Fuck Peer Review

Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei

In this issue we include contributions from the individuals presiding at the panel All in a Jumal’s Work: A BABEL Wayzgoose, convened at the second Biennial Meeting of the BABEL Working Group. Sadly, the contributions of Daniel Remein, chief rogue at the Organism for Poetic Research as well as editor at Whiskey & Fox, were not able to appear in this version of the proceedings.

From the program:

2nd Biennial Meeting of the BABEL Working Group Conference
“cruising in the ruins: the question of disciplinarity in the post/medieval university”
September 21st, 2012: Session 13
McLeod C.322, Curry Student Center
Northeastern University, Boston, MA.

Traditionally, a wayzgoose was a celebration at the end of a printer’s year, a night off in the late fall before the work began of printing by candlelight. According to the OED, the Master Printer would make for the journeymen “a good Feast, and not only entertains them at his own House, but besides, gives them Money to spend at the Ale-house or Tavern at Night.” Following in this line, continent. proposes in its publication(s) a night out and a good Feast, away from the noxious fumes of the Academy and into a night of revelry which begins, but does not end, at the alehouse or Tavern. continent. proposes that the thinking of the Academy be freed to be thought elsewhere, in the alleys and doorways of the village and cities, encountered not in the strictly defined spaces of the classroom and blackboard (now white) but anticipated and found where thinking occurs.
Historically, academic journals have served a different purpose than the Academy itself. Journals (from the Anglo-Fr. jurnal, “a day,” from O.Fr. jomel, “day, time; day's work,” hence the journalist as writer of the news of the day) have served as privileged sites for the articulation and concretization of specific modes of knowledge and control (insemination of those ideas has been formalized in the classroom, in seminar). In contrast, the academic journal is post-partum and has been an old-boys club, an insider trading network in which truths are (re)circulated against themselves, forming a Maginot Line against whatever is new, or the distinctly challenging. All in a Jurnal’s Work will discuss (in part) the ramifications of cheap start-up publications that are challenging the traditional ensconced-in-ivory academic journals and their supporting infrastructures. The panel will be seeking a questioning (as a challenging) towards the discipline of knowledge production/fabrication (of truth[s]) and the event of the Academy (and its publications) as it has evolved and continues to (d)evolve. Issues to be discussed will revolve around the power of academic publishing and its origins, hierarchical versus horizontal academic modules (is there a place for the General Assembly in academia?) and the evolving idea of the Multiversity as a site(s) of a (BABELing) multivocality in the wake of the University of Disaster.

Good afternoon. My name is Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei and I’m here as one of the co-editors of the online open access journal continent. Since this panel is mainly concerned with the possible future of academic publishing within the humanities, both online and offline, I would like to keep my remarks short, so that we have some discussion time at the end.

My point is very basic and slightly polemical, and derives directly from my experience as contributing editor for continent and running a small independent print-on-demand publishing house called Uitgeverij. I must immediately add that this experience relates to the fields of philosophy, philology, critical theory, and adjacent areas, and I do not claim to have knowledge of academic publishing in the humanities at large, especially not in the areas infected with statistics and other pseudo-empirical data.

Within the field that I work, both as author and as editor, there exists something that we’re familiar with called peer review. This is a system that seems to work very well in the fields of for example physics and mathematics, where all publishable papers are uploaded to an open access, free, pre-print server and are submitted to the collective vetting of the scientific community. When my brother, a theoretical physicist, tells me about the latest work that has appeared on this server, and the enthusiastic and collective reading the community engages in, I sometimes experience slight feelings of jealousy. In my field, the peer review system is opaque to its core. Somebody sends in an article to me, I am supposed to remove any personal data, and forward it to a few “peers” that I think capable of critically reviewing it. These peers in their turn remain anonymous to the author, who will have to rewrite (or trash) the article based upon a one-way and therefore non-existing conversation. Moreover, the article mostly does not appear online, freely available at a globally accessible server, but inside locked and pay-per-view systems that are out of reach for most people that I know. I live in Albania. There is no library
with JSTOR access. There are no student accounts. This is how anonymous peer review in the humanities is supposed to work and this is how I refuse to work.

There are, of course, many alternatives, often trying to approach or simulate the “ideal” system of the world of theoretical physics. Open peer review, wiki-style comment functions, but all of these do not address the fundamental problem for which peer review within the humanities was supposed to give a solution, a problem that is predicated on the fact that, contrary to the exact sciences, humanities hardly ever have certainty as their main goal. This problem, and it persists until today, is the continuing erosion and deterioration of a community of thought by the current academic and university system, a system that aims for the economic equivalent of certainty, efficiency. Peer review assumes mistakenly that in the humanities we are de facto all “peers,” that is, etymologically speaking, “equals.” But being equals means to share a minimal sense of community, which, as far as I am concerned, implies a constant exchange of ideas. Peer review in the humanities has instead become a system that is supposed to compensate for the destructive forces of the university on the community of thought itself. The abolition of the master-student bond. The desire for quantifiability. The fear for another “revealing” Sokal hoax, a so-called hoax.

We, philosophers, critical theorists, philologists, humanists at large, should embrace this hoax, this hocus, this hoc est, this “that is,” the factual risk that our entire thought is a scam. A thinking that is essentially without safeguards, whether internal or external, a thinking that is driven by the desire to be debunked, pulled down, proven worthless. And peer review is not going to do that for us. It will always come down to a small turn of phrase, an extra paragraph, a reference that you missed, a footnote that should be included, an acknowledgment that should be made, claims that cannot be empirically validated, blah blah blah. A review: anything but a traumatic reading.

As far as I’m concerned, peer review is a symptom and not a solution. The symptom of a university system that is falling apart, desperately trying to link up incompatible academics to kill each other off in anonymous free-form fights. Peer review is a waste of time, because each thought demands its own time, and its destruction will be the first step in reconstituting a possible community of thought.

Thank you.