, which was relatively low on action and made use of lengthy flashbacks to develop some of the main characters' pasts. That *The Walking Dead* is based on a comic series seems to add to the "character anxiety" manifested on the boards, and much time and energy is spent on comparing the characters in the comic and the series (with some substantial differences between them). Here are some examples of commenters invoking character development in their appreciation of the show:

> Kristen: Some people just want action, blood and guts. They should be watching Japanese guinea pig films. Not *The Walking Dead*. You are so correct, without character development there would be no show and it would have lasted one season. What draws people in are the characters and what happens to them, not just the gore. (EW)

> ColonelJessup: . . . That rich character development is one of the reasons I loved the show in the first couple seasons, but the show has become 100% dependent on the relationships between characters. This season has been almost completely made up of dialogue scenes between characters with very little to talk about plot-wise. I believe it is a sense of "critical and analytical appreciation" that leads me to critique the show, rather than blindly love it no matter what. (EW)

> KevyB: Seriously???!!! This show is absolutely INEPT at character-building! Was that great character-building that turned Glenn into the biggest idiot in the entire planet almost getting a girl killed cuz he can't walk around a friggin' tunnel??? Was that great character-building that made Daryl wander around with a bunch of violent imbeciles??? Is it great character-building any time that mullet-headed

oaf opens his mouth to the other under-drawn characters in his idiot posse???
There isn't a well-built character on this show! Carol is the ONLY somewhat-
well-drawn character on here, and that's because she's barely been on it this
season!! Next season she'll probably turn into a pacifist, followed by a short turn
as murderous Ms Governor, followed by a two-episode arc where she gets preg-
nant and has a baby, and then at the midseason finale, after everybody loses yet
another home in a violent fashion, she'll shoot Carl because he looked crosseyed
at Judith! (TVline)

These commenters not only analyze how characters evolve over time and how that
fits within the series' overall narrative, but they also use terms like character develop-
ment and plot—terms that once belonged to the professional lingo of script writers but
that have seeped into popular talk about television, now being regularly put to use in
viewers' evaluation of television.

Narrative Development and Season Finale as a Cliffhanger

Besides character development, commenters frequently invoke narrative develop-
ment, that is, they judge the merits of the show in building up and maintaining a nar-
rative arc, or sudden plot changes.

MarcBolan: The ambush/neck biting scene was awesomely done. A true holy shit
    moment. Loved it. (EW)
BlueMagnolia: [The Showrunner] does a lot of foreshadowing, beginning in 4x01.
    So, Beth being in all of those flashbacks, was just as important as Rick being in
    them. The part where he puts the hat on her head and calls her the "new sheriff
    in town" is a HUGE foreshadowing. And the fact Rick keeps and buries Len's
    compound bow and arrows with the guns outside of Terminus, and the fact Daryl
    took time to teach Beth tracking, hunting and archery, suggests that the bow may
    find its way into Beth's hands at some point. (EW)

As some of these comments show there is a veritable flame war between com-
menters that like Season 4's character development, and those who argue that it comes
at the expense of narrative tension. Some commenters go to considerable lengths to
make this point:

Aaron Rowley: At first, the second half of season 4 was a bit slow I have to admit.
    With that being said, they are doing this so they can bring out the individuality
    of each character. They want the show to be more than just about Rick and Carl.
    That is why they are focusing mainly on character development to make people
    "fall in love" with such characters to make their "eventual" death, be more of a
    dramatic event. I think people are dreading the second half of this season because
    it isn't action-packed like season 3. I think they have done a fantastic job in
    distinguishing the personalities of each character. (TVline)

> ColonelJessup: I'm down with character development, but this season has literally been one episode after another of people having very dramatic/serious arguments that are pointless–stuff that no real people would argue over. Take last week's for example . . . Glen argued with that crew for like 5-10 minutes about whether to stop for a couple hours and rest or to keep sprinting to Terminus, even though it'd already been a multi-day trip (maybe weeks, I have no idea the time frame for this show) and his loyal one companion [*sic*] hurt her leg. It had already been days (weeks?) and they had to sit and argue about a couple of hours?! Then when they reached the tunnel, another pointless argument erupted over whether to go in or around the tunnel—very dramatic, had a couple of farewell moments, etc. Then the other people just easily drove around (couldn't have taken more than an hour) and were there at the other side of the tunnel. Absolutely pointless arguments/discussions/decisions, void of any logic, with forced drama was deemed completely pointless 10 minutes later. (EW)

A particular form of narrative appreciation is the evaluation of the season finale in terms of how it works as a cliffhanger. Season finales have a particular role within a season: they must not only bring (some of) the narrative threads of the season to closure, but they must also set up the beginning of the next season and thus create anticipation for it. The Season 4 finale of *The Walking Dead* has most characters ending up in a place called Terminus, where they are trapped by another group of survivors of the zombie apocalypse, and there is a suggestion that they might be cannibals. Commenters not only dissect the show for hints of cannibalism, but they also debate whether this constitutes a good season finale.

> Meredith: I enjoyed the second half of the season, but I found this episode (especially the second half) tepid at best. Since we didn't really get a glimpse of how depraved the Terminus people are, it's hard to too strongly anticipate the next season. Not much of a cliffhanger, I'd say.
>
> Joe: You saw bloody carcasses as they were herded into a rail car. You heard other people screaming for help trapped in other rail cars. The season ended with our group trapped in a rail car with no weapons or way out. I'm not sure what you needed to see happen to make you anticipate next season, but for me I can't wait to see how they get them out of Terminus. It's basically as if *Star Wars* ended with Han, Luke, Chewie and Leia inside the trash compactor with the audience not knowing if they got out. (TVline)

What is again noteworthy is the extent to which these commenters judge the show in similar terms a scriptwriter would do. It is an indication of the extent to which previously professional vocabularies have become household terms for the commenters on the boards, a phenomenon that we in the following section will describe as the protoprofessionalization of television commentary. This protoprofessionalization becomes particularly clear when viewers move away from the actual episode and start to reflect on the narrative promise of the series in its entirety.

Narrative Promise

When commenters asses the narrative promise of the entire series, they move from a scriptwriter position to the position of a script doctor being called in to save a production. Take, for example, the following comments:

> Chris: Yes, thank you for being optimistic that Terminus has a higher cause. If the show is only about our faithful crew surviving one round of mean baddies after the next, it will never go anywhere, and eventually everyone will get killed off. Not just our protagonists, but all the humans. The only way for the story to remain interesting is if there is some hope for the remaining humans pulling together their resources to end the zombie plague. . . . That's a story that can remain interesting for several more seasons. A rag-tag band of survivors running willy-nilly through the aftermath fighting or escaping from bad mean people is just going to get boring—and even worse, hopeless. Let's hope the folks at Terminus have something productive to offer other than just one more evil group to fight. (TVline)
>
> WellDoneProductions: It would have been great to kill off ALL of these characters and start over new with the next season. I think this gang has pretty much had their stories bled dry—no pun—and it would have [been] nice to start over new. And it was really lame that scene by scene, they were all reunited—even in a boxcar at the end! (EW)

We are reminded here of Jason Mittell's analysis of contemporary television's narrative complexity. He uses the notion of the "operational aesthetic," an aesthetic that is less focused on "what will happen?" and more on "how will they pull this off?" His analysis stresses that viewers derive pleasure and even marvel "at the craft required to pull off such narrative pyrotechnics" (Mittell 2006, 35), but the commentary above shows that this can also backfire: it is precisely the "operational aesthetics" that lead the viewers quoted above to critique the show.

The Insider's View

If these comments are increasingly difficult to distinguish from the way professionals talk about television, there is also another, albeit less frequent, way in which the commenters come to resemble television professionals: by adopting the insider's view. Commenters regularly mention script writers or even directors by name, and assess their professional qualities. Take, for instance, BlueMagnolia:

> BlueMagnolia: You can't tell me that with all of the little easter eggs Gimple drops in each episode and season, these little seeds that are likely to grow into bigger story lines, are for nothing. He's a very meticulous writer who wrote season 4 with season 5's arc already in mind. He does a lot of foreshadowing, beginning in 4x01. (EW)

This comment is remarkable for a number of reasons. First, BlueMagnolia talks about *The Walking Dead'*s showrunner Scott M. Gimple in terms similar to those used by movie buffs when talking about directors, that is, in the language usually reserved for *auteurs* as the major creative force behind an audio-visual production. (In film studies, auteur theory identified the director as the *auteur* of movies, and claimed that directors could be identified by the signature stamp they put on their work.) This can be seen operating in the way this commenter associates Gimple with a signature *narrative style*, namely, the meticulous planting of "easter eggs" that will only be developed in later seasons.

In analyzing television's paratexts, Jonathan Gray argues that contemporary television is "resurrecting the television auteur" (2010, 107). He situates this in the multiplication of websites, entertainment magazines, DVD extras, and podcasts and argues that they "have made executive producers/showrunners considerably more visible than in earlier years of the medium. With this visibility, these individuals are increasingly able to add their voice to the audience's understanding of their products, and thus are increasingly able to construct themselves as authors" (Gray 2010, 108).

This increased visibility of television showrunners and executive producers is illustrated by the offhand way in which the commenter BlueMagnolia above drops Gimple's name, without even mentioning who the man is. This commenter simply assumes that everybody knows whom he or she is talking about, and hence no need to add extra information. In comments like these, viewers come across as people who know the production of the show inside-out, including the main players and their precise contribution to the show.

A methodological remark is required here. One might be tempted to interpret the abundance of insiders' views as a sign that some of the posters are professionally involved in media production. Given the discussions board's anonymity, it is hard to ascertain this, although the boards contain hints that at least some of the most vocal users are indeed professionally active. The already quoted ColonelJessup, for example, makes the following remark in response to a snarky reproach of a fellow commentor: "Whether or not I've 'created' anything before (I have, assuming you mean a work of fiction) has nothing to do with my issues with the show" (EW), suggesting he or she has at least some experiences in professional writing. But the fact that some of the posters may have industry backgrounds does not diminish the validity of the overall argument, as they infuse the debates on these boards with a professional lingo and aesthetic evaluations that are picked up by the other users (ColonelJessup's dismissive comments, for example, generated a torrent of arguments on character development).

The Protoprofessionalization of Television Criticism

Joke Hermes (2013) has argued that the academic knowledge we produce spreads through society and is being picked up in the way non-academics think about media, leading to a vernacularization of academic thought, or a protoprofessionalization of popular thinking about the media. The analysis presented here suggests a similar process has happened to television criticism, but instead of academic knowledge it is

professional knowledge—the knowledge that media professionals themselves use in their media making, as well as their reflection on it—that has become vernacularized. Everyday talk about television has always existed, but after sixty years we now witness an increasing protoprofessionalization of such discourse. The comments analyzed above show that the interpenetration of audience's worlds and professional knowledge has reached high levels, with viewers frequently talking about and assessing series the way an industry professional would, using concepts like character development, dramatic arc, cliffhanger, easter eggs, and the like. Avid viewers of *The Walking Dead* moreover display quite profound inside knowledge about the industry's working methods, the main players and their creative signatures. In a way, it seems as if these viewers have become semi-professional television critics.

The protoprofessionalization of popular television criticism is the logical consequence of changes the television industry has undergone in recent years. In *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television*, John Caldwell (2008, 1) argues that "film and television reflect obsessively back upon themselves and invest considerable energy in over-producing and distributing this industrial self-analysis to the public." Such public reflection cannot be reduced to a mere marketing ploy. Many of the new cultural forms Caldwell analyzes, like Behind The Scenes, Making-Ofs, Electronic Press Kits, and DVD's and Bonus Tracks, repurpose material that had previously served promotion and PR purposes, but at the same time they have also become integral parts of audiences' televisual diet. Writing about the DVD with bonus material, Caldwell (2008) observes,

> One of the DVD's chief innovations has been its ability to provide a cultural interface in which critical discourses (aesthetic analysis, knowledge about production technologies, working methods, and behind-the-scenes information) can be directly discussed and negotiated with audiences and users without critical/cultural middlemen. (p. 298)

The comments analyzed in this article are the fruits of years of education by the new cultural forms Caldwell mentions. They have built into their form the critical categories through which the industry evaluates itself and its products, and we as audience members are invited to do so as well. Caldwell stresses the elimination of middlemen, but from the perspective advanced in this article the crucial idea is that these artifacts are little pedagogies that teach audiences the knowledge and critical discourses through which to appreciate and evaluate television.

In the opening chapter of her *Must-Click TV: Television and New Media*, Jennifer Gillan (2011) recounts an anecdote that illustrates this pedagogic function of second-shift media. *Dawson's Chat*, a network-maintained website linked to the popular show *Dawson's Creek* (1998–2003), enabled members of the audience to communicate with members of the production team:

> During his October 26, 2000 Chat appearance, for example, writer Tom Kapinos defined the role of a showrunner, "the person who is in charge of the day-to-day creative voice of the show." As he explained, the showrunner is responsible for "putting out every script, making sure it's up to standards." He added, "he's the person the network and the studio

will come down on in the event that they don't like something," which is precisely what happened on *Dawson's Creek* when . . . the studio sent over a showrunner . . . . Consequently, he added characters that Kapinos and the original team felt did not fit, and therefore, took the story in the problematic direction. The moderator and the others on the chat were impressed with Kapinos' willingness to offer a "tale from the production site." (Gillan 2011, 44)

The new commons of TV criticism has thus produced a strange hybrid of laymen's knowledge and appreciation, but mediated through professional categories, that is, the concepts and analytical discourses the industry as well as professional critics have proliferated through society. "Commonified" TV criticism is a true monster in the sense John Law (1991) gives to the term: an impure mixture of heterogeneous elements of different origins. A distinctive outcome of the current dramatic restructuring and reinvention of the television industry is that separate categories of producers, audiences, and critics have been recombined into strange, new hybrids.

Conclusion

A number of conclusions can be drawn in regard to the new commons of TV criticism. At the most general level, the commonification and protoprofessionalization of TV criticism is just another aspect of the gradual erosion of the broadcasting era and all of its associated positions and distinctions, like the difference between producers and viewers, and the professionalization of media making that the broadcast era entailed. Harking back even further in time we can see that the distinction between amateurs and professionals that reigned in the twentieth-century increasingly becomes undone, not only in that amateurs ("ordinary people") participate in the making of media, but also in that those amateurs increasingly use professional standards to evaluate the products of the culture industry. As William Uricchio (2013) has argued, the 1950 to 1980 period was only a short blip on the radar of television, albeit a period that was fundamental in defining the medium. In this context it is worth remembering that the Dutch public service broadcaster VARA started its life as "Vereeniging van Arbeiders Radio Amateurs"—Union of Worker Radio Amateurs—a sign that amateurs were initially an integral part of the media making business, only to be gradually ostracized at the advantage of professionals (Wijfjes 2009). In the new commons of TV criticism we seem not to have exactly come full circle, but we see the result of a dialectical process in which two former opposites have become unified (again).

This has also led to a change in the way viewers evaluate television. It is clear that the protoprofessionalized version of common TV criticism is heavily influenced by the industry's own definition and appraisals of its products. In this sense, the industry has been effective in imposing on society its view of things, naturalizing its functioning and economic reasoning in the process (see Teurlings 2013). But at the same time the protoprofessional discourse has created a space from which to critique the television industry in its own terms, and this has the potential to change the rules of the game.

A comparison of the analysis presented here with Ang's analysis of *Dallas*-related letters is instructive in this context. We have seen that the ideology of mass culture, including its elitist connotations, has gradually been eroded. But this has not led to the uncontested victory of the ideology of populism, although there are some echoes of it when commenters dismiss critical comments with "why do you watch a series that you obviously hate?" Rather, what has happened, I think, is that the binary between the ideology of mass culture and populist arguments has gradually been made irrelevant, relegated to the back of our minds. In 1985, Ang wrote that the commercial television industry understood very well the logic of populism: "It employs the populist ideology for its own ends by reinforcing the cultural eclecticism underlying it and propagating the idea that indeed there is no accounting for taste, that in other words no objective aesthetic judgments are possible" (p. 115). What this article has described is precisely the coming into being of a set of "objective aesthetic judgments" (if perhaps not objective at least commonly agreed upon on), thus robbing the commercial television industry of its populist legitimization strategy. This does not mean the television industry will necessarily lose legitimacy, but rather that it will have to find other ways to convince us that its products are worth watching.

A word, finally, on the question of cultural hierarchies. The thesis on the new commons of TV criticism presented here could be read as an argument that knowledge hierarchies have been "flattened" (the fusion of laymen's and professional knowledge), or that cultural hierarchies no longer exist. In this context, it is worth remembering the limits of this case study, focused as it is on one particular contemporary form: the "Quality TV" series, with its associated narrative complexity. However, as Jason Mittell argues, such series have "a baroque quality in which we watch the process of narration as a machine rather than engaging in its diegesis" (Mittell 2006, 35). If the "commonified" television criticism presented here has tended to talk in aesthetic terms about *The Walking Dead*, this might very well be explained by this baroque quality. It would require research into the "commonified" television criticism of many other cultural forms (reality TV, sitcoms, fake news shows) to map how these genres are critically evaluated, and which critical repertoires and cultural hierarchies are invoked during the process. Such a holistic view, in which genres and the associated forms of "commonified" television criticism are understood as part of a social totality, does however require more sustained scholarly research on the different forms of popular criticism than the latter has hitherto received.

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Notes

1. The variety of commentary has led one commentator to claim that "the TV recap has evolved into a nearly independent creative form," and that "critical analysis is often as vital and interesting and consumable as the culture it discusses" (Anderson 2012, unpaginated).
2. For example, work on fan vidding, where original material is put to music, shows that these fan vids are not mere remixes but are often a critical engagement with the original work itself, "more akin to arts criticism than to traditional music video" (Coppa 2008, unpaginated). See also, Anne Kustritz's (2012) analysis of how vids of *Battlestar Galactica* propose a veritable ideological critique of the series' heterosexist assumptions.
3. http://popwatch.ew.com/2014/03/30/walking-dead-season-4-finale/ and http://tvline.com/2014/03/30/the-walking-dead-terminus-cannibals-season-4-finale-recap/. Comments quoted here have been edited for spelling but otherwise have not been altered.
4. Even though it is hard to quantify, I would say aesthetic statements account for the majority, followed by statements about the realism of the show. Taste arguments are far less common. The lively debates on these boards about the extent to which *The Walking Dead* is realistic in its representation of events is an interesting topic in its own right, but less relevant to the overall argument of this article.

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