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# Critical Dialogue: Interaction, Experience and Cultural Theory

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**Abstract**

Although topics such as fun, enjoyment, aesthetics, and experience are relatively new in HCI, long traditions of scholarship in the humanities and social sciences have examined them. Some have already been expressed in the appropriation of conceptualizations of experience in HCI research and practice. There is also a small but fast growing body of work in HCI seeking to approach these topics from the perspective of cultural and critical theory. In the history of ideas, experience and critical theory have not always made good bedfellows, sometimes complementing each other, sometimes resisting each other. This workshop will explore the ways in which HCI can benefit from a constructive dialogue between critical theory and experience in questions of design and evaluation.

**Keywords**

Critical theory, cultural theory, experience.

**ACM Classification Keywords**

H.5 Information interfaces and presentation (e.g. HCI):  
H.5.2 User Interfaces

**General Terms**

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### Introduction

A medieval monk sits in his cell staring at a large leather bound book exasperated because he cannot open it. Another monk arrives to provide technical help and tells him that it's a common problem. "You need to have the book facing upwards," he explains as he turns the front cover. Hesitantly the monk closes the book and opens it again: "Oh I see!". The two monks reside on YouTube and the sketch is one of the many comic takes on contemporary relationships between helplines and computers. For us, it serves as a reminder of the value of culturally and historically sensitive treatments of people's experience with technology.

Ten years ago studies of humans interacting with computers were also studies of workplace cultures where effectiveness and efficiency were key. Now studies of HCI are also studies of the home, the city centre, the bar, the car and so on where experience is as important as function for judging the value of interactive technologies. Furthermore the development of social networking sites like Twitter, Facebook and Youtube, and the unexpected uses to which people put them, indicate that studies of HCI are also always already studies of experience and culture. The scope of HCI has broadened from usability to experience and from productivity to fun, affect, aesthetics, and ethics. Experience, culture, enjoyment, design, and other related terms are now much used but under-theorized concepts in HCI. Yet they are all associated with rich histories of scholarship in other domains, and they include their own epistemologies, approaches, and outputs. Leveraging these terms in HCI will require thoughtful engagement with these traditions, and in particular, critical theory.

### Critical Theory

Critical theory is a general term that encompasses a wide variety of perspectives that originated in disciplines like literary studies, art, philosophy, sociology, and media studies. Critical theory then is a set of practices and traditions which draw on a diverse range of writers, schools of thought and theoretical orientations which are sometimes in direct opposition to one another. These include: semiotics (the study of signs and symbols), hermeneutics (the study of interpretation and meaning), structuralism (the study of underlying structures of cultural artefacts), post structuralism (the denial of the existence of such structures), deconstruction (well this is getting complicated now), psychoanalysis (yes and perhaps each of these deserves a paragraph on their own), feminism, Marxism, and postmodernism.

These schools of thought have produced a rich body of critical literature on people's lives. In the 1950s, the Chicago School theorists developed a mixture of Marxism and phenomenology which sought to analyze and also change mass culture. In the early 1960s Continental theorists such as Barthes and Eco also turned their attention from "high" to popular culture. In the 1970s, the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies used analytical tools that the West had developed to understand life in distant countries and turned them back onto the West. Each of these writers and schools of thought has made fleeting appearances in HCI e.g. [3][5][7][9][16].

As well as enabling HCI to explore points of connection with theoretical accounts of experience, an encounter with critical theory is also likely to bring into view a resistance to theorizing experience and related

concepts which have been invoked to question the usefulness of theory and assert the pragmatic need to get beyond theory. Such resistance assumes a binary relationship between theory and practice and undervalues the critical potential of theory. A more productive approach for HCI, and for this workshop, is to encourage a dialogue between critical theory and experience that would explore the value of both to HCI and the value of exploring relations between them in HCI. For example, exploring the questions of how theory, experience, or anything that emerges from looking at the relationship between them would benefit or inhibit design practice.

### Previous Connections

As long ago as 1996 Sherry Turkle noted that difficult and abstract notions in critical theory were sometimes most clearly exemplified by people's experience with new interactive technologies. The notion of sex as "an exchange of signifiers" for example could be illustrated directly with reference to chat rooms where cyber sex was engaged in primarily through textual exchange. Similarly post-modern conceptions of the fragmented self could be demonstrated with the multiple identities adopted by players in multiple user domains [17].

Since post-structuralist semiotics critiqued the notion that there was a direct correspondence between a cultural artifact and any single interpretation of it, ideas based in critical traditions such as reader-response theory have supplemented traditional semiotic readings of how interaction takes place. These approaches argue that meaning is emergent, constructed through a "performance" of the text in a particular context. Clearly this kind of theory is more difficult to implement as a set of design guidelines and perhaps for this

reason hermeneutics has received less attention in HCI (however, see for instance [12]).

When Winograd and Flores followed Heidegger in rejecting the view that things are the bearer of properties independent of interpretation [18], phenomenology's emphasis on both phenomena and the consciousness experiencing them began to be influential in HCI, e.g. [8][10]. When attention turned from usability to user experience, connections to critical theory became more frequent and complex. McCarthy and Wright's [14] book *Technology as Experience* drew extensively on the Russian literary critic and philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin and his problematic relationship with formal theory and preference for a decentred dialogue grounded in the particularities and uncertainties of lived experience. Phoebe Sengers and colleagues have long emphasized the culturally situated nature of computing and advocated reflective design [11][16]. Sengers, like Bell and others has also made use of feminist critical theory, e.g. [3]. Indeed recent CHI conferences have seen a greater acceptance of papers making direct use of cultural and critical theory to explore user experience in diverse settings, e.g. [1][2][4][6] [13] [15].

Following the earlier appropriation of experience in HCI, there is now what is beginning to look like a critical mass of critical theory in HCI. Developing an understanding of critical theory is a major undertaking, but it is arguably important for HCI to make sense of people's experiences with the technologies that will come in the next decades of this increasingly surprising century. This workshop will examine that argument as it relates to HCI research and practice.

### The Workshop

The workshop will take the form of a mini-conference of 15-20 people, including the proposers. Each participant will present a paper on some aspect of what we see as the emerging dialogue between critical theory and experience in HCI. As there is a diversity of views on this question even among the proposers, the aim is to have a critical dialogue. To facilitate this, presentations will be followed by discussion for which ample time will be allowed. The goals of the workshop are to:

- Provide a forum for a dialogue about relations between critical theory and experience in HCI.
- Encourage consideration of the value of critical theory and experience to HCI design.
- Plan an edited book or special issue based on the workshop.
- Outline a research agenda.

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