

Reviewing Across Disciplines

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The essays in this forum offer many thought-provoking reflections on the act of reviewing, one of the most significant—and most fraught—tasks we undertake as academics. To evaluate a colleague's scholarship is an enormous responsibility and something that very few of us, as Catherine Nesci points out in her essay, have received the training to do properly. The essays collected here encourage us to think deeply about the nature and purpose of reviewing and to see it as both an intellectual and ethical act. But they don't necessarily offer much in the way of practical advice and don't raise what I think are some of the most crucial questions facing reviewers, particularly on a site such as *H-France*, which seeks to bridge multiple disciplines.

In what follows, I want to ask and try to answer a series of questions relating to the problem of cross-disciplinary reviewing. To begin, should there even be cross-disciplinary reviews? Or should literature scholars review the work of other literature scholars and historians review other historians? If we do review a work outside the discipline in which we were trained, how should we go about it? Is the point to view the work from the perspective of our own discipline? Or are we obliged to evaluate the work according to the standards of the book's disciplinary affiliation? Is it legitimate to point to the shortcomings of a book if these shortcomings would only be perceived by someone trained in a discipline different from that to which the book or its author lays claim? What, ultimately, is the point of cross-disciplinary reviews?

I'll admit that I was led to think about these questions from my own personal experience as someone who was trained in a French literature department but who works on the border between literature and history. When my first book—about the representation of history in popular culture in the first half of the nineteenth century in France—came out in 2004, I remember nervously scanning the *H-France* site for months, fearing that I would get called to account for some crime of "lèse histoire" as many of my literature colleagues had been in previous years. When no review came, I felt relieved but also a bit disappointed that my book hadn't even been deemed worthy of attack. Then, rather oddly, the book did get reviewed four years later. The reviewer chosen for the task was Peter Fritzsche—not just a historian, but a historian of Germany, which still strikes me as a strange choice. I'll confess to feeling a bit ill-used by this review, not because it was bad (the review overall was grudgingly positive) or because it was short (a mere three paragraphs) but because I had difficulty recognizing in it the book I had written. Many of the reviewer's highly abstract musings seemed to have more to do with his own work than with mine. More disappointingly, he overlooked what I thought was my

book's main contribution, a literary historical argument concerning the shift from Romanticism to Realism in the nineteenth-century French novel.¹

Was this a legitimate review? I still go back and forth on the issue. On the one hand, every reviewer has the right to focus on what he or she finds interesting. I suppose I should feel honored that a German historian found anything of interest in my book at all, and I can't really blame him for not caring more about French literature. On the other hand, it seems to me that reviewers do have an obligation, if not to the author then to the reading public, to engage with the main arguments of the book in question. I often look to reviews to decide whether or not to read a book. I'll confess that on certain occasions I've looked at a review as a *substitute* for reading the book. In either case, I rely on the reviewer to give a good sense of the book's contents and arguments. In theory, a reviewer for a specialized journal has the right to focus on that journal's special area of interest. Someone reviewing my book for the journal *Année balzacienne*, for example, might be expected to focus on the chapter I devote to Balzac. Even then, however, I would expect as an author, and desire as a reader, to see a general presentation of a book's arguments. And for a site like *H-France*, devoted to French studies more broadly, reviewers do face an obligation, I believe, to give a full picture of the book in question or at least those parts of the book devoted to France, even when aspects of the book fall outside of the reviewer's area of interest or expertise.

I was certainly not the worst treated literary scholar on *H-France*. I know that many of my colleagues still shudder at the thought of the 2006 review by Gregory Brown of Susan Maslan's *Revolutionary Acts: Theater, Democracy and the French Revolution*.² More than any other, this was the review that made literature scholars fear getting a *H-France* review. At the risk of dredging up some unpleasant memories, I think it's worth returning to this review and the polemic to which it gave rise to understand better what is at stake in cross-disciplinary reviewing.

After bestowing a few words of praise on Maslan's "original and thoughtful work," Brown goes in for the kill. He acknowledges that a conventionally trained historian "may not be well equipped to assess or even understand the argument, evidence or method of the book," but then he proceeds to point to all the ways that Maslan fails to meet the standards of "recent scholarship by historians on French Revolutionary theater and democracy." Brown faults Maslan, above all, for "eschew[ing] institutional analysis," by which he seems to mean that she focuses too much on the texts of plays rather than on theater as a social practice and neglects to situate her literary readings in the real-world context of policing and surveillance—or worse, that she derives her understanding of these topics from Foucault. He criticizes Maslan for making claims about the theater's role in the Revolution based on literary rather than historical evidence and hence for "overstat[ing] her case." Brown positions himself as the defender of an empirical, archive-based historical method in this review and compares Maslan to a "bull in a china shop, breaking

¹ Peter Fritzsche, review of *Spectacular Past: Popular History and the Novel in Nineteenth-Century France*, by Maurice Samuels, in *H-France Review*, vol. 8 (2008), no. 38, accessed November 17, 2015, <http://www.h-france.net/vol8reviews/vol8no38fritsch.pdf>.

² Gregory S. Brown, review of *Revolutionary Acts: Theater, Democracy, and the French Revolution*, by Susan Maslan, in *H-France Review*, vol. 6 (2006), no. 122, accessed November 17, 2015, <http://www.h-france.net/vol6reviews/Vol6no122brown.pdf>.

everything in sight in a mad fury” for the way that she dismisses, or fails to engage with, or just fails to understand this type of history. Brown also questions the ethics of Maslan’s consignment of Paul Friedland’s 2002 historical monograph *Political Actors* to a single footnote, despite the fact that it is so closely related to the topic of her book.

In the discussion that followed the publication of the review, Maslan wrote two responses—a short and rather flip one and then a longer and more substantive one—in which she both defends her book and goes on the offensive.³ In a not entirely convincing response to the charge that she had failed to acknowledge her debt to Friedland, she provides a detailed chronology of her book’s conception and redaction, showing that she had published an article on the topic years before the appearance of *Political Actors*. Maslan goes on to deny the charge that she dismisses or neglects the work of other historians, pointing to the many moments in her book in which she engages fruitfully and respectfully with historical work. Perhaps the most compelling moment in her lengthy second response, however, comes when she offers a full-throated defense of her brand of literary analysis against the charge that it is not sufficiently historical. According to Maslan, we cannot “understand theater as an institution nor audience participation in theater if we do not pay attention to the plays that are at the center of all that activity.” It is necessary to take literature seriously as an aesthetic creation, she argues, in order to understand it as a social intervention. “To argue that plays understood as literary texts are not part of history, did not participate in history, cannot tell us anything about the past,” she writes, “is to sever violently the aesthetic from the real. This amounts to a retrograde understanding of art and a diminishment of the field of history.” According to Maslan, Brown’s charge that her book is insufficiently historical is inaccurate: what is at stake in her book is a different conception of history, one that sees literary or artistic representation not just as a reflection of reality but as an active producer of that reality.

Most of the twenty or so responses to this debate comment on whether Brown transgressed the conventions of reviewing etiquette—whether he was too harsh, too dismissive, etc. The response by J. B. Shank, however, cuts to the heart of the questions about cross-disciplinary reviewing that I listed at the start of this essay.⁴ Shank laments the “breakdown of communication” between “professional historians” and those practicing a kind of literary-based cultural studies, a breakdown all too typical of cross-disciplinary dialogue. Instead of policing the boundaries of one’s own discipline, Shank invites historians to imagine a different kind of cross-disciplinary reviewing, one that would set aside the “discursive and evidentiary protocols of professional history” and instead examine a book “in terms of the *habitus* that informs it.” The point of such an exercise would be to try to learn from the idiosyncrasies of the approach in question rather than to judge them for deviating from a disciplinary norm. “Appreciation for the potential historical value and unquestioned intellectual legitimacy of these different choices is manifest throughout the exchange, and in the end a patient, self-reflexive inquiry leads to a complex evaluation of the work, not to its haughty dismissal.” According to Shank, there is something

³ Susan Maslan, October 10 and 12, 2006, response to review by Gregory S. Brown, accessed November 17, 2015, <http://www.h-france.net/vol6reviews/Maslanresponsesvol6no122.pdf>.

⁴ J.B. Shank, on behalf of the Theorizing Early Modern Studies Research Collaborative, October 16, 2006, response to review by Gregory S. Brown, accessed November 17, 2015, <http://www.h-france.net/vol6reviews/Maslanresponsesvol6no122.pdf>.

“imperialist” in the kind of cross-disciplinary reviewing that seeks to denounce or erase the difference of other disciplines. We must treat these differences not as a “failing” but as an “opportunity” to learn and grow as scholars.

I think that Shank does a good job describing an ideal of cross-disciplinary reviewing, one based on mutual respect and predicated on the possibility of fruitful dialogue. Unfortunately, however, it does not seem that *H-France* has adopted this model. Based on an unsystematic survey of reviews since 2006, it appears that the site has opted instead against cross-disciplinary reviewing: the work of literature scholars now seems to be reviewed by other literature scholars and that of historians by other historians, etc. In an email to me, David Kammerling Smith acknowledged this to be the case but said that it resulted less from a conscious move away from cross-disciplinary reviewing than from an effort to include more non-historians as reviewers and editors. He also pointed out an important exception to this rule: *H-France Forum*, in which the same book is reviewed by several reviewers. In a handful of these forums—such as those devoted to the books by Christian Jouhaud, Christopher L. Miller, and Tom McDonough—reviews were solicited from scholars belonging to different disciplines. Nevertheless, it remains the case that there is now relatively little cross-disciplinary reviewing on *H-France*.

This strikes me as a shame for the reasons that Shank so eloquently exposes. While a reviewer who shares an author’s disciplinary assumptions might provide a more conventionally positive review, the community of scholars loses the opportunity to learn from the clash of perspectives that cross-disciplinary reviewing provides and that *H-France* is uniquely positioned to foster. To be sure, there is something to be gained also from reviewers who know a subject extremely well: they are often best placed to comment on a book’s contributions. But surely this is the type of reviewing that the more specialized journals can offer. Because it draws readers and reviewers from different disciplines, *H-France* has the possibility to do something different.

Of course, the stakes for this kind of reviewing are higher and the potential pitfalls more perilous. The key is to find the right reviewer—someone knowledgeable about, and open to, other disciplines. And not every book is a good candidate for a cross-disciplinary review. A book that positions itself squarely within a single discipline, that has no ambitions to speak to colleagues outside its field, should no doubt be reviewed by someone in that field. But a book that has implications for scholars working in multiple humanities disciplines—and both Maslan’s book and my own would fall into this category—do seem fair-game for a cross-disciplinary review. The editors at *H-France* are well positioned to make these kinds of judgments, especially now that the review editors come from different disciplines. It doesn’t seem quite fair, as used to be the case, that books by literary scholars were reviewed by historians, but historians were rarely reviewed by literary scholars. Thankfully, however, this no longer seems to be the case: several of the issues of *H-France Forum* included reviews by non-historians of works by historians.

I’d like to conclude on a positive note by pointing to what I take to be an exemplary instance of cross-disciplinary reviewing: Jann Matlock’s 2005 review of Hollis Clayson’s *Paris in Despair*:

Art and Everyday Life under Siege (1870-71).⁵ Clayson is an art historian, and her book offers an account of visual images produced by artists in Paris during the Franco-Prussian War. Matlock was trained in comparative literature and teaches in a French department but has worked between the fields of literature, history, and art history. She approaches Clayson's book in the terms of its own *habitus*, as Shank would put it, which is to say that she makes an effort to situate it in relation to the norms and expectations of art historical scholarship, while also pointing usefully (and knowledgeably) to the ways that the book transcends its own disciplinary boundaries. The review pays careful attention to the various art-historical arguments Clayson makes, critiquing them where necessary, but Matlock also uses her review to reflect on what this book has the potential to teach scholars in other humanities disciplines as well. Clayson's book, we learn, allows us to think differently about the boundaries between high and low cultural production. Its focus on art produced in a single historical moment points to new ways of understanding the relation between subjectivity, politics, and aesthetics, which have profound implications for the disciplines of history and literary studies, as well as art history. And the micro-historical approach sheds new light on a range of cross-disciplinary categories, such as "modernity." Matlock's cross-disciplinary perspective enables her to see in Clayson's book things that Clayson no doubt did not, while also doing justice to the book's explicit goals. A good cross-disciplinary review not only acquaints us with a work of scholarship but enables us to see other disciplines, as well as our own, in a new light.

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H-France Salon
Volume 7 (2015), Issue 20, #12
ISBN 2150-4873

⁵ Jann Matlock, review of *Paris in Despair: Art and Everyday Life under the Siege (1870-71)*, by Hollis Clayson, in *H-France Review*, vol. 5 (2005), no. 15, accessed November 17, 2015, <http://www.h-france.net/vol5reviews/vol5no15matlock.pdf>.