

Perform, repeat, react: performance criticism and contemporary political rationalities

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Michael Gove, um dos principais rostos da campanha Vote Leave (do referendo sobre a permanência do Reino Unido na União Europeia), disse recentemente que «as pessoas, neste país, estão fartas de especialistas». Segundo o jornalista Henry Mance, num artigo para o *Financial Times*, a incapacidade de Gove demonstrar, economicamente, o seu argumento de que o Reino Unido enviava semanalmente 350 milhões de libras para a União Europeia era a prova de que as políticas de «pós-verdade» já tinham penetrado no Reino Unido. A expressão «políticas de pós-verdade» assenta numa era contemporânea em que a fraude é moeda de troca transparente e poderosa, a nível tanto fiscal como político; expõe a precariedade do sentido, em que as estruturas que legitimam e que, por vezes, legitimam os factos e sua circulação se tornaram fluidas. As políticas de «pós-verdade» evidenciam também um paradoxo: por um lado, a necessidade crescente de recorrer a especialistas, a sustentações intelectuais, ao envolvimento crítico e político que permitam que a diferenciação ocorra para e com o público; por outro, o cepticismo face à singularidade e autonomia desses especialistas, temendo-se a sua corrupção, amarrada a formas de subjectividade em que as fronteiras entre o público e o privado, entre os factos e a ficção se tornam difíceis de discernir.

PÓS-VERDADE / PERFORMANCE / CRÍTICA POLÍTICA / ESFERA PÚBLICA / CRÍTICA DE ARTES PERFORMATIVAS

In 2011, five years before the UK voted to leave the European Union on 23rd June, artist and theorist Hito Steyerl proposed, in her essay *Free-Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective*, that we find ourselves in a constant state of free-fall. This perspective, Steyerl argues, “throws jaw-dropping social inequalities in sharp focus” but also offers a “shifting formation” (e-flux, 2011). The process of transition, negotiation and political manoeuvring made visible by the vote marked disparities between often conflicting social and cultural communities. It uncovered a fractured

critical community, and a theatre culture that struggled to address and represent the complexities surrounding this apparent political and social division. To conceive of the ways in which contemporary forms of criticism, particularly in theatre and performance, engage with the political in the multiple public spheres of our age, is to understand the ways in which transition, precarity and plurality mark these practices.

In *Enjoying Neoliberalism*, political theorist Jodi Dean defines neoliberalism as “a philosophy viewing market exchange as a guide for all human action ... redefining social and ethical life in accordance with economic criteria” (Dean, 2008: 47). Neoliberalism, Dean proposes, functions coercively at both an operational and ideological level; it foregrounds an individual desire that restricts modes of political structuring. It causes identities that are unstable and fleeting, challenging the possibility of these acting as sites of politicisation (Dean, 2008: 71).

In response to this contemporary conception of plurality, Jodi Dean argues that instead of “engaged debates, instead of contestations employing common terms” we are confronted by a “multiplication of resistances and assertions so extensive that it hinders the formation of strong counterhegemonies” (Dean, 2005: 52). Neoliberalism¹ collapses public and private by means of economic capital, and it is these operations that are increasingly shifting the voice, shape and scope of criticism in today’s cultural infrastructure. Yet there is, I propose, a politics of hope too underpinning criticism’s relationship to counterhegemonies, one which I hope to briefly sketch out in this essay.

I begin by considering the relevance of post-truth politics and debates on expertise to shifting forms of contemporary criticism, especially in the UK. I turn to Jurgen Habermas’ public sphere theory and Nancy Fraser’s redeployment that conceives of new political rationalities by means of counter-public spheres. In 1989, in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas argues that the formation of the bourgeois public sphere in the eighteenth century developed through democratic deliberation and the exercising and constitution of public opinion. Habermas is influential in tracing a relationship between criticism, deliberation and political practice that, despite its flaws, has been instrumental in thinking about criticism’s role and position in the

1 I deploy neoliberalism not only as a term that encompasses the expansive and global form of governance, but also as expressing a political rationality that constructs frames of legitimacy (Brown, 2014; Saad-Filho and Johnston, 2005). I am referring explicitly to the shifts in the organisation, dissemination and perception of public discourse.

public sphere. Habermas situates criticism and gives intellectual and political weight to its capacity to operate collectively. I briefly examine how the rooting of criticism in the political conflicts of the eighteenth century offers a possible avenue for tracing a different contemporary politics of criticism.

How can we revisit notions of community and deliberation under these circumstances, where spaces of critical dialogue are in constant conflict with the mechanisms of neoliberalism? And what of public opinion – is it something to be constructed, or something to be rescued?

ONE: MOVEMENT

In the lead up to the vote, Michael Gove, one of the key figures of the Vote Leave campaign, declared that “people in this country have had enough of experts”². In an article written for the *Financial Times* providing some context around this statement, journalist Henry Mance states that Gove’s inability to cite economic evidence to back up his claim that the UK sends £350m to the EU every week has been pinned to an importing of post-truth politics to the UK.

The term “post-truth” politics refers to a contemporary era in which deception is a transparent and powerful currency, fiscally and politically. Originating in America, and elaborated on by Ralph Keyes (*The Post-Truth Era: Dishonesty and Deception in Contemporary Life*, 2004) and more recently by Ari Rabin-Havt and Media Matters for America (*Lies, Incorporated: The World of Post-Truth Politics*, 2016), post-truth politics makes a convincing case for the ways in which organized misinformation and explicit deception have become viable political and media strategies.

Post-truth might be a hyperbolic way to identify a strategy for the manipulation of the public sphere that might not be all that new; it also presupposes that there is an alternative means of distribution of information in media that are inherently truthful – a highly contestable presumption. However, post-truth politics marks the extent to which deliberate misinformation has become a viable, and visible political strategy; it is also testament to a change in attitude towards the boundaries between fact and fiction in the media and beyond.

2 <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/3be49734-29cb-11e6-83e4-abc22d5d108c.html#axzz4AeOqTMyc>.

My contention is not that deception is novelty when it comes to political strategy, but that the term itself leads us to an even more problematic proposition: that collective subjectivity which so many have fought for, intellectually and politically, the fabric of deliberative democracy, has become a neoliberal instrument that turns the demand of transparency and freedom of expression into strategic modes of public manipulation; this calls for a rethinking of the terms with which we conceive of criticism. Post-truth evidences a precarity of meaning, where the structures that legitimate and, sometimes, legislate facts and their circulation become fluid.

Post-truth politics also evidences a paradox: we are increasingly in need of expertise, of sustained intellectual, political and critical engagement that enables differentiation to occur for and with the public, but we are also skeptical that this expertise can be singular or autonomous; and at the same time, the very fabric of expertise is corrupted, tied to forms of subjectivity in which the lines between public and private, fact and fiction are blurred.

Post-truth politics relies, as Gove³ has shown, on an open dismissal of expertise when that expertise provides arguments that are of no use. If we encounter the proposition of an era of post-truth politics, we must also accept the overall confused position that we have in regards to expertise, subjectivity and its instrumentalisation in criticism, the shape-shifting nature of critical engagement that is resistant to these confusions, and critical engagement that is a mere instrumentalisation of debate without any productive outcome.

A way of conceiving of these changes and their effects on criticism – be it the journalistic strand of cultural evaluation on newspaper and digital publication, or the discursive and oral forms developing in alternative to this – is to regard both critic and criticism as existing in a constant movement: a free-fall, as Steyerl proposes.

Free-fall, in Steyerl's proposition, is more than a paradigmatic shift in aesthetic perspective – it is also a means of capturing the contemporary condition as one marked by a paradox: one in which the constant

3 In Gove's view, it doesn't matter that economists are providing a counter-argument to his own, backed up with sufficient facts that open him up to dispute. There is something, in his view, far more contentious, and that is the inherent bias of the facts. Gove is taking issue with the politically-informed, and ideologically-oriented direction of the facts that these experts have gathered. And Gove is not the only one who has championed unsupported facts openly – Boris Johnson, another Vote Leave campaigner, recently supported the same argument, failing to account for Britain's rebate, which stands at around £100m weekly.

sense of movement is at the same time, a stasis, a kind of standing still. In free-fall, I find both a confrontation with a multiplicity of vantage points or perspectives, and a glimpse of hope. As Steyerl proposes, free-fall is also a means through which to understand a different dynamic of engagement with our contemporary political and cultural moment.

In Steyerl's conception, falling is afforded a disruption of balance, in which "perspectives are twisted and multiplied" and "new types of visuality arise" (2011). This is not oppositional to the historical horizontal perspective that shape traditions of visual culture throughout art history, but a move away from the calculable, navigable, predictable promise of linear representation. A culture of "3D nose-dives, Google Maps and surveillance panoramas" (2011) has also meant a shift from orientation to groundlessness: "if there is no stable ground available", she concludes, "the consequence must be a permanent, or at least intermittent state of free fall for subjects and objects alike" (2011).

The implications on this for thinking about criticism and its relationship to political rationality are far-reaching; in part, because free-fall involves a de-territorialisation, from the specificity of contained cultures of public discourse, to constantly shifting communities of critique, both atomised and in close proximity to each other. Political theorists like Jodi Dean (2005) and Wendy Brown (2014) have written extensively about the ways in which neoliberalism pervades as a dominant governmental rationality that prioritises processes of economisation across all levels of society. This is a different moment for criticism; one in which we declare its fall, its deterritorialisation, but also where we profess our passion for its sustained engagement and ongoing re-formation. And if the ground is no longer there, we might be more inclined to free-fall, together.

TWO: STAGES OF CONFLICT

2007 was a significant moment in recent history of performance criticism. It marked the confluence of seemingly disparate, yet fundamentally interconnected reconceptualisations of criticism. Open-Dialogues, a collaborative project between Mary Paterson and Rachel Lois-Clapham that "produces writing on and as performance" ("About Open-Dialogues", 2008) emerged as a result of *Writing from Live Art*, a programme for emergent critical writers ran by the Live Art Development Agency in 2006. In an email exchange with me, co-founder Mary Paterson expressed that

the project was aimed at disrupting “the (masculinist) hierarchies of knowledge implicit in criticism, including the authority of writing as a medium in relation to performance” (Damian Martin, 2017). Calling for an interest in dialogue and a keen disruption of “the field of criticism in terms of form, function and access”, Open-Dialogues functioned on a self-publishing model, at a time when blogging was just beginning to gain traction in the wider field of criticism.

At the same time, 2007 saw the establishment of what would become a long-term collaborative model between festivals and writers, with the founding of Spill Festival of Performance by Pacitti Company and its artistic director Robert Pacitti. Dedicated to showcasing work across live art, experimental theatre and performance, Spill Festival incorporated a writing programme, *Spill Overspill*, conceived by participants in *Writing from Live Art*. In its second iteration in 2009, *Spill Overspill* foregrounded its aim at responding “critically to the work shown, and to create a real-time discursive context for the Spill festival, one that spills out of the usual confines of a festival” (“Spill Overspill”, 2009).

These shifts were not just tectonic movements on the edges of practices that sit uneasily, yet side by side with the realm of theatre. 2007 was a distinct moment marked by conflicts of legitimacy that had been brewing in mainstream media between employed critics and bloggers, who often operated across cultural disciplines. The orientation of the research here encompasses both of these points of emergence, which intersect in fundamental ways that confuse what might be constituted as genealogies of criticism.

Commencing around this time, a so-called crisis of legitimation of criticality surfaces in mainstream media outlets marking a shift in the recent history of theatre and performance criticism. This crisis in theatre criticism equates the rise of the blogosphere with the demise of journalistic expertise. The major point of contention from employed newspaper critics is that bloggers lack the skills and expertise to perform the task of criticism – namely, in this case, that of an informed, expert cultural arbiter. Furthermore, bloggers, unknown to the public, are often intimately acquainted with the cultural landscape whose discourses they hope to shape. This lack of distance is seen as foregrounding a problematic subjectivity; being friendly, or even friends, with those whom you speak of, is an insult to the ambition of objectivity that so many critics had aspired to. So here we have a paradox of expertise; institutionalized critics argue for the demise of the discursive public sphere, the increasing lack of space

for criticism within their institutions, whilst at the same time seeking to maintain and legislate what expertise should look like.

In her recent work, *Theatre Criticism: Changing Landscapes*, editor Duška Radosavljevic delineates three competing landscapes as part of this shift: academic criticism, with its conflict between evaluation and interpretation, newspaper criticism, characterised by dwindling resources targeted at arts criticism, magazines (particularly *The Stage* and *Time Out*) and online criticism. Marking a distinction between mainstream media and the realm of online criticism, Radosavljevic approached the latter through its adherence to a distinct technological and socio-economic sphere (2016: 15).

Theatre Criticism: Changing Landscapes points to the ways in which criticism experienced both a diversification and a crisis occurring in parallel over the last ten years. In the same collection, critic Andrew Haydon further investigates this paradigm through his account of online criticism. He provides a three-phase overview: 1997, as a gestation period for online reviewing, with the establishing of *British Theatre Guide* and *Whatsonstage.com*, 2006, with the beginnings of the criticism blog and 2010, the “third wave of online writing” (Haydon, 2016: 125), with the establishment of *Exeunt* and *A Younger Theatre*. Haydon further argues for the identity of online criticism as distinct from newspapers, however, one key point of confluence complicates this as a distinction.

In 2007, *The Guardian* set up a regular series called *Noises Off*, hosted by critic Kelly Nestruck, that provided an overview of the debates within the blogosphere. *Noises Off* followed the establishment of a number of independent blogs, authored by both critics and makers, notably Chris Goode’s *Thompson Bank of Communicable Desire* in 2006, Andrew Haydon’s *Postcards from the Gods* that same year, as well as Culturebot in 2003 in the US led by Andy Horwitz. The blogosphere continued to strive, with the emergence of writers like Meghan Vaughn, with *Synonyms for Churlish* a year later, in 2008, and Maddy Costa, former *Guardian* critic who opened *Deliq.* in 2011.

The Guardian was the first newspaper to take an active position in the debate on criticism, was also an equal participant in the decries of legitimacy of the blogosphere, particularly through its chief theatre critic, Michael Billington. As Haydon observes, the fact that Billington “felt moved to say anything at all on the subject is significant” (2016: 134). It evidences an engagement that is two-fold: on the one hand, a battle for legitimacy, and on the other, an acknowledgment of a significant shift.

What Radosavljevic and Haydon foreground is the importance of online criticism as an active cultural participant in the diversification of criticism, in terms of both form and scope. However, what is also significant about 2007 is the way it anticipates the intermingling of criticism that is reflective both of itself, and of performance, with the changing pressures on cultural market. For the most part, these forms of criticism remain committed to reviewing as the main paradigm through which writing is approached. Whilst the changing landscape that Radosavljevic captures is evidently tied to questions of form, discursive capacity and conceptual ambitions of criticism, it is also equally connected to the changing pressures of the cultural market, and self-reflective attitude to denoting, advocating and marking cultural value.

This is no more evident than in the discussion of *Three Kingdoms*, an international co-production written by Simon Stephens and directed by Sebastian Nubling that, in 2012, became the heart of a public debate between newspaper and online critics. The point of debate focuses on the contemporaneity and value of the work, which newspaper critics derided for its politics, whilst online critic praised for formal and aesthetic brevity. In her article for *The Guardian* summing up the conflict, critic Maddy Costa provides a flavour of the contentions: “this collaboration”, she says, “is either self-indulgent, overstated, too enigmatic by half, or one of the best pieces of theatre you will see this year” (“Three Kingdoms: the shape of British Theatre to come?”, 2012).

Haydon mentions the same event for its marking out of online critics, and in particular, bloggers, as fundamental to changing the paradigms of debating theatre’s value. The appreciation that these writers had for the work, argues Haydon, created a paradigm that is now “common-place” (2016: 146), by way of mainstream theatre institutions becoming attuned to these voices which prior to 2007, were marginal to the public conversations on theatre. By the time *Three Kingdoms* emerged, online criticism “had an infrastructure, a readership and reach”, and the voices of those who “disagreed with the mainstream assessment were now part of the ecology” (Haydon, 2016: 145).

The debate evidenced a distinction between a generation of critics working in print, and an incoming generation of writers working online, and the responsiveness of the industry as it brought these two under the same umbrella. It also oriented much of the debate, on both sides, on the contemporaneity of the production and its value. Finally, it made

evident the contentions at the heart of both sides of the debate, to do with the question of artistic excess; in other words, critics who argued for the work defended its right to be, and those who decried its artistic politics, also sought to destabilise its legitimacy. What becomes evident, then, is how *Three Kingdoms* serves as a key example of the ways in which value and legitimacy interplay. It makes visible the different expectations at play, not only on criticism's formal commitments, but its politicised relationship to performance. The integration, or entrance of certain forms of online criticism into the cultural market, fostered institutionally rather than professionally, marks a point of distinction.

It is evident that *Theatre Criticism: Changing Landscapes* presents an overview of an ecology that continues to engage with interpretation and valuation. I want however to argue that a further distinction of the work of peripheral, collective practices of criticism, with projects like *Open-Dialogues* or *Spill: Overspill*, show a further politicisation of thinking about and through performance more attuned to the neoliberalisation of artistic value, and the pressures on media in the post-truth era.

It is in this climate that marginal works begin to take shape, both in the form of projects like *Open-Dialogues*, and increasingly nomadic writers navigating a range of platforms, seeking to reconfigure the relationship between critical writing and performance. It is evident that the visibility of a shift in mentality away from an implied distancing between critic and work however, does not translate into an ecological one. In other words, many of these practices and projects have a distinct focus, and operate by means of collaboration, whilst holding shifting positions to historical paradigms of criticism.

THREE: PERFORMING AUTHORITY AND DISCURSIVE PUBLIC SPHERES

Emergent at a time of conflict is a staging of a performance of authority between a tradition of criticism constituted in the media, originating in the early eighteenth century, that equates distance with objectivity, and the precarious practices of more embedded, collective practices.

The individualism propagated by institutions of the media after modernism is antithetical to the sociability and collective politicization of criticism's media origins in the eighteenth century. This is tied to our understanding of expertise in neoliberal culture, and the dangers of collectivity as a temporary, depoliticized space, against the powers

of assembly. At the same time, neoliberalism often results in collaboration as a mere instrument of compliance, without the solidarity and difference that often marks collectivity. What is worth noting is that the blogosphere gained its image of collaboration not necessarily through the sustained interest of the individuals within it, but because it was constituted as a counter-site by the institution of criticism. This collectivity has however become a strategy, a mode for criticism to question its role and shape in contemporary culture.

The collective holds an increasing role in critical culture; it provides a way of differentiating between practices that stage temporary communities as a performance of formation, and those that aim for discursive assemblies that make demands on both theatre and politics more widely. The dispute between critics and bloggers is a dispute between an institutionalized tradition of criticism, the publics and multiple public spheres with which theatre itself interacts. Criticism is, as art writer Paul DeMan argues, fed and shaped by crisis; it differentiates itself from other intellectual pursuits when it politicises engagement, as observed quite explicitly in the latter half of the eighteenth century, when it was “engaged in a process of differentiation and struggle over control of the very basis of intellectual protest” (1967: 38).

The ecology of theatre and performance criticism looks altogether different now, although such battles over authority and legitimation have not ceased. Despite numerous professions over the demise and decline of criticism, we find ourselves at a productive juncture, between precarious counter-publics, to use Nancy Fraser’s term, and instrumentalised public spheres of debate. This resurgence of conflict over who is entitled to perform criticism now is a productive one, although the reason for the precarious emancipation of critical publics is its focus on legitimacy rather than a questioning of what we require of criticism under neoliberal culture.

It is clear that the increasing marketization of criticism as a legislative activity leads to a demise of criticality as a mode of deliberation, as is evidenced in many theorisations of what constitutes a political change or rupture in society – such as the work of Chantal Mouffe on agnostic pluralism, Jacques Rancière on the distribution of the sensible or Judith Butler on the power of the assembly, traced back to continental philosophers of the polis, such as Hannah Arendt.⁴ I want to

4 I have written elsewhere about the political rooting of criticism, for example, see Diana Damian Martin, “Criticism as a Political Event” in Radosavljevic, Duška (2016), *Theatre Criticism: Changing Landscapes* (London: Methuen).

propose that collective configurations of discourse in criticism are a mode of repoliticising the relationship between theatre, performance and publics. We are seeing a development of the eighteenth century utopia of criticism as a deliberative practice, at a time of sustained functionalization of media under neoliberalism, and its processes of discursive commodification.

Michael Gove's case evidences a paradox in regard to both criticism and sites of politicisation: the performative identity of a politician with an explicit agenda, redeployed in opposition to the facts presented by economic experts; subjectivity attacking what it presents as subjective. Expertise becomes precarious under these circumstances, and so do experts themselves, because there is a constantly shifting set of paradigms that legislate the nature and definition of that expertise, its validity and viability. This is evident in Gove's statement: the experts are no longer experts when their findings refute the dominant political position. They are merely interpreters of facts, and their interpretation, in this instance, is flawed for its presumed political allegiance.

This is not altogether that different in the rift between critics and bloggers. The experts, those who are traditionally situated within the media, are denouncing the lack of expertise of those working outside of it; in doing so, they inadvertently create a community where there isn't necessarily one, and they seek to dogmatise notions of expertise that are, nevertheless, unstable. Thus counter-publics emerge, although the question of their counter-position is debatable; post-truth politics poses a contention to the problem of subjectivity in expertise, and this becomes evident in criticism, where matters of taste, value and judgment enter a dialogue with political, institutional and social landscapes.

In the case of digital publications, like *Exeunt Magazine*, with which I was involved from its inception, with Natasha Tripney and Daniel B. Yeats, this repositioning enables the self-organisation of a community of critics, albeit without infrastructure. In other cases, critics choose to operate nomadically, and approach criticism as a form of practice, be it embedded in processes, engaged in research, or at times, dramaturgy as well, following a more continental model. Collectives such as Open-Dialogues bring into dialogue performance and writing, drawing on strategies from art writing or performative writing; Dialogues hosts audience-centric post-show discussions without artists in the room, whilst festivals like Spill, Pulse or Fierce support programmes for young writers and temporary publications. Collaboration leads to collective

forms of critical engagement, that transcends individual subjectivity for a more culturally-oriented, deliberative model of debate.

This conflict has brought about a more plural landscape, undermined by the lack of sustained financial support for those critics trying to operate outside of these institutions. Increasingly, criticism is resituating itself in collective spaces: festivals, multi-authored publications, embedded processes. Is this a return to coffeehouse criticism, or do we need to think more carefully about how to differentiate between spaces of critical demand, and those of critical performance?

Adjacent discourses on criticism sought a move away from a singular model that is reliant on the authority of a figure of a critic, however were equally enmeshed in conflicts over criticism's presumed crisis. This renewed interest in subjectivity is not singular to performance criticism, but a shared concern. The visibility of particular intellectual conditions that came to govern the practice of theatre criticism was a result of the public conflicts over professionalization and legitimacy that came to dominate the early noughties. The plurality of emergent practices of performance criticism are reactionary to this conflict, and not the practice itself, I will propose. This is best understood by considering their divergent positions on subjectivity and its ability to enable criticality, which marks a point of both confluence and diversification. I propose that what marks these forms of criticism apart is their shared interest in creating discursive arenas over engaging in acts of cultural valuation.

FOUR: SHIFTING PUBLIC SPHERES

In 1989, in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Jürgen Habermas argues that the formation of the bourgeois public sphere in the eighteenth century developed through democratic deliberation and the exercising and constitution of public opinion. Habermas is influential in tracing a relationship between criticism, deliberation and political practice that, despite its flaws, has been instrumental in thinking about criticism's role and position in the public sphere. Habermas *situates* criticism and gives intellectual and political weight to its capacity to operate collectively.

In 1780, the London paper *The Gazetteer* publishes an anonymous letter proclaiming the freedom of the press as “the palladium of English liberty”. Historian Hannah Barker argues that this is a claim for the

constitutional importance of newspapers that is not unique; in fact, such claims were repeatedly made for the newspaper as acting as a “public tribunal in which the behaviour of the country’s rulers could be judged, criticised and ultimately kept in check” (1998: 1). Barker cites commentator Vicesimus Knox, who spoke of the potential use of such a space as a powerful engine of oppression.

Historians have placed importance on the development of the media as a potent alternative structuring of public politics; what we find is a plural landscape with differing approaches to political critique, challenging what the terms “people”, “public opinion” and “the public” meant under these conditions. Alex Benchimol, in *Intellectual Politics and Cultural Conflict in the Romantic Period* foregrounds the conflict between processes of “social, material and ideological transformation” (2010: 13) occurring at the time, and the stark social and economic inequality in the midst of this sustained wealthy. Pointing to the connections between Scottish Enlightenment and its dialogue with emergent continental European philosophical and political thinking, and English plebeian radicalism, Benchimol maps a site of intellectual struggle; this is between “divergent notions for the future development” of British society, fuelled by “competing intellectual publics” (2010: 15). Criticism here, is expanded as a multiple cultural practice- from coffeehouses to pamphleteers, and by means of critical resistance.

The eighteenth century is also a time of sustained reform, concerned in particular with questions of representation. This is perhaps evidenced less in Habermas’ work, who provided a singular view of the public sphere focused on a range of sites of public debate, including coffeehouses, pamphlets and periodicals. Many of these spaces acted as spaces of representation concentrated on deliberation as a form of demanding political recognition or critique. Historian Margaret C. Jacob underlines that “the identity of the privileged, literate and affluent participants in the public sphere (of the 18th century) can be found by examining private societies, clubs, salons, lodges and box office receipts as well as inventories” (1994: 98). Her study reflects the private nature of the public sphere theorised by Habermas, and its paradoxical need for positioning within or away from the state. Jacob underlines that this view of the public sphere as universal and autonomous is subverted by this public fragmentation, and a lack of ability for these groups to articulate interest-based arguments for their political right (1994: 99). There is as much evidence to suggest that notions of the public sphere were “perfectly compatible

with oligarchic authority”, as there are to suggest that at the same time, the unstable nature of the concept of the public at this time gave rise to productive moments of collective dissent. Historians agree that the eighteenth century was fundamental in giving rise to modern democratic societies, and providing a national political identity for the public.

From the onset, we find an unstable notion of the public and of the constitution of universal public opinion within the historical analysis of the British eighteenth century, and Habermas’ theorisation of the bourgeois public sphere. We can note the presence of strong individual critics in the late eighteenth century, leading to the development of publications such as Thomas Dutton’s *Dramatic Censor*, Thomas Holcroft’s *Theatrical Recorder*, inspired by Richard Steele’s *Theatre* in 1720. These periodicals that flourished in the nineteenth century did so alongside more politically-oriented publications that housed critical activity, such as *The Spectator*.

Despite the making of reputations of critics who established the critical tradition in Britain, for example, William Hazlitt or Leigh Hunt, the most productive aspect of the eighteenth-century critical activity in relation to theatre criticism was its relating of political and artistic landscapes. In reading this history, it is all too easy to remain focused on the prominence of individuals, almost all exclusively male, and their sole importance for the development of theatre criticism. It is possible however to develop a historiography that concentrates in the collective nature of criticism, its relationship to publics, assemblies, and self-organisation.

By understanding the diversity, sociality and aesthetic considerations of the eighteenth-century public sphere, we can find a more productive intersection between politics and criticism that foregrounds collective discursivity over individual authority. In this way, we also displace the importance of expertise as an individual form of resistance and site of critique and begin to question the difference between consensus and dissensus, to use Rancière’s term.

The logic of these operations of visibility, appearance and emancipation in Rancière is supported by a (re)distribution of the sensible, that which “simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it” (2004: 12). These operations of visibility are fundamental to the emergence of public spheres of criticism and made apparent by the increasingly collective nature of its development. This results in a mode

of re-instituting a “common sense”, albeit fractured. This is the very fabric of the political in criticism; dissensus is what differentiates policing or homogenization from deliberation, and also that which can institute the development of plurality in cultural debate.

The sociability of certain forms of eighteenth century criticism situated the practice in a public sphere, that, given its problems of access, also acted, to some extent, as a private space. What history does evidence however is the development of sites of expertise that legitimate individual critics or writers; yet when that legislative infrastructure collapses, the very fabric of expertise and its relationship to subjectivity changes; we are moving beyond the canonical image of the critic as a powerful arbiter, and find ourselves, instead, in a plural landscape in which criticism can make visible the politics, aesthetics, positions, forms and discourses of theatre and performance, bringing their spheres of influence and context back into play. What remains should not only be an exercise of differentiation and model-building, but one where we also revisit the relationship between a cultural infrastructure and its critical spheres of debate.

Habermas suggests that public opinion, formed through consensus within a public sphere, must remain outside of the mechanics of the state and corporate capital in order to maintain critical efficacy. If post-truth politics has resulted in a collapsing of the boundaries between fact and fiction, governmentality and civic, social and artistic practice, then it is disagreement that will maintain the autonomy and discursive capacity of critical engagement. It is less a matter of critiquing who engages critically, and more a question of thinking about plurality and the constitution of discursive public spheres. In other words, we need to move beyond the paradox of expertise.

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