



### The role of the reviewer

Assessment by [Denis Joe](#) April 2012

Having become a regular reviewer for the **Manchester Salon** website, it has struck me that any work or phenomena can stimulate debate; and it is the job of the critic to initiate a discussion. The role of the reviewer /critic (as opposed to social/political critic) is one of the most ambiguous of positions I can think of. The reviewer informs, expresses judgements, **and** helps guide audience taste (“We watch the movies, so you don’t have to”) and provide insight into artistic works.

Over the past couple of decades there has been a decline in critical reviewing. In 2007 Daniel J. Wakin wrote in the [New York Times](#) about his concern that US newspapers were getting rid of their classical music critics. Last year [The Chronicle](#)

### [Review](#)

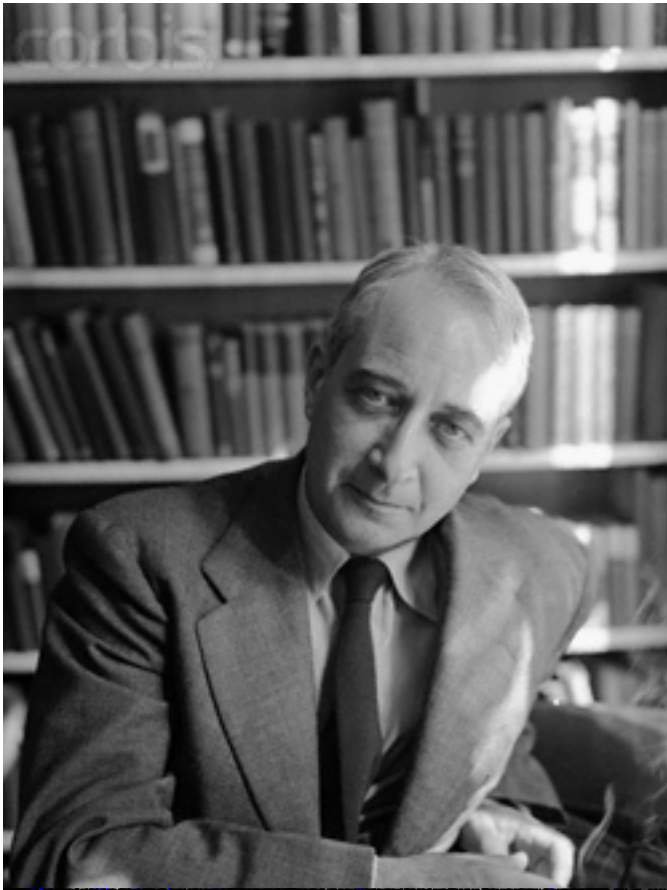
were

predicting the end of serious film criticism in the age of the internet (which I will come onto later in this article) and literary criticism seems to have always been in decline from its conception. What these concerns seem to illustrate is a change in the arts world, rather than anything inherent in the role of the critic. So Wakin's concern was specifically looking at how newspapers were reacting to a perceived decline in the audience for classical music. And this is more to do with the troughs and crests of the art world, than anything else.

Thomas Doherty, in The Chronicle, raises an interesting question in that he suggests that the rise of the internet, with its specialist websites and blogs, has spelt the end of serious film criticism. To an extent, Doherty's view of the internet as the cause of the problem is a cop-out. It overlooks a wider universal problem of how the role of the intellectual and academia in general has diminished in the eyes of society, and how the academic and intellectuals have responded to that decline. We can see this in many areas of life, particularly in the role that schools and universities play: not as preparation for life, but as a means of getting a job.

Over the years I have noticed that art criticism has gradually ceased to engage with the work in question, and has become more opinionated. Many reviews in newspapers and journals tell us very little about the piece. In short, reviews tend to resemble blog posts where the reviewer expresses their preference or dislike of something, but falls short of saying why, and what it is about the piece that has led them to their conclusion.

## Ideology



### Opinion

Criticism is sometimes regarded as opinion. I find that the most contemptuous statement a person can make against criticism is “oh well, that’s just your opinion!” Opinion plays a part in criticism but criticism demands much more than the subjective “I like/don’t like this piece”. Opinion expresses the personal likings of an individual and, to work, would normally require a level of intimacy between the person expressing their preference and to the person, or group of people, that they are addressing.

In one sense the internet can be seen as a tool which has allowed opinion to reach a wider amount of people. In the real, physical world an individual’s social circle would hardly match the number of ‘friends’ on Facebook, yet internet social networking allows us all the opportunity to express our opinions to a much wider audience and this has led some to blame the internet for the decline in intellectual life, just as TV was (and still is) viewed.

But it is too easy to blame modern technology for the contemporary intellectual crisis. For instance I would argue that the rise of portable entertainment, through iPlayers and such like, has little to do with the actual technology and more to do with the need for people to create their own space in a world where the authorities are extending their colonisation of our private and public lives.



Since the breaking down of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and the subsequent demise of Communism, there has been a growing sense of loss of identity in the West, that came about after its short-lived triumphalism. In a sense, the Eastern Bloc, with its one-party states and its illiberal societies, gave western democracy a spoiler to promote its own limited freedom. Once that disappeared and the West had nothing to compare itself to, it was found wanting.

This had a devastating effect on all sections of societies, not least intellectual life itself. Most

importantly, ideological differences, which are the hallmark of a democracy, began to cohere around a relativist viewpoint that came to be known as 'multiculturalism'. Ironically, it was Margaret Thatcher who inadvertently summed up the view that was to become multiculturalism in one of her famous remarks: "There is no such thing as 'Society'". Central to the multicultural view is that there is no society, just a collection of distinct groups of people whose lifestyles and cultures should be recognised as having equal value. In short what this came to mean was that no one viewpoint could claim predominance. More recently this has evolved into a commandment: "Thou shalt not judge."

The main problem with this relativist theory is not just its censoring approach towards discussion but also that the discussion is constantly changing, as if on a whim. Language suddenly finds new words and reinterpretations, which I have touched on in a previous review. Old values are dismissed with very little thought. Although multiculturalism portrays itself as paradigm that respects all lifestyles and races, and gives the impression of tolerance, it creates its own caricatures and demands adherence to its strictures. Infidels can expect swift and harsh censure.

An example that illustrates this point is expressed well in a piece about a new opera by Adam Gorb, [Anya 17](#), written for the student newspaper **Mancunio**. The piece was a review of the opera and was unfavourable towards it. I also reviewed the opera and found it to be a nasty, caricatured piece - see [Anya 17](#). In response to some comments defending the opera, the Mancunio reviewer pulled the review, with an apology for causing offence to the readers who commented.

What was so noticeable about the responses to the review was how little the respondents were concerned with the actual opera, as a work, and more about the reviewer's comments on it. The opera was hailed as being an account of sex trafficking (I don't want to go into details here, but read my review, part of a concert by Ensemble 10/10 for further details), and it was because of

the theme of the opera, and the fact that the reviewer had not taken the theme seriously, that the respondents unleashed a torrent of abuse. From my reading of the review it was obvious that the writer was young and inexperienced, and interestingly, one of the outraged commentators actually pasted it into their comment so it remained published. None of those responding, showed as much sympathy and concern for the inexperienced reviewer compared to the fictional character the opera.

I think that this illustrates how the internet allows for some to engage in acts which they would not do in the real world: the abuse meted out to the Mancunian reviewer struck me as rather cowardly, but it also illustrated an estrangement from society and how, even the process of expressing ones opinions can open up a can of worms.

I don't think that this is simply something to do with the internet though. I'm sure that readers would find the same reaction in real life. It is, however, important to realise that expressing an opinion, particularly when this is part of a critique, is a vital component of debate and writers should not be put off because they may offend readers. If people are offended by what you say, that is their problem and not yours (unless you make - or appear to make - unfounded accusations against someone). At the end of the day, they are free to respond, expressing their own views.

One of the aspects of today that I find difficulty with is how language has become divorced from any intellectual anchor, so that defining something is a never-ending exercise rather like seeking firm land in quicksand. This is something that can throw the critic into conflict with the reader or the artist. I recently learned, for example, that some institutions can no longer use the term 'young' (as in "Young Musician") and are required to use the term '**emerging**' making it seem as if there is a natal ward in some hospital that delivers artists.

### The impact of the internet and the demise of classic criticism

Most articles about the internet always seem to highlight its democratising element. And whilst this assertion is sometimes brought on to make extravagant claims, such as those made around the Arab Spring, there is an element of truth in it. Just as the invention of the telephone allowed people to speak to others over long distances, so too does the internet allow us to communicate with an enormous number of people, most who are, and will remain, strangers to us.

Whilst the potential for uniting groups of people is there, the democratising element is not simply a question of numbers - there is nothing democratic about the knee-jerk, lynch-mob approach that we find much of online, so typified by the Mancunion episode quoted above, where half a dozen comments results in a review being pulled. Democracy is also about tolerance.



An interesting article by the critic Andrew Collins, for [The Radio Times](#) suggested that advertisers appear to be enthralled by this idea of the democratising effect, and are by-passing the critic. They are using quotes taken from punters who have mentioned the product on social networking sites, such as Facebook and Twitter. Collins questions the value of this form of 'critique' and asks why we should trust what we read from unqualified comments on the internet.

This may strike some as 'elitist' but I think that his closing line, "You may not agree with me, but at least I'm real, and you can check my CV", is an important point. We know nothing about the people on Facebook or Twitter beyond what they choose to tell us. And so their particular tastes mean little. A critic, however, has something to fall back on, whether that be academic or simply a verifiable oeuvre. There is a big difference in what a friend tells us about a film, for example, and what a critic tells us. We are more likely to see the friend's assessment as part of the overall conversation and act accordingly by saying something vague like "Ooh, I'll try to get to see that". Yet if we take the trouble to check out a critic's assessment we would be far more liable to make the effort to act upon it.

Whilst I do think that there has been a demise in the quality of criticism, criticism still remains our best guide to shaping our tastes, and our overall view. Even if we disagree with the critic, it has still served a valuable lesson. Criticism, even as a review, is not simply about saying what is 'good' and what isn't. Criticism serves a purpose in contributing and shaping overall debate, because real criticism is a product of the critic's intellectual engagement with the world through an activity (that can be the arts or it can be through social/political criticism). And that is why, I feel, that the inclusion of a review section on the Manchester Salon webpage is important. It should not be seen as a snapshot of writers' tastes but as something which helps to shape the public discussions each month.

Public discussions also help writers to become better critics, because they are exposed to differing opinions and viewpoints. The crisis in intellectualism, quite apparent the past two decades, has also had a major impact on public debate as well as criticism. The *raison d'être* of the Manchester Salon and others across the UK and in New York seems to key into the desire for a wider public debate, and reviewing should be seen, not as an extension of the debate, but as an integral part of it.