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NOT CONTENT WITH CONTENT: RUPTURES IN MEDIA DISCOURSE?

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Cultural producers of traditional media have argued that content (shorthand for digital, social media, or online objects) is an assault on art. Writers, directors, musicians, actors, and stand-up comedians have not only disparaged content, but also those who produce it. Questions about the morality and values of content producers are prevalent in conversations about the current dominance of content in markets of cultural production. Further, the term content itself has been the brunt of much of this criticism. As content is increasingly used to refer not just to media that circulates online but also to the products of traditional cultural industries offline too, these producers have disparaged the use of the term and content itself as a threat to their crafts.

Through critical discourse analysis of public statements, interviews, and conversations, I examine how traditional cultural producers negotiate the term content's encroachment on their fields. In so doing, I attend to the contradictions and tensions inherent in the way cultural producers talk about content as a term and object in its oppositional relation to their craft. Specifically, I will show how contemporary discourse around content reinvigorates historical debates about how art's mass production and democratized accessibility compromise art's apparent autonomy and degrade cultural production (Benjamin, 1969; Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002).

Consistent with this conference's theme, this paper analyzes this archive to argue that while cultural producers perceive content as a rupture in art's sanctity, their discourse rather restages enduring conversations contending with the tensions of cultural production under capitalism. Digital humanist Tess McNulty (2019) has framed content as a term used to capture myriad online media forms and media studies scholar Kate Eichorn (2022) has argued that content's economic value lies in its capacity to circulate across the internet. Platform studies scholar Marc Steinberg has explored not only content as a term, but has also historicized content as a cultural object that emerged alongside the platform economy. I argue that discourse about content is not representative of a sea change in art's integrity as much as it is a term that creators use to express anxieties about the devaluation of their work in response to changing political economic arrangements that the internet has catalyzed. As their work becomes increasingly accessible to larger audiences via digitization, cultural creators worry that

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their work is becoming less precious, more easily consumed, and discardable, i.e., that their work could become content.

Art is art, and content is a cultural product that undermines art's integrity. This understanding of content and its relation to art emerges from my reading of conversations held by traditional cultural producers negotiating the changing landscape of their industries. For example, I bring into my archive an article from *Variety*, reporting on actor Emma Thompson's call for television executives to stop calling films content at the 2023 Royal Television Society's conference. Thompson states that content is a "rude word," and argues that as an actor "you don't want to hear your stories described as 'content.'" Further, she states "to hear people talk about content makes me feel like [it's] the stuffing inside a sofa cushion" (Yossman, 2023). In another instance, an article entitled, "Don't Call it Content," published in *Medium's* The Writing Cooperative, writer Mo Perry urges people to "stop calling writing *content*." Perry, echoing Thompson, describes content as "foam peanuts in a cardboard box." Further, she characterizes content as "grist for the mill, chum for the sharks...void of all meaning" (Perry, 2016).

In recorded interviews, on social media, and even in cultural productions themselves, self-described artists are obsessively criticizing content. Inspired by Lakoff and Johnson's work on metaphor, I read this archive of conversations to unpack the ways in which cultural producers systematically disparage content in relation to the cultural objects that they produce (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Content is "generic," "churned out," "Soulless." A "thing." A single unit of content is referred to as a "piece of content," as opposed to a film, a text, a performance, or a photograph. Inherent in this mode of unitizing is the distancing of the object from the media form, a desire to cheapen the value of the cultural object. Further, an assembly of content is referred to as "a mountain of content" or "a pile of content," where sometimes content is replaced here with "dreck," "filler," or "slop." Rather than enjoyed, viewed, or experienced, like one might a film or painting, content is "consumed" and sometimes, signifying a more immediate intake, "inhaled." This metaphorical language characterizes content as a product, produced on a cold, hard conveyor belt in indistinguishable mass quantities —uniform, disposable, culturally meaningless, a critique with which scholars like Eichorn (2022) agree.

In my reading of traditional cultural producers' understandings of content and the metaphors they use, I show how these producers seek to differentiate content from the fruits of their own craft. Specifically, content is signifier through which cultural producers assert the value of their art, and express anxieties over arts' devaluation in a moment when digital media and platforms appear capable of compromising art's cultural capital. Scholars and cultural producers possess the same suspicious urge to scapegoat content as a threat to art's social distinction. However, in their anxiety about the fading value of traditional media, content's critics have only grasped content as the negation of other cultural products, rather than as a separate entity worth interrogating itself. This work gestures towards studying content as an abstract, yet material object and concept that exists in a peculiar historical and global cultural moment, on its own terms.

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