

What's Entertainment? Notes Toward a Definition

Introduction

Entertainment has been a part of all cultures, from the Chauvet Cave paintings to the iPad. For Rothman, it is “the storehouse of national values” (xviii). Perhaps nowhere is that observation more apt than in the United States, a nation that Gabler terms a “republic of entertainment” (11). Many Americans seem to feel entitled to high-quality entertainment (Zillmann and Vorderer viii), and more and more entertainment jostles for their attention (Wolf 46). Zillmann goes so far as to predict that entertainment “will define, more than ever before, the civilizations to come” (“Coming of Media Entertainment” 18). The importance of entertainment can be gauged by a study conducted by Brock and Livingston (259). They asked 115 American undergraduates how much money they would require in order to give up television for the rest of their lives. More than half said they would demand over a million dollars, with several naming amounts exceeding a billion dollars.

Despite the centrality of entertainment to society, however, academia has treated the subject in a disjointed, scattershot, sometimes condescending fashion, for a variety of reasons. To start with, the earliest communication theorists chose to study the mass media in terms of persuasion rather than entertainment, and most subsequent scholarship has retained that em-

phasis (Katz and Foulkes 376; Singhal and Rogers 120). Furthermore, many scholars look on entertainment as too trivial for study (Shusterman 291). They believe that entertainment amounts principally “to taking up large amounts of the daily time of individuals, but not representing an important force for human behavior change” (Singhal and Rogers 120). In addition, different disciplines have asserted dominion over different aspects of the topic. Scholars of communications, film, literature, art, popular culture, leisure, history, psychology, sociology, economics, policy, law, neuroscience, and other disciplines all have claimed partial, often overlapping authority. But the importance of the whole has been neglected: no single discipline has undertaken to map the vast landscape of entertainment. Lieb observes that theorists have largely failed to explain “what entertainment is, what kind of functions it inherits, and how much further it may expand” (226). Vorderer deems the academic response to entertainment “astonishing, to the point of being incomprehensible” (“Entertainment Theory” 131).

To be sure, some entertainment scholars may see no need for any single, overarching definition. For them, a subjective approach (discussed below) suffices: entertainment is whatever individuals find entertaining. But we believe that development of a more objective definition can help unify and advance the field of entertainment studies. Terminological exactitude, after all, is a basic foundation of scholarship. We follow the example of Browne, who in 1972 published “Popular Culture: Notes Toward a Definition.” He wrote, “Despite the obvious difficulty of arriving at a hard and fast definition of popular culture, it will probably be to our advantage—and a comfort to many who need one—to arrive at some viable though tentative understanding of how popular culture can be defined” (10).

So, with due acknowledgment that some may see our undertaking as bootless, this article sketches different approaches to defining entertainment and then proposes a set of criteria. Our hope is to help launch a conversation, one that can fruitfully continue as diverse approaches to the study of entertainment arise and mature.

We begin with two observations that, though perhaps commonplace, ought to be kept in mind. First, entertainment often does more than entertain—or, put differently, entertainment functions are often intertwined with nonentertainment functions. According to Staiger, children and teens spent more time at movies during World War II in part because mothers were

working, so theaters became de facto day-care centers (22). Katz and Foulkes similarly observe that families may watch TV together in order to bond (382). Second, and regrettably, “There are few things less entertaining than trying to define mass entertainment” (Bosshart and Macconi 3).

Defining Related Fields

Popular and Elite Culture

Meyersohn treats *popular culture* and *entertainment* as synonyms (331). What, then, is popular culture? The term has been defined in capacious terms. Mukerji and Schudson write:

[P]opular culture refers to the beliefs and practices, and the objects through which they are organized, that are widely shared among a population. This includes folk beliefs, practices and objects rooted in local traditions, and mass beliefs, practices and objects generated in political and commercial centers. It includes elite cultural forms that have been popularized as well as popular forms that have been elevated to the museum tradition. (3-4)

Santino treats popular culture as “the expressive elements of daily life,” with *expressive* referring to the attachment of symbolic meaning and *daily life* referring to everything except elite art (Motz 10). Browne proposes an even broader definition: “Popular culture is the television we watch, the movies we see, the fast food, or slow food, we eat, the clothes we wear, the music we sing and hear, the things we spend our money for, our attitude toward life. It is the whole society we live in, that which may or may not be distributed by the mass media. It is virtually our whole world” (“Popular Culture Medicine” 260).

Elsewhere, Browne suggests that culture falls into four categories, defined by their modes of dissemination:

Those elements which are too sophisticated for the mass media are generally called Elite culture, those distributed through these media that are something less than “mass”—that is such things as the smaller magazines and newspapers, the less widely distributed books, museums and less sophisticated galleries, so-called clothes line art exhibits, and the like—are called in the narrow sense of the term “popular,” those elements that are distributed through the mass media are “mass” culture, and those

which are or were at one time disseminated by oral and non-oral methods—on levels “lower” than the mass media—are called “folk.” (“Popular Culture Notes” 6)

Popular culture in the broad sense, Browne maintains, includes mass culture, folk culture, and popular culture in its narrower sense—everything, that is, except elite culture.

What is elite culture? Under one approach, elite culture is whatever cultural critics give their seal of approval. Wollheim writes of the institutional theory of art; in his words, “Painters make paintings, but it takes a representative of the art-world to make a work of art” (14). Fiedler (23) and, to an extent, Gans (9-10) argue that class partly affects taste; the upper classes are more likely to embrace what is defined as elite culture than the working class. Another approach emphasizes self-improvement, even at the cost of pleasure. Edwin Lawrence Godkin, the founding editor of *The Nation*, defined culture—meaning high art—as a matter of labor for the audience: “[C]ulture ... is the result of a process of discipline, both mental and moral. It is not a thing that can be picked up, or that can be got by doing what one pleases.... In fact, it might not improperly be called the art of doing easily what you don’t like to do” (202).

In general, however, elite culture is an amorphous category (Mukerji and Schudson 35). After all, lowbrow entertainments can become highbrow. Elizabethan drama was considered popular entertainment during its time but has now become high art (Kammen 9; Levine 11-81; Shusterman 292). With auteur theory, similarly, film became of interest to elite viewers and critics even as it remained mass entertainment (Haberski 39-40).

Leisure

Leisure also overlaps with entertainment. Freysinger and Kelly discuss various approaches to defining leisure (17). It can be defined by a list of activities, they note, though perhaps only daydreaming always qualifies as leisure; all other forms can sometimes be work. Another approach is leisure as a state of mind: the feeling of having freely chosen to undertake a certain activity. A third is leisure as quality of action, which looks at whether the activity can be characterized as “playful.” A fourth approach is leisure as a social construction, which examines groups—by race, gender, class, and other variables—and the forms of leisure that dominate within them. A fifth approach considers leisure as political and examines relationships of power and privilege as they affect leisure activities. A final approach is

leisure as a dimension of life, which considers leisure in the context of the individual's other activities. The authors conclude that all of the approaches assume some levels of freedom and playfulness. Mobily and Shaw likewise report that studies generally find leisure to be characterized by freedom (14; 19-20). McLean, Hurd, and Rogers, however, note that leisure can include commitments and obligations, as in gardening or mastering a musical instrument (34).

Traditional Definitions of Entertainment

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, *entertain* in its earliest usage meant “[t]o hold mutually; to hold intertwined.” The word comes from Latin, *inter*, meaning *among*, and *tenere*, meaning *hold*. One can construe *hold* as “focus attention” (Shusterman 292).

Adding *among* suggests two meanings: to focus on one of several objects competing for attention; or to be one of several people focusing on an object. The multiplicity, in other words, can refer to entertainments or to members of the audience. The latter suggests a communal nature to entertainment. Turner applies a slightly different term in writing that entertainment “literally means ‘holding between,’ that is ‘liminalizing’” (73). Turner’s approach suggests that entertainment functions as a sort of passage, perhaps (among other things) the audience’s passage through an entertainment work.

Governments also define entertainment. According to Tseng, the Bureau of Labor Statistics treats entertainment spending as comprising four categories: fees and admissions; televisions, radios, and sound equipment; pets, toys, and playground equipment; and other entertainment supplies, equipment, and services (73). As *The New York Times* points out (Kuehl), this approach encompasses pet food and veterinarian fees but not books. In Pennsylvania, the Township of Middletown defines entertainment for tax purposes to include “theatrical or operatic performances, concerts, vaudevilles, circus, carnival and side shows, . . . athletic contests, . . . exhibitions, contests, displays, and games” (qtd. in Martin, 799). Here again, books are excluded, as are films.

Scholars' Definitions of Entertainment

Objective Approaches

A few scholars have proposed objective definitions of entertainment. Zillmann and Bryant —"crudely," by their own admission—define entertainment as "any activity designed to delight and, to a smaller degree, enlighten through the exhibition of the fortunes or misfortunes of others, but also through the display of special skills by other and/or self," a definition that encompasses "any kind of game or play, athletic or not, competitive or not, whether witnessed only, taken part in, or performed alone," including "musical performances by self for self or others, of others for self, or with others" (438). For Barnouw and Kirkland, entertainment is a commodity that requires profitability: it is an "experience that can be sold to and enjoyed by large and heterogeneous groups of people" (50) and "a particular category of marketed product" (51). Mendelsohn and Spetnagel emphasize time and place rather than money: "Entertainments ... occur in designated places and on schedules that are originated by the entertainers and not by audiences" (20).

Subjective Approaches

What entertains a given individual is inescapably subjective, a matter of taste (Lieb 230; Vorderer, Steen, and Chan 4). One might paraphrase Berelson: some kinds of communication, under some kinds of conditions, will entertain some kinds of people (184). Some scholars contend that empathy can signal the presence of entertainment. Bosshart and Macconi suggest that entertainment requires one "to identify himself or herself with fictional persons and actions" (5). Similarly, Oliver explores tragedy and other somber forms of entertainment, and concludes that enjoyment of them correlates with what she terms "tender affective states," which are "associated with feelings of sympathy, warmth, kindness, and understanding" (55). Zillmann proposes an Affective Disposition Theory, in which audience members morally assess a character's behavior and either approve or disapprove it ("Theory of Affective Dynamics"). To Vorderer, Affective Disposition Theory constitutes "the strongest theory on entertainment available" ("It's All Entertainment" 252).

More elaborately, Vorderer, Klimmt, and Ritterfeld develop an empathetic model that includes physiological, affective, and cognitive di-

mensions (389). They begin with antecedent conditions, including the person's willingness and ability to suspend his or her disbelief. The suspension of disbelief is characterized by the willingness to let oneself go into some other world, whether a movie, a game, or any other form of entertainment. For these scholars, five emotions potentially lie at the core of entertainment: exhilaration; fear and relief; sadness or melancholy; sensory delight; and achievement, as in winning a video game (393). The authors give an example of how the theory works. A woman reads the latest book by John Grisham in order to seek distraction. "She is ready to suspend disbelief about how unlikely somebody like the hero of her book might be in the social world." She feels the fear of the villains who threaten her hero and feels "as if she is 'there' at the time and where and when the action takes place" (404). There are phases of suspense and relief; it is like being on a cognitive roller coaster.

Many other definitions are functional in nature. Entertainment can provide diversion and rejuvenation, according to Shusterman:

To sustain, refresh, and even deepen concentration, one also needs to distract it; otherwise concentration fatigues itself and gets dulled through monotony. These lessons, one might say, are inscribed in our anatomy of vision: we succeed in securing our physical sustenance and refreshment by looking outward and inward. (293)

Katz posits "mild arousal" as an element of entertainment, and argues that people seek "a balance of excitement and security" through entertainment (72-73). Similarly, Zillmann and Bryant cite studies showing that people tend to seek particular types of entertainment depending on their moods, as a sort of regulator (457). Research suggests that over-excited people tend to choose calming entertainment, for example, and people suffering from depression choose comedy. People thus select entertainment as part of "seeking mood changes for the better (i.e., in terminating bad moods, in switching over into good moods, or in facilitating and extending good moods)" (Zillmann and Bryant 443). Much entertainment consumption "is adaptive, recreational, restorative, and in this sense, therapeutic" (Zillmann and Bryant 457-458).

Meyersohn (336-337) and McLean, Hurd, and Rogers (31) apply the concept of "flow experiences" pioneered by Csikszentmihalyi. A flow experience, Csikszentmihalyi writes, entails the "complete involvement of the

actor with his activity” (36), “the merging of action and awareness” (38) with “a centering of attention on a limited stimulus field” (40). Flow can occur with play, creativity (including scientific creativity), and religious experiences.

Wurst also considers the user: “[W]hen we look at what entertainment means for those who use the media and expect to be entertained by their content, it is enjoyment that we most often find” (389). Mendelsohn similarly defines mass entertainment as “the experiencing of pleasure from the mass media of communication” (15). Vorderer defines entertainment as play, “a form of coping with reality” (“It’s All Entertainment” 256). Like children’s games, he argues, media use is “motivated more by internal than external causes”; it brings about “changes in perceived reality”; it is characterized by repetition, as “media users develop entertainment preferences and return to them in a more or less regular way”; it can lead to disappointment; and it tends to operate on the audience member’s part at a “low intellectual level” (254-255). Klimmt and Vorderer observe that entertainment can inform as well as amuse (349).

In a classic work, Stephenson stresses the element of play. As the key to the study of entertainment, he proposes looking for “conditions under which people can have communication-pleasure” (205). He distinguishes play—“disinterested, self-sufficient, an interlude . . . that brings no material gain”—from work—“not disinterested, . . . not an interlude in the day . . . and produces goods, services, or ideas, etc.” (192-193). Stephenson goes on to distinguish “communication-pain” from “communication-pleasure,” in keeping with Mendelsohn’s and Wurst’s emphasis on enjoyment as an element of entertainment:

Communication-pain is a command for work and action, for effort and production; education, the development of skills, and so on all may entail hard work and are subject to communication-pain. . . . Communication-pleasure is enjoyment, contentment, serenity, delight, such as is characteristic of entertainment, art, drama. . . .
(Stephenson 194)

Stephenson’s dichotomy between work and play contrasts with Csikszentmihalyi’s notion of flow, which can arise during work of a creative sort (36).

The fulcrum of entertainment is the human brain itself. Increasingly, subjective states of mind can be measured objectively. Sacks explores the

power of music in his book about “musicophilia” (literally, the love of music). He notes that music activates, and thus occupies, more areas of our brain than language does, making humans a musical species. Through magnetic imaging, further, empirical evidence demonstrates a functional segregation of brain structures underlying physiologic and verbal ratings along emotional dimensions of valence and arousal (Anders, Lotze, Erb, Grodd, and Birbaumer 200). In one study, musicians and non-musicians did not significantly differ concerning the responses to pure tones and piano tones, indicating that musicians do not differ in use-dependent reorganization in the brain (Lutkenho, Seither-Preisler, and Seither 935). To a greater and greater extent, according to advocates, researchers will be able to map enjoyment or pleasurable experiences in the brain.

Some authors, however, raise cautionary notes. Shermer remarks on the limits of brain imaging (67). More broadly, Lehrer claims that if neuroscientists want to understand the mystery of consciousness, they will need new methods. In his view, modern neuroscience represents the triumph of reductionism, in which “[t]he mind ... is just a particular trick of matter, reducible to the callous laws of physics.” He further observes that if a Beethoven symphony is reduced to wavelengths of vibrating air, we understand “less about music. The tangible beauty, the visceral emotion, the entire reason we listen in the first place—all is lost when the sound is reduced into its most elemental details. In other words, reductionism can leave out a lot of reality” (M8).

Antonyms

Like work and play, some terms are perhaps best defined by their antonyms. Leisure or play is the opposite of work (e.g., McLean, Hurd, and Rogers 37). Popular culture is the opposite of elite culture (e.g., Gans 7). What, then, is the opposite of entertainment? In keeping with Csikszentmihalyi’s flow concept, boredom is a strong contender (Bosshart and Macconi 4). Healy writes, “To feel bored is to suffer, in however slight a degree and for however short a duration. That is to say, it is a state of being from which one would like to be set free....” (42). Mikulas and Vodanovich define boredom as combining discontent and low arousal (1). O’Hanlon adds the concept of monotony to the blend (54).

If boredom is the disease, we suggest that entertainment is one—not the only—possible cure. But we should reiterate that we believe entertain-

ment must be defined objectively, not subjectively. Entertainment, whatever form it may take, will bore some members of the audience. It will fail to entertain them, but so long as it entertains some (and meets other criteria), it remains entertainment. We will say more about this below.

Cultural Context

Most definitions talk of entertainment principally from the perspective of one being entertained. Taking *culture* in the sociological sense, we can consider entertainment in its broader context, too. Parr and Lashua describe the approach with regard to leisure studies; it is equally applicable to entertainment:

[L]eisure is a phenomenon that is continually negotiated by people within constraints imposed by historical forces (e.g., capitalism), cultural ideology, and politics, and is embedded in social contexts (e.g., race, class, age, gender, ability/disability). Negotiation of roles and “appropriate” choices may occur within social structures and status hierarchies from both the “top-down” (hegemony) and “bottom up” (resistance)... Leisure becomes an aspect of life through which people may be repressed or liberated, controlled or empowered. (3)

Motz elaborates on the point, observing that some scholars view popular culture as a set of “texts or artifacts” (e.g., Hebdige 12), whereas others view it as “a series of processes, practices, or performances”; the latter scholars see popular culture “in terms of communication among individuals or groups” (Motz 9). In the process-oriented approach, according to Motz, “texts are always evolving rather than static, and the audience as well as the creator of the text is involved in the creation of the meaning of the text” (6). In terms of entertainment, we might, for example, consider *Avatar* as a text whose meaning depends on, among other things, the audience’s attitudes toward and experiences with warfare, native peoples, and the environment, attitudes and experiences that will vary by time and place. From another angle, one can see cultural power differentials lying behind the high culture/low culture distinction, with access to higher forms of art “limited by the high cost of participation, the necessity of higher education in order to appreciate the forms, the enforcement of certain types of audience behavior, and the exclusion of those outside the dominant class from policy-making positions in cultural institutions” (Motz 7).

Entertainment producers, distributors, and consumers operate in a web of relationships with government and other cultural institutions, too. The Production Code, for example, ensured that cinematic criminals came to bad ends from the mid-1930s to the mid-1950s. Government propaganda offices during the World Wars worked with producers to ensure that film and other entertainment media stayed on message. During the 1960s and 1970s, the Supreme Court relaxed obscenity law, which changed the nature and availability of erotica. Some (e.g. Putnam) have suggested that contemporary entertainment forms encourage Americans to remain at home and thereby erode public discourse. In such fashions, society and entertainment constantly influence each other.

Possible Elements of a Definition

We propose the following as elements of a definition of entertainment:

Objective. As noted above, we reject the notion that entertainment must be gauged subjectively. Even though what entertains an individual is subjective, we believe that entertainment must generally be defined in objective terms if the definition is to prove useful to the majority of scholars. We say “generally” because, as discussed below, Stephenson’s subjective notion of communication-pleasure is an element of our definition, but with a focus on a segment of the audience and not on a particular individual.

Communication. We suggest that entertainment involves some sort of communication between an audience (including an audience of one) and a text, defined broadly. The requirement of communication helps avoid the sort of boundless definition that Browne gives for popular culture—“the whole society we live in” (“Popular Culture Medicine” 260). If nearly everything is entertainment, then the field of entertainment studies becomes all but meaningless. The communication requirement excludes massages and eating, again by contrast to Browne’s definition of popular culture (“Popular Culture Medicine” 260).

Note that we do not limit the *content* of that communication in any respect. The content of entertainment is limitless. It can be gazing at dead bodies, or “actual human specimens” (*Bodies*), which can be likened to viewing statuary. Fiction masquerading as fact can constitute entertainment: consider Benjamin Day’s Moon Hoax in the *New York Sun* in 1835

(Bjork 128), or Orson Welles's *War of the Worlds* hoax of 1938 (Barnouw 87). Watching and listening to religious rituals qualifies, too, as Stephenson notes (195). Similarly, we believe that the highbrow/lowbrow distinction, perhaps meaningless in general today, is inapplicable here. Elite forms of art qualify as entertainment in that they provide communication-pleasure to some members of the audience. Contrary to Wollheim's institutional theory of art, in addition, entertainment requires no imprimatur (358). No high priests need to approve a particular film, for example, before it can qualify as entertainment. We likewise reject the distinction between entertainment and education. A Chautauqua lecture can be entertaining for some, as can textual analysis of a novel, consistent with Kimmt and Vorderer (349). But contrary to Vorderer, entertainment need not operate on a low intellectual level ("It's All Entertainment" 255). In addition, entertainment is not necessarily narrative—music, among other forms, also qualifies—so it does not require an empathetic or other response to characters, contrary to Bosshart and Macconi (6) as well as Zillmann ("Theory of Affective Dynamics").

We reject institutional approaches to defining entertainment, too. Contrary to Mendelsohn and Spetnagel, we do not believe that entertainment necessarily "occur[s] in designated places and on schedules that are originated by the entertainers and not by audiences" (20); reading or listening to music on one's own schedule qualifies. We also find unhelpful Barnouw and Kirkland's insistence on profitability as an element of entertainment (51), which would exclude nonprofit museums and theater companies as well as PBS, NPR, and the BBC. Entertainment may, in cultural terms, often reflect aspects of the capitalist system, but the pursuit of profit is not an essential element.

External stimulus. Consistent with our focus on communication, we believe that entertainment requires some sort of external stimulus. One cannot, by our definition, entertain oneself. This criterion excludes day-dreaming, which Freysinger and Kelly cite as the only activity that always qualifies as leisure (18), as well as singing, contrary to Zillman and Bryant's approach to entertainment (438). One can, however, be entertained in solitude, via a book, DVD, or some other text. The stimulus must be communicative, further, but it need not operate as mass media, contrary to Mendelsohn (15). Viewing a museum exhibition qualifies as entertainment.

Pleasure. A principal goal of entertainment is to provide pleasure. This criterion is in keeping with Stephenson (45) as well as Mendelsohn (15) and Wurst (389). Boredom is not entertainment. Neither is unpleasant effort. If, as Godkin maintains, cultural immersion (elite culture, in his case) does not bring pleasure, it falls outside our definition of entertainment (202).

Admittedly, the inclusion of pleasure does introduce an element of subjectivity into our generally objective definition. Our focus, however, is not on the response of a given individual, but rather on any subset of the audience as a whole. Of course, not every member of the audience will necessarily take pleasure from a particular entertainment, or from a given portion of an entertainment. The test is not unanimous approbation, but entertainment does require some level of appeal (Hinds 43). Nevertheless, we believe that one of Vorderer's criteria, that entertainment can lead to disappointment ("It's All Entertainment" 251), is unhelpful; what cannot lead to disappointment? Further, the pleasure given by entertainment need not, in our view, reach the level of "flow experience." That raises the bar too high; the rarefied experience of flow, with its total loss of self-consciousness, may result from entertainment, but entertainment does not require flow. In addition, unlike Zillmann and Bryant (441) as well as Katz (72-73), we do not address the motivation of the audience member. We need not posit that people consciously or unconsciously seek therapeutic or mood-regulating entertainment, beyond Stephenson's communication-pleasure.

Audience. As the foregoing suggests, we believe that entertainment must have an audience. Entertainment is at some level a public institution. This is not to rule out entertainment in solitude, as noted; a TV program does not lose its status as entertainment when the second person leaves the room. But entertainment must reach beyond its creator. On this point, Tolstoy writes of "the infectiousness of art." In his words, "If a man . . . experiences a mental condition which unites him with [the creator of a work] and with other people who also partake of that work of art, then the object evoking that condition is a work of art" (139). Entertainment is likewise communal, between creator and audience member as well as, at least potentially, among different audience members.

Passive audience. Passivity is a commonly understood, if often unspoken, element of the process of mass communication, which traditionally

“describes the media user as a witness to depicted events; an onlooker, listener, and, in general, an observer of what is presented on a screen, a page, or by a speaker” (Vorderer “Interactive Entertainment” 23). When Brock and Livingston asked students to define entertainment, more than two-thirds defined it in passive terms, such as “a show being put on for you: watching TV, listening to music, going to the movies” (268). The authors conclude that students define entertainment in terms of “being entertained relatively passively, by some exogenous performance or spectacle” (270). But others disagree. Zillmann and Bryant, for example, consider the display of one’s own skills to be a form of entertainment (438).

A passivity criterion for entertainment excludes forms of active recreation, many of which are also excluded by our first criterion, communication: playing sports (though watching sports would qualify), playing an instrument (versus listening to a musician), dancing (versus watching dancers), gardening, gambling, riding a Ferris wheel, and, perhaps ironically, “entertaining” neighbors with a backyard barbecue. These excluded activities, we believe, qualify as leisure but not as entertainment. The experiences are too *sui generis* and idiosyncratic. Concededly, different individuals, and even the same individuals on different days, will perceive a given entertainment in different fashions. But the variations in the experiences provided by recreational activities go further. The experiences of any two spectators at a baseball game differ, for example, but not nearly as much as do the experiences of any two players in the game.

Like Tolstoy, we believe that people being entertained ought to share a common experience, not completely but to some significant degree. So we propose passivity as a criterion. Entertainment (unlike leisure or play) is, we suggest, an experience of spectatorship more than participation. This passivity, of course, does not exclude emotional involvement, as in the case of a spectator at a baseball game. Elements of a spectator’s more active behavior, such as standing and cheering, fall outside our definition of entertainment, but so do other aspects of attending a ballgame, such as eating a hot dog or wearing a team cap. As noted above, entertainment is often interwoven with nonentertainment.

Concededly, passivity is the most problematic of our criteria, and perhaps the most likely to become outdated. With electronic games, Second Life, and other forms of virtual reality, some of which involve all five senses

and movement of the whole body, the line between spectator and participant grows blurry. It is likely that interactive technologies will move viewers increasingly into doers. As Vorderer observes, the development of interactive media “has completely questioned our theorizing about entertainment” (“Entertainment Theory” 143).

But it is difficult to encompass these interactive media in our definition without also including many activities that we do not consider entertainment. If a conversation in the public forum of Second Life is entertainment, as would be the case with an active-audience approach, then why not a conversation in the public forum of a city park? Why include online or videogame versions of chess or Scrabble but not the original board-game versions—and then if chess, why not charades; and if charades, why not dancing? If an Internet flight simulator qualifies, why not flying an authentic plane? How can videogames be distinguished from slot machines; and, once that line is crossed, how can video poker be distinguished from real poker? Positing an active audience leads to overinclusiveness that appears to be greater than the underinclusiveness resulting from the criterion of a passive audience. With misgivings, thus, we propose a passive audience as an element of entertainment.

In sum, we believe that entertainment must be defined largely in objective terms. Entertainment, in our view, involves communication featuring external stimuli; it provides pleasure to some people, though not of course to everyone; and it reaches a generally passive audience.

Conclusion

We have proposed criteria with which to identify entertainment and distinguish it from leisure, popular culture, and other categories. The challenge is considerable. “Entertainment is difficult to define *because* everyone knows what it is, because it is a common-sense idea,” writes Dyer (1). We suggest that entertainment, defined in largely objective terms, entails communication via external stimuli, which reaches a generally passive audience and gives some portion of that audience pleasure. Our criteria are perhaps obvious and very much tentative; we have noted some of their weaknesses. We offer them in hopes of launching a conversation that will

advance the field of entertainment studies—a first word rather than a last word.

Mukerji and Schudson observe that in a generation's time, popular culture studies went "from an academic backwater to a swift intellectual river where expansive currents from different disciplines meet" (1). Within a generation, perhaps the same will be true of the infant field of entertainment studies. The foundational task of discussing potential boundaries of entertainment can only help.

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