



Revisiting reviewing: The need for a debate on the role of arts journalism in South Africa

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Abstract

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The assault on the editor of a publication at a South African arts festival by an artist who disliked a review of his concert again highlighted an age-old rift between artists and critics. However, the response that this incident elicited among readers of this and other publications, showed surprising support for the artist rather than for the journalist. If this is read as an indication of a disillusionment among readers with regard to the standards of arts journalism in South Africa, the relationship between arts journalists and society should be re-examined. Ethical journalism rests upon a relationship between journalist and audience, and a sensitivity for the context in which journalism is practised. This article examines arts journalism within changing societal contexts, with a specific focus on the South African situation, where artistic production still bears witness to cultural and ethnic divisions of the past. Against the background of the changes that have occurred in society on a local and global level, it is argued that a re-evaluation of the roles and responsibilities of arts journalists is needed – especially in the light of the formation of new cultural identities after apartheid. In conclusion, an ongoing and in-depth debate about the ethical responsibility of arts journalism is suggested in order to ensure its continued relevance within an increasingly commercialised cultural context on the one hand, and within a changing South African society on the other.

Opsomming

'n Herbesinning oor resensering: die noodsaak vir 'n debat oor die rol van kunsjoernalistiek in Suid-Afrika

'n Aanval op die redakteur van 'n feespublikasie by 'n Suid-Afrikaanse kunstefees deur 'n kunstenaar wat nie gehou het van 'n resensie oor sy vertoning nie, het weer 'n ou kloof tussen kunstenaars en resensente onder die aandag gebring. Die reaksie wat hierdie insident ontlok het onder die lesers van hierdie en ander publikasies, het egter verbasend baie steun vir die kunstenaar eerder as vir die joernalis getoon. As hierdie reaksie 'n aanduiding is van lesers se ontnugtering met die standarde van kunsjoernalistiek in Suid-Afrika, is dit nodig om die verhouding tussen kunsjoernaliste en die samelewing te herondersoek. Hierdie artikel ondersoek kunsjoernalistiek binne veranderende sosiale kontekste, met 'n spesifieke fokus op die Suid-Afrikaanse situasie. Kunsjoernaliste se rol binne 'n samelewing soos Suid-Afrika, waar artistieke produksie steeds getuig van die kulturele en etniese verdelings van die verlede, word ondersoek. In die lig van die veranderinge wat in die samelewing op 'n plaaslike en globale vlak plaasgevind het, word dit beredeneer dat 'n herevaluering van die rolle en verantwoordelikhede van kunsjoernaliste noodsaaklik is, veral in die lig van die vorming van nuwe kulturele identiteite ná apartheid. Die artikel sluit af deur aan te beveel dat 'n voortgaande en diepgaande debat sal plaasvind oor die etiese verantwoordelikheid van kunsjoernalistiek wat die voortgesette relevansie daarvan binne 'n toenemend kommersiële kulturele konteks enersyds, en binne 'n veranderende Suid-Afrikaanse samelewing andersyds, sal verseker.

1. Introduction: Arts, criticism and society

A Latin proverb goes: *De gustibus non est disputandum*, translated as "There is no accounting for tastes" (Knowles, 2000:277). Yet arts journalists make a living out of precisely that – accounting for taste. Or do they? Is arts journalism merely based on individual opinions, or is there also some intersubjective framework in which they operate? Are arts critics a law unto themselves, governed by a specialist knowledge only an elite few are privy to, or should they be accountable to the public at large and governed by codes of conduct? Is there an universal aesthetic that arts journalists should be initiated in? Do they operate according to individual standards or should different aesthetics be developed according to the varying contexts in which arts journalists work?

Questions such as these about the practice of arts journalism¹ and the role of critics became pertinent again during and after the 2002 Klein Karoo Arts Festival held in Oudtshoorn, South Africa, when Jan-Jan Joubert, editor of the festival newspaper *Krit*, was reportedly assaulted by the pop star, Steve Hofmeyr, on account of the newspaper having published a negative review of Hofmeyr's show. Hofmeyr's dissatisfaction with the review (Human, 2002), was reportedly rooted in remarks about his family and his fans. Hofmeyr was reported to have chosen to assault the editor and not the reviewer herself (who fled when Hofmeyr approached), partly because Hofmeyr was of the opinion that Joubert as editor should have guarded against the journalist transgressing the boundaries between the public and the private (Nieuwoudt & Booyens, 2002:1).

One can argue that there will – and should – always remain some tension between art critics and artists, for the sake of journalistic independence (Botma, 2002). The incident, however, also worryingly, highlighted the chasms existing between arts journalists and the public whose interests they are supposed to represent – many of the letters published in Afrikaans newspapers as part of the ensuing controversy showed support for Hofmeyr and defended his action against what was generally seen as a poor review. The review in question would probably be deemed to be below the accepted

1 Critics such as Titchener (1998) distinguish between arts reporters, reviewers and critics according to the different approaches they take in writing about the arts. It is debatable, however, if such a distinction should be made between individuals rather than between different genres or types of articles or stories. The same journalist can, for example, write an advance article, an immediate reaction, or review, of a production as well as a lengthier, more in-depth article, called "criticism" in Titchener's terminology. These genres can also overlap. The distinction between review and criticism is also not clear-cut. Harriss *et al.* (1992:457) defines a review as "presenting the facts without editorializing" and criticism as a form of writing that requires expert judgment. It is doubtful whether the term *review* can imply a form of writing without some form of editorialising, and what the use of such a definition would be – if a review does not contain comment, how is it different from a report? Because of the unclear boundaries between these different forms of arts writing, the terms *arts journalism*, *reviewing* and *criticism* are used interchangeably in this article. A significant part of arts journalism in South Africa also consists of reporting on upcoming events, giving coverage to the politics of arts and culture in the country, interviewing artists, etc. The principles and guidelines informing arts news reporting – e.g. news selection, framing, emphasis etc. – are related to those informing evaluative reviews, and is therefore included in the term *arts journalism* used in this article. While the emphasis may, however, fall on reviewing in particular, the concern is more with popular media than with the academic form of criticism such as may be found in the pages of scholarly journals.

standard of mainstream publications (in his defence of the publication of the review, Joubert [2002] emphasised that the review should be read within the context of the informal festival atmosphere). However, the fact that many members of the public expressed antagonism against the media and made use of the opportunity to deplore the standard of reviews in general, is alarming.

The strong reaction the review elicited² – a debate raged in the Afrikaans press for weeks on end – seems to suggest a dissatisfaction related to arts journalism on a larger scale than only the specific review in question. This article will not offer an analysis of the specific case, nor will it attempt to answer all the above-mentioned questions arising from the incident. It is aimed rather at exploring some general aspects of arts journalism and its relationship with society. When, as one would deduct from the public reaction following the above-mentioned debacle at the Klein Karoo Arts Festival, this relationship shows signs of severe strain, it is necessary to again bring into focus the demands of this particular form of journalism in order to examine its responsibility towards society. Indeed, as Ansell (2003:42) notes: “Arts journalism is in crisis in South Africa, and no one seems to care”.

Two aspects regarding the relationship between the arts, the media and audiences can be identified. On the one hand a media-ethical investigation could pertain to moral judgments about the content and possible effects of artistic production that are channelled to audiences via the mass media, such as films, videos, video games,

2 Space does not permit a content analysis of the debate itself that took place in the weeks after the incident. The debate was especially intense in the Afrikaans press, although the English press also gave coverage to the incident (see e.g. *Cape Argus*, 2002; Van der Merwe, 2002; Wilson, 2002). More than 32% of the respondents in an Internet poll conducted on the News24 website supported the artist, as opposed to 22% who did not see anything wrong in the review itself. 45% of the respondents expressed neutrality about the incident. Artists at the festival also almost unanimously chose the side of the artist against the journalist (Booyens & Pelser, 2002:3), and Hofmeyr was also quoted (*Cape Argus*, 2002) as saying that he experienced support “nationally and internationally”. In several of the letters written to the press in the ensuing debate, the critic was chastised for what was considered a personal attack on the artist. A spokesperson for the festival was quoted as saying that the public reaction against the review indicated a strong support for the artist. She was of the opinion that artists felt defenceless against the media and suggested a need for the media to engage in an open debate with artists to alleviate what she called a frustration that had been building up over a long period (De Vries, 2002:10).

pop music and the like. Another aspect would be the evaluative function performed by arts journalists: the ways they go about in gathering arts news and material for evaluation, how they disseminate information and opinions about artistic work and how their work is informed by certain assumptions about the relationship between the arts, media and society. As for the first consideration: Although difference of opinion exists as to the extent of the influence that the entertainment media has on audiences³, arts journalists should be aware that it might be expected of them to provide some kind of guidance with regard to the potential harmful effects of the work under review, for instance where it concerns the consideration of juvenile audiences (cf. Day, 1991:303). However, the ethical ramifications regarding the *contents* of entertainment media products is not the focus of this article.

The article is rather concerned with the second aspect, namely the act of criticism itself – in other words, how artistic works are *judged* by journalists. Even from an ethical point of view – a framework that will only be touched upon but not elaborated here – the imperatives incumbent upon arts journalists will have to extend further than merely issuing warnings about potentially morally offensive material in the work under review and re-iterating age restrictions – arts journalists should constantly scrutinise their place as mediators between creative expression and the society in which this expression takes place. Because they contribute to the understanding and appreciation of art (Day, 1991:337), arts journalists should take seriously their responsibility towards both artists and audiences. A sensitivity to the broader societal context, the attitudes and tastes of their audience, and the function or aim of art in this society should therefore be cultivated by arts journalists.

It is the contention of this article that the contexts in which arts criticism is conducted – both globally and in South Africa specifically – have in recent years undergone changes to such an extent that the role and responsibilities of arts journalism should be re-considered. The focus will subsequently focus on these changes on a local and global level to indicate the need for a substantial re-evaluation of the ethics of arts journalism in South Africa. First, however, brief consideration will be given to the role of arts journalism in the public interest.

3 For some views on the influence of media violence and sex on audiences, see Day (1991:209-210), Claassen (1994:88) and Retief (2002: 213 ff.).

2. Arts journalism and the public interest

Although space does not permit to provide a detailed discussion of the relationship between arts and ethics, it is necessary to make a few comments regarding the broad framework of media ethics in which South African arts journalists work. The majority of ethical codes in the country are based on liberal democratic principles, and in some cases concepts such as *objectivity* and *truth* are used fairly uncritically in these codes. A critique of these codes will not be given here, but merely a broad overview of the prevailing ethical climate in the South African media industry, so as to sketch the social context in which debates about ethics in arts journalism would take place.

Since criticism affects the relation between art and human life (Siebers, 1988:7), their critical choices should be ethically justified so as to facilitate this relationship responsibly. The ability to judge art within a broader societal framework and having “some instinct for how that context affects what we see and how we see it” (Taylor, 1999) and helping audiences to “understand the world we live in better and to broaden our horizons” (Van Nierop, 1998:vi) is what sets good critics apart. A sense of context is therefore indisposable for reviewers. Each review or article “should reflect the reality of the year and place in which it is written”, Cariaga (1991:173) claims.

As is the case with other forms of journalism, the arts journalist has to be led in his or her decisions by the public interest – bearing in mind that he or she is also a member of the public exercising an opinion over a specific work and sharing this opinion with others for their benefit (De Moor, 1993:24). A critic’s major responsibility is therefore towards the reader, rather than towards the artist whose work is under review (Harriss *et al.*, 1992:459). Mass media entertainment, Claassen (1994:95, 100) indicates, also educates and socialises audiences and plays an important role in the formation of values. While this role has implications for a reviewer’s consideration of the moral sensibilities of their audiences and the likelihood for a work under review to offend (which is not the focus of this discussion; suffice it to say that a work of art should not be judged good or bad purely on the basis of its compliance to moral values), it also means that art and entertainment form part of the symbolic frameworks and discursive formations in which identities are formed. Ideally, the media in a democracy will provide “informational and symbolic resources for citizenship” (Steenveld, 2002:71), which could be understood as including signifying frameworks that would help audiences make sense of societal changes. Since art contributes to such frameworks of understanding, the facilitation of

audience interaction with artistic works can therefore be seen as part of the democratic duty of the media in a society in search of a new national identity (cf. Steenveld, 2002:65). The media, after all, contributes in no small way to the formation of world views as well as to collective and personal identities (Gripsrud, 2002:5-6).

The position from where the critic mediates between artistic work and audience has, however, undergone certain significant changes in recent years. Since these contextual changes have implications for the role and responsibility of the critic and is of central importance to the core question of this article, namely whether a re-evaluation of the role of arts journalism in South Africa is necessary, it is worth considering them in more detail.

3. General changes

The re-examination of evaluative frameworks for judging artistic expression is not a new phenomenon. On a theoretical level, this has for instance taken place within postmodernist cultural studies, which criticised global capitalism and its artistic exponents by subjugating artistic evaluation to a broader analysis of the ways in which aesthetics form part of a culture of consumption. The aim was to establish how cultural expression can escape the “hegemony of capital-driven commodity production” (Thornton, 2000:32). This focus on the commodification of culture to serve hegemonic agendas has again resurfaced in current critiques of globalisation, as will be pointed out shortly. Of importance to note here, is that the theoretical insights of poststructuralism brought an awareness that aesthetic values and norms for excellence are constantly under review, never finalised, open-ended. As Thornton (2000:32) points out: “(T)he canon is now forever ‘opened’ (...)”. A consequence of poststructuralism’s “hermeneutic of suspicion” was the awareness of all evaluation and interpretation as “precarious and subjective”, which in turn led to a “resurgence of social and cultural criticism” that rested on the view that the world *outside* the text informed the assumptions and hierarchies that could be unearthed *within* the text (Dickstein, 1992:6). One result of this changed focus was that boundaries between “high” and “low” art were blurred, and value judgments about the standards of artistic performance therefore became less clearly defined. For instance, “popular” art forms now form part of the scope of academic inquiry, while “serious” art also incorporate elements from popular forms.

Recently, changes in the arts and entertainment industry have also led to a change in the role of the critic within the chain of artistic

production and reception. This phenomenon is linked with the increased importance of entertainment within the global information economy. Giger (1999: 24-25) points to the increasing space that popular culture occupies in arts and culture journalism, compared to a decade or two ago. More importantly, he comments on the shift towards the “what” rather than the “why” of arts and entertainment – the fact *that* a certain artistic event will take place has become, according to him, more important than the *content* of that event and its *importance*. Concomitant with this event culture is what he calls the “symbiosis of star cult and sponsoring” – the determination of cultural activity by large corporations which fabricate celebrities, that in turn become ends in themselves rather than artists whose celebrity is dependent on their work.

Giger (1999:25) laments: “This shift from traditional culture criticism to event reporting is a fateful one, because it introduces a populist concept of quality: what is important and therefore good is what most people go to see”.

Giger (1999:25), however, also admits that the succumbence to market forces has also done artistic criticism some good, in that it represents a greater realisation of the commercial and therefore socio-political context in which artistic production takes place.

However, the increasing economic pressures on the media, dictating that journalists should seek to satisfy their customers at all costs, make it all the more difficult for journalists to weigh immediate gratification of a target audience against the sensibilities of society at large – a society which also includes those from which financial rewards will not be forthcoming: children, religious or cultural minorities, the economically disadvantaged. The increasing trend that Baker (2002) points out for newspapers, that is to be profit-driven and subsequently cutting back on costs, will undoubtedly also have implications for arts journalism in general. Arts sections in newspapers, especially those focusing on art forms which do not attract mass audiences, are generally not the most profitable, especially compared to, for instance, sports pages, because they appeal to a smaller niche audience (cf. Berger, 2001). This added pressure could probably cause arts journalists to divert their attention from reflections about societal responsibilities and contextualising towards more immediate concerns about attracting readers and cutting costs.

In another development, technological changes have made it easier for new participants in the evaluative discourses to emerge. This

development has resulted in an erosion of the power of reviewers in influencing opinion. Society today is pervaded by information and technological developments such as the Internet, where “blogging” has become a rival for mainstream journalism, and opinion is “democratised”. Linked to this broadening of the discursive field, is the development of what is commonly referred to as the knowledge economy or the information society. In this new economy, art and entertainment do not occupy the same peripheral – and critical – position they had previously. Arts and entertainment have now increasingly become a participant in social and economic processes. This trend was illustrated a few years ago by Sony’s creation of a fictional film critic, one “David Manning” of “The Ridgefield Press”. Quotes by this fake critic was used to promote Columbia Pictures’ films (Bowen, 2001). This is an indication of an individual (sometimes even respected) critic’s opinion becoming a commodity in the marketplace rather than a critical or heuristic tool. Moreover, issues such as authenticity, objectivity and originality are more difficult to pin down as technological advances are accelerating the process of globalisation. The ability of big entertainment and media companies to provide publicity for their own products has been increased by takeovers and mergers creating media conglomerates such as AOL-Time Warner. The consequence is that pressure has mounted on reviewers to take part in the media hype surrounding new films, since their publication forms part of the same commercial interest as the one producing the art work (cf. Taylor, 1999). The publication and broadcast of bestseller lists or “blockbuster” lists of ticket sales can be seen as an example of this emphasis on commercial success. Dickstein (1992:57) expresses this tendency with reference to book reviews:

Instead of selling books themselves, publishers have learned to peddle the personalities of authors. [...] Newspapers and magazines have responded to this [...] climate by integrating reviews into their new Style sections and surrounding them with interviews, gossip, feature stories, ads, and listings. Accounts of book and movie deals, paperback sales, production problems, and the private lives of authors and performers have increasingly taken the place of critical judgments in the form of reviews. Nimble young journalists have learned to work their critical ideas into profiles and interviews, often between the lines. Reviews themselves often seem beleaguered. It is still possible, occasionally, to see a book or movie roasted in one column while being promoted uncritically as a glorious event on the other side of the page. But this schizophrenia has become too stressful even for reviewers to bear; it’s far easier for them

to join the chorus of celebration before passing on to the next undying masterpiece. Reviewers have become television performers themselves, peddling their personalities in bite-size chunks like actors on talk shows.

This over-exposure contributes to the rise of the celebrity cult, so that the tautological situation arises that people are well-known because audiences are told that they are well-known, as Daniel Boorstin famously described celebrities (see Gitlin, 2002:147).

While this situation must partly be attributed to uncritical or lazy journalists that merely repeat promotional material, it does sometimes happen that something originating as promotional material has acquired the status of news by the time the journalist deals with it. This situation leaves him/her no choice but to report on it. What started off as hype has, by the time it has reached the journalist, become news – the who's who that attended the première, for instance, the record amount of money that a film launch cost, etc. Now this information gets repeated as *post hoc* facts, even further bolstering the celebrity discourse. Eventually this discourse becomes so powerful that an omission of facts or events that belong to this discourse, will be seen as an oversight. Creating a counter-flow of information that would go against the grain of this fabricated news and celebrity discourses is virtually impossible. A regime of truth is created with the assistance of big capital, and any information or utterance going against this discourse, will be punished by falsification or marginalisation.

The increasing economic pressures on journalists has caused concern extending beyond arts journalism specifically. Russell Baker (2002:4), speaking from an American perspective, recently proclaimed that “this is journalism’s age of melancholy”:

Newspaper people [...] have of late lost all their gaiety, and small wonder. They have discovered that their prime duty is no longer to maintain the republic in well-informed condition – or to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable, as the old gospel has it – but to serve the stock market with a good earnings report every three months or, in plainer English, to comfort the comfortable.

4. Local changes

Because of the pervasive influence of global media and the far-reaching tentacles of the industry, the above also applies to South Africa. The effect of these changes in what one could call the

cultural economy of the media are, in fact, even enlarged because of the unequal power relations between global media industries and local contexts.

It is therefore not surprising that commentators have pointed to the detrimental effect the growth of the global entertainment industry may have on smaller artistic endeavours in developing countries. Market globalisation is seen to threaten independence (Dearham, 2003), affecting artistic production as well as the quality of journalism in South Africa, where

... books are considered a luxury, even for students; in which lotto tickets are cheaper than newspapers; in which our biggest celebrities are Big Brother rejects; in which children are dying of starvation when we are spending R60-billion on arms; in which our cities are spending less on libraries than they did 20 years ago (Harber, 2002).

Ansell (2003:42) also notes the “shoddy standards” of arts journalism in South Africa that makes this form of journalism even more “vulnerable” to commercial pressures.

Similar to their counterparts elsewhere, critics in South Africa should focus their attention on deepening the discourse on arts and culture in the face of the barrage of entertainment hype reaching them from abroad. They should especially take heed of the relationship between artistic expression and societal contexts, in the knowledge that these are interweaved and dialogical (cf. Smit & Van Wyk’s [2001:151] reference to Bakhtin’s notion of “dialogism”). The role of arts journalism in creating meaningful discourse about art does, however, become even more complex in a society like South Africa, with its diversity of backgrounds, cultural orientations, vast class differences and a historic privileging of the tastes, aesthetics and morals of certain minorities. Arts critics should therefore fulfil the role of facilitators for this dialogue, especially in South Africa, where many of these speech partners have been kept silent or muted in various ways.

In these circumstances arts journalists should bear in mind that the imperative of social responsibility also have implications for the relationship between journalism and the market economy. According to Graham Murdock (cited in Rønning & Kasoma, 2002:16), there exists a “fundamental perception of the relationship between democratic processes and egalitarianism, and here the agenda of market liberalism [...] parts ways with a more social- and rights-oriented interpretation of the role of communication systems and

democracy". Crucially, in a democracy "audiences should be treated as both consumers and citizens, and constitute a public" (Rønning & Kasoma, 2002:16). This requirement applies to arts journalists as well. They also have a role in critically evaluating and interpreting entertainment products as well as other forms of artistic production with a view to the public interest. The concept of *public interest* and how it relates to taste, however raises intricate questions that will have to be dealt with in a debate about the future of arts criticism in the country. For instance – what is the difference between public interest and public curiosity that translates into public consumption? Who can decide what is in the public's interest? How can the "tyranny of the majority", a danger inherent in utilitarian thinking, be avoided when using the public interest as a guide?

Arts journalists or reviewers are indeed writing the history of, among other forms, South African theatre (Basson, 2002), and as such play an important part in the canonisation and the fixing of aesthetic boundaries. In this hybridised context critics should also constantly subject their own aesthetic values to a critical re-evaluation to uncover the underlying prejudices and assumptions informing their judgments. Arts journalists in post-apartheid South Africa should therefore be aware of their responsibility with regard to cultural and aesthetic value production in a diverse society still marked to a large extent by the antagonistic politicisation of linguistic and cultural diversity during apartheid (Tomaselli, 2000:282). Arts criticism in South Africa has also evolved along ethnic and racial polarisations. Ansell (2003:42) reminds one of the strong tradition of literary criticism and arts commentary in the black press that dates back to the 19th century, and cultural discourses in the struggle era that defied the apartheid hegemony. She notes that a separate cultural discourse was created in the Afrikaans press, concomitant with Afrikaans identity discourses. A re-contextualising of art and culture discourses in post-apartheid South Africa would also imply a view towards these different traditions, how they contributed to the formation of identity and how they can be drawn upon in the construction of post-apartheid cultural identities.

This re-contextualising does not imply succumbing to superficial "rainbow" discourses or bowing before the new masters of political correctness, but rather retaining the critical independence that is a central tenet of good journalism (cf. Black *et al.*, 1995:94; Retief, 2002:133). Albie Sachs's warning (quoted in Muller, 1999/2000:41) should be heeded in this regard:

Instead of getting real criticism, we get solidarity criticism. Our artists are not pushed to improve the quality of their work, it is enough that it be politically correct. The more fists and spears and guns, the better. The range of themes is narrowed down so much that all that is funny or curious or genuinely tragic in the world is extruded. Ambiguity and contradiction are completely shut out, and the only conflict permitted is that between the old and new, as if there were only bad in the past and only good in the future.

Reverting to simplistic dichotomies between Western and African art, pre-apartheid or post-apartheid artists or “apartheid art” vs “struggle art” will only serve to set the debate on arts and culture back. Turning around the old binaries is not an option, nor is the obliteration of all difference (cf. Muller, 1998:81). Rather, practising arts criticism in post-apartheid South Africa might mean asking new questions, putting new issues on the agenda, expanding current criteria to also include contextual imperatives. These imperatives then might mean relating the work of art to a wider network of meaning which would include the *socius* from which it is drawn and in which it is performed, and evaluating the success or otherwise of these relationships. A work of art that says something about the socio-political context does not immediately become a good work of art by virtue of its political sentiments – it can even be a mediocre or bad work of art because this message is portrayed too clearly, too unequivocally. By this the potential for art to resist hegemony and oppression is not denied, but resistance (and especially of the politically correct, caricaturally subservient and predictable type) alone an aesthetic does not make – although this was often the case in anti-apartheid discourses⁴. But this does not detract from the fact that art cannot be viewed as somehow separate from its societal context. Contextual awareness also entails critically examining the political economy of art in South Africa and how the production, performance and circulation of art serve commercial interests, and how these interests impact on the content of the art work – for instance the appropriation and commodification of indigenous art. The debate on a post-apartheid aesthetic is too broad and complex

4 Cf. for instance Pallo Jordan's (1989:264, 265) re-iteration of the ANC's position then that the “task of the democratic artists is to define, through their art, the political and social vision of the democratic majority” and that although the ANC did not “require poets to become political sloganeers”, they did “require propaganda art”.

to be entered into here⁵, but arts journalists should at least recognise the need for debate on the issue of standards and realise the danger that universalist aesthetic ideals might homogenise Western cultural norms and oppress other forms of aesthetic expression that differ from them (Thornton, 2000:31, 35). Critics in post-apartheid South Africa should therefore also interrogate the standards with which they judge works of art and attempt to develop an aesthetic in which African notions of artistic excellence (cf. Mphahlele, 2002:381) are incorporated. Although values, morality and canonical norms are constructed within relations of power, rather than being pre-existing or having evolved naturally (cf. Thornton, 2000:31, 35), a re-appraisal of these norms should not necessarily mean that an aesthetic should be dictated by ideological considerations that would narrow down the structures for artistic evaluation rather than broaden them.

The process of contextualising arts criticism in South Africa today should also entail the evaluation of existing boundaries between “high” and “low” culture⁶. South African criticism of the arts should scrutinise the ways in which the distinction between “mass” and “popular” culture incorporate hegemonic notions about race, gender, class and ethnicity serving elite interests (Thornton, 2000: 29). The way that this contrast was also employed in apartheid discourses to maintain cultural superiority for white artistic endeavours in order to “fortify the divisions between white and black in South Africa after 1948” (Muller, 1998:75) should also receive attention. Again it should be emphasised that this does not mean that standards should be lowered or jettisoned, but rather that these standards are not replicating ideological structures belonging to a previous era.

5 For an outline of this debate from a postcolonial perspective, see for instance Coombes (1994), Clifford (1988), Said (1991; 1993). For a discussion of debates on aesthetic evaluatory frameworks pertaining to South Africa, see Coetzee, Smith and Willemse (1990:60) (regarding literature), Muller (1998 and 1999/2000) (regarding music) and Rankin (1997) (regarding artistic evaluation in educational contexts).

6 This distinction is handled in a somewhat outdated fashion by Day, in referring to “popular entertainment” versus “art” and distinguishing between categories such as “fine art”, “folk art” and “popular art” (Day, 1991:326-327). His definition of “popular art”, for example, reads: “... creative works that measure their success by the size of their audiences and the volume of their profits” (Day, 1991:327). Where would leave this, for example, “alternative” rock music – as a form of “fine art”? The postmodernist introduction of popular art into the mainstream of what was before considered “high art” does also not receive attention in Day’s discussion.

In the post-apartheid era in South Africa, this function of the media – and that includes media dealing with the arts – is vitally important to reinscribe previously marginalised voices into the public discourse. This would mean that arts journalists constantly challenge themselves to extend their own frame of reference by improving their cultural literacy and general knowledge.

5. Conclusion: the need for debate

This article attempted to show the need for a critical evaluation of arts reporting in South Africa and set out to outline some of the reasons why such a re-evaluation is necessary. It is contended that specific attention be paid to the responsibility of arts journalists in order to ensure their continued relevance within an increasingly commercialised cultural context on the one hand, and within a changing South African society on the other.

In conclusion it could be said that there exist some compelling reasons for an in-depth look at the state of arts journalism in the country. The contexts, both globally and locally, in which arts journalists work, have changed significantly in recent years. Globally, arts journalism has lost some of its power and its position as critical voice on the margins of the establishment. In the new economy, art and entertainment are increasingly subject to market forces, and arts journalism therefore has become more of a commercial role player than in the past. Locally, the previously imposed boundaries between cultures have been fading since the end of apartheid. While the legacy of apartheid continues in the sense that there are still large inequalities among cultural groupings concerning access to education, media and wealth (translating into some audiences being much more attractive to advertisers than other), the cultural identities of apartheid are starting to be renegotiated. In this process the media – and to a large extent arts journalism, since cultural and national identities are often formed through signification processes such as artistic expression (cf. Gecau, 1999:19-20) – plays an important role. Arts journalists will have to sometimes require of audiences to re-evaluate their expectations in order to overcome the rigid categorisations of art and culture according to the imposed ethnicities (Zegeye's term, 2001:2-3) of the past.

In a challenging context such as contemporary South African society, journalists have to negotiate their way through many obstacles. Arts journalism should not be exempt from the critical self-evaluation that journalists working in other fields should subject

themselves to. This requirement should not be confused with a plea for aesthetic norms being imposed from above. Superficial political correctness and a prudish morality-based imagination stifle artistic expression. However, in mediating between artists and the public, arts journalists should not underestimate the impact their work may have to unlock artistic value that may lead to new forms of identification emerging in a country where the processes of re-imagining ourselves (Nuttall & Michael, 2000:2) might be emerging but are far from complete nor taking place on equal footing.

Where does this leave the critic in his or her relationship with their audience? It was mentioned in the introduction that the public reaction following the debacle at the Klein Karoo Arts Festival indicates strain in the relationship between critics and audiences. It was subsequently argued that the role of the arts journalist has changed in recent times as a result of global as well as of local processes, and that a responsibility rests on arts journalists in South Africa to examine ways in which their work might contribute to a redefinition of culture and identity in the wake of the end of apartheid's divisions. In order to fulfil this ethical obligation to society, arts journalists should, on the one hand, strive to establish credibility among their audiences by good quality criticism. This would imply the development of skills and the fostering of support for arts journalism. On the other hand, arts journalists also have a responsibility not to merely pander to the lowest common denominators in an increasingly commercialised industry, but actively strive towards the repositioning of the arts within an indigenous context – and this without abandoning the notion of artistic standards.

This is indeed a tall order. An ongoing debate to examine this ethical imperative is therefore of utmost importance.

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Key concepts:

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