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‘Criticism’: Notes on the Circulation of Cultural Judgement

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Abstract

This article explores some aspects of 'criticism' as an activity occurring across diverse areas of culture, one which includes both 'professional' academic and journalistic reviewing of the arts and increasingly extends to a range of 'amateur' bloggers and online discussion threads. It looks at the definition, characteristics and functions of 'criticism' as a term indicating practices of interpretation and judgement, located within varying contexts of cultural 'authority' and cultural consumption. In exploring factors of change and their implications it refers to recent research in the sociology of culture, journalism studies, film studies and television studies in order to suggest that further attention to the shifting varieties of critical space, critical voice and critical language would be timely and productive.

Contributor Note

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Introduction

In this article I want to overview some issues concerning the contemporary character of 'criticism' and the nature of the shifts it is presently undergoing. I use this term to indicate a wide range of ways of appraising the qualities of cultural products (e.g. books, films, plays, fine art, television, music) through a considered commentary, mostly written. 'Criticism' is therefore a discursive form through which cultural experiences and cultural values (located within flows of cultural power) are exchanged and disputed. To use 'criticism' in this way makes it different from 'critical' in the sense of 'finding fault' since 'critics' can be strongly positive about the works they examine – usage of the word in this context, although implying analysis and assessment, is not directly tied to the idea of finding deficits. It is also different from 'critical theory', the *critique* of the current political order drawing on bodies of radical social and philosophical thinking. Certainly, some academic criticism draws on 'critical theory' but any idea of equivalence would be deeply misleading.

Criticism's relationship with power, notably the power to attribute quality, is particularly true of the many forms of criticism that have a variously 'professional' character but it is also now apparent, and made more subject to variation and even modes of opposition, in the range of 'amateur' forms for offering written and sometimes lengthy interpretations and judgements on cultural products. This range is currently expanding and developing in ways which both reflect the existing profile of cultural practice and cultural engagement at the same time as they are helping to change it.

This is essentially a 'working paper', a synoptic account of themes which deserve further attention. It is at points speculative in character and in seeking to raise certain questions, it may beg others, given the varied dimensions of the practices it examines. It raises some theoretical points concerning cultural power but it recognises that the understanding both of cultural power and cultural practice requires to be embedded in substantive studies. Many of the works cited have such embedding and it suggests the need for further projects in order to bring sharper focus as well as substantiating data to the structures and processes identified.

There are two related concerns being pursued. The first involves the definition, cultural positioning and functions of 'criticism' as a category of activity, broad issues which I think can benefit from closer analytic attention. This is particularly true in a situation where both cultural production and consumption are in transformation, reconfiguring some of the terms upon which cultural value is attributed. This leads on to the second concern - which is to ask in what ways the character of 'criticism' is beginning to change and what the larger implications might be of the emergence, often into new online critical spaces, of amateur voices. The route I have chosen will require moving rather briskly across diverse aspects of 'criticism' but the mapping of varied territory is central to my intentions.

I begin by looking at the broad dimensions of criticism as a form of practice, and then examine some of its cultural functions before exploring the issues of value and of judgement that lie at the core of critical activity. Finally, I focus directly on aspects of current change.

The dimensions of 'criticism'

The category of the aesthetic is, by definition, central to most cultural criticism, even if this is often not explicit. However, a connection to economic, political and social values is also widely apparent if, again, often only implicitly. The work of Pierre Bourdieu (for instance Bourdieu 1984 and 1996) provides a major intellectual benchmark for exploring these connections but I also want to make reference, if only briefly, to more recent studies across the arts and media. Indeed, part of the promise of doing further work on this theme lies in the way it makes a productive linkage with strands in the sociology of culture, cultural studies, and film and television studies.

There are problems of definition and of borderlines surrounding my key term but we can proceed here by regarding 'criticism' as the making of considered claims about the nature and values of a cultural product grounded in analysis and evidence and proceeding by argument. Obviously, engagement with a cultural product precedes the production of a critical account of it, exempting cases of critical fraud. Criticism moves to a level of self-conscious deliberation and formulation both about the response to the work and the aspects of the work that generated this response, often bringing in contextual factors, including comparisons and contrasts. In doing this, it moves beyond everyday talk about cultural and arts experience, talk which nevertheless may involve good measures of reflection and argument. The reading of criticism also invites, and to some extent requires, a move to this more considered, more 'formal', level of address to questions of cultural experience and value.

A 'professional' grounding for critical judgement in some kind of approved competence (knowledge of the history of the specific field, its materials and techniques, and of achievements within it) is a necessary prerequisite for academic work and the gaining of a basic competence along with exercises in the writing of criticism form an important part of advanced education in Arts subjects. Such competence is regarded as desirable for occupying the role of 'critic' within the frame of journalism, although here the sheer fact of being *employed* to 'review' cultural products may be adequate grounds for conferring 'professional' status. As I have indicated, the arrival and growth of forms of 'non-professional' criticism is rather rapidly changing the established pattern of what kinds of people write criticism and how they write it.[1]

In these very broad terms, we can observe that there is a great deal of critical writing in circulation. Following the multi-question formulation made famous in the field of mass communication by Harold Lasswell (1948), we could ask 'who writes what critical commentary about what cultural works for whom and why'? We could also ask 'who reads what critical commentary about what cultural works by whom and why?' since questions about the uses of

[1] The status of newspaper and magazine critics as 'professional' has varied in its security and in its relation to the role of 'journalist'. See the valuable accounts in Selfe (2012) on film, Lotz, (2008) and Rixon (2011) on television, and Klein (2005) and Powers (2009) on rock music, the latter setting her study within a useful survey of criticism across the 'high-popular' divide. It is clear that film, television and popular music reviewers had challenges of recognition to overcome which were primarily to do with the perceived legitimacy of their fields, a point brought out in all of these studies. See also note 3 below.

criticism are at least as interesting as those about its production. Pursuing such a Bourdieu-like project would be a task impossible without extensive selection, but simply reflecting on the sheer scale of activity posed within the context of the flows of arts and media production and consumption in many contemporary societies is instructive.

Any such survey would have to connect with the spheres of academic 'criticism', including that in film and television studies as well as in literature, drama, art history and music. In these spheres, the role of the 'critic', addressing questions of meaning and value within the frame of scholarship, remains a prominent one within the over-arching occupational requirement of 'research'. The assumed reader of much academic criticism is another academic, another 'critic', so any propositional exchange about meaning and value is one between ostensible peers involved in specialised activities and is often conducted in a specialist, not to say esoteric, language. This is likely to be as true of critical commentary on *Paradise Lost* as on an episode of the television series *Breaking Bad*.

Until recently, the most extensive range of critical activity was variously journalistic, involving the arts and media pages of newspapers, the arts commentaries of television and radio, and a range of periodicals both specialist and general. This is where the regular practice of 'reviewing' is undertaken which, unlike most academic criticism, concerns itself largely with new cultural work, with work around which the dense pattern of previous evaluations and identified 'blind spots' upon which academic criticism often builds its commentaries is not present. When it is used instead of 'critic', the title of 'reviewer' may suggest a lower status claim for the activity and this connects with another marked difference from the academic model – a difference in approach, tone and address.[2] The conventions of the arts 'columnist', addressing his or her regular readers on matters to do with their routine cultural life, set up much more directly sociable relations than academic criticism, if nevertheless ones in which a level of authority is assumed from the fact that someone who is a 'specialist' is largely addressing non-specialists (although assumed authority may work more easily for certain art forms, say opera, than for others, say television).[3]

In mapping the scope of critical activity, a connection would now have to extend to the vast and growing range of web accounts, some on sites with declared commitments (promotional or fan-based), but some issuing from the many individuals practising 'independent' critical blogging and posting at various lengths and drawing adaptively on a range of models, including journalistic reviewing. One of the most interesting features of this development is the massive expansion it involves of 'amateur' *writing* about cultural products,

[2] Gillespie (2012) distinguishes between 'criticism' and 'reviewing', regarding the latter as consumer-oriented and lacking the depth and range that the former displays. However, given the wide variety of existing journalistic practice and, now, of amateur arts blogging, any attempt at firm distinctions based on what are essentially normative criteria would be hard to maintain.

[3] Across the established and emerging range of critical spaces, the question is raised of the relation between the complexity and/or aesthetic density of a cultural product and the scale, nature and possible impact of the kinds of critical activity that can be generated around it. Here, we can note the challenges sometimes posed for conventional critical, as opposed to cultural studies, approaches to that which is widely seen as 'only entertainment'.

where the very form of writing involves factors of length, deliberation and styling, and particularly of reach, not widely available within the constraints of previous 'amateur' cultural commentary (e.g. letters to the editor, local and interest-group periodicals or talk within the small groups in which spoken critical accounts might be offered).

The cultural functions of critical writing

If we examine why criticism is read (not necessarily the whole story about why it is written) two broad functions stand out. Just how current expansion in the range and character of critical activity variously weakens, strengthens or offers additions to these functions will be significant.

1. Criticism involves the circulation of further knowledge about cultural works, including their contexts, production and meaning. This is clearly true of academic criticism, addressing an audience largely of subject specialists. It is also true of journalistic criticism, where the business of providing 'consumer information' about works to which the reader might give future attention across the range of available options is primary. In both cases, the knowledge offered, both contextual and interpretative, is likely to involve judgements as to quality, although critical accounts extend their engagement with cultural artefacts well beyond the passing of judgements even if issues of value are central to the very idea. The varieties of amateur, web-based modes of criticism are also involved in the circulation of kinds of knowledge about cultural products, knowledge which is often more experiential than 'formal' in its character, although by no means always. Web-based accounts can assume an equality of exchange far more easily than either academic or journalistic accounts, since the principle of rapid response and discussion is built into the cultural technology and emergent protocols employed. While some bloggers may self-consciously assume the role of 'critic' or 'reviewer', mirroring a professional stance, others offer their accounts more in the communicative mode of group dialogue (here following the important precedents for popular critical activity introduced by book clubs and reading groups).

2. Criticism offers judgements about value and quality. Although, as noted above, this is not the exclusive function of criticism, one important aim is the according of values, and some critical works, including many on the web, give a strong emphasis to their verdicts. In reading criticism, the different satisfactions of finding agreement and disagreement both come into play alongside the pleasures of recalling a cultural experience (for those who have already, for example, read the book, seen the film or watched the programme).[4] Alongside the attractiveness of arriving at conclusions, there is also the attractiveness of holding on to a measure of uncertainty about both what a work *means*, with or without the added biographical emphasis *for me*, and just how good it really is. Elements of ambiguity and 'debatability' are central to the appeal of the arts across the spectrum and much criticism acknowledges and develops this sense of at least partial 'openess'.

[4] The example of the literary critic F.R.Leavis is relevant here. His ostensible encouragement of dialogue in criticism is, however, somewhat out of line with his own dismissive approach to many of those whose judgements differed from his own. Leavis (1961) gives an exposition of his dialogic perspective.

In relation to this, critical communication cannot be seen typically to end in value 'resolution', whereby, say, the reader finally agrees with the writer having considered the basis of their judgements, or two or more parties to an exchange reach a consensus. Verdict-shifting (including complete reversals) certainly goes on, and so does 'learning', as aspects of a work which were not previously noted are recognised and fresh interpretations placed on those that were, but not usually with so neat and decisive a conclusion. 'Agreement to disagree' may be a common and entirely acceptable outcome, with various factors identified as the reason for this as I discuss further below.

Writers, artists and various type of cultural worker (e.g. actors) sometimes claim to 'ignore reviews' as a matter of course, confident in the qualities of their own work and perhaps seeing critics and reviewers as a marginal, parasitic grouping in relation to the creative, imaginative work of those 'inside' the arts. However, they will be aware of how much a negative consensus among the major reviewers can impact upon sales and attendances just as a strong positive consensus can boost these.

The co-ordinates and contexts of judgement

With just what degree of objectivity critical judgements can be made is an issue with classical lineage. The grounds of 'good judgement' have become a matter for intensive debate within many arts disciplines and have been given detailed scrutiny within the aesthetics subfield of philosophy (see, instance Carroll 2008 and Grant 2013 for recent studies). The framing of debate here, whatever its local analytic precision, has often been narrow, generally lacking a recognition of the economic and social positioning of critical activity and sometimes projecting it solely as a kind of cognitive-deliberative endeavour, albeit one generated from the specific complexities of aesthetic experience and beset by quite distinctive challenges of procedure.

The extent to which criticism has a 'subjective' grounding has long been a point of debate across the arts. Here, a degree of what we can call *subjectivised* positioning is a feature of some critical *writing* and is often signalled by the use of phrasings such as 'What I found most attractive', 'I began to feel', 'It seemed to me,' 'I have always found'. By contrast, in other writing, a firmer *objectivist* stance is maintained, in which the intrinsic nature of the work itself ('its' qualities') is given prominence ('the ending fails completely', 'displays a mastery of tonal contrasts', 'the work lacks coherence', 'this is brilliant and original writing') without reference to any effect introduced by the critic or reviewer, located within their given demographic and cultural space, engaging with it. Mostly, it is not possible cleanly to divide these two approaches since there is movement between them and different forms of combination, sometimes explicitly signalled but sometimes working what amounts to a trans-valuation between the more subjectivised and the more objectivised moments. A crude version of this would be 'Well, I like it and so it is good' but the bridging work is rarely so direct and unsubtle and it is generally achieved with varying levels of self-consciousness (as with 'agreement to disagree' as a closing strategy, noted above). Any trans-valuation, however, can run into the problem that while statements about tastes, about 'likes and dislikes', are

acceptable as positions within a plurality of options, statements about 'the good' and 'the bad' incline strongly towards a singularity of resolution and therefore towards argument as to which, among the competing judgements, is finally the 'right' one and which are 'wrong'. Critical writing may be given a provocative edge by an uncompromising objectivism on questions of value but this can also be seen, perhaps more nowadays than previously, as an unacceptable shift to the assertive and the dogmatic.

Many journalistic critics avoid the evaluative closure implied by strong objectivist conclusions, and the kinds of message this carries to readers ('if you disagree, you're wrong') by more openly incorporating subjective factors into their assessment without undercutting their firmness of account. A more relativising approach ('this is my view, yours may quite understandably differ') aids a reduced-stakes invitation to pose a dialogue about *criteria*, thereby taking a step back from judgement itself, even if this is a dialogue 'inside the head' of the reader. Such a move may, of course, finally lead to unresolvable issues which are more to do with the social and personal factors affecting interpretation (the outer 'co-ordinates' of judgement) than factors concerning properties of the book, film, programme or album itself. The growing range of amateur online criticism shows both objectivist and subjectivist stances being taken up in various combinations (see below). However, the attempt, noted earlier, at generating 'fresh' forms of cultural *conversation*, ones which place an emphasis on the idea of 'honesty', weights many accounts towards the latter.

I noted above the importance of the economic and social positioning of criticism. How does such positioning bear on what criticism variously does and the languages within which it does it? As work in the sociology of art and in cultural studies has shown (again, Bourdieu's various essays and studies remain the indispensable reference point) around the arts in many countries there have grown up ideas of quality, and the *appropriate* ways of affirming and contesting value, that relate strongly to broader indicators of 'cultural capital' as well as to the approved sources of specialist knowledge and competence. In this way, criticism and reviewing has often worked (if sometimes unwittingly) to reflect and sustain existing dispositions of cultural capital, as these are distributed across variables of economic position, social class and education. The reproduction of cultural 'taste' within a hierarchy both of forms and genres and of 'proper' dispositions and modes of response, is thereby aided.

However, the actual *effectiveness* of this project in securing widespread acceptance of a set of 'datum values' outside of the main institutions of the cultural establishment (including those involved in education) and outside of those social class fractions most heavily invested in the affirming endorsement they provide, has always to be questioned and made subject to investigation rather than simply assumed. Of course, for many years the growth of the vigorous and increasingly varied spaces of 'popular culture', spaces having their own flourishing bodies of critical commentary, has seriously complicated any sense of a unified system with an agreed, and efficiently reproduced, 'hierarchy'. More recent patterns of diversity in the cultural economy are likely to have introduced further complexities into value recognition and value acquiescence, a

development noted further below. This is an area where the continuing possibilities for important further investigation are opened up in quite exciting ways by the new turn in critical activity.

Any assessment as to the scale and character of value reproduction needs to be careful, as Bourdieu recognised, not to overlook the extent to which contesting and alternative critical accounts of cultural value are, at any one time, in play, some partially framed as lying *within* the accepted terms of cultural debate, some clearly marked, at least for the time being, as lying *outside* these terms. This is true both in relation to the established arts and to the reviewing of film, television and popular music. Recently, for instance, Kersten and Bielby (2012) closely examined the criteria at work in film criticism in the context of broader cultural changes and raised the issue of to 'what extent cultural arbiters like film critics have begun to expand the scope of their interpretative focus in light of these changes' (2012: 197).[5] Clayton and Klevan (2011) brought together a range of close analyses of the variants of language employed in writing about film and within a longer historical frame, Frey (2013) looked at transitions in the core critical criteria used by film critics in 1950s and 1960s Britain.

Diversity within critical spaces like that around film partly reflects demographic change around the popular arts themselves and their audience/reader relations but it also reflects the demographic range of the various kinds of publication in which critical discussion of the same artefact (film, television series, CD etc.) is now undertaken. As noted, the critical spheres enabled by the web open this diversity further, not only by permitting a hitherto constrained range of 'amateur' critical voices to find expression but by allowing a huge increase in the range of items, from mainstream to narrowly esoteric, which can receive critical attention. In looking at the expansion and the shifts in what I have called critical spaces, it is important to remember how the availability of first, videotape and then DVD, streaming and home digital recording, has radically altered the possibilities for critical scrutiny of film and television. The flow of criticism into the experiencing of audio-visual artefacts has thus been expanded and intensified, allowing among other things for 'revaluations' to be undertaken and for critical attention to engage continuously with material from the past as well as the present. A comparison with the much earlier effect introduced into music criticism and broader musical culture by the advent of the gramophone record is pertinent here.[6]

Criticism and cultural change

Limited forms of 'amateur' written criticism have been around for a long time, sometimes gaining access to mainstream publications but mostly appearing in various forms of alternative and local outlets with small readerships. At another level, oral discussion and debate about values in the arts and popular culture is clearly a feature of

[5] The idea that film is now perceived as a 'higher' form than it was once judged to be, inviting forms of criticism more securely within what Bourdieu called 'the aesthetic disposition', informs the analysis of their findings. It is clear that television has also attracted a criticism of more seriousness than once was the case, partly resulting from developments in 'high end' drama (a development widely discussed, including in Nelson (2007).)

[6] On this, see Day (2002).

everyday life, taken up in what are sometimes the briefest of exchanges. This 'talk about culture' is too casual and fragmentary to be usefully covered by the term 'criticism', however varied and broad this category is, and we might better refer here to the play of 'critical voices'. The unprecedented variety of critical accounts in circulation which has followed the growth of web publication can be seen partly as an extension and transformation into writing of this earlier oral exchange in respect of brevity and casualness of language (as in the growing volume of Twitter comments). However, web criticism spans across between more 'informal/colloquial' and more 'formal/propositional' attitudes towards its object of attention and some amateur blogging is like an expansion of critical journalism in its offering of extensive and considered commentary from a self-consciously *authorial* position. Many of even the shorter contributions display a level of organisation in the deployment of evidence and argument, and in the conventions of exchange, that differs markedly from forms of talk. Some of this work has a tiny readership, some of it has clearly gained a widespread following.

Often, the nature of professional reviewing judgements becomes a topic within the amateur contributions. For instance, commenting on *The Independent's* review (8 September 2012) of the UK television drama series *Parade's End* (BBC2, 2012 adapted by Tom Stoppard from novels by Ford Madox Ford) one comment posted on the newspaper's site read:

> What a pretentious, ludicrous review. This self-indulgent production parades a stream of unsympathetic roles portrayed by actors who don't seem to know or care anything about their characters, their anxieties, who they are, where they are or how did they get there in the first place… Behold the critic who is more cultured and intelligent than ordinary viewers.

Here, the explicit and derisive projection of the 'critical/ordinary' distinction gives the professional/amateur play-off an added edge.

A much more measured approach leading on to further commentary is taken by a posting (20 September 2012) on the *Guardian*'s website following a review of the same series:

> I cannot praise this series more highly. The acting […] has been superlative, the production exquisite, and the script is perfect. I do not accept the reviewer's criticism of Stoppard's script. Why should a writer pander to the accepted view of how a television drama should be paced? In fact, it is this slower pace that gives Parade's End its charm…

A rather similar, vigorous, tone to that of the first post cited above is to be found in the *Daily Telegraph*'s website's string of comments on the series (posted 24 September 2012). Here, the writer defends an earlier contributor who offered a lengthy (1,300 word) critique of the series, only to be roundly rebuked by others for his poor judgement (a rebuke including the sharply relativising comment: *I enjoyed Parade's End for most of the reasons you did not*). The defending post has an exclamatory start:

> Spot on my brutha. You are 100% correcto. Screw the people who say your critique was too long – it

> certainly didn't match the tedium of the show one bit! In fact, your review was witty, erudite, informed and well-researched… the one further comment I would add concerns the truly bizarre editing that sometimes made it unclear whether the characters were in the same country or not.

Perhaps the most notable feature here is the move from a demotic webspeak to terms of evaluation *of another review* ('witty, erudite, informed'), which are close to those which might appear in an upmarket book review, before making a specific critical point ('bizarre editing'). It is also interesting that while the first and second comments above are implicitly addressed 'to everyone', the third is addressed to a specific person whilst nevertheless written for 'everyone'. As elsewhere on the web, the play off between notionally 'open' and 'closed' forms of address and between initiating and reactive contributions introduces a new element into the pattern and the options of evaluative commentary. Other posts on this series sometimes provide shorter but far more formal contributions to a critical assessment, as here (*Daily Telegraph* site, posted 23 September 2012):

> The movies had a great but unacknowledged influence on modernist writers like Huxley, Lawrence, Hemingway, Ford and Faulkner, who differentiated themselves from the simple moral polarities of the cinema by exploring sexual identity, new social currents and politics using language in new ways.

Again, these citations indicate an area that invites further sustained inquiry. In particular, a comparative look at how different areas of cultural activity are now surrounded by different types of online critical space would be illuminating. We know that, for example, the literary works on the Booker prize list, the artworks selected for the Turner prize, the latest classical, jazz and popular concerts and CDs, recent cinema releases and last night's television drama, are all variously being subject to scrutiny and evaluation by blogging and posting. Newspaper and magazine sites provide one collecting ground for this new kind of critical activity (and the spread extends well beyond the titles I have cited). These sites are well placed for visibility, but many other spaces are opened up by social media, both for the sustaining of regular blogging output and the submission of one-off comments. Who joins the 'communities' gathered around these sites, perhaps variously as 'leaders' and 'followers'? How far is the demographic profile distinctive and how do the emerging conventions of discussion and dispute, the 'manners' of contribution and exchange, vary? Here, comparison with the work done on the deliberative styles of political discussion sites (following, for instance, the lines of approach in Wright and Street 2007) and on the participatory culture of fansites (taking up some of the issues raised in Pearson 2010) would be instructive. There is also the question of who regularly accesses this online writing apart from those who actively contribute and of how 'success' is generated from the growth of a reading constituency. It would be useful to know just how far amateur work is becoming an addition to, if not yet a substitute for, more conventional appraisals by those either seeking to make a judicious cultural selection or to reflect on, clarify for themselves or simply find out more about, a cultural experience they have already had.

For the time being, only occasionally do the professional critics respond directly to what is happening in this broader, popular space but there is no doubt that they are aware of its modifying presence (for a recent perspective on this by a professional critic, perceiving the need to 'adapt', see Kermode 2013). They are also aware of the way that book, music, film and television publicity is now selectively using comments from the blogosphere and the twittersphere to promote material alongside the citation of professional critical voices (on this see Turner-Dave 2013). The converse situation also arises too, where immediate and negative 'amateur' responses to material can have an impact on sales or ratings, a situation which has recently caused some re-thinking of the best 'launch strategy' for certain cultural products (Lawson 2013 discusses an example from television). Although it can be exaggerated and is subject to strong national variations, there is evidence of a displacement, 'from beneath' at it were, occurring with respect to the role of professional newspaper and magazine critic, a displacement which, in some areas, threatens a reduction in the number of critical columnists employed (comments and sources of data can be found in Rayner 2008, Rixon 2013 and Frey 2013). Not surprisingly, this has led to attempts at defending the value of professional criticism and its importance for the 'health' of the arts it covers and the general cultural good. There is perhaps some irony here, insofar as a number of the more ambitious 'unofficial' critics setting up on the web have hopes for the quality of their accounts to be recognised to the point where they are offered paid work (again, Turner-Dave 2013 addresses this point, as does Rixon 2011 and 2013).

I have tried to sketch out a profile of some aspects of 'criticism' as this practice occurs around different forms of cultural production and across different spaces. I have considered, too, some of the changes that are happening within it and around it. What can be identified, although only further investigation will clarify matters of scale and direction, is a varied responsiveness to shifts in the economy of culture, including patterns in the circulation and 'use' of cultural goods, and a new positioning of the 'amateur' in relation to the 'professional'. This is not simply a matter of 'offline' versus 'online', since most professional critics also have a strong online presence too, whatever more traditional spaces in the mediasphere they occupy. Not surprisingly, elements of the older forms of cultural hierarchy are still active and continue to be reflected and reinforced by some of the critical activity in current circulation, if less uncompromisingly and exclusively so than in the past. A connection between professional criticism and kinds of promotionalist bias (much remarked upon, for instance, in the selection and reviewing of books in newspapers but extending to a broader range of cultural products) also continues, although here amateur reviewing can act as one form of counter, despite the presently unequal terms of visibility. Meanwhile, at the 'thinner' end of the amateur spectrum, there is a convergence with the industry-initiated discourses of 'consumer feedback' in which serious deliberation is displaced in favour of snappy 'product rating' (a tendency given focus by Gillespie, 2012).

This said, the shift introduced by the extended demographic range and the variety of expressive forms of the 'critical voice' is significant and likely to become more so. There are good grounds for

regarding it an enriching factor in the changing spaces of culture, producing a livelier and more varied dialogue about values and criteria and a more questioning and often more personally frank dimension of exchange.

I remarked earlier how work in the sociology of culture has recently shown a renewed interest in questions of cultural and aesthetic value, seeking to pursue inquiries in a way which neither collapses into forms of relativism nor trades on the unwitting reproduction of criteria that remain, themselves, unexamined. Reviewing some of the more significant contributions, Simon Stewart has emphasised the need to research 'cultural evaluation as a quotidian activity' (2013: 12) and to place emphasis on 'the level of engagement with the cultural object' (13). I have suggested that further empirical investigation of changing critical practices across diverse critical spaces, professional and amateur, would form a valuable part of our knowledge about the distribution and character of different types of aesthetic experience, and the valuations placed upon them.[7] Such investigation would, among other things, bridge between an understanding of media audiences and 'users' and inquiry into the developing applications of the web as a means both of personal expression and social exchange. It would help refresh an engagement with wider questions of quality and value in relation to different parts of a changing cultural economy and to disparate social constituencies. Such questions have, of course, proved difficult to ask let alone answer and they have often been posed in highly abstract as well as polemical ways. However, they will rightly remain at the centre of debate about the cultural conditions of modern life.

[7] Within the changing patterns, criticism produced in the academic sphere is likely to continue to inform aspects of critical journalism, partly through the processes of formal higher education. It will influence broader public perceptions not only through this but also through the occasional writings of academics in newspapers and magazines. However, as in the past, its directions will be guided primarily by its own priorities and readerships and its impact upon wider cultural evaluation will, in most cases, be indirect and often marginal.

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