

Gail Pool, [Faint Praise](#), *The Plight of Book Reviewing in America*, Columbia, University of Missouri Press, 2007, reviewed by Geert Lovink.

For a long-term reader of the New York Review of Books like me it came as a surprise to read about the decline of book review culture in America. Of course, in the Land of the Superficial, under the rule of G.W. Bush, everything critical, cultural or intellectually demanding must have gone down the drain. But that wasn't exactly my impression. The New York Reviews of Books is one of the best review magazine in the world. Gail Pool doesn't see it that way. For her NYRB is not best practice but an exception to the rule. In her book on review culture in America Pool presents intellectually prestigious publications as niche products that do not cover the "general interest." What Gail Pool qualifies as a risk, namely to produce controversies beyond the book under review, I would see as the ultimate aim. Reviewers become boring the minute they start morally judging and take the seat of the author or publisher. It is such a downer to read that the reviewer found a spelling mistake. So what's today's state of the art in book review culture and how it is responding to the rise of Internet?

I expect reviews to provide a critical context of the work. The review is a mature literary genre in itself that does not merely have the obligation to inform. Rather, reviews should unsettle and question. Reviews make connections and provide us with the bigger picture. It is up to the PR machines of the publishers to deliver the blurbs to potential readers. If this division of labour properly works book reviews can really spark debates, widen our horizons and put new ideas and concepts into world. Gail Pool would agree with this. Reviews create an intellectual culture that the readers is invited to participate in. Despite all talk in post-modern times of the dead of criticism, I strongly believe in the art, and necessity of such a public venture. What reviewers do is not merely multiply commercial memes but comment on the context they observe in the cultural objects that are under review—and the better ones give 'cultural guidance' how to position ideas and cultural currents. Reviews are the glue between our cultural expressions and make it possible for ideas to move from music to novels, towards fashion—and back into a text.

I doubt if the main reason to read reviews, as Gail Pool states, is "to help us decide what to read." I wonder if it is strategic to reduce reviews to 'consumer advice' and if the recommendations through friends and colleagues isn't much stronger. The fun part of visiting a bookstore or

Amazon is exactly that you stumble upon titles you haven't heard about. One is never free of peer pressure and cultural/class preferences in what we read but it is certainly part of the art of book reading to make your own unique choice. Let's at least further cultivate this illusion. Why spend time in a bookshop if you already know what you'll purchase? See if you can walk out a store without having bought a single title. The ideal reviewer is a cultural agent with a much broader task than to put the thumb up or down. It is all about remixing found concepts and stories with one's own mind flow.

The perfect reviewer is a self-appointed theorist who opens up the borders between the review and essay form, thereby constantly blurring the origins of ideas. We don't need more information. We can find the PR texts anywhere else. Books that once raised curiosity will stay will soon or later pop up. The object has called upon you and this is stored somewhere. That's my belief. A review doesn't have to summarize—unless the work is transient in nature and in the process of disappearing. Interesting happenings such as installations and performance, conferences, actions and even web-based works can be described in detail, but this activity should be seen as a passionate affair of the storyteller. If a culture is strong enough it will be able to forget events and nonetheless pass over collective experiences through deeper layers. A strong review culture first of all debates and is dialogic, which according to Bakhtin carries on a continual dialogue with other works. With this I do not only mean intertextual. New media are often self-referential enough and rather need unlikely linkage.

I came to Gail Pool's book with a specific question. How could a high quality review culture be established in the new media field? This question has preoccupied me ever since the founding in 1995 of the nettime group of mailinglists together with Pit Schultz. It is one to have a (speculative) theory that can function as resource of general concepts. In order to build a rich and diverse Internet culture it is necessary, but not sufficient, to build and maintain exchange nodes such as announcement lists, newsletters, portals and (electronic) magazines. Again, information exchange as such does not translate into an interesting (sub)culture. In my understanding, and this is what was reinstated in Pool, reviews are pivotal nodes between works and their audiences. Through reviews we do not only announce the existence of a blog, software, installation or festival. Through a practice of critical judgement we establish a set of Temporary Common Values (which then can be criticized and modified), necessary to form a quality judgement and position the works in the culture at large. If we forget the latter, new media

turns into a boring expert culture. Without contested common values there cannot be (sub)culture. These are expressed in reviews, which, in the end, is nothing more than a sophisticated version of gossip. Reviews then play a critical part in the archipelago strategy: how do we build interrelated islands of practices that are neither centralized nor completely insulated from each other?

To me all reviewers are critics, a term that should not only be reserved for academics. It is obvious that writing reviews is hardly a profession that will earn you a living. With Pool I demand higher wages for the reviewers of the future, but don't think that separate general interest review sections are the way to go. What should be raised is the general intellectual level of all media, period. In such an effort critical review culture should distance itself from rating system and not incorporate the consumer test rage. We're not testing the quality of products. Let's distinguish between the purchase of a fridge and a book that might upset you. Let's hope the fridge doesn't. What Gail Pool points at is that mainstream media have downplayed negative criticism altogether. In a climate of anti-elitism, one is quickly accused of being a difficult, messed-up person, lacking even the basic skills to communicate, resulting in "dumbing down the tone of reviews to make them accessible."

Obviously Gail Pool had to ask herself the question how to judge the current Web 2.0 recommendation craze. "The book on Amazon with 600 high ratings may indeed be good. But to be useful to readers, these unknown reader-reviewers, like professional reviewers have to make their case, which is what the well-written, well-argued review does." Pool's problem with Web 2.0 is that it does not encourage quality. "Does anyone really want to read through 600 reviews of a single book? The scrolling alone would be wearing, and by the time I'd read a few dozen reviews, I'd no longer either need or want to read the book." The problem here is one of search. What search tools could be developed—not owned by Google—to tackle the problem that Gail Pool presents us with here? It is not enough to <tag> or have contextual bots to do the automatic tagging for us. It should be part of our media literacy not to panic in such a case. The problem deep down the Long Tail is not of getting 600 reviews but organizing one or two good ones to start with. One of the ways out could be to force corporations such as Amazon, Yahoo, Newscorp, Microsoft and so on to invest more in quality content support. Identify and reward quality recommendations, invest in critical magazines, install fellowship programs for net criticism, and last but not least: raise technical

awareness.

‘User generated content’ is nothing more than priceless noise: trash for the readers, gold for the shareholders. I recently had a debate with a Web 2.0 start-up owner who admitted for him user content would become irrelevant the moment he’d sell his company. We are working for his profit. He saw himself as a ‘multi-preneur’ (so-called entrepreneur who walks away from the job way too early, letting others deal with the ‘creative’ mess). What will happen with the content and the community after the deal was done, he couldn’t tell. I would say: he couldn’t care less. Profiles, recommendations, ratings, they are all data that contribute to the value of the company. Reading Pool lead me again to the question how to overcome Andrew Keen’s criticism in his *Cult of the Amateur*? We need system solutions here. It’s too easy, as Karin Spaink and others have recently done, to stigmatize Keen as a reactionary who is merely defending the values and interests of the ancient media regime. Karin is right, but we can’t stop there. We should stop working for tomorrow’s bosses. It’s time to get a better understanding how to redistribute wealth and income in this ‘free’ and ‘open’ world. The uncritical praise of social networks, placed in opposition to the print and broadcast media, is merely replicating 1990s schemes and leaves no space for the critique of techno-libertarism. Soon the Web 2.0 boom will be over. Merely celebrating citizen content takes us away from the hard task to design the building blocks of a new digital utopianism that does provide fair living wages from cultural workers—and their reviewers.