

Art Criticism: Fervent Mediation between the Artist and the Public

Pulling criticism out from under the carpet, Prof. Chetana Nagavajara examines its public role in the arts.

An Apologia for Constructive Intrusion

Criticism in Thailand is not in a healthy state. To criticise (openly) is, in the Thai context, to run the risk of incurring the wrath of friends and colleagues, who prefer a friendly discussion on the weaknesses of their works rather than a published account. Some Western-trained artists are no exception in their reaction to such criticism. These artists usually caution colleagues, who are critical, in the following manner: "If you have anything to say about my work, come and tell me in private, but don't make it public." This attitude has been confirmed by the research on criticism ("Criticism as an Intellectual Force in Contemporary Society") which my colleagues and I have been conducting during the past few years under the aegis of the Thailand Research Fund (TRF).

This does not mean that Thais are totally bereft of critical ability. It simply means that our critical culture is intrinsically linked with an *oral tradition*. Furthermore, people tend to avoid an activity that is confrontational in character. The advent of the internet has opened up new possibilities for criticism, but adherents to the new system have gone to the other extreme, giving free rein to critical exchanges marked by acerbity and vulgarity. There is a lesson to be learned from making too big a leap from critical reticence within the bounds of an oral culture to a free-for-all mode of (often anonymous) communication without passing through the intermediary stage of a *written culture*. There is something to be said for a criticism

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anchored in a written tradition which commits its practitioners to a *public* responsibility.

People growing up in some open societies can take criticism for granted. But we in Thailand cannot presume upon a ready-made acceptance of written criticism as part of our contemporary culture. As far as the arts are concerned, it is often necessary for criticism to play a mediating role between the artist and the public. Contemporary art in this country may be moving so fast as to leave the general public behind, and only caters to a small group of connoisseurs or wealthy collectors who regard works of art as mere adornment of their luxurious way of living. As for myself, my academic provenance is Comparative Literature, and in that discipline, mediators and intermediaries are regarded as performing an extremely useful function in bridging cultural gaps. Criticism too can perform a valuable duty in creating a true understanding between the artist and the public. I shall illustrate my point about the need for criticism by way of three *anecdotes*.

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A prize-winning painting adorned the ante-room of a Rector's Office, depicting a rural Thai house. Two professors were standing in front of the painting, with me standing intrusively between them (criticism being by its very nature intrusive). The following was their conversation:

Prof. A: It does not look like the real thing.

Prof. B: Well, if you want to look at it that way... (He never finished his sentence).

Myself (being still young and impertinent): It doesn't have to look like the real thing.

That was the end of the story. You can well understand that my intrusive behaviour has made my professional life at this university rather difficult. I have since become a critic.

The second anecdote tells of a distinguished Thai painter and academic who saved enough money to build a country home which he turned into a private art gallery, containing a significant collection of his own works, which he treasured and did not want to sell. The gallery was open to the public by appointment. The artist eagerly desired to make his home a meeting place for artists, critics and art lovers and even instituted his own prize which he awarded to colleagues who had made contributions to the art world. I myself was one of the laureates on account of my critical activities (mainly in non-visual fields). His sudden demise seems to have changed all that. When a

group of critics and scholars contacted his heirs with the wish to visit the collection and organise in *situ* a critical discussion on the late artist's works, the response was negative. The very term "criticism" scared off the heirs who declined to receive the group on the grounds that since the artist had already passed away, he would not be in a position to defend himself against criticism. Incidentally, the artist's heirs too had received formal training in the visual arts at the tertiary level.

The third anecdote happened at the exhibition hall of the Faculty of Painting, Sculpture and Graphic Arts, Silpakorn University in Bangkok. A young artist was organising a one-man show at the Faculty's Gallery, and was very keen to have his exhibition critically assessed by a group of critics and scholars, and the general public. The wish in itself was a great advance in terms of the recognition of the merit of criticism. Around sixty people turned up, and a lively discussion ensued, which testified to the fact that his works succeeded in arousing genuine interest. Being well-educated and a modest man, the artist absented himself. His works were imbued with the spirit of Buddhism and lent themselves to various conflicting interpretations. A proposal was made that it would be futile to guess what the artist had in mind and that it would have been better to invite him to be present and to explain his works in detail for the enlightenment of the visitors, and better still, that all artists should henceforth be invited to introduce their exhibitions (A gap of twenty years separates *Anecdote I* and *Anecdote III*, but it would seem that not much progress had been made in the way of understanding or appreciation of what art is about - there is justification for criticism to continue to perform an intrusive function).

I *suggest* that the intention of the artist and the finished product did not always converge, and cited theories (drawn mainly from literary criticism) about the "intentional fallacy" and, to cap it all, Roland Barthes' point about the desirability of the "death of the author".

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What can we infer from the above anecdotes? I will offer three points. First, there exists a misapprehension about the nature and function of criticism that needs to be rectified. Second, basic concepts and fundamental principles about the arts cannot be taken for granted. Third, criticism certainly has a role to play in Thai society, and should also fulfil the function of public education. Things being what they are, criticism should not hesitate to become intrusive, that is to say, *constructively intrusive* in the sense that it should be ready to offer its good services in good faith, even when no explicit demand is forthcoming.

The Plight of the Mediated World

Let's face it; our experience of the arts in the contemporary world is increasingly mediated. The advent of technical reproducibility (to borrow Walter Benjamin's term) has opened up immense possibilities that inevitably enlarge the horizon of artistic reception. From a democratic standpoint, this may be considered a boon for the common people nowadays who can have access to great works of art which at one time were enjoyed by only a privileged few, albeit in reproduced form. The area of classical music is perhaps the supreme example. Nevertheless, it may not be easy to conclude whether the advantages outweigh the disadvantages. The difference between first-hand and second-hand experience may not be that of emotional or aesthetic involvement: a recorded performance and a live performance can both engage the audience emotionally and aesthetically, and the pundits of contemporary technology even claim that great perfection can be achieved in a recording studio rather than in a concert hall. Besides, some artists, such as the late Canadian pianist Glenn Gould, maintained that a musician could give his best through a recorded mode of communication. But his case may be an exception. People born and bred in the push-button age may not always appreciate the value of real human contact through a live performance, unless and until it is worked up or jazzed up to a point of frenzy by extra-aesthetic sensationalism! The famous Italian conductor, Riccardo Muti, was very critical of his own profession, or to be more precise, of some of his colleagues who had exploited the media for the purpose of self-aggrandisement, and in a television broadcast some years ago came up with the verdict: "We are a race that should disappear. We do a lot of stupid things!" Self-criticism counts as much as critical accounts offered by professional critics.

It may not be sufficient to weigh up the pros and cons of reproducibility from the point of view of the recipients alone. What may have been lost in our technological age is the mutual enrichment between creating and receiving. The arts of the previous era thrived through the support and involvement of *amateurs*. And it may be worthwhile to take cognizance of the etymology of the word "amateur", signifying one who loves. The appreciation of the arts at the receiving end often inspires amateurs to cross the frontier to the *creative* realm. The poet and dramatist Bertolt Brecht once expressed the desire that an ideal theatre should be one in which the dividing line between the performers and the spectators should be obliterated and that such a theatre should be sustained by amateurs. On the other hand, the professionalism of our age, propped by sophisticated "reproductive"

technology, has been successful in ensuring the viability and desirability of mediated experience.

Yet, it would be unfair to deny the *educational* impact of these technological achievements. The study of art history, for example, has been revolutionized by the advent of reproducibility and lately by the Internet. But this can go too far. Even some decades ago when photography was the major instrument of reproducibility, critics were already wary of the mediated appropriation of knowledge. Students

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were taken on study tours to visit architectural gems, but they rarely paid attention to the real things: they just took photographs. In the past, art history used to be in the hands of those who could at least *draw*.

In other words, they were expected to be minor or amateur artists who were appreciative of the artistic value of the objects under scrutiny. The new breed of "professionals" commands an amazing amount of facts and data, but may be weak in aesthetic capability.

When we turn to music for comparison, we find one comforting feature of contemporary musical education and musicology: many educational institutions still require a minimum competence in a

musical instrument (predominantly the piano) for would-be music scholars and musicologists.

Lest I be misunderstood as being fundamentally hostile to modern technology, I should make it clear that I am sceptical of the media and technology only when they are bent on reproducing first-hand experience, and thereby unwittingly engender a passive attitude which in turn frustrates all creative urges. To put it more radically, the media often fail when they merely *mediate*. The media becomes constructive when they constitute themselves into an integral part of the creative process - witness the immense contribution to the contemporary artistic world by the cinema, electronic music and video art. Their achievements can be ascribed to the fact that they can communicate directly with the public.

The Rise of the Middleman

Being a language and literature teacher, I am rather sensitive to lexicographical and semantic possibilities. When people these days talk about "curators", I cannot help looking back to my early experience with museums in Thailand, and the image of a haggard-looking elderly gentleman sitting in a dimly-lit corner of a museum, peering over a

book of inventory and blinking profusely with an expression on his face that betrayed some hidden apprehension about objects not yet lost but might be lost in the future. No curator of a contemporary international exhibition would look that way anymore, for he would normally be proud of the project in hand which is supported by a huge subvention either from the state or from a foundation. Besides, he would be conscious of the immense power of his position which he could wield over the art world, for even the most distinguished artists who want to exhibit with his help will have to fit into his conceptual framework which he can sometimes dictate with his own will. Moving from the word "curator" to "curate", older dictionaries do not make an entry of the latter as a verb at all, although the current usage of the word "to curate" signifies the task and responsibility of a contemporary curator of a museum of modern art or an exhibition, thus reflecting the dynamism that characterizes his status in the contemporary world. The passage from a *nominal* to a *verbal* status does portend some socio-cultural change that will have a far-reaching effect.

This phenomenon is in consonance with our current mode of living. The art world has expanded so fast and to such an extent that it is no longer possible for the artist to organise his own activities in such a way as to cater for the needs of the public, and some organisational and managerial mechanisms have become necessary. The new arrangements, in principle, should benefit both the artist and the public, and the ideal middleman should possess a high degree of technical knowledge as well as sufficient critical acumen to be able to make judgment as to how the public should have access to works of quality. The ideal intermediary is usually sympathetic to both the artist and the public and is adept in steering the middle course that will protect the interests of both parties. He need not be a first-rate artist himself, but he must be able to tell a great artist from a mediocre one. His aim should be to serve the arts in such a way as to make them thrive on the basis of quality and public accessibility. In other words, he should also be a good critic. Let me cite some specific examples. A famous German symphony orchestra fell prey to a self-serving star conductor who had been appointed conductor-for-life, and it is said that the orchestra survived because of the perspicacity and fair-mindedness of its manager (called "Intendant" in German) who knew how to attract great talents as guests to the orchestra, thereby maintaining quality on all fronts. And one of his managerial skills was

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to be able to "manage" in his own unassuming way the maestro at the helm of the orchestra as well. Another example may tell a different story. A national museum of modern art in a Western country acquired immense space for exhibition through conversion of an old building into a spacious museum. It was supposed to exhibit works of international stature, and if this principle was strictly adhered to, artists of its own nationality would not have much of a chance. The *curators* were smart enough to introduce a new concept based on subject matters, and in this way lesser artists of their own nationality could fill the almost inexhaustible space. They were probably not acting as good critics. But who would question their skills as managers?

If I have been crossing over back and forth between the visual and the performing arts, I have done so with a purpose. The advent of *performance art*, usually originating in the domain of the visual arts, must give us pause, for there seems to be a confusion between the attractiveness of a concept and the quality (or lack of quality) of the work produced.

A Thai visual artist has attracted attention on the international scene by cooking and serving Thai-style fried noodles (*Phad Thai*) to visitors, but it is doubtful whether his culinary ability was of an international standard. But that is perhaps the secret of performance art in that the quality of the work does not count as much as the idea and the concept behind it. Within the past few years, another Thai artist has been presenting her video art depicting her reading of traditional Thai poetry to corpses in a mortuary, to the consternation of some viewers and the delight of others. I noticed that the charm of her recitation came precisely from her defective reading, which was somewhat out of tune and rhythmically faulty. Had she delivered her verses with greater professional skill, something would have been lost, and that something was perhaps a kind of Brechtian alienation (*Verfremdung*) which invested her work with a quaint attractiveness. Are we to conclude that a defect in one art form is the hallmark of another? If the argument is carried to its logical end, we may have to pass the final verdict to the effect that *performance art* is the prerogative of those visual artists who have not mastered basic skills in the *performing arts*.

It may be a dangerous proposition to lump managers, curators, critics, directors and performing artists together under the rubric of "middlemen". Certain art forms, especially among the performing arts, do not establish direct communication between the creator and the recipient, and require intermediaries in the form of performing artists to interpret and convey the message of the originator. Among the

performing artists themselves, distinction has to be made between those who actually perform and those who direct performances. Music and theatre have made room for this second-type of artistic personnel whose power has grown beyond measure within the past century or so. Musical tyrants are notorious for their dictatorial rule over orchestras and opera houses, and history has confirmed that a few (or very few) of them have made significant contributions in terms of their interpretative power, but the rest of them, more often than not, can thrive only through conspiracy with managers, impresarios, business manipulators and publicity tycoons, as demonstrated convincingly by the British critic Norman Lebrecht in his books *The Maestro Myth* (1991) and *Who Killed Classical Music?* (1997). Needless to say that their status as middlemen (with direct artistic function), supported by other "middlemen" (with no direct artistic function), affords them opportunities to enrich themselves at the expense of those who really perform the music. How many orchestras have become bankrupt because they pay the maestros so much that there is very little left for the musicians?

The situation in the modern theatre runs along a similar line, with theatre directors acting as interpreters of the works of playwrights, and staging these works in such a way as to captivate the attention of the public. In some countries, like Germany, theatre directors can let their imagination run wild in the staging of plays (unless they run into trouble with the heirs of certain playwrights, such as the children of Bertolt Brecht). They too enjoy absolute power (but perhaps are not rewarded as astronomically as their counterparts in the concert halls and opera houses), and can tyrannize actors and actresses in the name of artistic quality and innovation. Again, contemporary society tends to favour and empower these intermediaries to such an extent that a term has emerged to designate this type of theatre as the *directors' theatre* (known in German as "Regietheater"). And when state subvention comes into play, these directors become the envy of their colleagues in other fields, for some theatres may receive a greater subsidy than a tertiary institution. Lavish productions rely far too much on scenery and theatrical gadgetry, such that they obliterate the role of the actor on stage. I saw a production of Georg Büchner's *Woyzeck* at the Schillertheater in Berlin over a decade ago, which must have cost a fortune to stage, although we all know that the text is suited for a studio theatre or a workshop. In a subsequent conversation with one of the actors, I learned how humiliated actors felt as a result of the stress on non-human components of the production. The actor said something to me which became prophetic: "If state subvention is withdrawn tomorrow, the German theatre will enjoy a new life." A year or two after that, the Berlin Senate closed down the Schillertheater. The actor lost his job, survived on a meagre pension and spent his time constructively by reading poetry. As a literary man, I did not find that counterproductive at all. But look at what the middlemen can bring us to!

Let us now turn to literature. Perhaps one might think that the literary world is free from the dictates of middlemen and that writers reign supreme. This may

be true of a few well-established writers, but those struggling to find a foothold in the republic of letters do have to contend with middlemen as well. Their presence may not be readily felt, but budding writers know only too well that their future lies in the hands of publishers, readers, members of literary juries and, above all, the press. This is where the critic makes himself felt. If he is honest and discriminating, he can do a great deal to separate the wheat from the chaff. But power corrupts, and critics who at first are well-respected for their critical acuity may soon become enamoured with absolute power. They will not exercise their influence on the print media only, but will also appear on television, adjudicate for literary prizes, receive honorary doctorates, and get appointed as adjunct professors at prestigious universities. People look to them as the "Literary Popes", an originally derisive term in German (Literaturpapst) to signify a narrow-minded dogmatist in the Age of Enlightenment, but in our unenlightened era, the expression most probably makes you think of a well-respected literary personality. If criticism presumes upon its infallibility, it is committing suicide. The decline of the critic occurs when he becomes an arrogant middleman incapable of self-criticism.

Militating against Mediation

It will have been noticed that the approach I have adopted for this article is more of a macro-treatment of the subject of criticism. I do not mean to belittle the role of criticism in assessing the merits of works of art or artists, but I believe that the social, cultural and, last but not least, economic environment has a bearing on artistic creation and reception, and should be subjected to criticism as well. It would be unrealistic to wish that business considerations be excluded from all dealings with the arts, but the minimum that any sensible amateur of the arts is entitled to ask for is a certain measure of fairness in the "business". Business people do have (or at least claim to have) their professional ethics, and we should demand the same from all sectors of the art world. Criticism will offer its good services in this respect. Perhaps I have been too harsh on the "middlemen", as though the artists themselves have always been beyond reproach. It comes to pass that a performing

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artist settled for a fee and a few days before the actual performance announced that his/her fee had gone up by 50 percent. Short of a contract, what could one do in such a situation? I once read a critical account in a newspaper telling of such an incident, and the critic concluded with a statement that lingers on in my mind after so many years: "The public should be told." Yes, the prime contractual partners (whether there exists a contract or not) are the artist and his public. An intermediary does not play a role here, even if the artist may have been (ill-) advised by his manager!

We live in an age swamped by publicity. Much creative imagination has gone into advertisement. It can easily be noticed that our press expends great effort in

making previews of coming events, whose thoroughness and sophistication far surpass accounts of the actual events. My colleagues and I recently organised a discussion group on criticism; it was attended by journalists responsible for the art and entertainment section (the combination of art with entertainment belies a distinct policy adopted by our press). They refused to call themselves critics, and this happened not out of modesty. They would rather describe themselves as "journalists interested in the arts". When we chided them that their papers give ample room for elaborate previews and are not very supportive of reviews, they maintained that this is the policy of all newspapers in Thailand. A preview can raise hope about what is to come and its author can use his literary power to laud things which have not yet happened. A review is an account of what has happened, a look backward which must reflect the real thing, and our journalists do not enjoy full freedom to give an honest and truthful account of what actually occurred, especially when it happened to be a failure. Artistic events are usually run or supported by business concerns, and if a newspaper has the temerity to publish a critical account by its own journalists of an artistic fiasco, then this is to be considered a commercial loss to all parties, and the newspapers concerned may be chastised by having advertisements withdrawn. The 'Kapital' remains, after all, the decisive factor. Where is freedom of expression? What do we mean by freedom of the press? We all know that the situation is deteriorating in this country.

Criticism in such a socio-economic limbo must have a very difficult time indeed. But there is a way out. Newspapers are ready to publish critical articles written by academics who are willing to identify themselves and assume responsibility for what they write. That is why we find distinguished academics writing for newspapers or magazines with a wide circulation instead of concentrating on producing academic papers for publication in learned journals with peer review! People did tolerate us until very recently, for the present political leadership finds criticism, and especially political criticism, a nuisance and often brands academics as people lacking in experience of the real world; people who bury themselves in the library. It is a boon that the present leadership is not overly interested in the arts, but the recent creation of the Ministry of Culture, disbanded some forty years ago and now revived, is not to be welcomed uncritically, for it is difficult to find a state apparatus enlightened and impartial enough to gauge critically the true merits of artistic enterprises. Critics cannot help being wary of lending support to those "middlemen" with business interests and political connections (and the two often go together); they are also sceptical of colleagues from academia who are only too eager to serve the powers-that-be, over-confident that they will be able to

exploit the naivety and ignorance of politicians when it comes to artistic matters. I never underestimate the prowess of politicians to exploit those who originally set out to exploit them.

So where do we stand with criticism? The context of the arts being what it is, it would appear that criticism has to pitch itself into an oppositional stance, that is to say, into a paradoxical situation in which one group of middlemen (and critics also qualify in that capability) has to militate against other groups of middlemen (including artists who have turned middlemen) to clear away obstacles impeding the public's true appreciation of the arts. A question could be asked about the legitimacy and credibility of the critic to act in the name of public interests. What right has he to set himself up as the judge of artistic (and sometimes ethical) values? That is why we expect a critic to act in good faith, and in the pursuit of true judgement he must be knowledgeable and competent in his field and possess a high degree of objectivity and, above all, fair-mindedness. To earn the trust and confidence of the artists and the public, his fervent mediation need to be governed by an ethical mission. Criticism at its best should act as a voice of conscience to society. Yet, if we think of a critical culture as a process of maturation, the question arises as to when does criticism come of age. An answer could be that in an ideal art world, there is no need for criticism at all, for the public will have been enlightened to such a point where it can independently and critically assess the works of artists, in which case criticism will have only an interim function to perform, and an educational one.

The death of criticism will be its own consummation.

The above article is an edited version of Keynote Address delivered by the author at the International Seminar 'Reshaping Realities and Representation' at Silpakorn University, Bangkok, 10 June 2003

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