

Introduction

Art and Culture Critique: Decline or Supremacy?

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Introduction

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- 1 What are the implications of the Internet for art and culture critique? The Internet is changing expert critique by giving every user the opportunity to become a critic. The fifth issue of *RESET* deals with the development of critique in digital worlds: what objects does it apply to? Who produces it, and how? What effects does it have?

A widening of the domain of critique?

- 2 Critical activity has spread in cultural and artistic circles in order to mediate between publics, producers and creators. It became a journalistic specialization from the second half of the 19th century (Rieffel, 2006) and helped to legitimize and structure some cultural domains such as literature, theater, painting, classical music or opera. Critics were, at that time, art critics. Throughout the 20th century, the area covered by critique has opened to a number of productions, such as cinema (Baecque, 2003), radio and television (Bourdon & Frodon, 2002), wine (Fernandez, 2004), etc. This extension coincides with three phenomena: the expansion of a specialized press; the systematization of critical pages in the cultural press; the professionalization of critics (Carbonnel, 2006)
- 3 The language of professional critique is now re-appropriated by Internet users who evaluate movies (Allard, 2002; Pasquier, Beaudoin & Legon, 2014) or literature (Bois, Vanhée & Saunier, 2015). Digital critique fits within a context of proliferation and diversification of online evaluation systems. Opinions can be expressed with words on blogs, websites or comments, but they also can be expressed with numbers, produced by individual notations or algorithms. Many works explore these new devices of evaluation (Beauvisage et al. 2013) by focusing on economic consequences of online recommendation (Belvaux & Marteaux 2007); by discussing the effectiveness of social networks (Mellet, 2011; Benhamou, 2012); by analyzing the role of the Internet in promoting cultural works (Beuscart & Mellet, 2012). In the areas traditionally covered by critique, the Internet does not only modify the business models and organization of

companies (digitalization, downloading, online shopping, etc.). It also fosters new tools and formats of evaluation, such as ranking the popularity of products according to the number of clicks they received, bloggers suggestions, or consumers' comments.

- 4 Critique has, however, one specific feature: it implies writing and arguing. Critique involves a process of description, analysis, judgement or prescription (Rieffel, 2006). The following papers focus on written critique and leave algorithm calculations aside.
- 5 While the forms of critique are changing, the array of products subject to it is widening (books, films, but also television series, video-games, etc.) and the critics are getting more diverse (professionals and non-professionals). These changes question the links between critics and the other actors of the cultural field.

Is everyone a critic? Critique's democratization

- 6 The possibility for everyone to express themselves publicly on diverse digital formats – linked to a movement that Patrice Flichy (2010) called the « consecration of the amateur » – questions the democratization of the critic's expertise. The Internet blurs the status of non-professional critics, who are both consumers and producers of critique. It also blurs the traditional frontiers between professionals and amateurs who speak from both a private and public point of view (Verbood, 2014; Kammer, 2015; Kristensen & From, 2015). How does the participation of non-professional critics change professional critics' work? What part of the evolution of critique is due to the Internet's distinctive features, particularly interactivity? The Internet seems to reverse the top-down legitimization by professional critics in favor of a bottom-up logic in which cultural products are recommended by amateurs.
- 7 Critique contributes to create the value of cultural products. However, this function is not performed by isolated people. The social contexts in which critique takes place are shaped by both relations of cooperation – in the Beckerian perspective of “art worlds” – and of competition – in the Bourdieusian perspective of “social fields”. In the Beckerian perspective, critique takes part in the cooperation between the various actors of culture worlds (artist, producers, press officers etc.). This perspective highlights the emergence of a consensus on the value of cultural goods and the ways to evaluate them. In a digital environment, where critics are diversified, such a consensus can be more difficult to reach.
- 8 The Internet updates several questions such as the issue of critics' impacts and status. These topics invite us to re-analyze the production of consensus (Van Rees, 1987) in the light of the critical discourse's volatility on the web. The following articles deal with these issues and question critics' autonomy.

Role and power of critique in cultural fields

- 9 The Internet challenges the “power” of critics. Reception studies show that critique's effects on consumers' representations and choices is far from automatic.
- 10 A number of sociologists defend the idea that critique as a genre is disappearing (Moulin, 1992; White & White, 1965) due to its transformation into a means of promotion in the hands of marketing and advertising agents (Pourtier, 2006). In addition, other sociologists argue that the influence of critics is being reduced to the

very definition of art (insofar as a work of art is an object of art critique) with no direct impact on sales or prices (François, 2008).

- 11 Even though critics are no longer “guides”, they still seem to retain a role as “attention catchers”. Research on contemporary transformations of culture worlds, including the Internet, show that critics have a structuring effect due to the consumers’ uncertainty regarding “singular goods” (Karpik, 2007) and due to the producers’ struggle for visibility. Therefore, the studies that focus on visibility (Heinich, 2012), reputation (Chauvin, 2010), or recognition (DEPS, 2010), pay particular attention to the role of critics.
- 12 By selecting some works to review them, critics realize a “rarefaction” of the space of “symbolic goods” (Bourdieu, 1977). They give a value to those cultural works that can possibly be turned into an economic price. The mere selection work, whatever the judgment might be, is enough to qualify the item as worthy of appreciation – and thus as piece of art. The existence of a critique is indeed a signal of the growing legitimacy of a domain. It has been noticed for jazz (Fabiani, 1986), cinema (Darré, 2006) and TV series (Béliard, 2013).
- 13 Even if critique has a minimal influence, it could have an effect on supply by selecting some products among others (Naulin, 2010) and thus modify producers’ strategy. The growing field of PR (press relations), dedicated to the intermediation between producers and critics, is a signal of the extent to which the “power” of critique is taken into account. In this context, the development of online critique raises some questions about the consequences of the diversification and the « power » of critics.
- 14 This *RESET* issue challenges traditional sociological questions. What about cultural legitimacy, and “artification” (Shapiro, 2004) today? Does the Internet change “advertising/critique dialectic” (Béra, 2003)? As opposed to advertising, critique epitomizes an independent channel of recognition and ranking of cultural products, which works as an actor of symbolical legitimization (Bourdieu, 1992). Does the Internet induce a « mix of genres » between critique and advertising?
- 15 The choice of this issue’s title (“Art and Culture Critique: Decline or Supremacy?”) reflects these questions: can we consider that the extension of criticized works, in accordance with the easiness of online publication, lead to a banalization of critique, or, on the contrary, to a burgeoning and an omnipresence of their activity?

A 2.0 critique?

- 16 The four articles show that, in spite of the extension of “what can be reviewed” induced by the Internet, digital reviewing still tackles “traditional” areas (cinema, literature, jazz, contemporary art). The diversified fieldworks of those articles also enlighten the multiplicity of digital devices used by reviewers: blogs, websites, YouTube and specialized websites comments, etc.
- 17 The tension between amateurs and professionals is a major stake of this issue: two articles deal with this question. Valérie Beaudouin and Dominique Pasquier’s article questions the amateur’s use of professional reviewers’ norms. Analyzing a dataset of online reviews on French movie website, they question the articulation between professional and amateur reviewing. The article shows that the choice of criticized movie, the scoring, and the way of reviewing differ. Amateurs who frequently publish

reviews, do it for a long time and review lots of movies are closer to professional reviewers than the others.

- 18 The pro-am tension is also questioned by Géraldine Bois, Émilie Saunier and Olivier Vanhée. They study the competition between bloggers and professional reviewers in the literary field. Are bloggers legitimate? What is their positioning with respect to established hierarchies? According to the characteristics of the publishing houses and of the books, editors do not confer the same weight to bloggers and traditional book reviewers in their promoting strategy. The growing solicitation of bloggers can be interpreted as a recognition of their legitimacy by traditional actors but it is not always interpreted like that by bloggers themselves. This article allows an understanding of the bloggers' point of view about their ability to overturn established hierarchies.
- 19 Legitimacy and cultural hierarchies are also a major stake in the study of Internet reviews. Wenceslas Lizé analyses the role of jazz critiques in the legitimation process of this musical genre. He specifically looks at the way jazz listeners are named by reviewers as an indicator of the social value attributed to jazz. Whereas institutionalized reviewers played an important role in the legitimation of jazz, online reviewers' role is more ambiguous. They are themselves submitted to a legitimation process that impact their activity.
- 20 Even institutionalized art forms like contemporary art face cultural hierarchy questions with the development of online reviews. Thomas Legrand's study addresses comments posted under YouTube contemporary art videos. It shows that expected democratization of discourses about contemporary art does not occur. Comments almost always participate in controversies around the question of what is (and what is not) art. The conversational aspect of the YouTube device drift the reviewers' discussion from the art piece to the ability of each speaker to judge the artistic nature of the work of art.
- 21 The four articles of this issue shed light on the specificities of online reviewing. W. Lizé shows that it is less the device (online or paper) than the artistic "genre" that determines the way of evaluating. Similarly, V. Beaudouin and D. Pasquier show that reviewing criteria do not strongly differ according to the place where they occur. However, there are differences among amateur reviewers between the very active ones, close to professional standards, and using aesthetical criteria, and the less active ones, using a more emotional rationale. Indeed, the different articles show a quite strong boundary between professional and amateur reviewers. Literary bloggers usually do not identify themselves with professional critiques; amateur film reviewers differ from professional in their actions (movie choices, rating, justifications), and amateur contemporary art critiques are clearly opposed to professional curators. Nevertheless, the articles simultaneously underline the heterogeneity of amateur profiles and they suggest a form of continuity between amateurs and professionals thanks to the Internet.
- 22 Finally, the articles state that until now, online critique remains secondary in comparison with "traditional" critique. G. Bois, É. Saunier and O. Vanhée show that the usual actors of books promotion do not consider online amateur reviewers as equal as professional critiques. Similarly, T. Legrand indicates that online contemporary art commentators have a very marginal effect on the economic field of contemporary art. The promoting effect seems far more limited than what is usually said. The balance sheet regarding the disrupting effect of online critique is thus nuanced. If new ways of

reviewing, new tools of expression, new actors and new devices appear, it remains that all of this does not question, at least in the short run, the dominant position of traditional critique and its role-model function.

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