

***The Regeneration of the Book Review: A Reply to Stephen T. Casper***  
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When I read Stephen Casper's article of 19 May on the death of the book review, I was paralytically shocked. The book review dead? But I had just read a long, beautifully written, informative, and fascinating review of a new biography of Margaret Thatcher! Surely the form deserved better than this as its last example. A brilliant review, yes, but I hoped it would be about a subject more uplifting than the polarizing politics of a woman so respected and despised.

When I read beyond the first sentence of Stephen Casper's article on the death of the book review, I better understood what he was actually talking about. It isn't that the book review is dead — people still read *The New Yorker* after all — but that it no longer seems to count.

**A Perceptual Problem**

Among university intellectuals, the people who are paid to research and create new knowledge, a book review is no longer considered to be real work. After all, it's just a short commentary on someone else's work. The writer may be generally familiar enough with the field to write intelligently on it, but a book review in most academic journals amounts to 1-2000 words summarizing and briefly evaluating the worthiness of the book's goals and the degree to which it achieved them.

Intuitively, this amounts to little more than a professor slumming it writing *SparkNotes*. Of course, in real life, it takes a great deal of effort to reflect accurately in such a small space an entire book, especially if it's an interesting book, full of bold and innovative new ideas, interpretations, and investigations. Such a task takes a talented and skilled craftsperson to be successful.

However, I am not writing about what a book review actually requires, but how it is perceived. And if Digital Measures' indifference is any indicator, the book review is perceived as barely being worth the 30-odd kB it takes to store the file. A high-quality book review takes hard work, but all that hard work is invisible. The solution may lie in doing more than simply "excoriating crap books," and "lauding terrific ones."

**Fighting Back**

If this form of writing, and the work that goes into doing it well, is going to be disrespected by the wider scholarly community, then perhaps it may be time for a shock to the system. The typical attitude by which book reviews are dismissed is that they don't constitute real work. So perhaps the way to combat this attitude is to take this perception to its extreme, to make a mockery of their dismissal.

One way to accomplish this is by actually doing — or rather, not doing — exactly what those who dismiss book reviews expect. Write the review, but don't bother reading the book or thinking about the book in any sensible way at all. For example, one recently published book of

philosophy I purchased was Dorothea Olkowski's *Postmodern Philosophy and the Scientific Turn*. The book itself is a brilliant exploration of how ideas developed in ecology and dynamic systems theory can challenge and change long-accepted assumptions in philosophy of science, where the paradigm for the conception of science and scientific law has long been physics.

A traditional review would examine and critique the scope of her research (she concentrates on European philosophers who have picked up ecological and dynamic systems ideas already, but whose works have been ignored in North American philosophy of science because of their origin in French theory), and takes a political spin on how we conceive of science's role in society (she continually returns to Hannah Arendt, further demonstrating the continued importance of Arendt's thought for our age).

The book drifts away from its earlier unity of purpose by the later chapters, however, which were originally conceived as separate articles and published in more condensed form in journals. And an early confrontation with the Sokal Hoax and its implications never really leads anywhere, as Olkowski is more interested in building a philosophy of science inspired by Arendtian politics and complexity theory rather than returning to old battles. This is either a benefit or a deficit, depending on what you want to read in such a book.

However, such a nuanced examination of her work and the intellectual labour this would require is useless, because everyone knows book reviews aren't real work. So let's skip all the work no one believes we do anyway, and just give a rough approximation of what the book is about. The back-cover blurb describes "a phenomenological account of human thought and action to explicate the role of philosophy in the sciences." So write a few remarks about Husserl and Heidegger, even though the index shows Husserl receives a few cursory mentions and a footnote at most, and that Heidegger isn't even in the book. Everyone knows they're the only ones in phenomenology who matter.

And even though the index shows Arendt is all over this book, I don't need to mention her. After all, everyone knows Arendt never stepped out of Heidegger's shadow anyway. The cover has a striking illustration of a metal sculpture of a feminine human with countless wires and tubes emerging from her brain and spine. So maybe I'll write for a few paragraphs about some stereotypes I'm vaguely familiar with — feminist angles on the merger of man and machine. Check for spelling mistakes, send to my editor, and that's all the work anyone expects to go into a book review.

Such activity is utterly fraudulent, but there is precedence for making up details of and fictionalizing book reviews.

I think Roberto Bolaño offers the best example of how to make the effortless book review meaningful. Bolaño's novel, *Nazi Literature in the Americas*, is written as an encyclopedia of fascist authors in the Western hemisphere covering a period from the late nineteenth to mid twenty-first centuries.

All these authors and works are clearly fictional inventions of Bolaño himself, but their falsity does not make them any less truthful. Nothing in the book is factual, but the stories Bolaño tells reflect larger truths about how an otherwise liberal society can produce individuals who find its core principles only worthy of contempt, and for whom violence and aggression are the only legitimate or effective means to achieve one's dreams. Its fiction tells a more profound truth than any simple collection of facts can manage.

However, this technique often requires just as much work as a regular book review, and is in some ways even more difficult. I no longer have to read the books I review, but now I practically have to write whole new books in my head, based on superficial information about the actual book in my hand, then spin that imagined book into a profound thematic statement about human nature. Such a process is exhausting. Bolaño at least got one of his most acclaimed novels out of it. Yet I would still receive no credit or recognition for my work because all I did was write a book review.

### **Making the Invisible Visible**

None of the above suggestions are at all serious. They accord more with the attitude of guerrilla theatre than intellectual writing. And they are just as effective.<sup>1</sup> But they are worth considering beyond their value as a joke, because such guerrilla review tactics are a natural human response to an institutionalized frustration. If book reviews are perceived as having little to no academic value, then we may as well act as if they really have no value and make a circus of the whole mess.

But such an approach only vindicates the institutional tendency to devalue book reviewing. Book reviews have grown devalued because they have become falsely perceived as requiring little work. Turning book reviews into satires and self-parodies only provides more reasons not to value book reviews.

There is another approach to book reviewing that can return the prestige to the form, and possibly even its relative ranking in publication trackers like Digital Measures. Begin with this notion: what if you read Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology* as a book review? Leave aside any of the various dogmas and counter-dogmas about deconstruction or critical theory and simply ask what *Of Grammatology* does.

At its simplest heart, it's an essay on Rousseau that explores implications of some of his more marginal writings on his better known works. That's all. But it uses that structure to make what at the time was an original interpretation of Rousseau's philosophy, and explore what that interpretation indicates for the wider tradition of Western philosophy.

And that's the kind of scope that a book review can do. This is clearly not a book review in the sense that Casper describes, that blend of excoriation and lauding. But this kind of expansive, ambitious reading of a work, and the equally ambitious and expansive writing about such a work,

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<sup>1</sup> That is, not effective at all.

is the only way I can think of to put the actual work that goes into producing a high-quality book review into focus. If the problem is the widespread false impression that book reviews don't require much work, then the best way to combat it is to make your review such a monumental work of critical writing that it becomes impossible to ignore what work goes into it.

One practical drawback is that this technique requires even more work than the traditional book review. But in order to revive a form of writing from the assault of a falsehood held to be intuitively true, one must sometimes overcompensate in one's labour.

And the great benefit of such an enterprise is the production of ever higher numbers of potentially groundbreaking intellectual and philosophical works. Consider how a review of Olkowski's book would look according to this model of the book review as outsized ambition. A book review on this model would not just evaluate how well a writer achieved her goals, but would continue the pursuit of those goals.

For example, one direction in augmenting Olkowski's work — among many, in a work of such wide range and nuanced detail — is to follow her making a problem of what she calls the Archimedean view of science, the impassive measurer of the world who is free of ethical concerns. Picking up the ideas Olkowski sees in Arendt's work of the ethical community of inquirers, one could examine the relationships of scientific with political institutions, how popular views of pure scientific research are shaped by political and religious concerns. One could consider science's integration into the economy, and the institution's growing need to justify itself according to stockbroker's priorities, for example, whether this massive particle collider will be a solid financial investment. One could explore the tensions, conflicts, and benefits (and who precisely gets those benefits) that can result from such relationships. One could compare Arendt's conception of the community of inquirers with similar concepts developed in parallel with Jürgen Habermas, or as a historical precedent with Charles Sanders Peirce, and triangulate among these authors to anticipate future developments of the concept. One's book review would be a sprawling new inquiry, a sequel that takes the original work as a launchpad. No one could deny the work that went into such a project, and the worthwhile character of such work.

Of course, all this might turn out to be practically impossible: there are only so many hours in each day, after all, and some of those require occasional interaction with families, friends, other loved ones, and sleep. Perhaps no journal editor in a sober frame of mind would accept such a sprawling work as a book review. 'I said you started on page 85 and ended on page 88. And you gave me a bloody monograph!'

At the very least, helping book review culture survive requires pointing out all that the techniques of book review can do when they are given free reign to work. One only needs a few examples of a format at its best to demonstrate its value.

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