ENG 5024 – Directed Studies –

Cultures of Critique

MA in English and the Media

Nurturing a culture of critique is essential to the development of a healthy arts and culture industry.

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The concept of 'culture' has a variety of interpretations. In the early 16th century the term 'culture' was broadly used to refer to the cultivation of soil. It is from that period that the metaphor for the 'cultivation of the mind', was derived.[1] There are of course numerous definitions for the term 'culture' and it is not the intention of this essay to define the term however it would be sufficient to look at culture not only as cultivation of the mind but also as a concept based on patterns of traditional values which can in themselves become products and catalysts for action.[2] Culture can be learned, passed on and can also become an element that shapes society. Arnold looked at culture as something to be achieved through hard work, moving away from the anthropological view of culture as a way of life. Culture, in Arnold's terms was a tool to bring about social improvement.

A culture is thus something which can change or which is changed by the people who are part of it. It is a process which requires continuous work to lead to intellectual freedom. Critique becomes an essential part of a culture involving a rigorous analysis of anything literary, rational or political.[3] Critique helps people refrain from becoming[4] "slave[s] of thought".[5] The evaluation of a work of art, performance, or literary work is based on knowledge and experience. Critique is well–informed and is required to review the activities in the present context.[6] These evaluations which take the form of

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[1]*Oxford Dictionary*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013)
<http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/culture> [accessed 22 May 2014].
[2]Spencer Oatey, H.*What is Culture? A Compilation of Quotations* (GlobalPAD Core Concepts, 2012)
<http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/al/globalpad/openhouse/interculturalskills/global_pad_-_what_is_culture.pdf>
[accessed 25 May 2014](p.4).
[3]*Oxford Dictionary*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013)
<http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/culture> [accessed 22 May 2014].
[4]Matthew Arnold*, Culture and Anarchy: An Essay in Political and Social Criticism 1869*
<http://www3.nd.edu/~cvandenb/MA.C&A.select.pdf> [accessed 22 May 2014] (pp.2-4).
[5]Peter Melville Logan, "On Culture: Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy*, 1869", BRANCH:*Britain,
Representation and Nineteenth-Century History*, ed. by Dino Franco Felluga. Extension of *Romanticism and
Victorianism on the Net*. <http://www.branchcollective.org/?ps_articles=peter-logan-on-culture-matthew-arnolds-culture-
and-anarchy-1869> [accessed 25 May 2014].
[6] Nicolas, Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans by Simon Pleaseance and Fronza Woods (Dijon: Les Presse Du Reel,
1998), pp. 29-30.

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discussions, essays, and reviews are essential since they provide a knowledgeable basis for improvement.

This improvement is what Nietzsche refers to when he speaks of a higher mode of culture and society that could bring about well-developed individuals who reject 'idols of the mind' which keep free thinking, prisoner.[7] Subsequently appreciation of genuine art would not be possible when there is a low level of cultural criticism. Nietzsche attributes this low level of criticism to the type of education and newspapers.[8] The inability of individuals to question established beliefs calls for a radical reform in education and the public sphere. Educational systems according to Giroux should be the starting points to create a culture of participation and a culture of nurtured critique.[9]

Following Kant's argument that people's senses react to stimuli that are external to the mind, critique becomes a reaction to a performance that has been pleasing or otherwise to the senses.[10] Consequently a culture of critique should be perceived as an opportunity for the scrutinisation of diverse means through which a better result could be obtained. As stated above well-informed critique should provide insights and perspectives which would not have been explored before, allowing the performance to achieve a better result or to attract a different audience. Concurrently

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[7] David Kellner, "Nietzsche's Critique of Mass Culture " <http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/kellner.html> [accessed on 24 May 2014].

[8] David Kellner, "Nietzsche's Critique of Mass Culture " <http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/kellner.html> [accessed on 24 May 2014].

[9] Robbins, Christopher G, "Searching for Politics with Henry Giroux: Through Cultural Studies to Public Pedagogy and the 'Terror of Neoliberalism'," *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies*, 31 (2009), 428–478 <doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10714410903344361> [accessed 24 May 2014] (pp.432-4).

[10], Makkreel, Rudolf A, *Imagination and Interpretation in Kant* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p.21.

Adorno claims that there seems to be nothing left for the consumer to classify as films have known endings, music anticipates what is coming next and stories adhere to specific lengths.[11]

The view point that probably criticism is for the high culture wherein critics understand what critique is about is almost condemned by Collini who suggests that critics often appeal for ways to overcome the shortcomings of the discourse that they are criticising.[12] He believes that who or whatever is being criticised is the victim of some particular intellectual or stylistic failure.[13] Collini looks at 'slow criticism' as a tool to make audiences think more reflectively on what they have just been part of. Audiences ultimately make choices according to their interests as these 'cultural choices' help shape the people's identity and they help shape a culture.[14]

Critique need not be negative as some people including professional critics and performers interpret it to be. Critique also implies encouragement rather than just denigration of a performance. Living in a globally interconnected world in which internet is widely available, it is much easier for anyone who has got internet access to post a comment, share reflections through social media and blogs. The Guardian in fact, has both its website on which reviews are published as well as its own Facebook page which allows audience engagement through posts on its Facebook wall.[15]

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[11] Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, 'The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception', *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, < http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/adorno/1944/culture-industry.htm> [accessed 25 May 2014] (pp.2-3, 5-6).

[12] Stefan Collini, ' "What Ultimately For?" The Elusive Goal of Cultural Criticism', *Raritan*, 33 (2013) <http://web.a.ebscohost.com.ejournals.um.edu.mt/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=09c3434d-4d3c-4afe-8f54-9f2ab28d7578%40sessionmgr4005&vid=2&hid=4106> [accessed 22 May 2014] (p.2).

[13] Ibid., (p.4).

[14] Neal Gabler, 'Everyone is a Critic Now', *The Observer*, 30 January 2011, (Guardian News and Media Limited) < http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2011/jan/30/critics-franzen-freedom-social-network> [accessed 23 May 2014].

[15] Guardian Culture: Media/News/ Publishing, <https://www.facebook.com/guardianculture/info> [accessed 26 May 2014]

Through the affordances of social media, such as the ability of posting comments, criticism takes a different stance. The professional critic is now joined by the online citizen, in judging and reviewing a performance/work of art.   Although definitely not everybody is a professional critic, the internet and social media have enabled people to be part of a flourishing culture of critique through which professional critics are also able to listen to other people's opinions.

Conversely, attention must be paid to the fact that critique might become an appendage to the marketing sector.[16] Quite often critical reviews will either sell or trash a particular work. Internet may also act as a marketing tool luring audiences into what is acceptable and what is not. One must then also be critical of the tool which is allowing a wider form critique to take place. Internet can be seen to be taking over that power wherein institutions might also act as professional critics and define or predefine what should be watched, read, loved or ultimately discarded.

The subtle potential of the internet may be able to change this scenario if it allows the formation of a new public – a questioning public, a public who wants more, a public who wants to see something different and a public who is ready to make this known. It is this questioning culture then which makes, builds or gives a particular 'aura'[17] to a particular piece of work. The work of art becomes almost pointless without the critique that got it there or that will take it to higher levels.

Therefore the internet has opened a new 'public sphere'[18] where arguments, debates and enthusiasm can be shared.[19] The critical platform has shifted to an online one, including more

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[16]'Is The Age of The Critic Over?', *The Observer*, 30 January 2011, (Guardian News and Media Limited)<http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2011/jan/30/is-the-age-of-the-critic-over> [accessed 24 May 2014].
[17]Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, Illuminations*, ed. by H. Arendt (London:Penguin Books Limited, 2008), pp.221-3.
[18] According to Habermas, the public sphere was that space in which rational discussions took place with the aim of keeping the established order in check.

participants and the proliferation of different opinions. The significance of this shift lies in the fact that the power of the critic has increased enabling artists to channel their work differently, to work along the critique provided, to produce what is being requested by a public which is increasingly demanding and insatiable. It has indeed offered the possibility for citizens to become reviewers of anything they might have participated in.

Conversely, passivity will only lead to an arts sector which becomes located in a stalemate position. Hari Kunzru claims that critique which is left only in the hands of the few risks reflecting the tastes of a particular group of informed people, ending up lauding art which gratifies or fits in with their exigencies.[20] According to Kunzru the internet which incorporates relationships between different cultures, provides the right set up to have genuine criticism from a public who is not necessarily paid to do the job.

In Neal Gabler's, *'Everyone's a Critic Now'*, there seems to be a sense of contempt towards the sort of criticism which shares ideas – he terms this 'critical consensus'.[21] He condemns not the consensus itself but the overwhelming positivity of such a critique. He clearly shows that whereas critique before was in the hands of the few who could therefore use that power to act very close to 'cultural brainwashing' currently, due to the advent of social media and the internet, this power has dwindled.

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[19] Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. By Thomas Burger, (Massachusetts:MIT Press, 1991), pp5-9.
[20] 'Is The Age of The Critic Over?', *The Observer*, 30 January 2011, (Guardian News and Media Limited) <http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2011/jan/30/is-the-age-of-the-critic-over> [accessed 24 May 2014].
[21] Neal Gabler, 'Everyone is a Critic Now', *The Observer*, 30 January 2011, (Guardian News and Media Limited) < http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2011/jan/30/critics-franzen-freedom-social-network> [accessed 23 May 2014].

Conclusively despite the fact that critique may still be considered as negative and some would like to believe that the age of the critic is over,[22] the interpretation and evaluation of works of art are still essential for a reflexive examination of validity. A culture of critique is all about getting audiences to communicate feelings and discuss their views about a particular work, thus enabling a better understanding of the intellectual tools that may be used to nurture more active publics in the cultural scenario.

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[22] 'Is The Age of The Critic Over?',*The Observer*, 30 January 2011, (Guardian News and Media Limited)<http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2011/jan/30/is-the-age-of-the-critic-over> [accessed 24 May 2014].

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<http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2011/jan/30/is-the-age-of-the-critic-over> [accessed 25 May 2014]