

TINY ROBOTS IN OUR POCKETS:
A CRITICAL EXPLORATION OF PODCASTS

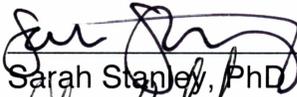
By

Quinn Elizabeth Dreasler

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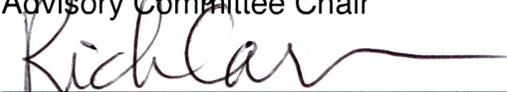
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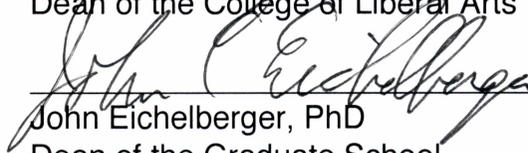


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TINY ROBOTS IN OUR POCKETS:
A CRITICAL EXPLORATION OF PODCASTS

A
THESIS

Presented to the Faculty
of the University of Alaska Fairbanks

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for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

By

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Fairbanks, AK

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Abstract

This project is an exploration of the audio platform of podcasting. It is in three parts. The first part is an initial introduction to the medium of podcasting and an introduction to a critical theory of media studies in regard to popular culture. The second part is an exploration of the educational and academic applications of podcasting as well as an examination of aural learning as an important cultural mode of discourse. There are pedagogical implications and examples of utilizing both popular culture and podcasting in the classroom. The third part is a critical examination of selected podcasts that feature discussions of popular culture and how those discussions fit into the critical modes, genres and discourses outlined in the first two parts of this project. This discussion focuses mostly on the critical examination of science fiction films in podcasting. There is a conclusion that wraps up the main ideas and critical theories discussed in the project as well as an epilogue that addresses concerns raised at the defense of this project regarding pedagogy and accessibility. This is the transcript of this project. The actual thesis artifact is a series of three podcasts that are available through the University of Alaska Fairbanks Graduate School Archive and through the website SoundCloud.

<https://soundcloud.com/quinn-dreasler/sets/quinns-thesis>

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Part 1: Podcasting and Pop Culture: A Critical Examination

This is my thesis for the completion of my Master's degree in English at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks. The listening part of my thesis is a podcast. The written part is a transcript.¹ The podcasts I have chosen to engage with here, in this text are an incredibly small fraction of what is available in the vastness of the Internet. This podcast is an engagement of and towards a critical theory of podcasts, the benefits of using them to learn about critical thinking and how to apply knowledge and theory to other kinds of culture, and a few examples of why they can be so powerful when we use them to engage with critical thought.

This project is in three parts. The first part breaks down the podcast into hard data—what a podcast is, how many people engage with them, who makes them, and what we can expect from the critical discourse in podcasting. The first part also takes a deep dive into pop culture consumption and how we use, look at, and engage with it—and how that conversation fits into podcasting. The second part looks at podcasts through the lens of their academic and educational value as well as breaks down the conventions of podcasts about popular culture. The third part contains examples of different podcasts—specifically conversations about science fiction in popular culture and how they fall into the critical mindsets and sensibilities that are outlined in parts one and two, as well as a discussion of their critical academic value.

¹ This text document is a transcript of the thesis, which is available in audio form. The citations in this thesis are done in MLA style, but in the footnotes. This is in order to not disrupt the transcript. All of the sources, in their full citations, can be found in the Works Cited at the end of this document.

First of all, podcasts are audio blogs that can be downloaded or streamed from the Internet. Podcasts can feature critical discussions, interviews, personal journaling, soundscapes, reviews, stories, or just information. A podcast is similar to a radio program, but is available whenever and wherever an Internet connection is available. Unlike a radio program, a podcast is a file that can be stored and listened to at any time. Many radio programs come in the form of podcasts, but there are hundreds of thousands of podcasts that are available to download for free, that are only be found on the Internet. Podcasts also have an ephemeral essence—they are usually set to disappear from your phone or computer after they have played. They do not have to fit into a specific format—or a specific time constraint. Podcasts are fiction and non-fiction, journalistic, savvy, stupid, fun, boring, and exciting. Many of the most popular podcasts are non-fiction or comedy.² The podcasts that are discussed here, in this project, are specifically ones that pertain to pop culture and criticism—non-fiction for sure, but also podcasts provide an outlet that is different from print or written online criticism. It is a way to talk about media that is new and fresh in an alternative format.

Podcasts are not the be-all-end-all medium for criticism, but they are a great way to learn how to discuss things critically. They are a great way to be able to learn how to watch, consume, and discern our own media intakes. The way that podcasts present information--in a conversational form, and in such an accessible content form—is one of the best ways to find voices of content creators that may not always have had a voice. Podcasting is a diverse, democratic medium that continues to grow and flourish. There

² “Top Ranked Podcasts.”

are hundreds of thousands of podcasts available, and many of them contain valuable ways to learn and to grow. Technology provides a means to an end in the democratization of education and information—the availability of technology and the accessibility of the technology to people of all races, backgrounds, ethnicities, religions, and social classes provides a way to bring a parity to all kinds of information that, until recently, has been available to only the educated, privileged few.³

Podcasts, such as the ones I will discuss here, are cultural commentary; they feature reviews and critiques of different aspects of culture like movies, TV shows, music, Internet memes, or books. Some podcasts, like *Jordan, Jesse, Go!*, are completely unscripted and often rely on the host's life experience and musings for content. Others are cultivated, but generally spontaneous. One podcast I will talk about a lot in this project, *Pop Culture Happy Hour*, has four hosts who make notes and gather information about a specific topic, and have an organized, edited discussion to that end. Other podcasts, like *RadioLab* or *How to Do Everything*, feature carefully edited interviews, soundscapes, and recorded transcripts to illustrate and explain all sorts of things from how color is made of light to how blood relates to different cultural artifacts. Podcasts like *Serial* take a more serious tone and are more like traditional journalism with carefully produced and paced stories. Podcasts like *The Moth* are a combination of scripted stories that different writers present in different contexts—usually one author reading aloud their own work. On the other end of the spectrum are carefully plotted and conceived podcasts that tell stories—like *Welcome to Nightvale*—which is a fictitious,

³ Kellner, 8.

scripted show done like a news report—think *Prairie Home Companion*, but if Garrison Keillor were replaced with H.P. Lovecraft—or the podcast *Thrilling Adventure Hour*, which is a send-up of old-time radio dramas that are compelling as they are winking and have a cavalcade of famous voices to lend to the characterizations.

Podcasts come in every variety and mode that one can imagine. For the purposes of this project, I will be examining those that engage in critical sensibilities in regard to popular culture. When I say “sensibilities” I mean conglomerations of different traditions of thought. For example, many current feminist critics espouse Judith Butler’s theory of gender and gender performativity, but may also espouse other critical values—based on class, race, and political views to varying ends. Each individual contributor and commenter may and can espouse certain critical viewpoints, and, for the most part, in culture-critiquing podcasts, each contributor creates a voice for themselves through these sensibilities and, through these cultural viewpoints, cultivates a specific voice that sets them apart from one another. I will also be examining how, through the podcast content and podcast communities, those critical sensibilities can be explored and impact listeners. Through the mode of podcast, I believe listeners can learn to espouse critical viewpoints. They can learn and change their own perspective. I think this creates a critical empathy in listeners, as well as a keener awareness of being a critical thinker and critically minded. The nature of this medium fosters a collaborative dialogue between those who espouse different viewpoints, create dialogue between genres: dialogue between the critic and the consumer, between the producer and consumer, and between the producer and the critic. Through critique of popular culture and popular

media, we can engage with media that is meaningful to us—like the *Terminator* movies or the TV show *Gilmore Girls*—but also learn to use the voices and sensibilities of these critics to expand our horizon and make us more empowered, critical thinkers and smarter and more informed consumers.

Podcasts are Rich Site Summary or “RSS” files. Sometimes RSS files are referred to as Really Simple Syndication--that is they will automatically download to a user’s computer, phone, or MP3 player when a new episode is available. This subscription service is free and enables users all over the world to catch up with the new information at the same time. Podcasts are often weekly or biweekly, some podcasts have seasons, some are culturally responsive—like those that review certain kinds of television or movies—and some are less formal, appearing only when the creators have time to generate content. Podcasts function inside the internet commerce system of information that is available straight from content producers. Like most blogs, tumblrs, twitter feeds, or YouTube videos, podcasts are free.

The word “podcast” was initially used in *The Guardian* newspaper in February of 2004.⁴ The writer, Ben Hammersley, was attempting to make a portmanteau of the word broadcast and iPod. Although he speculated⁵ several other words, “podcast” stuck and became a familiar part of the lexicon of technology.

A podcast can come in a variety of modes. There is not any limit to what a podcast can or cannot be. Podcast accessibility is paramount, though. Most podcasts are available for free through websites or as iTunes downloads—in fact, according the

⁴ Hammersley, n.p.

⁵ “But what to call it? Audioblogging? Podcasting? GuerillaMedia?”

Apple website, podcasts found through iTunes must be free for users to download.⁶

Some podcasters will allow a subscription for new episodes for free, but keep archived or “premium” episodes behind a paywall, like *Mark Maron’s WTF* podcast⁷—he keeps his podcasts accessible in digital archives for a subscription fee—or the archived episodes of *This American Life*—which are available for ninety-nine cents each.⁸

Although the “pod” in podcasting refers to the iPod, made by Apple, most electronic devices capable of holding music or sound can be vehicles for a listener to enjoy a podcast. There is a nearly infinite amount of content available to be downloaded, and as of 2013, Apple had recorded statistics of over one billion podcast subscriptions.⁹

Although Apple does not publicly display a real-time update of its statistics, there was a projected total of seven billion podcast downloads in the year 2014.¹⁰

At the end of 2014, there was a sudden cultural surge of interest in the podcast as a genre—not necessarily because of the genre itself, but because of a particular podcast that became so popular that it was downloaded over five million times in the first month or so of its release.¹¹ The podcast *Serial*, serial like a serialized novel, not something that we eat for breakfast, is a spinoff podcast of the extremely popular *This American Life* program and radio show that uses the layering of interviews and commentary to share a story. The first season of *Serial* is focused on a fifteen-year-old murder case in Maryland, and each hour-long episode is devoted to a different segment

⁶ "FAQs: For Podcast Makers."

⁷ "WTF Premium Episodes."

⁸ "Ways to Listen."

⁹ Friedman, n.p.

¹⁰ Dredge, n.p.

¹¹ Dredge, n.p.

of the case—one episode about the star witness, one about the defense attorney, and one about the length of time it took to drive across town to corroborate the star witness’s testimony. The story telling was so enthralling and precise, it resonated deeper than genre and became an item of consumption that was instantly a critical hit. This is one of those instances where quality and good marketing can intersect and in such an accessible format, can become pervasive. *Serial* has become a benchmark and a gold standard in podcasting—its creators have radio production backgrounds, but, save for the first episode which aired in lieu of *This American Life* on National Public Radio, was available only online as downloadable podcasts. *Serial* represents a cultural shift in the world of podcasting and move towards looking to podcasting as an important cultural medium—one that can have lasting cultural impact and staying power—as a way to tell valuable stories. It was the first podcast to have its own podcast—the news site *Slate* ran a podcast series that discussed each episode of *Serial*, they did background research and critiqued each episode—it was the first podcast to fold back in on the medium of podcasting. Since so many podcasts are about other forms of media, this move by the *Slate* editors shows the podcast’s move from a sideshow to being a cultural mainstay. *Serial* was a breakthrough for podcasts and podcasting—a shining example of what the medium can do to illustrate a story and move toward playing a longer game of engagement with culture and consumers.

This kind of information medium—this kind of accessible information was actually predicted in 1973 by a cultural theorist, Ivan Illich. He called these accessible, smaller-format learning opportunities, “Tools for Conviviality.” In his essay explaining this theory

he talked about the inevitable breakdown of mass-production and mass-produced culture.¹² His thesis is intricate and long—his theory is far more global than the issues that I address here; however, he does provide this term and a theory that are useful in discussing this means of social interaction with culture and social interaction that is not based in a mass-produced environment. These “Tools for Conviviality” invoke the concept of social media, even though accessible social media was still 25 years away—but his concept of these social tools is, in essence, creating practical access to academic ideas and complex thought for more of the population. Podcasts, and the way that I approach them here, are a tool for conviviality—and a reaction to and a substitute for mass-produced media. They are also a way to disseminate critical thought in a way that is by the people, for the people. The Internet fundamentally changed how people can participate in media, in politics, and in the world.¹³ The participatory culture is democratizing, sure, but it is also empowering.

The podcast *Pop Culture Happy Hour* from NPR is a podcast that breaks down specific cultural artifacts, mostly movies and TV shows, but also books, comic books, theater, awards shows, and the nature of celebrity. Linda Holmes, who is the pop culture editor for NPR.org, hosts the podcast. There is an episode¹⁴ in which the podcasters try to piece together a theory of what makes a good advice columnist, and I believe a lot of what they say is applicable here as we try to figure out the critical sensibilities of podcasters. They refer to it as a philosophy, and one can, after being

¹² Illich, n.p.

¹³ Kahn and Kellner, 703.

¹⁴ Holmes, et al. 16 Nov. 2012.

exposed to this philosophy, come to expect what kind of information and what kind of framing will happen around a certain situation or a certain type of media. They begin to refer to this as a sensibility, which is the word that I have co-opted from this conversation to apply to podcasts, podcaster's views, and critical theories they espouse. This also applies to the philosophy and direction of the podcast—mostly because this is a productive way to think about criticism and a productive introduction to how podcasts can lead us to critical ends. Podcasts create the tools for conviviality. This discussion deals with the overlap of philosophy with criticism and the way we use philosophies to be critical. This conversation begins by discussing Dan Savage and Miss Manners and a variety of other advice columnists. Stephen Thompson, the panelist speaking in this clip, explains:

ST: What you're going back for, with advice columns, is an overarching philosophy. You learn how to apply someone else's philosophy to a bunch of different situations. What you're really looking forward to in an advice columnist, what's the most important thing for an advice columnist to have is a consistent philosophy, and obviously you want to be adaptable, and you want to change with the times, advice columnists who have written for 50 years have gone through changes in social mores, and whatnot, but you still want to apply, you guys were talking about Miss Manners, where she has an over-arching philosophy of being kind to others, and all these things are about being gracious towards other people, I like it when advice columnists have kind of a consistent

worldview that they are applying to many different situations ...The role of the critic is often to cull, and the role of the advice columnist is often the same thing.

The way Thompson integrates this idea of philosophies is the way I plan to look at the way critics, in this case on podcasts, use their critical sensibilities to cultivate an identifiable philosophy. These philosophies, through the serialized form of podcasting, become identifiable with their limitations and can cultivate and invest in specific schools of critical thought. However, the way this critical thought is presented can have larger and deeper implications, despite the frivolity of the culture that the podcasters are choosing to engage in and with. Because podcasting is ushering in a new way to discuss media, it ushers with it a new way to focus the criticism of the medium.¹⁵ Nick Stevenson argues in his essay, “New Media, Popular Culture and Social Theory” that the new channels of information are “horizontal”—directly from a mid-level creator to a mid-level consumer. There are still structural hierarchies of media, of course, but the Internet makes it easier for there to be lateral discourse as well as top-down discourse—which, in turn, is inverted to bottom-up discourse in which the consumers can talk back in a big way to the producers. This new media approach and this new way of cultivating critical thought is what is happening in podcasting, and something that Stevenson invokes in a global sense in his thesis. He posits that along with new technological forms, there should be criticism keeping equal pace.¹⁶ He argues that the hybridization and the “de-centralization” of culture democratizes the information¹⁷—and

¹⁵ Stevenson, 157

¹⁶ Stevenson, 158

¹⁷ Stevenson, 158

so in order to create a critical theory of podcasting—I am moving laterally and allowing the podcasts to help define themselves.

This podcast episode about critical framing and advice columns is an example of how we look at and apply all criticism. We look to different kinds of minds to have different kinds of critical opinions and to invoke schools of academic criticism when we are looking at literary works and art. Looking to a specific school of criticism is what we do when we try to make sense of—or interpret through a lens—a piece of art. The way Stephen Thompson frames looking to a critic for a sensibility is a microcosm of looking to a critical academic for a socio political framework to discuss art. Framing this discussion through podcasting is an interpretation of this critical application as well as an interpretation of this lateral movement through a new technological medium.

There is a cultural phenomenon that I would like to address about the media that I will be engaging with critically here—the idea of ironic consumption or guilty pleasure media. All of the critical discussion that I am engaging with comes from a place of pure enjoyment—but ironic culture consumption is an important part of the critical theory of popular media. The idea of ironic consumption is explained well in Dana Cloud’s article, “The Irony Bribe and Reality Television: Investment and Detachment in *The Bachelor*.” This article explains the parallel of irony and enjoyment, focusing specifically on the television show, *The Bachelor*, where young women compete with one another for the attention of one man. She explains her position, and implicates *Bachelor* producer Brad Womack as creating a rift between the reality of reality and reality of reality TV:

The Bachelor invites two kinds of investment simultaneously: the

pleasure of the romantic fantasy and the pleasure of irony in recognizing the fantasy's folly. Brad Womack's violation of the romantic contract exposed the emptiness of its promises; an ironic viewing posture enables one to enjoy both the romance and its emptiness. Below, an analysis of the contradictions upon which the show's fantasy founders (thus encouraging an ironic response), alongside exploration of fan discussion board discourse, confirms the capacity of audiences to maintain simultaneous earnest investment in and "winking, playful distance" toward the program. This oscillation of stance signals a textual strategy that I label the irony bribe.... the irony bribe is a strategic mechanism of a cultural text that invites audiences to identify with the pleasures of the reaction against the taking seriously of a patently ideological fantasy (such as faith in true love as a source of women's agency). Ironically, the irony bribe naturalizes the worldview of a hegemonic text in the process of denaturalizing it. Irony is the fantasy bribe's Other in its production of investment through disinvestment.¹⁸

Cloud uses this basis for her critical theory that we can both enjoy and detest something—that we get a sense of superiority and a sense that we are critical and smarter for knowing the difference between something that is awful and something that is great. The ironic distancing, although tempting, keeps and limits our enjoyment of culture because it means we never have to emotionally invest in anything, least we are hurt or maligned for a discrepancy in taste. Reality television at its best is emotionally gripping, and at its worst is nauseating and perverse, and Brad Womack's ability to

¹⁸ Cloud, 414-5

juxtapose both of these ends of the spectrum makes for a spectacle at worst, and engaging television at best—but it is nowhere in the realm of real-life reality—reality TV functions more often than not in the Jean Baudrillard¹⁹ concept of hyper-reality, where reality is constructed, but no reality truly exists. Reality television walks the line between what is real and what is constructed, and much of the entertainment value of the show comes from the awkwardly constructed narrative. However, reality television is popular, and reality television is something that people watch, but we many not all watch it for the same reasons. Pop culture hovers precariously between this idea of ironic enjoyment and the idea of high art—and good criticism transcends that and engages with both of those ideas in meaningful ways.

Which—let me go on a tangent for a second. Linda Holmes, got her start writing about TV shows on the now-defunct website *Television Without Pity*, which was a website that wrote and curated recaps of television shows. These weren't just summaries, and they weren't exactly criticism, they weren't satire, but they were some combination of all three—yet greater than the sum of their parts. *Television Without Pity*, in no uncertain terms, completely altered the way critics and fans talk about and interact with television—and because of that, has completely improved and widened the scope of talking about popular culture. If there was no *Television Without Pity*, we would probably still have podcasts that focus on pop culture criticism, but the fundamental way that we currently interact with popular culture, whether we realize it or not, has been affected by *Television Without Pity*. This shift in the way online media speaks to the

¹⁹ Baudrillard, 1557.

consumer and also speaks back to the producers focused online media in a way that affects most culture criticism today, and very much affects the criticism and critics that are featured in this project. In fact, television producers started paying attention to online fans. Some, like Aaron Sorkin had negative reactions to the in-depth commentary—he famously wrote an episode of *The West Wing* where he derided bloggers and online communities—but some, like the producers of the short-lived WB show, *Popular*, gave copies of the positive and encouraging reviews from Television Without Pity because the cast and crew had been struggling with morale after bad press.²⁰

Television Without Pity started as a forum to talk about *Dawson's Creek* episodes in the late 90s. It turned into manically detailed, refreshingly critical, and surprisingly sharp-eyed, thousand word play-by-plays of episodes. As the recappers summarized each scene in lurid detail, they could also make the reader think critically about the gender diversity of a cast, the metaphors that are coming across onscreen, the lighting, the make-up, or the inconsistencies in the plot. With scathing paragraphs of bon mots like,

Cut to the dock. Dawson and Jen sit on a bench in the fog. Get it? "Fog"? Memo to the writers: we got it, okay? The Guitar Of Speechless Fury thrashes away as Dawson, whose nostrils now serve as a temporary shelter for half a dozen homeless families, stares bleakly into space and Jen fluffs her hair. Jen tries to comfort Dawson, saying that she knows he only has her, "a semi-stranger," to help him deal with this right now, and also they've never really talked about

²⁰ Andrejevic, 27.

anything serious, but that if he wants to talk, she'll listen. Dawson whips his head around to look at her, but doesn't seem to see her and doesn't say anything. Then he turns around to face front again. Poor Jen -- every time she tries to act nice, she gets shot down.²¹

This kind of intricate detail is in each scene. Each scene of each episode of hundreds of shows was lovingly written and posted to this site. Some of the site's contributors have gone on to be television writers themselves—some of them have written books, and some of them still write for other websites, like the culture-oriented *Vulture* or television-specific websites like *Previously.tv*. *Television Without Pity* glorified and exemplified exactly what Dana Cloud talks about in the “Irony Bribe”. For instance, in a recent review on the *Vulture* website of the television show, *Agent Carter*, the writer, Sulagna Misra, both appreciates and lauds the show for having representation of an heroic woman character. But also call out the show for underrepresenting characters of color, and does so in a fun and engaging way—she is able to identify what is good about the show and what is bad about the show, despite the fact that it takes place in an alternate comic-book inspired universe in 1946.²² *Previously.Tv* makes it even clearer, including features like “I Can't With This”²³ in which they discuss and recap shows and tropes that are socially or culturally problematic ranging from a diatribe on the reality of women sleeping in their bras to the representation and actions of queer characters on television. The cheeky name for this section on the website belies its true nature—there

²¹ Bunting, n.p.

²² Misra, n.p.

²³ “I Can't With This” Archives.

is silly stuff, sure, but there is also a movement and a push to be more responsive to social and societal issues, and this is one way that the community can respond to the culture. The ability to balance the silly and trifling with larger issues of building trust and community with audiences creates a dynamic narrative, one that has become pervasive in popular culture media—and one that is so useful in podcasting—when the listener can identify a tone and a voice with a particular sensibility or viewpoint, that discussion becomes all the more rich and inviting. The communities that surround criticism like these websites and culture podcasts are vital and allow for the tide of culture to turn all the more rapidly, responding instantly to current events and social movements.

When *Television Without Pity* ended its creation of new content in April of 2014, there was an immediate outpouring of gratitude for what it did. *New York Magazine's* online culture website, *Vulture*, published a particularly noteworthy obituary for *Television Without Pity* by Margaret Lyons.

[*Television without Pity*]²⁴ certainly popularized the recap concept — which is now utterly pervasive across entertainment-based and general-interest sites — but it also introduced a new vein of what TV coverage entails. At one side of the spectrum is obsessive, effusive fan coverage, and at the other is formal, detached criticism. There's a place for both of these things in the universe, of course, because man is meant to live in balance. What [*Television Without Pity*] did is insist that television criticism could be both arch and informed, that you

²⁴ Most instances of *Television Without Pity* being discussed, including in this quote, it is referred to as TWoP, which is great for brevity in writing, but sounds stupid in a podcast. Whenever it is referred to as TWoP, I have taken the editorial liberty of spelling it out, because, in this thesis, I am saying it out loud.

could watch a lot of *Roswell*, you could *care* about *Roswell*, and you could still think *Roswell* is dumb garbage. Prestige shows like *West Wing* or *The Sopranos* don't get a pass just for being fancy — even a recap praising a fabulous episode still had jokey nicknames for people, or wry labels for various TV clichés. Many of the recaps are incredibly funny, but there are plenty that had serious ideas about storytelling or costuming or characters' gender politics, too.

In fact, when *Television Without Pity* went dark, many writers (both writers who wrote for *Television Without Pity*, and ones that did not) took to Twitter and blogs to express their outrage and sadness at the end of a cornerstone of current pop culture criticism. Linda Holmes tweeted, “Just so you know, without [*Television Without Pity*] there is no me at NPR, and no [*Pop Culture Happy Hour*]²⁵ since Stephen never writes to me in December 2004 about *The Apprentice*.”²⁶

The way that *Television Without Pity* curated the desire for longform criticism in tandem with obsessive fandoms²⁷ quickly became the gold standard for writing about and considering popular culture. The Internet, as the great equalizer, was showing the world that someone could be thoughtful and insightful and also think James Van Der Beek's haircut was awful, and that was possible in the same sentence. This harkens back to Dana Cloud's discussion on ironic distance. At the point in which we enter the discussion, all bets are off on taste standards. Pop culture critics, for the most part, and the ones with which we engage here are fans of all varieties of culture, and that includes

²⁵ Ditto PCHH for *Pop Culture Happy Hour*

²⁶ Holmes, 27 March 2014.

²⁷ Internet pidgin for the fan base of a particular TV show, film, or book. Collectively, those who are fans.

stuff that may also be dumb garbage. This standardization of highbrow and lowbrow became the way that all outlets—blogs, podcasts, and international media websites began talking about cultural output. Highbrow and lowbrow cultures have no definition here. Highbrow culture and lowbrow culture are born of a perception that we each have cultivated as consumers. For some people, highbrow culture may be opera and Shakespeare. For some, it may be good television like *Breaking Bad*. For others it could be certain types of music like the band Wilco or Bob Dylan. Here is the deal though—these opposites, this binary of what is ok and what is not, is not useful to this discussion. Cultural studies and the critical examination of popular media are founded on that same principle—that is that all culture, both the mass-produced and the high culture are valuable for assessment and are valuable barometers for looking at the world.²⁸ I have only included these terms to show how they aren't effective because they are so subjective. The idea of a “guilty pleasure” is a useless one. Cultivating a taste in culture is liking what it is that you like, but being aware enough to understand when it is problematic. This understanding and critical eye is representative of this new wave in criticism where we can take things that can be considered problematic or shallow and still understand the value—the emotional value, the entertainment value, the production value—anyway. The evolution of *Television Without Pity* gave us this model that is used today by most cultural critiquing outlets—by breaking down the media we consume into identifiable parts—we can isolate what is both good and bad about the media we consume. Podcasts, as I will introduce in the second and third installments of this

²⁸ Kellner, 8.

project, do this in a variety of ways. However, it all started with a few bloggers being simultaneously fed up and entranced with the plot holes and horrendous hairstyles on *Dawson's Creek*. It is important to be able to evaluate culture across the spectrum of what is available—this project specifically focuses on reactions to mass media, which gives life and function to the social tools of conviviality and also creates an accessible access point for the conversation about critical thought—one that is familiar and of interest to a wide variety of consumers.

Television Without Pity created a conversation—one that could be consumed by fans of media as well as the media producers. The distribution of digital material is so pervasive that it is possible for products to reach audiences that they never could before, but also allows the audience to reach back. One of the main points of this specifically was the accessibility of the *Television Without Pity* forum—the commenters could interact with the critics, sure, but sometimes the content creators would get involved, listening to fan ideas—bypassing even the critic and taking back ideas that were sprung directly from the consumers. Although it accelerates the turnaround on culture, it also makes for a wider variety of culture from which to choose, and allows each change or each tweak to be part of a larger conversation.

The interactivity of the media, especially as it pertains to fan participation with television shows, is something that is just beginning to become a hot topic in academic literature. Mark Andrejevic wrote an article on the interactivity of fans with the site *Television Without Pity*. His thesis is based on the interactivity of online media and television. He cites J.J. Abrams, who is a popular creator and director, who explains that

the relationship between online forums for viewers and creators is reciprocal and creative minds who ignore the online communities will certainly be weeded out by the consumers.²⁹

In an early episode of *Pop Culture Happy Hour* there is a discussion on taste and guilty pleasures.³⁰ The reason I bring this up, and the reason that this is important to this conversation is that it is a collaborative dialogue, and it is a collaborative dialogue on the critical nature of popular culture, and how we interact with it.

Stephen Thompson (S.T.): I think this philosophy has become a little more common—my philosophy is that there is no such thing if you feel guilty about liking something, you're being a big dope. If you like something, OWN IT! It leads to a lot of, sort of, phony-opinion-holding. Because it's like, This is the opinion I can brag about having, that makes me sound smart; this is the opinion that I'm ashamed of, because it makes me sound, like, lower.

Linda Holmes (L.H.): And the question is, what is the origin of the guilt? Trey, you have some lowbrow tastes and some highbrow tastes and ...

Trey Graham (T.G): I don't know what you're saying, madam.

L.H.: You have some of both, talk to me about guilty pleasures.

TG: Pretending you don't have lowbrow tastes is like presenting a facebook version of yourself to the world. Entertaining this notion of a guilty pleasure, and hiding the things you don't want to admit you take pleasure in is like polishing up that profile photo and only posting the joke after you've worked it two or three

²⁹ Andrejevic, 33.

³⁰ Holmes, et al. 9 Dec. 2011.

times, Glen Weldon.

Glen Weldon (G.W.): it's called workshoping.

T.G.: I wonder if the concept of the guilty pleasure is more specifically an American thing, or a more specifically, Protestant thing, because if you parse the phrase, and we are, as Americans and as the inheritors of Protestant anti-pleasure legacy, we are more conflicted about most pleasures, right?

G.W.: If it's a guilty pleasure it's because it's violating your own values—it's something you like despite yourself—not about whether you can brag about it to other people—and I think there are legitimate guilty pleasures, where the guilt is very literal and the pleasure is very literal—certain movies of a certain spicy nature—for us to have an interesting conversation, we need to talk about our own inner yardsticks—for this to be a useful conversation—instead of equating things like comic books as a guilty pleasure, or in your case, Linda, romance novels as guilty pleasure—they're not—we don't feel guilty about reading them. We have to think about what things violate our own sense of worth, our own sense of what's good and bad, yet that we have a sincere pleasure in—not this ironic distance—this is not something that's so bad it's good—that you enjoy by laughing at it—this has to be something that you actually take pleasure in, but that you recognize that it is, Trey used the word “lowbrow”, I would use the words, “Lacking in Quality.”

S.T.: This is bad, but I like it anyway.

L.H.: But if you like it...

T.G.: But then by whose measure is it bad?

ST: Your own.

The reasons I included this dialogue are twofold. One, it explains and extrapolates on the theme of guilty pleasure, which figures in heavily with the critique of popular culture, and is a common theme and discussion throughout this project. Regardless of the quality of the product, are we able to approach their products objectively? In many critical cases, it is important to separate the artist from the work—Roland Barthes’s “Death of the Author”³¹ critical theory haunts us—he explains that in order to truly be able to objectively criticize the work, we must divorce it from its creator, the creator’s hopes, dreams, and passions, its time period and the conditions in which it was produced. We, as readers, must apply our own understanding in order to see the work from a variety of perspectives. It is in this way that Barthes makes way for other critical theories—with his own theory he opens the door for all kinds of interpretations. In order to apply the lens of the reader, we must be able to look at the work objectively—is that an example of taste, or is that an example of ethics? The media that we will be discussing here will be more of the former, and less of the latter. The ironic consumption of knowing that we can enjoy something and still maintain critical distance is paramount in this discussion. Mostly, this discussion is focused around the fact that ironic consumption is silly. There is no reason to consume something if we do not get some pleasure out of it. Trey Graham makes a good point when he discusses his theory that there is a Protestant-like guilt that we, as Americans feel if we do or like something—

³¹ Barthes, 168.

especially a piece of media that is not actively constructive, either as a hard-working person contributing to capitalist society or towards our best idea of ourselves. He makes the point that when we curate our own tastes, we are trying to curate ourselves toward our best self—and anything that does not fit into our conception of ideal cannot be included in that profile. If we like something pithy or frothy like reality television shows, soap operas, or CW shows, we are not investing in our intellect, nor are we investing in our cultural tastes. To enjoy something that is lowbrow is plebian, and that does not fit in with our aggressively-self-improving selves. In order to combat that social climbing, it is important to remember our tastes are individual and our interests are varied. The discussion of what is valuable about culture—both morally and aesthetically—is not a new conversation.³² Sally Markowitz’s essay on guilty pleasures comes to the conclusions that it is important and valuable to be able to discuss things that may be positioned as guilty pleasures because it makes us feel good to talk about things that are entertaining instead of saving all of our criticism for more serious and tragic art.³³ When we talk about highbrow and lowbrow tastes, we like to think of ourselves as discerning if we have highbrow tastes, and lacking self-control if we have lowbrow tastes. Instead, with the ideas taken out of this podcast discussion, I posit this: regardless of our tastes, as long as we can be discerning and critical about our consumption, it is ok to like what we like. Trying to be ironic to distance ourselves is trying to say that we accept and know what we actually like is trash—embracing it means we can understand its entertainment value while also being aware if what we like

³² Markowitz, 307-9.

³³ Markowitz, 315.

is problematic.

The second reason why I have included this dialogue from *Pop Culture Happy Hour* is that it is an active demonstration of what I am attempting to convey when I talk about the collaborative nature of podcasting and the way that discussion can guide and shape a sensibility as we strive to come to a common goal, whether it is a critical discussion of media, or a meta-critical discussion on how we approach media. The dialogue that happens in a podcast, especially this podcast, is useful in examining what we want out of our own cultural experiences. What do we look for in a cultural artifact? How do we define our tastes? How do we discuss something that we love? How do we decide to love something regardless of quality? Markowitz's essay also touches on how culture plays on our sympathies, but identifies them as separate from aesthetic experiences—how we can feel emotion and empathy, but understand that as different and separate from an aesthetic experience.³⁴ That is, how we can look at the so-called guilty pleasure—and that's how we can look at culture that might be considered dumb garbage and have a critical reaction to it. Sometimes, culture that we deem a guilty pleasure—something like Cloud's example of *The Bachelor*, something we deliberately take distance from, thus making it much easier to drive a critical wedge between ourselves and that media, but what about things that are revered? How do we take critical distance from something that we may unabashedly love, or that is generally quantified as good? I think this discussion has a lot to do with that, and so does critical theory. I think that in the discussion of pop culture, it is unnecessary to invoke academic

³⁴ Markowitz, 315.

theory or use an elevated tone in order to get one's point across—and indeed, that's why podcasts are so successful, they can foster a critical discussion while still maintaining accessibility. This discussion shows how we can take the ideas from one person or another and manipulate them to come to a more specific point and a more elevated conclusion. The discussion that happens here is collaborative and useful to a critical end—even if the discussion is about something like *The Bachelor* or *Terminator*. However, in this project, I will draw critical academic conclusions from these discussions, regardless of their initial register. Each podcast, and indeed, each person on podcasts brings with them a tradition of criticism, whether they are formally trained or not, which comes from experience, a viewpoint which comes from years and years of culture consumption, and comes from being sharply focused on specific aspects of culture, and that is what I am calling a sensibility.

Each of these critical sensibilities contributes to the discussion of podcasting in general. Podcasting is an increasingly popular medium, and is therefore instrumental in the current cultural consciousness and current popular thought. These critical sensibilities, when engaged in dialogue, can inform and engage the population in ways that other media cannot. Dialogue and conversation encourage contribution, whether it is silent or active. Just like in seminars and classes, being a part of the conversation by participating or listening can influence thought. This can cultivate a listener's and participant's own sensibilities and increase critical thought. Many of the podcasts that engage with sensibilities are created by those who already write and produce content, whether for blogs, radio, or comedy writers working as comedians or as writers on TV

shows. Popular media is a valuable cultural barometer—and so is its critique. By taking this criticism seriously and engaging with it on an academic level, I believe that we can utilize critical traditions that are often reserved for so-called highbrow culture—and turn that discussion into a tool for conviviality. I also believe that only using critical interpretation for highbrow culture or canonical literature is limiting. It is limiting accessibility for a large swath of the population, it is limiting a large section of culture that has a lot to teach us, and it is limiting ourselves as consumers to be able to enjoy and discuss media in specific ways. The way these podcasts can interact with such a wide variety of media makes it far less daunting to have an important conversation about media, whether it is about race, class, or gender or whatever. Media engages with big, important themes, and writing them off as lowbrow is limiting to us and to them. Podcasts come in so many forms, and come with so many points of view and explanations that it makes talking about our culture and consumption something that is pleasurable and simple.

Even though criticism is widespread and accessible, both in print media, and online, there is value in listening to collaborative voices working through a discussion on a particular subject. Opening a dialogue toward media makes being critical a positive and constructive process; engaging with differing opinions creates opportunity to open our minds to new movies, TV, music, and books—because the collaborative critical effort can make it easier to approach media from a variety of angles. Being intelligently critical of something and still able to enjoy it is way better than discarding it because it is a guilty pleasure, or trying to enjoy something ironically, and having to manufacture a

reason to curate this taste alongside “legitimate” interests. Creating an artificial taste is a disservice to our best selves—liking something wholly and with integrity is what makes us interesting—having a passion and being able to talk intelligently and critically about our passions is what makes us truly able to engage fully with culture.

Podcasters, because of their commitment to culture and their commitment to discussing culture, are allowing us an in-road to look at media from a variety of viewpoints. It is because of their buy-in to the culture that we are allowed to see different avenues of access to different kinds of culture. This medium is especially potent because we get to hear the inflection and passion in their voices as we listen to a podcast. Because we are able to sense the engagement, not only with words but with emotion, it gives the entire experience a more well-rounded appeal and we, as listeners can further our enjoyment of our cultural consumption by looking at in so many different ways.

In essence, these kinds of critical-format podcasts are a form of fandom or fan art or fan fiction. They provide an outlet for praise and enthusiasm as well as a place for critique and intricate discussion of what we do and do not like about our media. The passion and humor that listening to actual voices discuss something and listening to opinions form and change in real time is also important, and something I will explore and explain in the second part of this project. It also provides listeners with a community with whom to begin a relationship based around common interests. The community of online fans who support, appreciate and participate in the discussion are a valuable part of the podcasting community and a valuable addition to the culture and how the culture

is presented and manipulated. The Internet, in the vast, global sense has altered the way we can discuss and participate in culture. The way to be heard is not only through a Nielson box any more—now there is a more democratic, louder, immediate system to make ourselves heard and to find those who are like-minded. Podcasts are not the be-all-end-all when it comes to online communication, sure, but they have added a way for all voices to be heard, quite literally.

This ends the first part of this project. This first part is meant to position the listeners of this project to open their minds about culture and criticism, especially how it is available online. The second part focuses on the academic and structural features of podcasts—about how they can help us learn, and what about them is alluring and unique about the format. The third part is an exploration of podcasts from a variety of voices—and how those conversations can open up thoughtful critical issues and complex schools of thought.

Thanks for listening. See you in Part Two.

Part 2: Podcasting and the Educational Efficacy of Aurality

This is the second part of the three part series of my master's thesis on podcasting and the critical nature of the medium. This second part has to do with the educational and cognitive value of podcasting. Many cultures fostered an oral tradition, telling stories, singing songs, and reciting poetry—for centuries—so how does podcasting fit in with that? Colleges and universities, high schools, and grammar schools are working to make their curriculum more in line with current technology—but the curve is steep and keeping up is difficult—and part two of this project looks at the educational value of taking advantage of what is available and how that also may be applied to recreational podcast listening. The way we listen, speak, discuss, and learn and what that has to do with podcasting is all here in part two.

Many colleges and universities and even some high schools are beginning to incorporate podcasting and other media into their classrooms in order to engage their students in different ways than traditional teaching modes. It also offers the opportunity to engage with different learning styles since podcasts are such a flexible medium.

Matthew Roberts explains in his essay on podcasting in the classroom:

Providing easy electronic access to lectures offers all students additional opportunities during the regular flow of the course to refine their understanding, reinforce material they struggled with, or correct deficiencies in the notes they took during class.¹

Roberts's idea is nothing new to humanities education. Traditionally, humanities

¹ Roberts, 585.

classes like history, literature, and philosophy have relied on students doing outside information intake and processing it in classroom discussion. This technique is just starting to become popular with other fields of study, and is referred to as “flipping”—since it is the opposite of what is usually done outside the humanities. This discussion on classroom flipping is often science and math-based, in which students listen to a science or math lecture or watch a video, and then work on their homework during class with the instructor acts as a facilitator and advisor during the work time. This decreases the classroom burden on the teacher and increases accountability with students, since the work or discussion is happening with little to no face-to-face interaction. This process is called frontloading—that is—giving students access to resources such as readings, lectures, and activities that stimulate growth and set them up for success when approaching a new topic.

There have been many studies conducted for academic and scientific journals about how podcasts can be used in the classroom. A 2010 study² looked at the different uses of podcasting in the classroom, both as a lecture substitute as well as using podcasts as further supplemental media, just as an instructor could assign outside reading on a subject; they now they have an accessible opportunity to assign outside listening. The major benefit of podcasting for self-directed learners is that it allows both “Educators and learners to time-shift instructional or informational content.”³ Creating space and time to pace the learning process makes it much easier to accommodate differentiation especially for non-traditional students, part-time students, and students

² Walls, 374.

³ Bolliger, 715.

who have jobs, internships, and commutes. It can help students who have trouble focusing or who may have physical or mental disabilities that make getting to class some days more difficult, or allow students with Attention Deficit Disorder to prioritize and modify concentration periods so they do not fall behind in class. Podcasts can also allow students to multi-task. They can listen to their lectures while they work out, while they drive, while they walk to school, or while cooking, on the bus, or just about anywhere. This extends beyond the classroom—all podcasts are so portable and so accessible that it is possible and simple to take them on the go. And, with the most recent results from the Pew Research Center, over 80 percent⁴ of people 18-29 have a smartphone—and over 95 percent of undergraduate and graduate students own a cell phone⁵--making it easy to get them dialed in and connected to a multi-media classroom experience—whereas even five years ago less than half of Americans had an mp3 player, and ten years ago when that number was just 11 percent.⁶

Students can now learn online and at a distance with little or no extra trouble for instructors, and instructors can therefore create material that is accessible to students on their schedule and can fit their learning styles. It can be beneficial to have first hand information rather than students' personal notes,⁷ which may or may not be the most useful studying tool. Being able to revisit the firsthand information at one's leisure is shown in most studies about podcasting to be extremely helpful for students—of course they are only useful if the students listen to them—just as if a student purchases a book

⁴ "Mobile Technology Fact Sheet."

⁵ "College Students and Technology."

⁶ "Americans and Their Gadgets."

⁷ Heilesen, 1065.

and does not read it, it does them no good. Regardless of the available media, there is still a level of interaction that must take place in order for that media to be successful—podcasts are a little more portable than most textbooks, and much easier to produce, create, and add to classroom content, and much cheaper, too.

There are other benefits of podcasting that cannot be found in textbooks or other text-based resources. When instructors make podcasts students can hear their voices, their inflection, and their engagement with the material—and this is true whether it is an instructor creating the material, or if it is a student’s project that is being presented rather than a paper:

When lecturers are podcasting...students say, “we are feeling a sense of warmth and humanity,” and they respond positively. So when we ask students to share their voices, they have an alternative means of expression, and the literature suggests and some of the students, “ comments support the notion that reflection is supported through the verbal as well.... They can listen to the voices and some of the passion in their peers’ voices instead of just reading from a page...⁸

This article, by Dianne Forbes, Elaine Khoo, and Marcia Johnson, is based on their research on using podcasts in the classroom. They go on to explain that podcasting, rather than a written text, can also encompass a student’s natural cadence, accent, confidence, and a multitude of other specific aspects of speech that can engage listeners differently than the same information presented as texts. They write that the “passion” in their voices is a key to listener engagement.

⁸ Forbes, 328.

This idea of “passion” is a key to why I believe podcasting is such a successful medium. Hearing someone’s inflection, tone, sarcasm, laughter, and pitch can not only humanize the information, but make it easier to recall by creating more points of contact to the memory of the information. In her article on aurality and multimodal composing in the classroom, Cynthia Selfe tracks the history of the prominence of writing and the importance of written record in academics with the rise of the availability of paper, then the printing press, the typewriter, and the computer. She believes that it is important to incorporate all modalities of composing as well as intake in order to get the best-lived, fully immersed cultural and social experience. Although Selfe’s article is mainly a criticism of the way that the written word is used in academia at the expense of the spoken word, her thesis and her examples also work well when talking about the democratization of information through dispersal on the Internet. And—how different modes of information intake and output can have different meanings and different purposes. Form and content can oftentimes merge in a way that can be greater than the sum of their parts.

In his critical essay on the marriage of form and content in media, Marshall McLuhan⁹ says,

The idea of how something is presented creates its own specific effects, like the ability to do work when it’s dark because of the medium of electric light, or ever-quickenning speed of life, leisure, and business with the advent of faster and faster means of transportation—regardless of what it carries, the technological

⁹ McLuhan, 129.

innovation is implicated in the effect, regardless of what is actually moved or made.¹⁰

Podcasts provide a marriage of form and content—the way McLuhan points out that there is no escaping the content of the technology from the technology. Part of the effect of podcasting is that it is an incredibly portable auditory medium. Freeing ourselves to cross discourse genres—that is the mode in which the information is presented—makes for a richer experience. Both Selfe and McLuhan make the case for multimodal interactions creating a more vibrant environment and more meaningful interaction than limiting our engagement with media to one mode or another.

Podcasts are a simple, accessible way to convey information. Podcasts can even include power-point slides, pictures, video or a combination of all of those things. It is important to note that podcasts are generally only available to those with no hearing disabilities. However, accessibility advocates Peter Batchelor and Jonathan O'Donnell¹¹ created a website that provides possible solutions for podcasts to become accessible to the hearing impaired audience. They recommend creating a transcript, especially if the podcast is already scripted. More and more, though, podcasts like *Wham Bam Pow!* and *Pop Culture Happy Hour* are comprised of knowledgeable critics riffing on different topics rather than scripted and curated like *This American Life* or any of NASA's podcasts.¹² NASA has podcasts that have available transcripts on the website right next to the download for the audio file, however other podcasts, like those on the Maximum

¹⁰ McLuhan, 129.

¹¹ Batchelor and O'Donnell, n.p.

¹² "NASA Podcasts."

Fun Network do not. Most of the National Public Radio podcasts have thorough descriptions of each episode, and like *Pop Culture Happy Hour* have links to information about what they discussed, but none of the actual discussion. Podcast accessibility is very much up to the content producer. However, since podcasts can include video or images as QuickTime files, it is possible to close caption podcasts for real-time accessibility. Many podcasters make little to no money for their trouble to make a podcast and probably are not concerned about that small subsection of their potential audiences. The website LibriVox¹³ uses volunteers to create audiobooks for books that are public domain, but volunteers to transcribe podcasts are probably a long way off. There is always the option to run a podcast through Google Voice or other digital transcription services, but those are not always reliable. Batchelor and O'Donnell suggest petitioning specific podcasters to close-caption or transcribe their media in order to make it fully accessible, but until podcasting is more lucrative and less niche, then most podcasts will probably stay inaccessible to the hearing impaired.

Although there are obvious limitations to the medium, podcasts can also engage and enhance different kinds of learning styles. Howard Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences posits that every person has different strengths and can learn best by engaging in one of his eight classifications of learning styles in order to access information. Gardner's theory encompasses learning styles like visual learners who learn best by watching and looking, auditory learners who learn best by listening, kinesthetic learners who learn best by doing, or interpersonal learners who learn best by

¹³ "Librivox"

working with others. Leslie Wilson discusses the use of Multiple Intelligence theory in the classroom and how it connects more naturally to the organic process of teaching.

Because MI related techniques are very versatile, they serve as ways to create clearly differentiated or personalized instructional bridges and supportive scaffolds for students having difficulty reaching levels of independent learning. MI techniques help teachers convey the importance of different types of metacognitive functions and help them introduce related types of study skills and mnemonic devices to students. When applied to pupils' individual metacognitive levels, knowledge of MI categories and related methodologies can assist learners in functioning more effectively and independently.¹⁴

Multiple Intelligences are best engaged with authentic learning practices, and many authentic learning practices and student-centered teaching have to do with invoking a wide variety of genre and discourse in order to help students make those important connections. Colleen Ruggieri wrote an article detailing her experience applying authentic practices with Multiple Intelligences in her classroom.¹⁵ She used several kinds of media including songs and comics to help her students draw connections to her Transcendentalism unit—and allowed her students to pick a final project that allowed them to use their strongest Intelligence areas—through art or music, designing and conducting a survey, or planting a garden. Students were also offered the opportunity to self-evaluate, and were very critical of their own work because they were allowed to do their work their way on their own terms. Ruggieri only confirms what is

¹⁴ Wilson, n.p.

¹⁵ Ruggieri, 61.

often assumed intuitively—if there is more information in a larger variety of modes and media there is a better chance everyone will understand. Her results were positive and encouraging, and although she did not use podcasting in her assignments; she did invoke other modes of information intake and output that allowed for more creativity and engagement.

Although the theory of Multiple Intelligences is rather fraught with controversy on whether or not it has cognitive or scientific impacts, most educators would agree that learners all have differing strengths that can be classified into different kinds of learning styles. Teachers and educators work with hundreds of students a day, and no two are alike. Some learn best from visual aids, others from lecture, others from discussion, some from reading, and others from drawing or acting or building. One of the modes of learning discussed in Gardner's work is Auditory—those who benefit best from listening to information. Those who score high on in this category on a Multiple Intelligence test may benefit from extra aural stimulation and may be able to be more successful learning by listening. Those who are kinesthetic may be able to move while listening and may be able to associate the movement with the information. Those who are naturalistic may be able to take the podcast outside with them while they hike or garden—and that may prove successful for them. Although Gardner's theory may not be proved with empirical evidence, he provides useful ways and labels for talking about learning and learning experiences. He also gives us a tool for being able to examine how we enjoy and excel at learning best.

Leigh Jones presents a case study in which she introduced podcasting as an

alternative to writing thesis papers to her secondary students.¹⁶ Her students had, in the past, been more successful with discussions and verbal development of thesis ideas, but had difficulty translating their ideas to the page for their academic writing. By using podcasting, she allowed her students a mode of low-pressure, verbal discourse—and since that was an area of excellence for them, they began producing higher quality finished products with better critical analysis and more depth. It not only allowed students to demonstrate higher-level thinking skills, the multi-media aspect also afforded them the opportunity to put a creative spin on the information to make it more entertaining and accessible.

Jones also indicates that verbal/aural performance is equalizing among different races, classes, sexualities, and genders. Academic writing has long been the territory of the cis straight white man—that the “silent authority of privileged white males characterized academic writing.”¹⁷ Jones extrapolates this point from Cynthia Selfe’s article on auralty. This stems from Selfe’s observation about how writing and reading began to take precedent over speaking skills with the wider availability of means to print; however, she explains that this came at a cost of narrowing the printed material to those who held the power to print and distribute.¹⁸ Selfe’s thesis and claims in her article give a brief overview of the emphasis higher education, especially American higher education, gave on writing. She talks about phasing out oral discussion—the advent of the scientific method and carefully written, documented information and how it is the

¹⁶ Jones, 76.

¹⁷ Jones, 80.

¹⁸ Selfe, 623-5.

main mode for academic discourse. Since education was available only to the mostly male, affluent, white folks while the current school models were being developed; the written word became a tool of oppression as well as a tool of expression. Those who were not in the position to manipulate the written word turned to other forms of communication, and those forms were often oral, in the form of stories, songs, and ceremonies that subverted the institutional authority.¹⁹ Although her thesis is to show value in the aural tradition, she is looking to expand the modes of composition rather than replace one with another.

Selfe then notes that there was a connection between aurality and “lived experience.”²⁰ Her thesis is rooted in the notion that prioritizing one form of composition over another is limiting—for educators and for students.²¹ She even calls herself out for writing a paper in praise of aurality and provides links to her “sound essays” that she believes illustrates her point further. Her examples are instructors who use popular music, television clips, and radio broadcasts in order to create a more dynamic picture of the history of the Cold War that their students were studying—even though this was not the main focus, because popular culture was often regarded as “philistine culture.”²² She and other instructors used multi-modal engagement to breathe life into topics and to create a more real and memorable experience for their students. She gives examples of instructors who thought too much light and noise—like music or video--was distracting for students—distracting away from the written texts that should be the

¹⁹ Selfe 622-3.

²⁰ Selfe, 631.

²¹ Selfe, 618.

²² Selfe, 631.

primary mode of studying. However, Selfe then gives the example of students receiving verbal, recorded feedback from their instructors about their written assignments—how listening to an actual voice with tone, context, and emphasis made corrections clearer and more engaging for students rather than written feedback.²³ Selfe makes a lot of good points in her article, but most of them build toward a larger, inclusive view of how multi-modal learning and multiple genres of discourse can create a richer and more diverse pictures of the world.

These oral traditions and modes of aurality have just as much history and culture to offer as things that are written down, it is just harder to be able to keep them without memorizing them—which is why digital culture is completely altering the way that we can interact with history and cultures that are unfamiliar to our own. There's a lot of talk in educational fields about authenticity and making the learning experience one that is authentic to the students' own experiences. Oral culture and oral traditions are parts of all cultures to some degree—many K-12 students here in Alaska come from a strong oral tradition of the Native Alaskan cultures. They have cultural capital invested in oral traditions and oral storytelling. Being able to interact with them on that level can open up new modes of learning and discourse. Looking to their own experience and helping them learn and create through that voice is helping them be better students and better citizens—and educators and community members being able to experience that shift can change the outlook for what school, learning, and community can be. Buying into the students' participatory culture is one way of creating that authentic connection. More

²³ Selfe, 633.

globally, producers of media buy in to consumer's own participatory culture and come find us where we live. Wait—that sounds scary. Well, it is and it is not. The creation of media that we interact with allows us to participate, but comfortably and on our own terms. One of the best things about online media is the ability to step outside our own comfort zones and look and see what other people do and think. The great thing about podcasts is that not only is there interaction with those opinions and those worldviews, but there is exposure to the actual voice, and that extra layer of intimacy can form a bond. Being exposed to viewpoints that are not our own or our family's or our friends' can help us become better citizens and better thinkers, whether that opinion is political, social, or about re-watching the entire series of *Friends* now that it is on Netflix.

Back in Leigh Jones's classroom, she puts that theory into action. Instead of the student writing a paper in a learner's role, Jones's students were able to present their research and analysis to their classmates and their instructor as an authority. Jones's article focuses quite a bit on the performativity of the speech act and how embodying that dynamic and embracing that performance can instill a confidence in a learner that will allow them to fully express their authority on the topic. She says,

Through their performance of an authoritative role, students were able to practice asserting themselves actively in the class. Rather than perpetuating the traditional discursive exchange between the students and the instructor, the podcasting performance disrupted the space of the class and made us all audience members. Along with this shift in authority, there was also an element of creative ownership, or perhaps even subversion, which took place during the

podcasting assignment. ... They interpreted the performance in new, productive ways, assuming creative authority over their projects.²⁴

Because of the flexibility Jones gave her students with their podcasting project, many students explored different modes, which offered them new rhetorical situations. Two of her students created a podcast that took the form of a gun control debate, with each student pretending to be a guest on a news program. By engaging with these roles, the students used discourse to inhabit familiar sensibilities that allowed them to fully engage with the material, and come to a greater understanding through that rhetorical situation.

Jones successfully incorporated podcasting as discourse in her class. However, most podcast consumers aren't listening to podcasts in classroom—nor are they creating podcasts. Most podcast consumers are listening to podcasts for information, for commentary, for insight, and for fun. However, most podcasts still rely on those principles that Jones teases out in her article—the act of discourse and the process of talking through and about ideas make them more accessible and creates a deeper understanding of the content. Podcast consumers also respond to the multi-modal discourse provided by different traditions—hearing voices that come from different places and perspectives can create a more dynamic experience and broaden horizons. By inhabiting the position of a participant in the conversation, either by creating a podcast or listening to one, podcast listeners are opening themselves up to a deeper and more meaningful understanding of the world around them through the participation in this rhetorical situation.

²⁴ Jones, 81.

Aurality, and through aurality, podcasts are also a useful way to look at discourse genres. In a 2011 article on using popular culture as a teaching tool, Adam Lefstien and Julia Snell examine and build a critical theory of genre and discourse registers—they dismiss the notion that genres, especially in regard to modes of discourse are hard and fast.²⁵ They explore the ideas of using different methods of engagement when functioning in different social spheres—how modes of discourse change based on context. Combining registers and framing different kinds of discourse as participating rather than belonging to a genre makes the information more accessible. That is, engaging with an audience in a register of discourse in which they are comfortable can make the information more accessible and can give the audience more agency and authority over the information provided, regardless of the register it is delivered in.

They also talk about the idea of “high” culture versus “popular culture” and examine models of those two ideas being at odds—but propose a “hybrid, third-space”²⁶ culture in which the more rigid, ideological and political discourse genres can be combined with the audiences’ “habitus”—meet them where they live and combine the information and the value systems, and deliver it in a mode that is more native and familiar to the audience. Although this article is referring specifically to students learning in a classroom setting, there is application of this framework to the work that podcasts are doing. And, like we discussed in part one of this project, we know that trying to classify taste in culture is pretty useless, but learning to allow the discourse to function in multiple registers—by juxtaposing information that appears in one register with a

²⁵ Lefstein, 41.

²⁶ Lefstien, 43.

discourse style that is in another register—we can create that hybrid space where connections can be drawn and meaning can be created.

The way this information is presented in the article—using multimodal discourse on a variety of registers in order to find something that is more familiar to the student—is the same thing that a lot of critics, especially the critics that we are discussing here, do for their audiences. By making the listener feel comfortable with the discourse register as well as comfortable with the discourse context, there can be real “authentic” learning connections. If we are presented with information in a way that is comfortable and disarming then we are more likely to engage with that discourse. We are more likely to learn and understand if information is presented in a way that we get, like, and understand. Many of the culture-critiquing podcasters aren’t making podcasts so they can be boring and dry; podcasts are meant to entertain—but using a discourse register that is colloquial can bridge a gap when they are exploring more complicated ideas.

Also, genre and discourse registers can be applied to the medium of podcasting itself. If there is only one method of intake, we are not engaging with all the registers of information intake and could be missing valuable interfacing with different modes of media. Media intake, now, is rarely single-genre—news stories come with photos, videos with sound and so on—podcasting is another genre that can stimulate and reach for those who are auditory learners, those who are visually impaired—or can even just break the monotony of looking at a screen. Podcasts can allow us the freedom to enjoy culture, listen to news, weather, instructions, stories, or comedy without being tied, visually, to anything. Engaging with those other genres and modes of discourse can

create a greater variety for us as consumers and can reach us in new places, too.

Podcasts, especially those that engage critically with popular culture, can seem extra-ephemeral—taking a critical peek at something so fleeting can seem pointless. However, in podcasts like National Public Radio's *Pop Culture Happy Hour*, or Maximum Fun's *Wham Bam Pow!*, or WBEZ Chicago's *Nerdette*, the idea of exploring the zeitgeist of a new film (or an old film) a new internet meme, or a new TV show with the same critical gravitas often reserved for graduate-level academia shows that flexing the critical muscle—using the critical tools and applying them to a variety of media in a variety of modes—makes listeners stronger thinkers. It is an engaging and almost naughty prospect of using an academic critical sensibility and applying it to a Beyoncé song; however, there is a deeper level of enjoyment a listener or consumer can get out of a cultural artifact when looking at it through a different lens. Podcast producers, specifically the aforementioned podcast producers are sharp-eyed, often sharp-tongued critics that possess a wealth of background in popular culture, and have identifiable sensibilities that can produce new meaning out of seemingly one-dimensional material. These podcast producers are doing a lot of what the instructors who use podcasts do; they are taking information that may be inaccessible because of its discourse register and changing it so that it is pleasurable, accessible and engaging.

Almost all of the scientific and educational articles about podcasting come to the same point: podcasts are another effective and useful tool for classrooms to utilize. Just like any other tool, it works well if used correctly, and if unused, it is not going to work, because it is unused. Some people benefit from audio information, and some people

prefer to read and write. However, it is true that listening to lived experiences, stories, opinions, and information when spoken by a real, live person makes the information more interesting and more relatable because we can hear the passion, inflection, and history in a voice.

Podcasts can reach listeners in a lot of ways in a lot of places. They are a way to keep oral traditions the way they were meant to be appreciated and can add a new dimension to learning and composing. Reaching an audience in a different mode in a different kind of discourse is a way to be able to bridge gaps in understanding and make meaning by forging new connections through different modalities. Podcasts are simply another media, another platform that can be used to create, listen and understand.

This is the end of part two. Part three will be a critical “close listening” of several different podcasts that engage with popular media and through that engagement, come to solid critical conclusions. Using multiple discourse genres, the podcasters are able to draw complex conclusions and introduce important critical thought by using more common discourse structures and humor. Many of the podcasts feature multiple voices that are outside the traditional academic sphere and come from backgrounds that have not always been traditionally valued—and their voices, their literal, actual voices, contributing to complex discussions makes for varied and exciting discussions.

Thanks for listening. See you in part three.

Part 3: Podcasts and Critical Theory

The third and final part of this project explores three different popular culture podcasts and how they engage with academic critical thought. We know now that talking aloud can be beneficial for learning, and we know that talking about popular culture does not make us dumber, as long as we can still step back from it and assess it with a critical eye. We know that passion and inflection can help us remember and identify with information. We know that there is no such thing as good taste or bad taste. We know that the job of the critic is to cull, and we know that podcasts are a great medium to learn and explore different points of view.

This final section is an application of the critical mindset that is explored in parts one and two of this project. When we listen to podcasts, we learn. As we learn to be critical we learn a value system that we can apply to other media. The beginning of this third part is a exploration of criticism and what follows are a few podcast examples that display that criticism in action. Many times, these value systems, or sensibilities can be applied universally to all kinds of media. We will discover here a small portion of what we can learn from podcasts. I have tried to curate a segment of podcasts that are informative, relevant, and engaging, as well as a cross-section of sensibilities and avenues to talk about media and be critical of media. It is by no means comprehensive, but rather a primer for podcast listeners hoping to learn more about media criticism from a variety of voices. Although there are many avenues that pursue critical ends, this discussion will be focused on science fiction criticism because it is a relatively transparent genre that allows for socio political interpretation, as well as allowing for

important critical distance.

According to Marshall B. Tymn science fiction is enjoyed and appreciated because it, “prepares us to accept change, to view change as both natural and inevitable.”¹ Accepting new avenues to information, from the Internet, from pop culture, from podcasting, is the same process as taking in ideas of science fiction. We speculate about the future so it does not seem so scary. We speculate about the best possible future and the worst possible future to make the regular future less intimidating. The interaction with technology in our lives is similar to how we approach it in films, books, and television. In an article on using film and television in education, Andrzej Huczynski and David Buchanan say,

It has long been recognized that film is a powerful tool for illustrating topics and concepts and for demonstrating the application of theory, providing a source of pedagogical material more stimulating and motivating than conventional methods²

This article focuses on the educational application of film, but it also widens its scope to the availability of media in the Internet age. Films that use science fiction metaphors are an object lesson in criticism. Doubling them with the discussion and conclusions drawn in a podcast make them a meaningful exercise in criticism.

The first podcast is about the *Terminator* films, and the second is a conversation about alien movies in general. Cameron Esposito, who hosts her own podcast on the Maximum Fun network called *Wham Bam Pow!*, is a stand up comedian who espouses

¹ Tymn, 41.

² Huczynski and Buchanan, 708.

intersectional feminist critical thought as well as queer theory in her sensibilities. Her focus though, and the focus of her podcasts are science fiction and action movies and how popular culture reflects critical worldviews and vice versa. She doesn't spend a lot of time unpacking her viewpoints in a critical context, but has a knack for getting to the root of the critical message and laying it out in plain terms.

She gave a critique of the *Terminator* films on the October 21, 2014 edition of the *Nerdette* podcast³ that allowed her to riff on her love of the *Terminator* films, most specifically the way that we interact with technology and how that is reflected in the films.

I don't know if you've ever seen any of the *Terminator* films, but they are my favorite movies. The *Terminator* films really cover our interaction with computers throughout our entire time of talking to them. The first *Terminator* movie is really amazing because it happened right at the beginning of the Internet. (Clip from film) And if you noticed in this movie, there's a dance club called "Tech Noir." And that's because this movie was at a time when we didn't know what the Internet would be. And we were like; maybe it could be a dance club. I love that about that movie. It's a great interaction with robots and how they are going to be in our lives. Let's take *Terminator 2*. (Clip from movie) It's even more interesting because now the robots can change and shape shift and be in our lives in a different way... now that's kind of what happened—we have tiny robots we carry around in our pockets with us, but also this movie includes a lot of computer

³ Esposito, 21 Oct. 2014.

animation and the facial morphing technology that they use in this movie at the time had only ever been used in Michael Jackson's "Black and White" video. So it's this moment when we're re-introducing to these people what computers can do for movies. And now, if you see an action movie now, so much of it is digital effects. But they still are using practical effects in a lot of this movie. But that's another thing I love about it. When there's two Sarah Connors onscreen, that's because Linda Hamilton just has a twin sister, and she's a schoolteacher, so she took time off to learn how to do a one-arm shotgun re-load. And *Terminator 3* is the first instance of a female terminator, and I think that also reflects what was happening for women in film. (Clip from film) You know, Sarah Connor is such a tough character—she really trained in *Terminator 2* to get her bod back in shape after having a baby and her arms are really developed, and that's the first time we really got to see a woman work out for a film role. ...

The *Terminator* films are a series created by James Cameron. They are about time-travelling robots sent from the future to destroy John Connor—the leader of the human resistance against the robot uprising. The robot is sent far enough back in time to kill John Connor's mother before he is conceived. The first film⁴ takes place in 1984 and carries out pretty traditional gender roles: the male robot played by Arnold Schwarzenegger, tracks Sarah Connor, played by Linda Hamilton. She plays a cliché damsel in distress who is rescued by a man sent back in time to save her from the

⁴ *Terminator*, 1984.

robot. However, in *Terminator 2*, the narrative completely changes.⁵ The Sarah Connor character is in a mental hospital for trying to blow up computer factories—because no one believes her claim about the impending robot apocalypse, and her son, now a teenager, is a maladjusted kid bouncing in and out of foster care. Sarah Connor has become the action hero and is trying to save the world. The physicality of the role of Sarah Connor and how that shifts between the films is one of the starkest contrasts on film—in the first movie she is fashionable, with big eighties hair, round cheeks, and doe eyes. We see her as a romantic lead where she is led to safety and meets the man who fathers her child. Even at the end of the film, she is maternal, in a dress, writing a letter to her unborn son. In contrast, the first we see of her in the second film is her muscle-bound arms as she does chin-ups on an up-ended bed in the mental hospital, right before her dramatic escape to find her son. She is lean, and angry, all angles and bristling with rage and assault rifles. She subverts the expectation of gender, and subverts the expectation of her role—in the first movie she is passive and the action happens to her. In the second film she is active, a hero, however the price of her being the active party makes her sexless and mentally unstable—the price of being an action hero that is subverting the narrative of what a hero or heroine can be.

In her paper on gendered heroism, Sara Buttsworth calls out the double standard for women in heroic roles—specifically focusing on the parallels between the narrative of Private First Class Jessica Lynch’s very real capture during the Iraq War in 2003 and the fictional narrative of Buffy Summers fighting as the Vampire Slayer in the fictional

⁵ *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, 1991.

televised world of demon-infested Sunnydale, California. She spells out the double standard for women in heroic roles and how they themselves are demonized, shown as subverting expectations of society, and often punished with unhappiness or death for daring to challenge the heroic narrative. She also weaves in the narrative of Sarah Connor and the *Terminator* films to broaden the scope of her analysis—especially in regard to how the Sarah Connor character’s feminine qualities are downplayed in favor of playing her as a more masculine or genderless hero. However, the reason she is fighting killer robots in the first place is because of her status as mother—which is hard to reconcile with the vision of the action hero (or heroine.)

Esposito also discussed these films on her own podcast with co-hosts Rhea Butcher and Ricky Carmona.⁶ They all bring up points that also appear in Buttsworth’s discussion of female heroism, specifically points about motherhood.

CE What is interesting about this movie is all the characters are complex. Linda Hamilton’s ... Sarah Conner is a great mother because she’s protecting her son, but she’s also a really bad mother. She’s a great mother and a really bad mother. John Conner is like, the future of the resistance and is also the most annoying person on the planet. Arnold, the Terminator himself, is like, a murdering robot who, when he finds out he shouldn’t actually murder people just shoots them in the knees instead... And then, the whole movie is about, Can we trust machines? But it’s a movie where James Cameron used machines to make it, and obviously at the end, a machine saves them from the other machine.

⁶ Esposito, et al. 10 Apr. 2013.

Rhea Butcher: She's the best female character. Her and Ripley, are like, it. She's she's actually a strong female character that makes sense in the world she's living in. Like she's a mom, and she wants to protect her son at any cost. She's also mad at men, because they don't understand. They don't ever make life, so they just want to kill it. So she just wants to kill everyone to save everyone. And I mean, with great responsibility comes great biceps.

Esposito's read of the Sarah Connor character also evolves into how the character is positioned in culture, and also how the character can be read problematically in regard to the aspect of motherhood. Femininity and motherhood are two of the main issues that Sara Buttsworth talks about—and she refers to the Sarah Connor character specifically. Buttsworth talks about the parallels of Sarah Connor's character and the narrative of the first Gulf War. Sarah Connor was representing this new iteration of soldier—for the first time in U.S. combat history, women were recognized as combat soldiers, but the narrative of a woman soldier was still unevolved, so the narrative became that she was no different than a male soldier—that she could be just a soldier—and there is nothing besides her motherhood that is still attaching her to her gender. This idea of attaching motherhood to the concept of a soldier was something that was also being broadcast as part of the first Gulf War—playing up traditional themes of femininity and heterosexuality for the female soldiers in the war.⁷ Sarah Connor's only connection to her femininity is her son, and as a mother she is not nurturing or kind. Her only goal is to prevent the robots from taking over the world—and

⁷ Buttsworth, 51.

that comes at the expense of her gender expression. What Esposito and Butcher argue in the podcast is that this is a great representation of how a role can be played by either a man or a woman—that there is the ultimate equality of the sexes in that role.

However, Buttsworth argues that that sexlessness is still showing heroic women as the subversion of the norm. Even though these viewpoints may be at odds, the discourse that Butcher and Esposito are having is still as critically relevant as Buttsworth's article. All three of them are making a case for a character that is divisive—both points are valid, however. Buttsworth's point comes from the thesis that powerful women are inhibited from gender expression, especially hyper-feminine gender expression and are maligned or considered outliers if they are seen as both. Esposito and Butcher's critique can be seen as an expression of their own view of gender, which they discuss on their program and in their comedy and social media—which they view as a spectrum of different iterations of what a woman can and cannot be. The idea that Sarah Connor is not overly feminine does not detract from the fact that she is a woman and is a mother. The register and tone that they use in regard to Sarah Connor is generally awestruck—it is in their voices—they are taken with her physicality and impressed by the filmmaker's willingness to portray of a woman who isn't redeemed at the end of her story, but is not killed off or committed to the mental hospital again—the ending is nebulous. She overcomes her subversion, but not her mistakes.

In Esposito's review she not only discusses the evolution of women's roles in film and the evolution of the expectation of what a hero can be, but she also provides meta commentary on the technology of the film interacts with the technology in the film. The

movie magic technology developments mirrored the development of the technology in the myth of the film. In the first film, there are lots of explosions, and practical effects, but in the second film, there is much more frightening robot that is made of liquid metal—who moves like and appears to be a human—who can actually shape shift into any human it encounters. What Esposito gets at in her review is the reflection of how society—when this movie was made in 1991—was unsure how to let technology become a part of their lives. They weren't sure how to integrate it, and integrating it too far was a frightening prospect, and although *Terminator 2* is 25 years old now, it is still a fear and a struggle that we have in film and in life. She ends her review on the *Nerdette* podcast thusly:

And just understand that as humans we're always trying to figure out how we're going to interact with the world around us. Things that scare us the most are things that come out in action/sci-fi movies. We literally fight them. And I think that the biggest fight that we are having right now as humans is technology—we're not sure how it's going to interact with our world. So check those movies out.⁸

This kind of verbal exploration allows creators to build up an idea as though they are sharing it with friends. Without a filter or an editor, podcasters are allowed to work through ideas verbally in a conversational style that creates a comforting environment for the listener. Instead of a didactic approach about the implications of technology, Esposito hints at deeper currents that can be picked up and parsed through with a

⁸ Esposito, 21 Oct. 2014.

critical eye, but can also be passed over. It is also conversational enough and full of enough unanswered questions that this segment could be used to spark debate. Listening to her inflection and tone, it is easy to remember what she is talking about, and listening to her enthusiasm creates excitement about watching those films and watching for the dance club, and watching for the one-armed shotgun reload. The level of her engagement clues us in on what is important to her in a film, and gives us signals to look for not only in these films, but something to look for in other films, too. Esposito is touching on important aspects of science fiction criticism, because she is, herself, a science fiction critic—however she is leaving the legwork to the listener.

The points that she brings up—the idea of science fiction mirroring struggles that we, as a society have—is an accepted fact of science fiction criticism. In his essay, “Science Fiction and the Future of Criticism” Eric S. Rabkin posits that science fiction is even larger than a genre; it is a system. He says, “Science fiction is quite naturally the most influential cultural system in a time like ours, in which dominant technological change constantly provokes hope, fear, guilt, and glory.”⁹ Esposito’s review of *Terminator* engages with all the elements of science fiction—what we have (tiny robots in our pockets) versus what we expected to have—an Internet that is also a dance club? Esposito breaks down the meat of what a science fiction film is and how it is reflected in modern society. She rightfully claims we make futuristic films to reflect fears and doubts we have about the uncertainty of what will come. She extrapolates on the role of women in film and gives the listener something to think about—Linda Hamilton’s biceps,

⁹ Rabkin, 462.

mostly—but what they stand for in the history of popular culture and the role of women and the role of the hero and how those two do not have to be mutually exclusive.

The sensibilities that Esposito, Butcher, and Carmoda espouse on their program and what they do through movie reviews on their podcasts are what forms an idea of their priorities. It is a priority for them to see women in large roles, it is a priority for them to see queer¹⁰ representation, and it is a priority for them to see people of color represented in film. They often prepare to be disappointed by the representation or portrayals, especially in older films, because it's hard for queer people or people of color, or women to see themselves in characters that do not represent their experiences or priorities.

When Cameron Esposito tosses off a quick review of *Terminator* and discusses how it reflects on the interaction of humanity with technology, she is opening the door for us to discover this world of criticism, even as she does so blithely. What she alludes to is a standard trope of writing humankind versus technology. She clarifies by showing the lens or viewpoint that we, as consumers of media, look how the movie screen is reflected back on us—as our hopes and fears about the world around us. She does it in a manner that is fun, short, and to the point—learning in bite-sized chunks that can be expanded into fuller discussions is part of the podcasting experience.

Another example of podcasts interacting with science fiction is a great critical breakdown of the medium in an episode of *Pop Culture Happy Hour*, in which the hosts break down a taxonomy of what alien movies mean in relationship to socio-political

¹⁰ When I use the word queer, I use it as synecdoche for LGBTQ representation.

fears. In the episode, “An Exploration of Strange Creatures,”¹¹ the panel discusses how aliens are viewed in different forms of media and how they fit in with the broader scope of culture. So if we recall, Marshall Tymn said that science fiction shows us how we can change. This conversation ekes out the ways in which science fiction—specifically films about aliens—show us our fears and how to change to survive them.

LH: But I do like the occasional extra-terrestrial film, so that’s what I thought we’d talk about this week. So the first thing that came to my mind when we were trying to formulate this topic is that you have of course, in your alien universe, you have your sort of menacing aliens...

GH: Your hostiles

LH: Your hostiles

TG: There’s a taxonomy of aliens. There are aliens who are lost, aliens who are here to help us,

LH: Right

TG: Aliens who are here to eat us

LH: Right

TG: and there are aliens who appear to be here to help us, but are really here to eat us.

LH: And I would argue...

ST: And also the misunderstood

TG: but that’s aliens who are lost

¹¹ Holmes, et al., 8 June 2012.

LH: but I would argue that there are aliens who are who would be here to live peacefully, but because of the way we treat them...

ST: Oh, man

LH: ... then they decide to eat us.

TG: that is true.

LH: There are aliens that are just... wounded creatures. See *District 9*.

GW: I have a different... (indistinguishable) taxonomy. I broke it down to hostiles, friendlies, and indifferents. And I find myself more drawn to the indifferents...

LH: I'm shocked.

GW: The universe is a vast, busy place where we are but insignificant specks and the universe won't care when we go on—that is a very comforting thought to me.

LH: Give me an example of indifferents.

GW: Well, I always go back to the Volgons from *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. It's not necessarily evil—they're bureaucrats—they come along to destroy the planet Earth to make way for a hyperspace bypass. The fact that they don't care and the story starts with the destruction of Earth—this story always kind of jibbed with me. It's a fact that they torture their prisoners by reading them their bad poetry—as someone who taught high school creative writing—also really jibbed with me. The other one—we can't really get away without talking about in this segment, of course, is Marvin the Martian—another shout-out to a WB

character—because again, he is indifferent—he is (Marvin the Martian impression) “destroying the Earth because it is obstructing my view of Venus.” So again...

LH: filled with delight

GW: we’re talking about hostiles versus friendlies. Your classic would be E.T., of course, as a friendly,

LH: Right

GW: Someone who is lost, as Trey mentioned,

LH: But see, my argument is if E.T. stayed around, he would just get mad, grow into a surly teenager, and eventually turn on us.

GW: I ... I can’t argue with that premise.

TG: I want to see that sequel, actually.

LH: If you had been treated as he had been treated, wouldn’t you be angry?

TG: Stuffed into a closet with other stuffed animals?

ST: If we’re going to devise a taxonomy, I think we also need to figure out what the respective metaphors are. Because when you’re talking about the bureaucrats in Hitchhiker’s guide to the galaxy, part of what’s being said is that all living things are fundamentally petty in some way.

LH: Sure.

ST: And you know, Marvin the Martian blowing up Earth to improve his view, there are certainly things being said about the parallels to humanity. And I think when you’re talking about hostiles and friendlies; you know a lot of it is designed

to show some sort of commentary obviously on humanity

GW: Right

ST: So the mindset that is going in to each of those taxonomies is clearly saying something about humanity.

LH: Yeah

ST: and I think the fact that you favor the indifference, you know I kind of, as I'm looking at things like *Contact*

GW: sure

ST: Where the aliens have something to teach us, and the other thing...

GW: And 2001

ST: And 2001. And the thing about *Contact* is that it has a very... warm message to impart out. While humanity behaves in incredibly petty ways in that movie and she's kind of up against this unthinking, unfeeling bureaucracy ... blah blah blah, and they're keeping her from learning how to love, you know, I, as a liker of people, tend to be a fan, of, you know, the aliens, and sort of, thus, the universe at large is a friendly and warm place.

GW: So what do you think of *Close Encounters*? So technically, that's a friendly, right? Where they come down, and everyone's so happy, but they kidnapped HUNDREDS of people, and then at the end, there's music and everyone is crying and having that weird, creepy finger sex, and we're supposed to forgive them for kidnapping all of these people!

ST: They're new here!

LH: They don't know that's not how we do it.

LH: Here's the thing, I agree with Stephen, what is really interesting about the way we present aliens is what the underlying idea of how we relate to them is.

When I see the ones that have the hostiles, you know, like *Independence Day* or stuff like that, where it's very much a battle,

ST: setting up... setting the table for war.

LH: Because I believe it's a curious idea, people who believe that sort of if there are beings on other planets, they would be bent on annihilating us. For kind of no reason. And I always feel like, the place where that idea is born is that those are the people who feel like that's what WE should do.

GW: Yeah

ST: Yeah

LH: When somebody is saying like, this is how I believe this person THINKS, right?

GW: Right

LH: This is how I think aliens THINK

ST: Well I think it's an incredibly xenophobic mindset.

LH: Right? It's just somebody saying this is what I would do. So it's sort of what they project on the aliens is what the aliens do. So to me, the idea of the hostile alien is borne of a very hostile attitude yourself towards an external towards

ST: Immigrants

LH: What is external is to be battled and stuff like that.

TG: Or what is in the way in a resource-grab is to be annihilated.

LH: Sure.

GW: There's a jingoistic aspect to these Independence Days—we all build, we all join together—I would argue that more positive things about humanity—all joining together to fight these aliens—then in a lot of these so-called friendly aliens we have to hide this cute alien from humanity because humanity is

ST: Not ready

LH: Exploitive,

GW: fearful, grasping. There's a very anti-humanist in things like *E.T.* where the government is

LH: *Super 8* was the same way.

GW: And that's a mainstay. That precedes *E.T.* I mean, that's the basic premise of *My Favorite Martian* and other shows of that time.

LH: *Twilight*--

ST: *Frankenstein*

LH: *Twilight Zone* would do stuff like that too.

GW: Sure.

LH: Although they could also have the hostiles like in "To Serve Man." You know, when we talk about *Twilight Zone* and we talk about the birth of science fiction in popular culture, such a big period in that was the same period as anti-communism, and stuff like that, and I think that for a lot of people...

ST: And the communists were in space

LH: And a lot of these stories

ST: Space is very fraught.

TG: And it goes back much earlier than that. The first great science fiction story by HG Welles, *War of the Worlds*, right

LH: Right. That's what I'm saying, it was one of the periods of growth, not the origin of these stories, I'm saying it's one of these times when you have lots of stories about hostile aliens.

TG: In fact, I read something about this when I was poking around thinking about this today, HG Welles was inspired by a genre of literature that was called "invasion lit" and it was, was novels and stories about a "Sleeping England" being invaded by some European country, often Germany, and he sort of took that to another level.

LH: I realize that sounds a little bit facile, but I do think that very little of what we write and what we create about aliens is really about aliens, just because our information is so limited, such a blank slate, what you see with *Alien* is an exploitation, even though it's about extra-terrestrials, you're seeing exploitation, a basic fear, about your bodily integrity...

ST: Fear of disease

GW: *The Thing*, also,

LH: Fear of disease, exactly. With *Alien*, it's fear of bodily invasion and without giving anything away about *Prometheus*, that is certainly a continuing theme in *Prometheus*, that real... sort of... eyeball stuff

ST: You know it has cousins in zombies, you know, werewolves and zombies, we've talked about that kind of stuff, that zombies sort of have the thing of it is your body and you can't control it, that that's a terrifying thing.

TG: That's a big ol' trope in alien movies, like *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*...

LH: Right, and that's another kind of alien that I wanted to mention is the idea of an alien that you can't tell is an alien—a lot of these aliens are like the thing, the humanoid that has the big head, the tail, or the ET fingers or whatever, but there's another entire type of alien that, including, frankly, Superman,

GW: Absolutely

LH: Where you can't actually tell that it's an alien—this is the same way—it's an alien hiding in plain sight.

ST: And talk about a xenophobic mindset—that now we should be afraid of ourselves, and I think that, I think it was Glen, made a very interesting point earlier I was kinda talking about how I prefer the touchy-feely version of aliens, but ultimately, when you have touchy-feely aliens, it really almost always is in the service of—the enemy is actually us. We're the aliens! We're the bad guys.

This mode of discourse is one of the reasons that this show is so successful.

Each host comes with notes on the subject, but then, on the program they bring their notes together to bounce ideas off one another and to come with better conclusions than they would have come up with on their own. This is a model for a great podcast for collaboration, and it is also a model for how this mode of discourse can work out a critical thinking problem. This conversation is full of abrupt stops, full turns, people

finishing one another's sentences. There are rarely right answers, but the conversation evolves. The *Pop Culture Happy Hour* panel talks about a lot of films here—some of them are frightening, some funny, some inspiring, but they all talk about how these films have an impact outside of their genre and stand in for a greater socio-political message—especially in regard to fears—fears of surrendering our country to invasion, surrendering our bodies to invasion, or, in a few of these examples, finding out that life is completely meaningless because we, as humans, are at the bottom of the food chain.

In their article on the evolution of science fiction as told through the process of remaking films, Michael Katovich and Patrick Kinkade talk about the evolution of science fiction as a reaction to the way society, specifically American society perceives threats.¹² They comb through the history of science fiction films and talk about the evolution of the storylines—how in the 1950s and 1960s the threat and the portrayal of the threat was most often external—with the threat coming from another place and being completely Other—with a capital O. The 1970s and 1980s saw the threat become more internalized—the aliens look like us, the aliens can become us, or the aliens can infect or inhabit us, and finally in the 1990s and 2000s the movies become a question of our own humanity. Are we the aliens? Have we been the monsters all along? Parallel to this idea is the counter point—do we matter at all? Are we important, or are we so insignificant that our existence is expendable?

These fears directly reflect the socio-political landscape of those eras—especially in America, where Katovich and Kinkade create a taxonomy of their own: American eras

¹² Katovich and Kinkade, 620.

that are reflected in science fiction. Using the end of World War II as their earliest citation, they talk about the Cold War, the period after the Vietnam Conflict, the period after Watergate and President Nixon's resignation, and post-AIDS crisis as the general turnover points in science fiction and narrative eras.¹³ In the conversation on the podcast, the taxonomy is reflective of these eras, and also reflective of the fears of the eras. When Trey Graham mentions "invasion literature" he is talking about a specific literary movement that was a direct result of England's colonial mindset in the nineteenth century. England's power was so vast and so widespread—they began worrying that if they could take over countries so easily, that maybe their small country could be taken over easily, especially by the other mounting European powers. As England's power started to fade in the early part of the twentieth century, England was on the brink of war—it was a fear, but it was a founded fear. The invasion literature became a real reflection of the fears of the time—especially in light of both World Wars. The Cold War era, then, with the paralytic standstill of both American and Soviet governments sent imaginations spiraling into the worst possible scenarios—the fear of the known coupled with the unknown power of the USSR and the advent of nuclear warfare was enough to create a significant fear of the Other. Science fiction of the fifties and early sixties played into that idea that something terrible was going to happen, and even though it was veiled behind giant aliens or giant ant aliens—it was still that fear of the unknown coming and doing irrevocable damage—and that's what Stephen Thompson is talking about when he invokes the "xenophobic mindset." When there is an

¹³ Katovich and Kinkade, 621.

outward fear of something real, the human mind begins to speculate about the worst possible scenario, and movies about aliens are often direct metaphors that parallel those fears.

This simultaneously xenophobic and jingoistic mindset that was embedded in American society during the Cold War is similar to the one that happened directly after the first Gulf War—and after 9/11—especially in regard to aliens needing our planet to survive—utilizing our resources. The narrative shifts, too, especially with films like *Independence Day*,¹⁴ in which the aliens are specifically targeting us in order to use our planet since they destroyed their own. The movies like this transition the threat into a more liminal zone—it makes us ask ourselves how we are treating the planet—do we deserve to have it taken from us? *Independence Day* is specifically interesting because the only people who can save us are scientist and a pilot working together—the marriage of hard data and military operations.

In the conversation on *Pop Culture Happy Hour* regarding alien films, Glen Weldon refers to *Independence Day* as jingoistic. The combination of the United States of that first Gulf War was not enough to assuage the public's fears that we would either be attacked or have to attack in order to maintain our resources—in this case, a metaphor for fossil fuels—but also for American exceptionalism and the combination of the brawn—the fearless fighter pilot family man played by Will Smith, and the brains, the nerdy, inward, neurotic Jeff Goldblum made for the perfect combination of American stereotypes Smith's jock and Goldblum's nerd and Americans banding together in times

¹⁴ *Independence Day*, 1996.

of need. This combination is a classic example of the ideology of science and muscle working in tandem to push forward the idea of the American Dream.¹⁵ Much of the American science fiction written between 1980 and 2000 was an example of some permutation of Americans colonizing or a reaction to aliens' attempt to colonize America.¹⁶

Finally, their conversation turns to how disease becomes a fear and the fear of bodily invasion by something unwanted and something that cannot be resolved without death. The chest-bursting alien progeny in the movie *Alien* is perhaps the most visceral example of this kind of fear, but other alien films like *The Thing*—which was originally an invasion lit story that came out in the fifties¹⁷ was re-written for the AIDS crisis in the eighties¹⁸—where the outward threat became an inner threat—one that attacks your body, your health and your life. The fear of disease that they talk about in this podcast is shorthand for this biological warfare that was so deadly and so terrifying and so unknown that it began to be written into the socio-political landscape as an unstoppable inevitability.

Other movies, like *District 9*,¹⁹ roll current fears into past fears by combining the fear of biological warfare with the horrifying legacy of the South African Apartheid. Although Linda Holmes classifies it as a “wounded,” misunderstood creature in the podcast, that movie contains multitudes. The alien is wounded and misunderstood, but

¹⁵ Clute, 66.

¹⁶ Clute, 66.

¹⁷ *The Thing from Another World*, 1951.

¹⁸ *The Thing*, 1982.

¹⁹ *District 9*, 2009.

that's because it is a maligned citizen, only allowed to live in the slums of the city. It obviously has feelings and aspirations, but it is not seen as socially acceptable to integrate into society. That movie has serious layers of racial tension that play into South African politics in a way an American audience probably could not understand without a hefty knowledge of South African history—however, South Africa has a rich culture of science fiction that draws from many of its own crises.²⁰ The research by Deirdre Byrne pre-dates *District 9*, but discusses a half-dozen important science fiction works in both print and film. These works draw parallels between the winking metaphors of science fiction, technology and aliens to real South African troubles like the AIDS crisis and racial tensions. Invoking the film *District 9* in the podcast discussion on aliens, though is important not only for South African audiences, but also American audiences who may benefit from watching the film and learning more about South Africa—both its media culture that produced the film, and the horrific political climate that has existed there.

In the conversation on *Pop Culture Happy Hour*, the panelists are not only drawing conclusions and parity between films, they are also shedding light on the fact that science fiction films, usually represent something, especially fear. Americans are familiar with the traditional narratives that pervade our society, and the political climates, wars, and social movements that help illustrate these narratives. Looking at science fiction on a broader scale and comparing the known American science fiction tropes to those of British or South African can help broaden horizons, both critical and cultural.

²⁰ Byrne, 522.

Pop Culture Happy Hour is a touchstone of criticism, especially this kind of collaborative criticism that is so easy to cultivate in a podcast. They have a group of talented minds with different cultural pedigrees that are blended to advance their understanding of culture and how it fits together in the larger scheme of things. Each of the voices though, has a priority—Linda Holmes has a prizes earnestness, as well as devotion to stories that invest in world-building. Glen Weldon, conversely, is a comic book historian and invests in myth-building. At some points they agree, and at some points they do not. Stephen Thompson is practical and diplomatic and, like Linda Holmes has little tolerance for ironic distancing and prefers to be enveloped by a story even if there is a bit of disbelief to suspend. Trey Graham likes sweeping epics—a place where world, character, and myth collide. They all approach media differently, and there are plenty of episodes where they don't agree. However, these episodes where they come together to talk about genre, or to talk about a facet of media, like this one with the taxonomy of aliens—they help further the critical connections. The example in the first part of this project where they discuss advice columnists, they all bring an example to the table that opens up an insight into the meta-critical mind. They do the work of drawing the connections, collaboratively so that we, as listeners can draw our own connections between these cultural artifacts.

Because of their history helping build what pop culture criticism looks like, both Stephen Thompson and Linda Holmes come back to basic critical connections in their dialogue—they talk about archetypes, they talk about common tropes; all of the hosts on this show talk about their audience like their audience is not stupid. They cultivate

that baseline of critical know-how and yet, through their conversations, they make the information relatable, relevant, and applicable to other media. In the connections they draw here in this discourse can be taken and applied elsewhere: we can build our own critical taxonomies, and we can build our own nomenclature to distinguish our own tastes and our own critical sensibilities. Through these modes, I think it is possible to be able to relate to this kind of critical discourse and take that information into the world, even if it's just to talk about alien or robot movies.

Concluding Thoughts

Podcasts are a great medium to build on connections, to build on critical sensibilities and to cultivate and curate evaluation skills. There are a lot of great and important modes in which critical discussion can take place, but if there is not full engagement in the topic, sometimes it is hard to exercise that muscle. The fact that there is now pop culture criticism that is widely-produced, and available online, for free—it makes it easy and fun to play along at home, adding your own sensibilities and using these conversations to start your own. It's one thing to read a full review in someone else's voice, but it is another to learn to listen, think and engage in a discourse—in an actual conversation, that makes us more interesting as humans when we learn to engage with other humans on such an intimate level. We hear each other's voices, and listen for the passion and the humor. We hear and we listen and we respond in kind.

The conversations represented in these podcasts are reflections of the critical reality. They allow for exploration of critical thought with humor and allow listeners to draw on their own experiences to draw conclusions. Furthermore, the inclusivity of online communities allows for democratic participation—not only through the mode of podcasts, but also online forums and facebook pages and twitter feeds. The conversations can start in the podcasts and move broader, or can start online and be able to be met critically by those whose voices are smart and sharp. These voices draw upon education, experience, and one another to formulate and express critical thought in engaging and fun discourse. Podcasts on culture open up a way in to critical

discussions that it is easy and fun to participate in. Online communities and the democratization of information unlock conversations and ideas that can be beneficial for learning about being a critical thinker and an engaged citizen. This project focused specifically on one small splinter of the available podcast discussions—the discussions included here are even more dynamic when included in their entirety. The discourse that these hosts have on a weekly basis covers even more ground, and the podcasts that are available to listen to can reach anyone in any kind of hobby or interest that they may have.

The flexibility and accessibility of new media makes it simple to participate in discussions within your interests and communities, even if those are remote and niche. Participating in constructive discussions by listening to podcasts or by participating in the online community by creating your own podcast or interacting on forums, blogs, or twitter can foster understanding and a greater intellectualism within those communities. This discussion does not end with the end of this project. There are plenty of opportunities to draw out the critical aspects of all sorts of culture, and this is just the beginning. It is both the beginning of a renaissance of popular culture that can be appreciated and looked at as both engaging, smart, and entertaining, as well as the introduction of a new medium for us to foster relationships and help ourselves grow as invested citizens and critical thinkers.

Epilogue

So, after defending my thesis, which was an enlightening and enriching conversation, I'd like to wrap up this project. This section is for tying up some loose ends and looking forward—through my own sensibilities, through the scope of this project, and through the wider implications of podcasts and digital media. As we discussed, podcasts and the podcasts I had picked for this project, we kept coming back to the problem of bad podcasts. Sure there are bad podcasts, just like there are bad books and bad TV shows and bad movies. There are pieces of media that have more critical implications than others; some media is just more nuanced. What became clear is that it is up to a discerning consumer to decide what media is right for them—and what value that has intrinsically.

One distinction that I would like to make clear from the podcast is that there is a difference between offending one's sensibilities (the amorphous, taste-related senses) and offending one ethically. The ethical nature of what is good and bad is a much larger issue. There are podcasts that do not function well in craft, sure, but there are also podcasts that are problematic ethically. There are plenty of terrible podcasts that can be seen as ethically reprehensible and can be damaging or demeaning, just like there are with any other kind of media. Podcasts, though I am a champion of the media, do not always get it right.

There are several distinctions I would like to make in regard to this problem. Valuations of taste or high-brow versus low-brow culture are intensely personal. That's why the discussion on guilty pleasures was so valuable to this project. There is no set

standard for taste, and understanding that breaks us free to examine culture from whatever lens or standpoint that we choose. Some of those discussions and examinations may be more fruitful than others. Consumption speaks, and when we, as consumers, use, watch, listen to, and promote a product; more of that product is what we get. Regardless of the quality of the product, if we cannot condone the lifestyles of directors like Roman Polanski or Woody Allen, are we able to approach their products objectively? In many critical cases, it is important to separate the artist from the work; Roland Barthes's "Death of the Author"¹ critical theory haunts us. He explains that in order to objectively criticize the work or media we must divorce it from its creator and the creator's hopes, dreams, and passions, its time period and the conditions in which it was produced. We, as readers, must apply our own understanding in order to see the work from a variety of perspectives. It is in this way that Barthes makes way for other critical theories, with his own theory he opens the door for all kinds of interpretations. In order to apply the lens of the reader, we must be able to look at the work objectively, but at what moral cost? That is an example of ethics.

In the Lefstein and Snell article, there is a pragmatic argument for using popular culture as a touchstone for students to encourage ownership over the material and engagement. Although the lesson was planned with the best of intentions, the study ultimately decided that situation gave too much leverage to a few students and left other students out. Teachers can choose to augment their classrooms with popular culture, but they must evaluate it carefully in order to understand the critical and educational

¹ Barthes, 167-8.

value of it before they allow their students to engage with it. The classroom in the Lefstien and Snell article struggled with both balancing discourse genres and the instructor appeared to struggle with classroom management. The incorporation of the *X Factor* model of feedback is a novel one, and one that appears to engage the students. Lefstein and Snell concede that although this foray into integrating popular culture into the classroom may have not been successful; there are possibilities of that kind of integration being successful.

This is especially interesting to me, because as a teacher, I have been inspired to integrate popular culture into my classroom. Specifically, when I was teaching in a high school, I used the critical exploration of science fiction films as part of the curriculum for a film class. I thought using new, popular media would be engaging for the students, but there was an academic rigor that had to come along with those explorations. The class had expectations for how films were taught in the class, so I used the model that they were familiar with, and just changed the topic. This allowed for us to explore something fun and exciting, but still within the confines of the academic rigor of looking up vocabulary words, writing a short essay, and giving a presentation on a film they watched on their own. Like the classroom in the Lefstien and Snell article, I had some very dominant personalities who were quick to contribute in classroom discussions, but I also had students who were normally reticent who were drawn out by their interest in the material. One of the struggles we had in that class was deciding how we should balance the groups for the presentation. Each group was composed of three students. Instead of assigning one of the more participatory students in each group; I divided the

students up who had similar levels of engagement. All of my confident, quick-to-answer students were in one group, assigned down through the most reticent students all in one group. By assigning the groups this way, I was sure that each student would have to put forth the same amount of effort into the group project. Generally, that division was a success. Each classroom is different—and especially in secondary education—there is a need to balance academic rigor, student engagement, and classroom management.

I think that using podcasting in the classroom, or using any kind of popular media has to be integrated in a way that functions within the classroom's ecosystem. Lefstien and Snell's example gave too much authority to the students. The instructor in that classroom did not find a way for her to participate without interrupting, and that was disadvantageous for her classroom management and for the students who needed more scaffolding, guidance, and prompting. When I used popular films in class, I did it in the previously established process of learning that the students had come to expect, rather than trying to change both the content and the process of their learning cycle. I was sure to scaffold them in to the learning outcomes that I hoped for in the class—I prefaced the films with the history of science fiction, and gave them examples of how science fiction addressed sociopolitical issues. I gave them an opportunity to respond in several ways—both in discussions in class, in group presentations, and in written papers. I used written material, video clips, lecture, question and answer sessions, and written feedback for their presentations and their essays to continue the dialogue with them.

When you integrate new kind of media, you must be prepared to cull—students may get excited about the media because they may have interacted with it outside of school. It is easy to get caught up in the student’s excitement about an actor or a film, or a song that is popular since they are showing enthusiasm for what is happening in class. The most important thing you can do as an instructor is steer the conversation in more productive ways—acknowledging the excitement, but also focusing on the pertinent topic and the learning outcomes. Just like when we watch *Romeo and Juliet*, and all the students get excited about seeing Romeo’s posterior, we can acknowledge that, yes that is a butt, but tell me more about what you think their motivation is in the balcony scene. When we look at a piece of culture through a lens, whether it is a lens as a critic or a lens as an educator. Our job is to cull and distill, and be sure that we are focusing on the specific outcome and not losing sight of our goals.

Of course, podcasts have other limitations, too. One of the things we discussed during my defense was the accessibility. Podcasts are not accessible for those without computers or smartphones or iPods. Podcasts are not accessible for those who have limited data options like those in northern Alaska or other rural areas. Podcasts are very rarely accessible to the hearing impaired. Podcasts are harder to access if you have little experience navigating on the Internet like those who are older, or even the very young. I have a hard time imagining my own parents navigating iTunes to find podcasts, and I also cannot imagine them wanting more than being able to catch up on their favorite National Public Radio shows. I do know that they listened to my thesis on Soundcloud, though, so that’s a good step. I have also encountered 18-year-old

students in their early college years who do not know how to use Google—accessing podcasts may be difficult or uninteresting to those who have little experience using technology. Podcasts are just another kind of media that has limitations. I'd like to think that since free Wi-Fi is available most places, and since smartphones are pervasive and cheap, that those people with the motivation to listen to them can do so at little or no cost. Podcasts are not for everyone, just as visual media is not accessible to those with visual impairments, and the written word is inaccessible for those who do not speak the language it is written in or have minimal literacy skills. My point is this—podcasts can include more than they can exclude, and they can also access those, like myself, who have a harder time with print media, who do learn better from listening rather than reading. The point is not that podcasts should replace written media, but can help round out a fuller media experience for all.

The information that we want is out there in a variety of forms that fit many different kinds of learning styles, many kinds of lifestyles, and many kinds of preferences. Podcasts can be used in an educational setting, sure—and those who are looking for information will find it. Part of the reason I love podcasts is that I love being a part of conversations and I learn well when I can understand and respond, even if it is a one-sided conversation for me. I can draw upon things I've learned by reading, listening, and watching. All of those touchstones of memory help me engage and help me learn. In many ways, this project was deeply personal for me, as I found the act of listening to be the most beneficial for my learning journey, and I wanted to share that and explore that in a more critical way. If this project could continue, I would like to engage with

others about their learning styles and their reflections and their concerns, as well as their visions for their perfect learning environment and their experiences with podcasts. As it happened, I engaged with my friends and they participated in my project by lending their voices to other people's words—creating more contact points for the memories of the listeners to this project. Ideally, in a multi-modal world, they could have been active participants, learning alongside of me as they participated. I hope that by participating, and by supporting my thesis in its various stages that they will participate in conversations about digital media and the benefits of looking at all sorts of media from a variety of angles and making their own judgment calls on what is valuable to them. As for me, I know more of what is valuable to me, but more importantly, I know that what I learn now will be shaped by my understanding of culture. My approach to culture will be something more amorphous, rather than something that can be quantified

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