

# Critique of/in the media: the aim for metacritical approaches<sup>a</sup>

## *A meta para a crítica da/na mídia em abordagens metacríticas*

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### ABSTRACT

Diverging perspectives within the current reflection on different instances of critique have led to the concept of metacritique. This study discusses the possibility of metacritique as a critique of media culture, focusing on the peculiar difficulty of arriving at a consensual definition of this concept, due to its multiplicity and variability. It also discusses the concept's application within different fields of knowledge (sociology in special), discussing its relationship with media studies. It posits media metacritique as a concept able to bring together diverse media-practice analyses, demonstrating its relevance for recent audiovisual productions (television series and movies).

**Keywords:** Media critique, communication, metacritique

### RESUMO

A reflexão contemporânea sobre níveis distintos da crítica tem desenvolvido, a partir de perspectivas contrastantes, o conceito de metacrítica. Este artigo apresenta a possibilidade de se estabelecer uma crítica da cultura midiática por meio da metacrítica e a dificuldade peculiar em sugerir uma definição unívoca para o conceito, devido à sua multiplicidade e variabilidade, apresentando suas aplicações em diversos campos do conhecimento (especialmente a sociologia) e relacionando-o aos estudos das mídias. O texto propõe a metacrítica midiática como uma noção capaz de aglutinar análises sobre as práticas midiáticas, demonstrando sua pertinência em produções audiovisuais recentes.

**Palavras-chave:** Crítica da mídia, comunicação, metacrítica

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### INTRODUCTION: UNCERTAINTIES, CONVERGENCES AND DIVERGENCES AMONG DIFFERENT FORMS OF (META)CRITIQUE

A FEW SPECIAL CONCEPTS – especially new ideas resulting from neologisms that are still in the process of maturation – present such fertility for the analysis of communication processes that they eventually flourish in different fields, while remaining connected by their common root. In language studies, in particular, it is important to analyze how these new ways of presenting reality can converge to or diverge from the original meanings and linguistic roots on which they stand. This article aims to discuss the different meanings contributing to the apparently univocal concept of metacritique, highlighting points of confluence and departure from the concept's original meanings.

On the basis of contrasting perspectives, contemporary reflection about different levels of criticism has focused on the multifaceted concept of *metacritique*. In one meaning of this term, França (2014) furthers Boltanski's (2011) studies to emphasize the difference between mundane *criticism* and academic *metacritique*: the latter's starting point is commentary by different social actors, and it begs to reflect on speakers' assumptions and places. However, the same concept can be defined in an entirely different way, emphasizing its environment and objective rather than its starting point (Paganotti & Soares, 2015). Thus, *metacritique* can also be understood as media criticism conveyed by the media itself – insofar as we remain attentive to the criteria adopted by a given media critique of the original media expression as well as its commentary. One must not ignore the tension inherent in occupying a space within the inner workings of the very media machinery one intends to analyze.

To better understand the boundaries between the different definitions of this concept, it is necessary to ask: what is the *aim* of metacritique? Thus, this article discusses the possibility of establishing a metacritical *critique of media culture*. Although it is possible to discuss some commonalities and affiliations among differing notions of metacritique, as we will show later, here we also discuss the peculiar difficulty of even suggesting a univocal definition for the concept, given its multiplicity and variability. We also sought to present the concept's applications in various fields of knowledge, including media studies. Finally, the text posits media metacritique as a notion capable of bringing together differing analyzes of media practices, demonstrating its relevance in recent audiovisual productions. As we question the places of criticism and the aims of metacritique, some key issues guide our work. If media critique's goals are simultaneously a target and a challenge to criticism, what does media criticism actually seek? Possible answers to this question

are the attribution of values and evaluation criteria; the clarification and correction of mistakes, the deconstruction of presupposed intentionalities, the problematization of effects and consequences, the questioning of established points of view, the collaborative complementation between producers and receivers, the renewal of styles and languages, and the proposition of other modes of representation – especially of minority groups. Other, more complex aspects also arise, particularly in specialized criticism: 1) to contribute to the reflection and consolidation of the analyzed works; 2) to translate these works to the public and stimulate their critical reception; 3) to guide the market and its modes of realization; 4) to illuminate contemporary cultural production and confer it with visibility; 5) to establish criteria for the analysis of works and the public's formation; 6) to go beyond the interpretation of a work's internal elements, relating it to the political, cultural and social context in which it is inserted.

These various modalities, as a whole, corroborate the role of critique as an instance for legitimizing both the works and their modes of reception. However, with the advent of new technologies and the new sociability based on them, the function of critique has been transformed: it is no longer a singular voice in the composition of contemporary narratives' meanings; rather, it acts to expand their boundaries. Paradoxically, on the other hand, the disorienting proliferation of media productions – especially audiovisual ones – reaffirms the importance of critical exercise as a tool with which the public can position itself towards this increased number and variety of works. Such a dynamic points to the renewal of criticism's role as a device for the expansion of the relationship between works and their receivers.

In his first column in the section *Notas da Crítica Literária* (Literary Critique Notes), published on January 7, 1943 in the newspaper *Folha da Manhã* (created in 1925 and renamed to *Folha de S. Paulo* in 1960), Antonio Candido (2017) writes:

Usually, the critic faces a lot of expectations. First and foremost, he must define what criticism is. I think this is very fair, since [the critic] is, in short, an individual who provides opinions to explain an author's work. This metacritical aspect of the craft – perhaps its foundation and its most firm balustrade – is, however, sometimes a matter of such a personal nature, surrounding itself with such a necessary immodesty in its very utterance, that it would be better to ask the literary critic what his ethics are – what impositions he places on himself and what working principles he refuses to compromise on. The ethical aspect of the critic's craft is undoubtedly as important as the craft itself. (para. 1)

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Beyond an evaluative or pedagogical dimension, therefore, the *craft* of criticism – whether it is carried out formally or informally – presupposes an *ethic* and should articulate the fields of production and reception, reflecting on its own makings and on the works it evaluates on at least three levels: its establishment of criteria and values, its relationship with producers, and the renewal of the works themselves, not only in terms of content, but also formats – since they inevitably establish a dialogue with the surroundings in which they circulate. Thus, we can conceive of a critique of media culture that takes into account not only the works (their internal elements), nor merely their expanded contexts (external market demands), but rather seeks to uncover the balance (or tension) between these poles. Media criticism in particular is embedded in the social fabric and cannot be separated from it, as each of us takes part in media culture. The place of critique, therefore, falls within the gap between creation, circulation and appropriation of media culture discourses; it joins the choir of the receivers and brings up the question of the critic's role as a mediator. In this sense, criticism cannot disregard the social contexts in which it is carried out, always assuming a historical and political perspective, beyond prescriptive or normative aspects.

Forming around these circuits, media culture critique expands to encompass not only the criticism *of* media, but also criticism *in* the media. Each of these forks into at least two components: specialized criticism or academic criticism, that is, criticism as a way of looking at media objects in the media, and criticism by the media towards criticism made in the media, or the criticism engendered in the works themselves. Thus conceived, a twofold movement can be attributed to media critique: on the one hand, the realization of “a truly critical analysis of the media” and, on the other, the conception of “the role of critique as the deconstruction of crystallized discourses,” at the risk of sustaining only “opinionated or superficial analyzes that call themselves ‘critique,’ but in fact only repeat the obvious without demonstrating their claims” (Soares & Silva, 2016, p. 20).

In performing such movements, media critique finds new modes of representational construction (i.e., new ways of *perceiving* reality) in media discourses, transforming the regimes of visibility (i.e., the ways of *making reality visible*) and reconfiguring the distribution of the sensible (Rancière, 2012) among different social actors:

In so doing, media critique also becomes a critique of the ways in which representation – or the visible – is constructed, turning its gaze not only to aspects of production, but also to the reception and formation of the public, which, as we have seen, also participates in the circuit of critique<sup>1</sup>. (Soares & Silva, 2016, p. 21)

<sup>1</sup>This and other translations of the author.

By revealing aesthetic and narrative possibilities, pointing to the multiplicity of voices manifested in the criticized works and questioning hegemonic discourses and formats, the critique of the media points to other paths to be followed by production and reception systems, diversifying and broadening the very media culture in which it is immersed.

Thus, media critique is based on the analysis of specific productions and the concrete objects that circulate in the means of communication. These means compose a kind of media culture imaginary and, moreover, form a comprehensive archive of this imaginary, structuring social relations and being structured by them. Linked to media practices – and analyzing how media discourses are constituted, and what are their offsprings – critique is expected to point to the possible convergences and hybridity between means of communication. It is also expected to establish communicational links with the public and with any of its critical contributions. Finally, one of the pillars of media critique is to intervene not only in future productions, but in reality itself: otherwise, its relationship with social contexts would stand empty of any meaning. In other words, advancing beyond an aesthetic perspective, the critique of media culture must be paired with a political perspective. It can thus become a critique of cultural representations and mediations, and these representations and mediations may find in it a space where they can potentiate themselves in dynamic and variegated ways.

Carefully observing media practices and using them as building blocks of conceptual categories for the analysis of specific works, *media critique* intervenes in *media culture* as an active participant. We attribute the term *media metacritique* to the possibilities for the emergence of a critical effect, complemented by the ways criticism can be expressed (starting from and speaking about the media). Media metacritique contributes to the innovation and renewal of the media practices whence criticism originated (and to where it has turned), establishing a new starting point at the point of arrival. Metacritique, in this sense, broadens the scope of criticism, since it does not only deal with media productions but also with the criticism carried out *from within* these productions, emphasizing the relational and systemic character of mediations.

Of course, by taking the media by storm (since the media is its target), while cohabiting its vehicles (as it is transmitted through it), this form of metacritique poses some limitations that are difficult to resolve. On the one hand, there is a risk of exaggeration of the critical stance, with the adoption of a radically autonomous attitude to deny the contradictory situation of dependence inherent in this format of criticism. This is the case of criticism that considers one of its premises – independence – as an end in itself. In this case, the reflexive role of criticism and the need to expose its criteria may end up as secondary preoccupations,

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giving way to more radical or even militant positions, essentializing the attack on the media system to disguise the fact that the author of the criticism, after all, is part of this very system.

On the other hand, there is the opposite risk of a very deep and almost uncritical plunge into the media apparatus, a situation in which criticism may sin not for its excesses, but for its moderation: it is the case of criticism so immersed in the media system that it entrenches itself in it, defending and justifying it. The critic seems to give back to the media space he has conquered by providing an advocacy service to his contractors, disregarding the criticisms presented by others and opposing any change in the media system, which he understands and defends, and which seems to benefit him.

In both cases, the need to reflect on the very insertion of criticism in these media is ignored. This is essentially what differentiates them from the metacritical proposal presented below, which aims to avoid the trap of radical militancy, on one side, and institutional apologism, on the other. Still, it is undeniable that these two problematic approaches to criticism seem tempting, precisely because they present valid arguments: first, the importance of striving for autonomy to explore alternative paths in media production; secondly, the difficulty of constructing direct interventions able to overcome the limitations of systems that are resistant to change, which limits the concrete action of critique over the functioning of the media and reality in general.

Without disregarding these two points, in order to better delineate the concept of metacritique it is important to partially reconstruct the recent history of its use in communication studies – particularly sociological ones – differentiating its manifestations and its appropriations by authors dealing with varied phenomena, and highlighting how their recurrences or divergences reveal complementary forms for the analysis of media criticism. Throughout this analysis, we will find common assumptions that realign apparent conceptual distinctions, approaches and focuses, and bring their conclusions closer together, without losing sight of the different meanings attributed to the terminology surrounding the concept of metacritique. More than *inspirations*, there are common *affiliations* between authors: in addition to the genesis of new concepts – which inherit the legacy of previous ideas that they echo but do not replace – the goal here is to point to the alignment between often parallel concepts. In this sense, the application of Boltanski's (2011) inheritance analysis to these metacritical approaches can shed light on other original concepts used by this author, besides the concept of metacritique itself (such as metapragmatics and metalanguage). Such an exercise may help in further clarifying and determining the overall orientation attributed by this theorist to metacritique.

Far from presenting a dispute between authors and their respective definitions, what we suggest here is the importance of diversifying the meanings associated with metacritique. In this, we follow the critical approach of Boltanski himself (2011), who denounces the authoritarian efforts of institutions that seek to establish and disseminate univocal notions for controversial terms, normalizing and neutralizing imminently political meanings and disguising contradictions under a veil of homogeneity. As Boltanski (2011, p. 75) argued, the aim of metacritique should be to deconstruct concepts and reveal their instrumentalization, highlighting how unstable words can reveal themselves when one attempts to trace their origins and changes over time.

Bakhtin (2010) also considered that words should not be seen as simple representations of reality, since they hide social disputes for the control of their meanings. In a space of ideological confrontation, words are not only used to represent conflicting ideas, but also function as the very territory being disputed, for there is also conflict in the struggle to define words' meanings, the circumstances in which they must be uttered or controlled, and who has the power to do so. Different social actors may, in this dispute, strive "to impart a supraclass, eternal character to the ideological sign, to extinguish or drive inward the struggle between social value judgments which occurs in it, to make the sign uniaccentual" (p. 23).

This article seeks to show the different meanings behind the 'uniaccentual' homogenization of the concept of metacritique, highlighting their points of confluence and how each form, although distinct, preserves a common affiliation, by kinship, with the meanings whence it was derived. Since the "sign becomes an arena of the class struggle" (Bakhtin, 2010, p. 23), we intend to take into account that a complex concept such as metacritique cannot be presented as harmonious in its meanings, at the risk of leading to ignorance about its different – and sometimes complementary, or even competing – contexts. Thus, it is important to highlight under what circumstances and for what purpose (i.e., with what *aim*) the concept of metacritique is used.

## **DIFFERENT AIMS: METAPRAGMATICS, METALANGUAGE AND METACRITIQUE**

To understand the meaning proposed by Boltanski (2011) for metacritique, we shall discuss how this concept is placed alongside two other central elements of his work (and which come closer to each other due to sharing common goals and semantic affiliations, while adopting the same prefix): metapragmatics and metalanguage.



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In assessing the ways in which criticism is socially expressed, Boltanski (2011, p. 61) distinguishes two contrasts: the first is comprised of moments of critical practice (or social action); these moments are the focus of the properly pragmatic approach. The second is comprised of moments of reflexivity demanding the suspension of this practice, so it can be discussed; these moments are the focus of the *metapragmatic* approach. In pragmatic moments, routine social interaction occurs without social rules having to be discussed or problematized; actions can take place automatically and are perceived in a naturalized way. However, in times of profound crisis, or when the operation of the rules of social interaction is precisely the target of critique, it is necessary for many of these supposedly naturalized assumptions to also be criticizable, leading to the suspension of direct practical action, which gives way to debate around the principles that determine what can be done or discussed. Metapragmatics, therefore, are a type of practical action characterized by its focus on social practices; a reflection that suspends the presupposed ways of acting, dives deeply into their rules of operation, and can eventually overcome them, proposing new rules of interaction.

At this metapragmatic moment, some actors may act to *confirm* the functioning of the norms, in order to preserve the current order and reduce the degree of uncertainty that emerges in a scenario characterized by the questioning of previous assumptions – which had been considered self-evident, but now have become objects of contestation (Boltanski, 2011, p. 61). In opposition to these actors' confirmatory biases, Boltanski (2011, p. 62) proposes systems that “depend on factors of uncertainty to create unease, by challenging the reality of what presents itself as being, either in official expressions or in manifestations of common sense.” He defines these systems as *critical* forms of expression.

The metapragmatic concept is not only important for contrasting different forms of approaching the assumptions governing social interaction, but also for presenting a clear definition of what Boltanski regards as criticism: a social form that endangers the supposedly natural order, by suspending its automatic expression and questioning its assumptions, in order to give way to changes that would be difficult, if not impossible, without a reflection on the rules of the game. Moreover, this concept also indicates how Boltanski understands the meaning of the prefix *meta*, suggesting a practice that suspends, reflects upon, and potentially surpasses social practices.

One of the ways in which metapragmatics can question social conventions lies in the use of language to discuss language itself — that is, *metalinguage*.

But the most striking feature of metapragmatic registers is the use we find in them of the possibility possessed by natural languages... of speaking about



language itself without changing language.... In fact, recourse to metalanguage as a 'language instrument that serves to speak of a language object' (as Josette Rey Debove writes in her book on the subject) is the only thing which makes it possible to turn attention to the relationship between symbolic forms and states of affairs – a relationship that remains opaque or irrelevant in a practical register. (Boltanski, 2011, p. 71)

While citing Rey-Debove's definition of metalanguage as a "language instrument that serves to speak of a language object," Boltanski (2011, p. 71) emphasizes that this is the main – if not the only – mechanism for clarifying the normally opaque relationship between elements of the social order and their symbolic representation. By attributing meaning to a relationship seen as natural (that is, suspending a linguistic practice to reflect metapragmatically on its functioning, questioning its conventions and meanings), one opens a venue for indicating that this specific relationship is not the only one possible, as it may be arbitrary, not be the best one available, or even lack minimal adequacy. Thus, the meaning of the prefix *meta* in "metalanguage" can also be seen as the adoption of a posture of reflexivity in regards to the environment in which metalinguistic practice operates, implying interpretative alternatives and other possibilities of discursive action.

Boltanski (2011) also highlights the role of institutions, which assume the function of memorizing, fixating and diffusing the meanings that language presents to our world. For the author, these meanings are often definitively placed: certain terms are accompanied by definitions seen as acceptable and stable, in order to pacify or reduce uncertainties, ambiguities, or contradictions that may be the object of different forms of contestation or appropriation (p. 75) – this is the *confirmation* approach presented earlier. Considering this article's objective, this question in particular cannot be ignored. We are thus led into assuming a metapragmatical stance: after all, we seek precisely to question the meaning of a concept that is subject to uncertainty, suggesting a new appropriation of the *metacritique* term, based on metalinguistic discussions about its definition in relation to etymologically affiliated words.

With the above said, we can finally consider Boltanski's definition of the concept of *metacritique*: a contraposition to the forms of criticism adopted by different social actors in their daily lives. According to said definition, a more objective critique could be elaborated by researchers who depart from the various, socially widespread forms of criticism, and question their locations and their relationship to their objects, thus composing a second-order, or metacritical, critique:

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We shall say that critical theories of domination are *metacritical* in order. The position adopted, geared to the critique of a social order in its generality, distinguishes metacritical positions from occasional critical interventions which, from a position of scholarly expertise, call into question, with a view to reparation or improvement, some particular dimension of social relations without challenging the framework in which they are inscribed. But metacritical constructions must also be distinguished from the multiple critical stances adopted by ordinary people who, in the course of political action and/or the disputes of daily life, denounce people, systems or events that are characterized as unjust by reference to particular situations or contexts. In the rest of these talks, when we speak of *critique*, it is to these socially rooted, contextual forms of criticism that we shall be referring, while reserving the term *metacritique* to refer to theoretical constructions that aim to unmask, in their most general dimensions, oppression, exploitation or domination, whatever the forms in which they occur. (Boltanski, 2011, p. 6)

Everyday criticism, classified by Boltanski (2011) as a critique with lowercase *c*, would be characterized by its social rooting as a contextual form of criticism. On the other hand, metacritique, a form of critique with uppercase *C*, is comprised of “theoretical constructions that aim to unmask” (p. 6) forms of oppression, exploitation or domination that may sometimes be ignored or misrepresented by the criticisms of social agents, precisely because these social agents are partial in their positions, as well as involved and interested in the conflict they are dealing with and that they intend to influence. In the quoted passage, the author also differentiates his metacritique from punctual critical interventions, that may even come from academic specialists, but which are only intended to reform, partially question, improve or mend specific aspects of problematic social relations, ignoring the broader context in which they are inscribed. A more complex, contextualized and radical critique, such as metacritique, goes in the opposite direction, assuming its genuinely critical role by taking the risk of altering the social relations it deals with, questioning their foundations.

After following through with this theoretical flight across Boltanski’s (2011) three uses of the prefix *meta*, it is important to understand how the concept of metacritique is inscribed in and can influence the debates on media criticism in particular. França (2014), a pioneer in bringing the discussion of Boltanski’s metacritique to the field of communication in Brazil, highlights how this idea can be fertile for understanding criticism’s loss of predominance (and the need for its resumption) to the benefit of more descriptive and segmented case studies, a trend that has dominated communication sciences in recent decades. In his

study, França goes back to the tradition of critical theory that initially influenced communication research, revisiting a lineage affiliated with the Frankfurt School, Gramsci's hegemony studies, and Bourdieu's studies of domination. There are approximations between Bordieu and Boltansky, but also departures, since the latter's proposal would be a "*pragmatic sociology of criticism*, focused on the observation of actors' daily routine" (França, 2014, p. 108).

Boltanski's (2011) approach contrasts with the tradition of critical sociology, aimed at revealing the inability of social agents to resist or influence the many oppressive mechanisms of different institutions<sup>2</sup> (including but not restricted to the media), and recognizes that subjects – who should be the central focus of academic analysis – have a more active role. Thus, the pragmatic sociology of critique would analyze the social diffusion of critical mechanisms, what are the objects of critique in a society, and how these objects are criticized. In this sense, Boltanski would focus on critique as propagated by different societal actors, and which should be collected, analyzed, theorized, contextualized, and deconstructed by researchers who would then formulate a critique of criticism – or metacritique:

<sup>2</sup>Boltanski's (2011) objects of study – that is, institutions targeted by the criticism of different social actors – range from examinations as selective processes for professional or university positions to entities that intended to define criteria for the continuity of pregnancies.

The criticism of individuals and social criticism set, for the author, two distinct concepts, which he calls critique and metacritique. The concept of critique refers to isolated criticisms, developed by individuals from their own experience, which is localized and specific. On the other hand, metacritique is a second degree criticism, which rests on individual criticisms, feeds on them and gathers them, constituting and arising as a critique of the social order. It is, therefore, a theoretical construction and aims to unveil the oppression, exploitation and domination of a society or social groups. (França, 2014, p. 112)

Thus, it would be necessary to differentiate between a critique carried out by actors that are immersed in society's disputes – and who may have oppression as their object, but cannot always consider their own assumptions or functional context, nor deal in a disinterested manner with issues that affect them directly – and a critique endowed with exteriority, which can be presented only by a distanced observer, able to objectively describe or judge a reality precisely because he or she is outside it (as would be the case of academic researchers, for example) (França, 2014, p. 112). Metacritique, in this sense, feeds from everyday criticism but also stands apart from it, taking it as a starting point for its contextualization, deconstruction, critique, and eventual overcoming. This would separate specialized critique from criticism originated in social groups.



### A NEW MEANING FOR METACRITIQUE IN MEDIA STUDIES

Another tendency of communication studies attributes a different meaning to the concept of metacritique. To understand it, we must carefully consider the reflexivity of the prefix *meta*, which was also present in the metapragmatic and metalinguistic meanings discussed by Boltanski (2011). In describing the etymology of this Greek prefix, Cunha (2010) points out that the particle “expresses the ideas of community or participation, mixture or intermediation and succession” (p. 423). Along this semantic path, we seek to recover the original meaning of the prefix as a form of mediated social aggregation, which was also present in Boltanski’s concept (2011). Although the author does not discuss the origin of the concept, his approach fits well within this meaning by characterizing metacritique as succeeding the critiques made within social communities, even though, indirectly, metacritique intends to differentiate itself from – not merge with – this community space.

On the other hand, we cannot ignore the Latin meaning of the *meta* noun, which deviates from the Greek prefix. Cunha (2010) highlights the dual, contradictory meaning of this term, which can refer either to “landmark, boundary, barrier” or “target, objective” (p. 423). Thus, ‘meta’ can refer to what one seeks to achieve, but also to the adversities or limits that make this attempt difficult. Considering the various meanings for *meta*, it is possible to suggest another meaning for *metacritique*: not only an aggregating, mediated and reflexive critique, which seeks to criticize criticism (in Boltanski’s sense), but also one that considers the contradiction of critique’s insertion in the very medium it seeks to criticize – a critique of critical judgment that does not ignore the fact that its objective (i.e., critique) is also an obstacle to overcome.

As we have seen, the capacity for metacriticism does not come simply from the fact that the critic has a media production (whether print, sound or audiovisual) as its object, or from the fact that the critic criticizes the media. Rather, it comes from including itself (its premises and audience) in the scenario under criticism. After recognizing that not all criticism is metacritical, it becomes necessary to inquire about how criticism *of* the media *in* the media actually occurs (or how a media product can criticize the media itself); point out some criteria to be mobilized in this critique; and identify the new forms of expression that arise from it. Because it is not limited only to works, but also by circuits of production and reception, metacritique seeks to critique the media while advancing beyond it, recognizing itself as part of its mechanisms and providing the public with the tools for exercising criticism in a similarly systematic way (and not only in diffuse or scattered manifestations in social networks).

This scenario becomes more complex when we consider the media in particular, since much of the criticism of the media, after all, is also published by the media itself – often by the very vehicle of communication that is being targeted, as in the case of comments, letters from readers, or ombudsmen (Braga, 2006). Of course, one cannot neglect immediate communicative interactions (face-to-face and oral, for example) that do not depend on mediatization support, such as “face-to-face interaction” (Thompson, 2008, p. 17), given that criticism of the media can also be present in everyday dialogues. However, our focus must be on the case of communicative expressions that overcome these ephemeral manifestations, which are difficult to record and have limited impact. That is, what we emphasize here are communications that occupy the media space while carrying out a critique of the media itself.

In this sense, we must consider not only the critique *of* the media – that is, a critique whose purpose is to deal with media products – but also critique *in* the media – conveyed by a means of communication (Paganotti & Soares, 2015, p. 37). We thus recover the dual Latin meaning of the term *meta*: the notion of metacritique contemplates both the goal (critique *of* the media) and the boundaries (critique *in* the media) of such an endeavor. Such a critique cannot ignore its limits and barriers – its ethical aspect. It is necessary to consider the uncomfortable insertion of critique in the midst of the media apparatus it intends to deconstruct (Paganotti & Soares, 2015, p. 51).

Other forms of criticism may express only one of these characteristics: an academic lecture that critiques a soap opera's representation of police violence, for example, will have the media as its goal, regarding it as its “target, objective” (Cunha, 2010, p. 423); a newspaper criticism of abuse by police officers, however, will regard the media as its proper venue and adopt media language and format conventions – that is, the media in this case will act as a “landmark, boundary” (Cunha, 2010, p. 423) for the expression of said criticism.

It is possible to unite both forms of criticism by carrying out a critique *of* the media *in* the media. One example would be to publish, in a magazine, a critique of a music track that is considered offensive. Still, not all *criticism of/in the media* will necessarily fall within the category of metacritique, since the latter is a more specific process that also requires critical reflection on criticism's insertion in the media space, accompanied by the exposure of critical evaluation criteria. In the previous example, one should consider whether criticism against an offensive music track would not end up boosting its dissemination and notoriety, i.e., reflect on the insertion of critique in the media system one intends to criticize. The choice to actively criticize the music track should be justified by the criteria adopted in the formulation of the critique – in this case, these

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criteria understand that it is more important to discuss a problematic situation than to ignore it. In other words, truly metacritical critique should explicitly present the criteria underlying critical evaluation.

Metacritique, thus, is a unique way of approaching media practices. While it is included in the same space as the objects of its critical reports, it breaks with and questions this inclusion. In this sense, metacritique establishes itself in a fluid way, merging several critical layers in its narratives and thus constituting itself as an intermediary place, pointing to intersections and passages between media forms and spaces. Not only texts, columns or analyzes, but also the programs, products and works discussed in them carry out a critique of the media. In this intermediate space, the relationship with the public (be it the reader, listener or spectator) is also fundamental, since it is the public who recreates the works through mutually influential interpretations (both by professionals and the general public) – even though the public does not necessarily become a producer of original works, as was expected to occur in the supposedly more interactive world of digital media.

Based on this conception, the critique of mediations can also be thought of as *metacritical*, as it implies the agency of subjects, who become co-responsible for communicational processes by way of enunciative evocations associated with communicational praxis. Thus, those who carry out a critique are also participants of the media apparatus:

Choice involves agency. Agency involves the possibility of challenge and refusal. This is not to say that we can walk away from our media-saturated culture. Manifestly we cannot. But we can begin to understand it and in that understanding take responsibility for it. We can then challenge and change it. (Silverstone, 2002, p. 777)

Since communication evokes the *common*, a diversity of representations and interpretations are articulated in this perspective, attesting that a critical relationship with the media – whether on the part of producers, specialists or the public – has to accept the mediation challenges at the heart of media activities themselves, aiming to transform them. In addressing this particular kind of media criticism, the concept of metacritique becomes instrumental. It brings into perspective the circumstances in which this critique must make explicit its uncomfortable situation of criticizing the media while conveying this critique through a medium of communication.

Again, this kind of media criticism is not at all ubiquitous, which gives even more importance to the analysis of the exceptional cases in which the tension underlying this contradictory relationship is not ignored. Such a consciousness

regarding the occupation of the media apparatus can emerge in a parasitic manner, mimicking the same ill-fated mechanisms of spectacularization adopted by the very media one intends to denounce. However, it can also present itself in an innovative and reflexively critical way: i.e., critical not only in content, but also in format. This approach follows Fuchs' (2010) defense that specific media forms can only be considered genuinely critical when they present alternative discourses and narratives that really differ from the ones traditionally adopted by the media at large.

If the space of critique is channeled by media forms, critique not only becomes a part of what it is attempting to criticize, but also inscribes itself in the proposed critical analyzes, both in terms of content and formats. Therefore, this space too must be thoroughly critical. In other words, the instances appointed to carry out critique of/in the media should not only be concerned with themes and approaches, but also with the expressive and aesthetic forms of media productions. While considering narrative as a way of dealing with the world by means of (fictional or factual) fabulations built on language, we can attribute a political perspective to various media productions, whether these productions are focused on entertainment or information.

According to the definitions of transparency and opacity proposed by Xavier (2008), the meaning effect produced by the first is a direct (mediation-free) apprehension of reality, while the second, on the contrary, makes the various discursive layers explicit. At this point, we highlight Silverstone's (2002) approach to the concept of mediation, albeit in another order. The idea that media criticism should seek to understand the production and reception systems in which analyzed works circulate – considering the sometimes-unequal character of the various meanings and reappropriations operated by filmmakers or the public – leads us to conclude that mediations tend to become increasingly expanded and variegated. Concerning the definition of *media metacritique* proposed in this article, fiction as an instrument of societal transformation by means of narrative forms can either reveal its discursive strategies and bear the risk of criticism, or hide these strategies, presuming itself as totalizing, and thus empty itself of such potential.

Criticism of/in the media can only be metacritical by also reflecting on how critique should be presented, avoiding the attention-grabbing and simplifying resources adopted by the media that it intends to denounce. It is not enough for metacritique to “never hide its contradictory relationship and its commitment (in every sense of this term) to the media that it dissects, denounces and depends on” (Paganotti & Soares, 2015, p. 52). Critique may be considered compromised due to being to some degree contaminated by the media in which it is aired,



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but the agents of this critique of critique must remember such a compromise can also mean an exposure to risk and to damaging effects. This problem-oriented consciousness is characterized by a *reflexive* posture that does not only provide a reflection on the media, but must also take into consideration to what extent it should willingly reproduce mediatic modes of representation. Without this simultaneously destructive and creative force, critique would eventually be condemned to either empty and hypocritical denunciation or servile domestication, in a sterile reinforcement of what has been mediatized.

Reflection can even be presented in a self-critical way, making way for criticism carried out by media producers themselves. This occurs when the latter accept they have to reflect on the limits of their practice, their flaws or inadequacies, thus breaking expectations about the distinction between critique's targets and its agents (Soares & Paganotti, 2016). Whether in a self-critical manner or not, metacritique invariably reveals problematic media practices (their own or other media outlets'), reflecting on their negative impacts. This reflexivity can thus also be didactically transposed to its audience: while dissecting the way media is produced, it encourages a better reception by the public, which can identify its vices and demand more complex, contextualized and relevant approaches (Paganotti & Soares, 2017).

However, the main differential of such a perspective, in contrast to Boltanski's (2011) original proposal of metacritique, is that this form of critical action does not presuppose a cleavage between an academic space of metacritique and the everyday social practice of criticism, as performed by social actors from within the media apparatus. In this sense, no special space is reserved for criticism by specialists and researchers who otherwise would, far from the public podium, collect and process socially widespread expressions in order to produce a new, more sophisticated critique. On the contrary, what is emphasized here is a continuity between the academic and social spheres – their limits rather diffuse in an increasingly ubiquitous media culture, disallowing academic isolation or disregard for other modes of criticism coming from other social strata.

This perspective gives privilege to the gregarious sense of “participation, mixture or intermediation” of the Greek prefix *meta*, considering that media culture unites different social actors and that it is not so simple to differentiate academic reflections from social practices. Such a *media integration* approach differs substantially from the metacritical approach originally presented by Boltanski (2011). However, in a way, this particular meaning partially resumes the author's own reflection (p. 21) on the diffusion of university knowledge, where he points out that many of the academic criticisms find social insertion by being appropriated by cultural agents in the public debate. This would happen

due to the expansion of university education, which has reached different layers of society – contributing to an increase in the number of individuals who know about academic concepts and practices – and the diffusion of scientific knowledge via media outlets – who interview specialists to present their views on topics of public interest or disclose the results of their research.

Beyond the distribution of university knowledge, members of the public and social agents also have the ability to present contextualized, innovative and relevant critique, rivaling academic researchers in their knowledge of communications, or even surpassing them due to a greater ease in communicating their criticism to the general public. When one brings criticism distributed by the media into the fold, it becomes crucial to discuss how these non-academic critiques make their judgments – and how they expose their criteria or debate the choices made by other media products. In this sense, the metacritical focus shifts to a *rigorous analysis* of this dynamic, not only in order to detail the processes adopted by critics, but also assess their criteria. All critique that acts as “judge of the jurors, critic of those who cannot criticize” can be considered a form of metacritique (Paganotti & Soares, 2015, p. 49). Metacritique, thus, is the critique of how criticism is made.

As pointed out in the beginning of this article, metacritique can also be a tool for the analysis of different layers of critique: critique focused on the content and format of media products, considering aesthetic or political approaches; critique that deals with the process of mediatization and how individual products fit into a broader logic of strategies for conflict representation and attention mobilization; or even critique that carries out a sociological analysis beyond the media, addressing broader characteristics of our society and how they may be influenced by or determinant for a particular media (Paganotti & Soares, 2015, p. 49). Regardless of which method of criticism is adopted, what would be at stake in a metacritical analysis is precisely the clarification of these analytical criteria, which cannot be taken for granted. By naming and explaining the methods of analysis and critique, a new space for contestation opens up, showing that the paths followed by the media are ultimately choices – and therefore able to be transformed.

## **CONCLUSION: AN INTEGRATED, REFLEXIVE AND METHODOLOGICALLY RIGOROUS METACRITIQUE**

In order to demonstrate the propositions discussed above, it is important to briefly review some examples of metacritical approaches in recent audiovisual productions, pointing to a fruitful field of research that develops analyzes based

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on distinct approximations to this concept (Paganotti & Soares, 2015, 2017; Soares & Paganotti, 2016, 2018). The following works have some common features that allow them to be used as examples of what we call “metacritical devices” (Monteiro & Cánepa, 2018, p. 2): the weekly television program *Profissão repórter* (Profession: reporter) (Kamel & Barcellos, 2006–), which approaches the backstage of journalistic reports while at the same time producing great thematic pieces; the science fiction television series *Black mirror* (Jones & Brooker, 2011–), which has several episodes dealing with the presence of virtual screens, including television, in daily life; the television series *The newsroom* (Poul, Rudin, & Sorkin, 2012–2014), which mimics a fictional newsroom and recreates reports of true events; the movie *Anchorman 2: The legend continues* (Apatow, Farrell, & McKay, 2013), which portrays the production of a conventional television news show from the perspective of its anchorman, showing the show’s move from a traditional format to a sensationalist one.

We cannot disregard the singularities of each of these artifacts with regards to audiovisual narrative genres, formats, and exhibition channels. The movie *Anchorman 2: The legend continues* (Apatow et al., 2013), for example,

establishes modes of articulation which, from the metacritical perspective, are distinct from a series such as *The Newsroom* (aired by a pay-TV channel known for its bold productions, HBO). Here, the eventual recourse to humor seems to be affiliated with a matrix opposite to that of the screenplay by Will Farrell and Adam McKay. (Monteiro & Cánepa, 2018, p. 2)

Similarly, by affiliating with certain reflexive or self-reflexive documentary strategies, the Brazilian journalistic program *Profissão repórter*, “while opening up a whole field of possibilities for the metacritical use of audiovisual language, also ends up imposing a set of constraints on it, due to the broadcast character of the channel that airs it” (Monteiro & Cánepa, 2018, p. 2). *Black mirror* (Jones & Brooker, 2011–), a series aired by Channel 4 (a British public service television network), goes in another direction. Albeit commercially self-sufficient, Channel 4 sustains a commitment to deliver diverse and quality content, reflecting other European public broadcasters. Although such divergences are crucial for the understanding of these productions, we can also observe convergent metacritical strategies.

In addition to being aired precisely in the media they criticize (television and film), the four productions have in common the fact that they are made in an audiovisual format; deal with television and some aspect of journalism; their fictional narratives reconstitute informative or factual television programs; have a social and political approach to the contemporaneous relationship with

communication technologies; have narratives premised on the presence and participation of the public. Most importantly, in stylistic and conceptual terms, all assume the opacity of their discourse in proposing the unveiling of either their own inner workings or the ways in which television programs are created. Another characteristic also approximates their discourses to one another: their critical stance regarding media production and, more than that, regarding the previously dominant view that audiovisual images were transparent, which isolated professional producers from the people who consumed these images.

Of course, the aforementioned works cannot be thought of as a final or exhaustive list of possible examples of metacritical works. These productions only comprise an initial panorama, the result of previous research on the potential fertility of this concept as a media analysis tool. A variety of other works could also be evaluated as practical examples of the metacritical proposal discussed in this article. The elements that unite them – the clarification of the evaluative criteria underlying their criticism, their insertion within the media they want to criticize, always accompanied by a reflection on this proximity – were the criteria for their inclusion as representative examples of metacritical practice. These elements also point to a potential approach for further research on media products that adopt the three metacritical pillars (exposed criteria, integration, and reflexivity) suggested in this paper.

Each of these works presents the triad of explicit criteria, integration to social critique and reflection on their place of speech. The Brazilian program *Profissão repórter* (Kamel & Barcellos, 2006–) acts as a space for journalists to explain their choices, reflecting on the distance between reporters and their sources and subverting the premises underlying this distance, allowing interviewees to directly and uncomfortably question reporters (Soares & Paganotti, 2016). In the dystopian English series *Black Mirror* (Jones & Brooker, 2011–), one of the protagonists criticizes the methods adopted by the judges of a freshman show that exploits people's suffering. The protagonist is then confronted with an unavoidable invitation to occupy a position in this same entertainment media apparatus, adopting an ambiguous critical posture (Paganotti & Soares, 2015). In the US drama series *The Newsroom* (Poul et al., 2012–2014), the characters criticize press errors and defend ideal criteria for journalistic coverage, while fighting for a precarious autonomy in a channel dominated by economic and political interests (Paganotti & Soares, 2017). The comedy movie *The Anchorman 2: The legend continues* (Apatow, Ferrell, & McKay, 2013) ironically adopts the same exaggerations it condemns, exposing to ridicule the process of rationalization that equates television sensationalism with the comic *nonsense* practiced by the film (Soares & Paganotti, 2018).

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In all cases, going beyond the fact that these are different audiovisual media content with different formats and objectives, what brings these products closer and includes them in the present reflection is precisely the carefulness of their critiques in regards to exposing their criteria, their place of speech and their potential conflicts of interest.

Previous resistance to disclosing the modes of operation of audiovisual production established a kind of magical deference on the part of the public, which ensured a degree of control of the audience precisely because of its ignorance regarding these narrative strategies. By becoming knowledgeable about the techniques and styles of the programs they watch, consumers regain some degree of power and ability to interfere with these productions. In the case of journalism – not coincidentally the common *locus* of these works – behind-the-scenes concealment efforts are often even more radical. Proof of this is the absence of ‘making of’ pieces about journalistic productions, which proliferate when it comes to fictional works. The irony of such a stance is that, for information purposes, programs aimed at denouncing and monitoring social and political issues do not allow themselves to be assimilated critically, hiding their shortcomings and misconceptions (often transparent in the backstage). Bringing together these and various other aspects of audiovisual production from the second decade of the 2000s – which circulates on television and cinema, but is widely consumed on internet sites or social networks – the aforementioned productions show how some practices previously disclosed only in ‘making of’ pieces now occupy the central stage of the television scene, treating television critically, self-critically and, as we have argued in this article, *metacritically*.

As we have pointed out, it is not possible to ignore social tension in media expressions when these expressions purport to criticize the very communicational processes in which the critique’s emitter is inserted. Similarly, considering Boltanski’s (2011) approach to the possibility of criticizing forms of language representation as a supposedly stable element with immutable and naturalized definitions, this article sought to indicate divergent meanings for the concept of metacritique, considering the fundamentals of concepts such as metapragmatics and metalanguage. In the process, a metalinguistical discussion on the meanings of these terms became necessary, metapragmatically suspending their practical action to consider the meaning of these previously naturalized approaches.

Thus, and following Boltanski’s (2011) approach once again, one cannot expect a single, pacified meaning for the concept of metacritique. On the contrary, one should be open to dissent, considering other meanings and debates regarding this definition’s effectively unstable form. It cannot be seen as exclusive, as the

only legitimate definition or as the only appropriate one. After all, it refers to an approach among others, and may gain more or less prevalence depending on its use by the public. What has been defended in this paper is the importance of presenting the *criteria* adopted for the conceptualization of this form of criticism, the way it stands alongside other forms of critique and meta-approaches, and a *reflection* on critique's capacity for transformation. These are precisely the three metacritical approaches discussed in the previous section, aimed at complementing Boltanski's (2011) concept: *integration of media perspectives* (to avoid the detachment of academic views from widespread criticism in society and the media itself), *reflexivity* (self-criticism about the insertion of criticism in the media that serves as its object), and *careful analysis* (not only a thorough analysis, but also a critique of the criteria for judging a work of media).

It is important to highlight that the first proposition – media integration – diverges from Boltanski's (2011) metacritical approach, which, while premised on the construction of critique from enunciations that circulate socially, also requires distanced reflection by disengaged researchers. It is also necessary to point out that the other two approaches suggested comprise, in a way, a strategy to incorporate concepts that have been discussed by Boltanski (2011) in his work on criticism, albeit with other aims. Reflexivity, for one, demands a suspension of communicative practice to discuss its uncomfortable insertion within the media processes it intends to criticize, focusing on the functional rules of communication as a whole, in a metapragmatic manner. In this sense, careful analysis inevitably adopts mechanisms of metalanguage in discussing the composition of critical discourse and its criteria. We believe that discussing the different meanings of metacritique and other related concepts, such as metapragmatics and metalanguage, is fundamental for the critique of media culture and its challenging insertion within the panorama of discursive strategies, disputes for representation and struggles for recognition that it intends to address. ■

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