

Arts criticism in crisis? a Polis special report and event

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  **Tonight (Monday 3rd) Sir John Tusa is in conversation with Rosie Millard in a special Polis event at the London College of Communication. Email polis@lse.ac.uk to reserve a seat.**

*“Few subjects agitate artists and promoters more than the critics writing in the print media. Overwhelmingly, most of those who work in the arts feel misunderstood and usually badly treated by the media – print and electronic.” — Sir John Tusa, from his book, *Engaged with the Arts*.*

To celebrate this event Polis has commissioned this special report from journalist Lara Farrar on the state of thinking about Arts Journalism

The story behind the success of Samuel Beckett’s play, “Waiting for Godot,” is one that Dr. Ronan McDonald, a senior lecturer in Modern English Literature at the University of Reading, knows well.

It goes something like this:

When the play premiered in London in 1955, it was greeted with hostility and contempt, said McDonald. Theatergoers left in the middle of performances, and daily newspaper reviewers wrote scathing critiques.

But eventually public opinion began to shift in a more positive direction, mainly because Kenneth Tynan and Harold Hobson, two of Britain’s most influential drama critics of the time, started writing favorable reviews of the play in Sunday newspapers, spurring audiences to give it a second chance.

“People said, ‘Hey, maybe we should look at this again,’” said McDonald. “People started to pay attention to it.”

Over fifty years later, “Waiting for Godot” is widely considered the most important theatrical work of the 20th century. But this is not the main reason why McDonald tells this story.

Instead he tells it as a sort of nostalgic lament for the end of what could be considered the golden age of arts criticism — a time when critics, like Tynan and Hobson, commanded respect and authority over their readers, introduced audiences to new artists and art forms and educated the public about style, culture and class.

“I think we have lost something,” said McDonald, who authored the book, “The Death of the Critic.” “There are still loads of reviewers and loads of venues for review but that kind of critic who penetrated the public conversation and whose work really mattered doesn’t exist anymore.”

All opinions are equal

McDonald is not the only one who feels this way. Over the past several years there has been a subtle, but increasingly prevalent, debate centering on the changing state of arts criticism, arts journalism and the role of the art critic: in the electronic age of blogs, user generated reviews, public interactivity and citizen journalism, it seems all opinions are equal, and everyone is entitled to have one.

“Everyone having a view where no one is being prized more than another means that everyone has their tastes confirmed,” said McDonald. “Culture becomes more homogenous, more uniform, more banal and completely into the hands of a voracious entertainment industry, which can produce more and more formulaic products.”

McDonald traces the so-called decline of the traditional art critic back to the late sixties. “The anti-authoritarian, anti-hierarchical spirit of that era did away with the patrician idea of the critic as expert,” he

said.

But others see it as a more recent, or at least more apparent, development.

“Art critics are entirely insignificant,” said David Lee (cq), art critic and editor of the visual arts newsletter, The Jackdaw (cq). “There is no art critic today who has any influence at all on whether an artist becomes famous.”

Blame the Tate

Lee places the blame for the degeneration of arts criticism, at least in the British media, largely on the Tate Gallery and its “repackaging” of the Turner Prize in the early nineties. The Tate started the Turner Prize in 1984. The annual award, named after the English landscape painter J.M.W. Turner, is presented to an individual considered to have made the greatest contribution to British art every year.

In 1991, the Tate realized it needed to find a way to generate more publicity for the prize, which was being widely ignored by a disinterested public, said Lee. “They wished to get people talking about contemporary art,” he said. “Until that time, no one [cared].”

The outcome of the Turner’s makeover was a shift in the way British newspapers covered the arts, said Lee. Coverage moved from the arts section to the news section, which also meant the nature of the arts story changed — articles now had to be entertaining, if not sensationalistic, preferably controversial and, most of all, newsworthy, he said.

Arts journalism began to emulate celebrity journalism. The spotlight shifted from the painting to the painter. “It all adds up to celebrity,” said Lee. “It is almost as if the art is insignificant.”

What is not insignificant, though, is the subsequent explosion of public interest in art. “To a greater degree more people are aware of what is going on now than they ever have been,” said Lee.

In 2007, for example, over five million people visited the Tate Modern, making the gallery, which opened in 2000, London’s most visited tourist attraction last year, while contemporary artists, like Damien Hirst and Tracey Emin, have practically become household names.

But an interested public does not necessarily mean an informed public, said Lee, who, like McDonald, points his finger at critics who “are prepared to play the celebrity game” and are not concerned about introducing their readers to new artists or educating them about art.

“They [art critics] all write about the same shows, and they always go to the same places,” said Lee. “It is a very narrow coterie of taste which is being promoted all the time.”

Yet critics cannot be held totally responsible for the state of their profession, said Brian Sewell, a British art historian and art critic for The Evening Standard since 1984.

A vicious news cycle

“There is a way in which institutions control a critic,” said Sewell, noting the demands of increasingly faster news cycles combined with galleries that fail to provide critics with adequate information about exhibitions, permitting the press to view new shows only a couple of days before they open.

“The result is that criticism itself is uninformed because it hasn’t had time to think,” he said. “This is the way in which it is now controlled.”

Sewell also points to what he sees as a regrettable, but increasingly popular, trend towards the celebrity-as-

critic, where celebrities are courted to become reviewers, their opinions valued simply because they are famous.

“There seems to be on both radio and television generally a view that if you want to introduce people who know nothing about a subject to a new subject in the arts, then the best person to introduce it is to use someone who also knows nothing about it,” said Sewell. “You get people presented as having the authority of critics who know absolutely nothing, and I mean absolutely nothing, about the subject.”

Art soup

Sewell said a similar pattern of naivete is emerging from the work of younger art critics. “The history of art is just soup in which Rembrandt and Renoir are sort of swimming together at the same time” he said. “They have no sense of art history.”

The debate about the relationship between the arts and journalism does not only center around visual art and the British media’s coverage of it. It also extends largely into the intangible world of the Internet, with its blogospheres, user-generated reviews and immediacy of publication, which some say has all but rendered obsolete the once authoritative voice of the critic.

The Web wins

A recent study by the California-based online ticket seller Goldstar Events found, for example, that over 60 percent of respondents said they would be “very likely” to seek out a website with user-reviews compared to just 25 percent who said they would turn to a newspaper or magazine. Almost half of those surveyed also said a negative review by a major columnist would have little or no effect on whether or not they attended a live performance.

“It [blogging] is enabling a greater critique of a greater range of work,” said Gillian Nicol, an editor for The Artist Information Company’s website, a-n.co.uk. The website features a section called Interface, an online platform that allows users to post their own art reviews.

Aside from diversifying the selection of new art introduced to the public, Nicol said a-n’s blog also gives aspiring writers a chance to showcase their work by subverting the hierarchical structure of the mainstream media.

“I think it opens up the potential for people to rise to the surface and for people to become visible and to gain a kind of name and reputation,” said Nicol, who often recruits contributors from the blog to write for a-n Magazine, the website’s corresponding publication. “The mainstream kind of system is very closed [to new writers].”

Rachel Lois Clapham is an example of a writer who has found success in the blogosphere. Several years ago, the curator and critic began posting reviews of contemporary art shows on her MySpace.com page, gradually developing a base of readers who followed her work.

Eventually galleries began to invite Clapham to review exhibitions. She now writes for a number of print publications and websites, including Writing From Live Art, a Live Art UK and Arts Council-sponsored webpage aimed at cultivating new writing talent.

Digital liberation

“It [blogging] is very democratic,” said Clapham. “You don’t have to be rich, and you don’t have to study contemporary art theory, and you don’t have to be an art historian to publish your own work. It is a liberating thing.”

But Clapham is very cognizant of the fact that traditional critics, like David Lee and Brian Sewell, disdain blogging and see the Internet as a force that is also devaluing arts criticism.

“I can only think that those people are threatened,” she said. “What it means with someone like Brian Sewell is your job is not so safe. Ten years down the line it could be someone on MySpace that you read, not someone in the broadsheets.”

“I would say that blogging and everybody having their own opinion has literally brought something to the fore that has always been there,” Clapham added. “Everybody does have an opinion. It is just in the past, certain people’s opinion mattered more than others, and that is an ideology I would question.”

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