

# Better Criticism

## Ten Commandments for a Dying Art

For 20 years, from 1993 to 2013, **Chris Tookey** was the film critic for the *Daily Mail*, the UK's best-selling mid-market daily newspaper. He was also film critic for the world's most popular online newspaper, *Mail Online*. In 2013, he won the award Arts Reviewer of the Year from the London Press Club. Other jobs have included TV & film critic for the *Sunday Telegraph*, TV critic for the *Daily Telegraph* and theatre critic for the *Mail on Sunday*. He has written features and reviews for *Prospect*, the *Sunday Times*, *Observer*, *European*, *Books & Bookmen* and *National Review*. He is a prolific broadcaster, interviewer and interviewee on radio and TV, has presented *Back Row* and *The Film Programme* for Radio 4, and has worked in television and theatre (fringe, regional and West End), as a writer, composer, director and producer. His books on criticism are *The Critics' Guide to Movies*, *Named & Shamed: The World's Worst and Wittiest Movie Reviews from Affleck to Zeta-Jones*, *Tookey's Turkeys*, *Tookey's Talkies* and *Better Criticism: Ten Commandments for a Declining Art*.

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## Ten Commandments for a Dying Art

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**Chris Tookey**



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Chris Tookey

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## **FOREWORD**

### **The Ten Commandments of Criticism**

One of the most popular, smug and inane observations of the last few years is “everyone’s a critic”.

Looked at superficially, criticism is in rude health. There is a huge amount of it, and it’s more available than ever. Just turn on your computer. On subjects from films to food, hotels to video games, music to theatre, art exhibitions to zoos, reviews are everywhere – and not only in the democratic, freedom-loving west.

There is, of course, an awful lot to be said in favour of increasing the range of people who criticise. There is no reason why reviewing should be the preserve of a metropolitan, white, male elite, as it has been in the past – though let’s not *exclude* metropolitan white males, who should be allowed their voices as well. Everyone has the right to criticise, and it lies at the base of our other democratic freedoms. Our ability to assemble, vote and speak freely all depend on our right to express opinions.

Look deeper, though, and the news is far from good. Most professional critics of the arts, especially in America and the UK, will tell you (truthfully) that paid reviewing is under threat. Editors are culling most – sometimes all – of their best critics. In the academic world, balanced criticism is being driven out, in favour of weird and wacky dogma. Especially on the internet but also in newspapers and magazines, there’s more *bad* criticism than ever before – needlessly rude, ill-judged, poorly expressed or bigoted, and sometimes all four.

There are “reviews” that are not reviews at all, but paid-for marketing tools or uncritical hagiography by friends and relations of the artist (and sometimes by the artist himself). Corruption in the field of reviewing is rife. Bad is driving out good.

Even in such havens of free speech as Western Europe and America, the story of criticism over the last few years has been a shocking tale of sackings, corruption, suicides, murders and editorial stupidity. Good, honest critics are an endangered species.

In our universities, “critical theory” has disgraced real criticism, by seeking to place the critic above other creators, and viewing all creation through a prism laid down by Hard Left dogma, based on race, gender or environmental activism. Emanating from universities and academic publishing is an unappetising aroma of intellectual snobbery, assuming that structuralism (or whatever doctrine is currently fashionable) is the only way to look at art.

In the wonderfully simple world of critical theory, the villains of our age are authority, capitalism, Christianity, conservatism, convention, ethnocentrism, the family, global warming, heredity, hierarchy, loyalty, morality, nationalism, patriarchy, patriotism, sexual restraint and tradition. Any cultural artifact that seeks to justify any of these things is quite

simply wrong.

This leads to “clubland reviewing”, the kind of criticism that reflects little more than the writer’s anxiety to belong to a like-minded association of reviewers. This approach is especially rife at the BBC, where TV and radio producers alike seem to feel that any reviewing panel should consist of a token left-wing feminist, a left-winger from an ethnic minority and a left-wing gay man or woman. This, think the producers, will produce a balanced discussion. It produces the opposite, of course, by leaving out the vast majority of people and rendering them silent - which is why hardly anyone bothers to watch such programmes or listen to them. Between them, the token critics will cover all the bases of political correctness but ensure that the viewers will receive virtually no information on whether the play, book or film being discussed is worth the effort of seeing. This is part of the madness of our times.

One of my purposes in this volume is to do something that has not been attempted before. I want to praise and encourage *good* criticism that comes from a multiplicity of standpoints – criticism that is sensitive, informed, entertaining, useful and (above all) honest.

Let’s not forget, either, that in many countries it’s very hard to be an honest critic. Dissent is unpopular in all authoritarian societies. Speaking out is punishable by persecution, imprisonment and even execution.

On the night of March 22, 1980, in La Paz, the most famous film critic in Bolivia, Luiz Espinal, was kidnapped, tortured for hours, and murdered. His corpse was abandoned outside the city, where a peasant found it at dawn on the following day.

Besides being a film critic, Espinal directed the TV programme *In Flesh and Blood*, in which he tackled themes such as prisons, political violence, prostitution, drugs and guerrilla warfare.

Film criticism disappeared altogether from the press when the military took over, soon afterwards. The Bolivian Association of Film Critics, which Espinal had helped found in 1979, ceased to exist.

Colonel Luis Arce Gomez, who was rumoured to be responsible for Espinal’s execution, became minister of the interior under the military regime. The government turned into an agent for a multi-million dollar cocaine trade.

Espinal may not be well known outside Bolivia, but he was a critic who deserves to be remembered for his courage in defending his democratic beliefs. Months before he was assassinated, he denounced the impending dictatorship each week in the pages of the weekly magazine *Aqui*. He may not have guessed that he would be its first victim – but if he did, that did not stop him from writing what he knew was the truth.<sup>i</sup>

In Russia under Vladimir Putin<sup>ii</sup>, expressions of dissent all too often result in premature death. The Russian journalist Anna Politkovskaya<sup>iii</sup> was gunned down in October 2006 after criticising Putin. Coincidentally, or perhaps not, her execution took place on Putin’s birthday.

Politkovskaya foresaw her own assassination, saying “People sometimes pay with their lives for saying aloud what they think. In fact, one can even get killed for giving me information. I am not the only one in danger. I have examples that prove it.”<sup>iv</sup>

The phenomenon that gave her grounds for optimism was the internet:

“We are hurtling back into a Soviet abyss, into an information vacuum that spells death from our own ignorance. All we have left is the internet, where information is still freely available. For the rest, if you want to go on working as a journalist, it's total servility to Putin. Otherwise, it can be death, the bullet, poison, or trial — whatever our special services, Putin's guard dogs, see fit.”<sup>v</sup>

A week after Politkovskaya's shooting, former Russian spy Alexander Litvinenko<sup>vi</sup> accused Putin of sanctioning her murder. Just two weeks later, Litvinenko was poisoned in London with a lethal dose of radioactive polonium. The main suspect in the case, a former officer of the Russian Federal Protective Service (FSO), Andrey Lugovoy, remains in Russia. As a member of the Duma, he enjoys immunity from prosecution. But even before he was elected to the Duma, the British government tried to extradite him without success.

Litvinenko was in no doubt about who had ordered his execution. He had recently written two books, *Blowing Up Russia: Terror from Within* (2002) and *Lubyanka Criminal Group* (2002), in which he and former KGB member Yuri Felshinsky accused the Russian secret services of staging the Russian apartment bombings and other terrorist acts in order to bring Vladimir Putin to power. They also claimed that Putin had been personally involved in organised crime, including covering up drug traffic from Afghanistan.<sup>vii</sup>

Historian Robert Conquest<sup>viii</sup> reviewed *Blowing Up Russia: Terror from Within* in the *Guardian*, noting that “it has taken Litvinenko's murder for the book to appear in this updated edition.” He added that it was “as vivid a condemnation of the Putin regime as has yet been written.”<sup>ix</sup>

From his hospital deathbed, Litvinenko sent a defiant message to Putin:

“You may succeed in silencing me, but that silence comes at a price. The howl of protest from around the world will reverberate, Mr Putin, in your ears for the rest of your life.”<sup>x</sup>

In 2015, yet another of Putin's most outspoken critics, Boris Nemtsov<sup>xi</sup>, was shot and killed by four bullets in the back. Putin's ally Ramzan Kadyrov, Chechnya's president, immediately blamed the crime on “western spy agencies”. The muck-raking website Lifenews.ru, which has close links to Putin's former spy agency, the FSB, announced that Nemtsov was paying the price for his colourful love life. It noted that at the time of his murder, he was walking past the Kremlin with a Ukrainian model.<sup>xii</sup>

It would seem a good deal more probable that he was murdered for his opposition to Putin's regime, and in particular its secret war in Ukraine, that had resulted in more than 6,000 deaths. Nemtsov had already described Putin's annexation of Crimea as “illegal”. In the weeks before his death, Nemtsov expressed fears that Putin would have him killed.<sup>xiii</sup>

Let Luke Harding of the *Guardian* take up the story:

“Hours before his murder, moreover, Nemtsov said he had ‘documentary’ proof that undercover Russian soldiers were fighting and dying in eastern Ukraine. It was an assertion borne out by a steady flow of coffins returning in the dead of night from the war zone in Donetsk and Luhansk. According to his friend Ilya Yashin, Nemtsov was preparing an explosive essay on the subject. Nemtsov had written dissenting pamphlets before. One of them, *Putin: A Reckoning*, accused Russia's president and his circle of massive personal

corruption. Another targeted Yuri Luzhkov, Moscow's former mayor, later toppled. But this new one went to the heart of the Kremlin's big lie. At the weekend, police seized Nemtsov's hard drives. There seems little prospect his last polemic will now ever be published."<sup>xiv</sup>

Nor is Putin's Russia an isolated example of a merciless, homicidal dictatorship bent on suppressing criticism. In China, dissidents are routinely locked up on charges such as "spreading counterrevolutionary propaganda", "inciting counterrevolutionary activities", "disturbing public order", "defection to the enemy" and "treason".<sup>xv</sup>

I could fill another book with their names and individual stories. Writers who have fallen foul of the Chinese Communist system and been imprisoned for expressing criticisms of the regime have included the historian Bao Zunxin, Cai Lujun, Chen Pokong, He Depu (for inciting subversion on the internet), Jiang Lijun, Liao Yiwu (who bravely wrote a poem called *Massacre* about Tiananmen Square), Lu Jiamin, Shi Tao, Yuan Hongbing and Zeng Jinyan.<sup>xvi</sup>

In his book *The Slaughter: Mass Killings, Organ Harvesting, and China's Secret Solution to Its Dissident Problem* (2014), investigative journalist Ethan Gutmann<sup>xvii</sup> has alleged that Chinese dissidents are routinely rounded up and executed so that doctors can harvest their organs for transplantation. Needless to say, the book has been banned in China.

Even more bizarre reports have come from North Korea. Former guards who defected from Prison Camp No. 22, a labour camp in Hoeryong County, North Korea, revealed to human rights groups that human vivisection and experiments with biological and chemical weapons were routine there.

An August 2013, a report from the Washington-based [Committee for Human Rights in North Korea \(HRNK\)](#) called for an inquiry into the fate of 20,000 former prisoners of Camp 22. In 2012, the camp population was [reported](#) by Radio Free Asia (RFA) to have diminished suddenly from an estimated 30,000 to 3,000. RFA's sources, who were undercover North Koreans, revealed that most of the prisoners had starved to death. In September 2013, the *Washington Post* editorial board [wrote about the disappearance](#) of the camp: "Thousands of prisoners seem to have evaporated into thin air — perhaps via Camp 22's crematoria."

A former Camp 22 guard, Ahn Myong-chol, testified before Congress, published a memoir, and spoke out about North Korea's mass atrocities to various media, declaring he was doing so in penance for having once been part of the DPRK's inhuman system. He told NBC News in 2003:

"They trained me not to treat the prisoners as human beings. If someone is against socialism, if someone tries to escape from prison, then kill him. If there's a record of killing any escapee, then the guard will be entitled to study in the college. ... Beating and killing is an everyday affair. They are not treated as human beings; they are just like dogs or pigs."

A 2004 BBC [documentary report](#) featured interviews with North Korean camp survivors and Camp 22's former head of security, Kwon Hyu, who confessed to the crime of extermination and other crimes against humanity. He and an escaped victim confirmed

that prisoners of conscience had been used as guinea pigs for biological and chemical weapon experiments over several decades, on a systematic scale.<sup>xviii</sup>

Kim Jong-Un (1983 -) succeeded his father Kim Jong-II as Supreme Ruler of North Korea in 2011. He has carried out purges within his own government of anyone he believes may be disloyal, up to and including his own close relatives. He had his uncle, Jang Sung-Taek, executed by machine gun, along with members of Jang's family. These include Jang's sister Jang Kye-sun, her husband and ambassador to Cuba, Jon Yong-jin, and Jang's nephew and ambassador to Malaysia, Jang Yong-chol. The nephew's two sons were also killed.<sup>xix</sup> At the time of Jang's removal it was announced that “the discovery and purge of the Jang group... made our party and revolutionary ranks purer.”<sup>xx</sup> After his execution on 12 December 2013, state media warned that the army “will never pardon all those who disobey the order of the Supreme Commander.”<sup>xxi</sup>

On 7 March 2013, North Korea threatened the United States with a “pre-emptive nuclear attack”. Its supreme leader has also revealed plans to conduct nuclear strikes on Los Angeles and Washington, D.C.<sup>xxii</sup>

In *The Interview*, a Hollywood comedy, Seth Rogen and James Franco play Americans who are enlisted by the C.I.A. to try to assassinate Kim. In June 2014, North Korea promised to unleash a “merciless countermeasure” should the film be shown.<sup>xxiii</sup>

When the film’s production company, Sony Pictures, suffered an embarrassing breach of its internal computer network only weeks before the movie’s December release, the North Korean government in Pyongyang was widely blamed.<sup>xxiv</sup>

On a more serious note, there are said to be about 120,000 political prisoners in North Korea. Such is the level of repression that we don’t even know their names. Even the United Nations, which is notoriously slow to condemn dictators, voted overwhelmingly in November to recommend that he and the rest of North Korea’s leadership be hauled before the International Criminal Court, in The Hague, and tried for crimes against humanity.<sup>xxv</sup>

Persecution of critics and other dissidents does not exist only under dictatorship. With the rise of extremist Islamic movements, cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad bring the artists not only death threats, but also assassination. Most notoriously, journalists and cartoonists working for the Parisian satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* were massacred by French Jihadi gunmen, causing worldwide condemnation.<sup>xxvi</sup>

Several writers have received *fatwas*, or death sentences, merely for questioning the Islamic faith. There are too many examples to list them all, but here are three lesser-known examples.

In 1993, Bangladeshi fundamentalists proclaimed a fatwa against Taslima Nasreen in 1993, after she wrote newspaper columns critical of the treatment of women under Islam. The next year she wrote *Lajja* (Shame) which described the abuse of women and minorities. Again there were death threats, and the Bangladeshi authorities confiscated her passport. She fled the country via Calcutta, was granted asylum in Sweden, lived in Paris, and finally went to India. Even in India, she was ordered by the Indian government to leave the city of Kolkata after riots there, and had to move to Delhi.

In March 2007, an Indian Muslim group called the All India Ibtihad Council offered a 500,000 rupees bounty for her decapitation. The president of the Council, Taqi

Raza Khan stated that “Taslina has put Muslims to shame in her writings. She should be killed and beheaded and anyone who does this will get a reward from the council.”<sup>xxvii</sup>

In an interview given on September 30, 2002, for the American TV programme 60 Minutes, American Southern Baptist pastor and televangelist Falwell said: “I think Muhammad was a terrorist. I read enough by both Muslims and non-Muslims, [to decide] that he was a violent man, a man of war.” The highly immoderate response of Iranian cleric Mohsen Mojtahed Shabestari, was to issue a fatwa calling for Falwell's murder, saying he was a “mercenary and must be killed.”<sup>xxviii</sup>

In 2010, an Australian imam called Feiz Mohammed called for Dutch politician Geert Wilders to be decapitated, after Wilders compared the *Quran* to *Mein Kampf*, stating that “the book incites hatred and killing and therefore has no place in our legal order.”<sup>xxix</sup> It may be doubted whether calling for Wilders to be hated and killed was the most sensible response to his accusation.

In Malaysia, Muslim clerics were reported in 2015 to have issued no fewer than 1,500 *fatwas* condemning anyone attracted to such nefarious western practices as celebrating Valentine’s Day or Halloween. Other crimes deserving death sentences were putting on dog shows or practising yoga.<sup>xxx</sup> So in Malaysia you don’t even have to criticise anything to receive a fatwa.

Many fatwas have been treated in the west with scornful derision or dismissed as mere posturing, but they are in fact quite serious. Easily the most notorious was the 1989 fatwa against Salman Rushdie by the Iranian Ayatollah Khomeini, for Rushdie’s novel *The Satanic Verses*. In 1991, Rushdie's Japanese translator, Hitoshi Igarashi, was stabbed to death in Tokyo, and his Italian translator was beaten and stabbed in Milan. In 1993, Rushdie's Norwegian publisher William Nygaard was shot and severely injured in an attack outside his house in Oslo. Thirty-seven guests died when their hotel in Sivas, Turkey was burned down by locals protesting against Rushdie's Turkish translator, Aziz Nesin. In 1998 Iran stated it was no longer pursuing Rushdie’s death; however, that decree was reversed in 2005 by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Rushdie is still in fear of his life, but alive.

Others have not been so fortunate. In February 2015, American critic and blogger Avjit Roy, who had been promoting secular views in books and on the internet, was dragged from a bicycle rickshaw and hacked to death in a Dakha street in Bangladesh by fanatics wielding meat cleavers.<sup>xxxi</sup> His wife, Rafida Bonya Ahmed, suffered head injuries and lost a finger. “While Avijit and I were being ruthlessly attacked, the local police stood close by and did not act,” Rafida told Reuters.<sup>xxxii</sup>

A month later, a second blogger, 27 year-old Wasjiqur Rahman, was stabbed to death in Dakha, after writing in favour of atheism and against religious fundamentalism.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

Most recently, there have been the activities of extreme Muslim fundamentalists, operating mainly, but not exclusively, in Syria and Iraq. Fanatics from Islamic State, or

Isis, are continuing to murder many thousands of people, not for any crime but for not sharing their radical Muslim beliefs.

Isis is not the only organisation to blame in the Middle East. Under the brutally theocratic judicial system of Saudi Arabia, criticising the king is banned. Liberals are flogged and dissidents tortured. Women cannot travel without a man's permission.

There are too numerous victims to mention, but Khaled Johani was jailed for calling for democracy. Raif Badawy was flogged for opening an online liberal forum. Hamza Kashgari was imprisoned for daring to question Islam on Twitter. Abdul Hamid Al Fakki had his head chopped off for sorcery. Amina bint Nasser was beheaded for being a witch. Manal al Sharif was imprisoned for being a woman driver.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

Dozens of people are beheaded every month by the Saudi authorities. But, according to Human Rights Watch, the U.S. maintains a “deafening silence” on human rights violations by Saudi Arabia, because Saudi Arabia is its key ally in the region.<sup>xxxv</sup>

Iran, too, is notorious for its intolerance of criticism. The methods of its theocratic government include blanket censorship of all media, jamming of foreign satellite TV broadcasts, and the closing down of dissident newspapers and magazines. A new 2016 Law on Political Crimes criminalized all expression deemed to be “against the management of the country and its political institutions and domestic and foreign policies” and made “with intent to reform the affairs of the country without intending to harm the basis of the establishment”. Common Iranian punishments include floggings, blindings and amputations. These are sometimes carried out in public.<sup>xxxvi</sup>

Also in 2016, Turkey's Islamic President Recep Tayyip Erdogan used the excuse of a failed coup against him to imprison more than 40,000 people, dismiss nearly 90,000 civil servants and close down at least 184 media outlets. 118 journalists were sent to prison without trial.<sup>xxxvii</sup>

Hard-line anti-Islamic governments have been just as sensitive to criticism. In Tajikistan, a 2016 law declared that “insulting the leader of the nation” was a criminal offence. In November of that year, the independent newspaper *Nigoh* and website Tojnews announced their closure because “conditions no longer exist for independent media and free journalism”.<sup>xxxviii</sup>

Secular rulers can be every bit as monstrous as religious ones. Take Zimbabwe under Robert Mugabe<sup>xxxix</sup>. The Human Rights Forum in Harare, a coalition of 10 groups, including the Amani Trust, Amnesty International and the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace, published a damning report on Mugabe's regime in August, 2001:

“The rule of law has been replaced by rule by thugs. Armed militias roam the countryside assaulting people whose sole 'crime' is to support the opposition party. The victims receive little or no protection from the law enforcement agencies; worse, members of these agencies sometimes participate in the assaults. To retain power in the face of increasing opposition, Mugabe has been prepared to subvert the democratic process, the independence of the judiciary, the freedom of the press, and the professional neutrality of

the police and the army. He has deliberately stirred up violence, race hatred and political intolerance, and he has brought economic destitution to his country.”<sup>xi</sup>

Mr Mugabe and his ministers have repeatedly issued public death threats against their opponents. The late defence minister, Moven Mahachi, told a rally in 2000 that “we will move door to door, killing... I am the minister responsible for defence. Therefore, I am capable of killing”.<sup>xi</sup>

In June 2001, the foreign minister, Stan Mudenge, told trainee teachers: “As civil servants, you have to be loyal to the government of the day. You can even be killed for supporting the opposition, and no one would guarantee your safety.”<sup>xii</sup>

Small wonder, then, that Robert Mugabe has banned western critics of his regime from Zimbabwe. Only after his death – and perhaps not even then - can we expect full exposure of his murderous activities against those who have dared to criticise him.

The United States of America has long been regarded – by friends and enemies alike - as a bastion of free speech, but even here there are worrying signs of dictatorial tendencies. When President Donald Trump attacks credible news sources such as the BBC, CNN, *New York Times*, *Daily Mail*, *LA Times*, *New York Daily News* and *Guardian* as purveyors of “fake news” and calls them the “enemy of the American people,” he appears anxious to smear anyone who presents opinions or facts that diverge from his own view of reality.

Damian Collins, Conservative MP and chairman of the Culture, Media and Sport Parliamentary Committee, shares Trump’s dislike of deceptive journalism but told the Huffington News:

“We need to fight for a clear definition of fake news. This term should be restricted for news stories that are entirely fake, or where the key part of the story has been made up. It is pernicious for politicians like Donald Trump to use the term ‘fake news’ to include any piece of journalism that they disagree with. This deliberately blurs the lines, and suggests that fake news is in the eye of the beholder, rather than being something that can be clearly defined. When people then rightly call out websites that are pushing out fake news stories, the challenge could come back that all news organisation engage in fake news, so what’s the difference? This is dangerous.”<sup>xiii</sup>

This kind of authoritarianism in the face of legitimate criticism appears to be on the increase around the world. It has often needed bravery to stand up and be counted; and never more so than today.

The British restaurant and TV critic Adrian Gill expressed this need succinctly when he wrote:

“Freedom of speech is what all other human rights and freedoms balance on. That may sound like unspeakable arrogance when applied to restaurant reviews or gossip columns. But that’s not the point. Journalism isn’t an individual sport like books and plays; it’s a team effort. The power of the press is cumulative. It has a conscious human

momentum. You can – and probably do – pick up bits of it and sneer or sigh or fling them with great force at the dog. But together they make up the most precious thing we own.”<sup>xliv</sup>

Despite the low reputation of criticism and the poor quality of too many of its practitioners, it is a noble calling; and we – especially those of us in the west - have become far too complacent and sluggish when it comes to recognising its importance.

The right to free and honest expressions of opinion is a universal one, and it lies at the foundation of every other liberty.

## **THE FIRST COMMANDMENT Thou Shalt Expect To Be Criticised Thyself**

### *Beware of The Scrunts*

Critics are routinely reviled and deeply despised - and not only for their overuse of alliteration.

When told of a proposal that there should be a university chair for music criticism, the orchestra conductor Sir Thomas Beecham<sup>xlv</sup> responded tersely “if they must have one, I think it should be an electric chair.”<sup>xlvi</sup>

At the Annual Dinner of the Critics’ Circle in 1922, the playwright and author Sir James (J.M.) Barrie<sup>xlvii</sup> hinted that he too had entertained homicidal thoughts towards critics. Cheerily addressing the assembled reviewers as “scum”, he mused:

“How easy it would be to follow a critic or two to their office on a first night and give them a sudden push as a bus came along. But I dare say you are all rather nippy at the kerbside.”<sup>xlviii</sup>

There are plenty of people, especially in the creative fields, who would happily prescribe the death penalty for reviewers who have maligned them. You can tell this from the way critics are portrayed in books, plays and movies. They’re a bad lot.

In Joseph Mankiewicz's film *All About Eve*<sup>xlix</sup>, the sharp-tongued reviewer Addison DeWitt, based on real-life theatre critic George Jean Nathan<sup>l</sup>, turns out to be a criminal blackmailer.

In Douglas Hickox's black comedy film *Theatre of Blood*<sup>li</sup>, drama critics representing the seven deadly sins are gleefully murdered in a variety of spectacular ways. The first victim is hacked to death by tramps, in a reenactment of *Julius Caesar*. The next is speared, and his corpse is dragged behind a horse, like Hector in *Troilus and Cressida*. Other deaths include drowning, decapitation, electrocution by hair curlers and – perhaps most memorably - being made to eat one’s ‘babies’ (when an effeminate, gluttonous critic, played by Robert Morley, is force-fed his pet poodles).

In John Updike's story *Bech Noir*<sup>lii</sup>, the author writes with enthusiasm of literary critics being terrorized and culled by a vengeful writer. One is poisoned; one is driven to

suicide; a third is asphyxiated when his oxygen supply is turned off; another is crushed to death under the wheels of a New York subway car.

In M. Night Shyamalan's film *Lady In The Water*<sup>lviii</sup>, a know-it-all literary and film critic (played by the diminutive, bespectacled and splendidly cold Bob Balaban) is killed and eaten by scrunts (don't ask – imagine rabid wart-hogs from outer space). This was widely interpreted as Mr Shyamalan taking revenge on reviewers who had been insufficiently reverent about his previous film, *The Village*<sup>lv</sup>. Unfortunately, the critic character's supercilious complaints about cinematic clichés, laboured exposition and unrealistic dialogue were even more applicable to *Lady in the Water* than they had been to *The Village*.

The critics bit back by being beastly about all M. Night Shyamalan's subsequent films - a succession of turkeys including *After Earth*<sup>lv</sup> ("It's impossible to take this movie seriously, certainly not as seriously as it takes itself" - Peter Rainer, *Christian Science Monitor*), *The Last Airbender*<sup>lvi</sup> ("an insult to anyone with a triple-digit I.Q." - James Berardinelli, *ReelViews*) and *The Happening*<sup>lvii</sup> ("a load of shite" - Robbie Collin, *News of the World*).

Oh dear. I suppose that means we'll all end up being eaten by scrunts.

### ***Expect To Be Hated***

I have spent most of my professional life as a critic – of music, books, television, theatre and movies. I was paid to watch movies for 28 years,<sup>lviii</sup> was Chairman of the British Film Critics' Circle for five of them<sup>lix</sup>, and was voted Arts Reviewer of the Year in 2013.<sup>lx</sup> My reviews have been read by millions of people all over the planet.<sup>lxi</sup> All the same, look me up on the internet and you will find that I am, in some people's opinion at least, the Worst Critic in the World.<sup>lxii</sup>

Internet bloggers have claimed – without producing a shred of evidence - that I never like movies based on comic strips<sup>lxiii</sup>, or action movies<sup>lxiv</sup>, or movies that aren't in a foreign language<sup>lxv</sup>, or movies that are in a foreign language.<sup>lxvi</sup> It is also claimed that I hate any film that doesn't promote wholesome Christian values.<sup>lxvii</sup> None of this is even slightly true.<sup>lxviii</sup>

At least one actor hates me. Former film actor and self-confessed crack-addict<sup>lix</sup> Danny Dyer once denounced me on a DVD commentary track<sup>lxx</sup> as a "nonce", which I understand is a prison term for someone who sexually interferes with children. That's the same Danny Dyer who held down a job as agony columnist on the lads' mag *Zoo*, until he went too far with his advice to one reader that he disfigure his ex-girl-friend, so that no one else would fancy her.<sup>lxxi</sup> The last film I reviewed of his, *Run for Your Wife*, made just £602

on its first weekend, averaging £67 per screen.<sup>lxxii</sup> The last time I looked, he was in the TV soap *EastEnders*.<sup>lxxiii</sup>

I have been accused many times on the internet – anonymously, needless to say – of being a paedophile and a couple of times of bestiality.<sup>lxxiv</sup> Needless to say, none of these accusations has the slightest basis in reality.<sup>lxxv</sup>

My undesirable reputation as a pervert came about after a review I wrote of *Kick-Ass*, which complained that the film purveys “a perniciously sexualised view of children and glorifies violence, especially knife and gun crime”. I called attention to the sexual overtones in the deliberately glamorous, fetishistic way Hit-Girl and her startlingly violent behaviour were portrayed, and in her sexually explicit vocabulary. I wrote that the movie’s writers clearly wanted the audience to see Hit Girl not only as cool, but also as sexy.<sup>lxxvi</sup>

I could also have called attention – though I didn’t, because I was writing for a family newspaper – to the reception she received on YouTube, where numerous repellently lubricious comments were appended to videos of Hit Girl, leaving no doubt at all where the writers’ sexual preferences lay, and what they would like to do to her. These included “I’d fuck her brains out”, “mmmmm sexy”, “i wanna fuck her bad”, “she’s hot” and “I’d fuck the shit out of her tasty tight asshole. Damn she is so damn fine. My dick would explode if it even got near her sweet pussy.”<sup>lxxvii</sup> I would have thought that such comments remove any scintilla of doubt as to the film’s effect on this highly appreciative section of its target audience.

However, literally hundreds of bloggers, twitterers and facebook fiends weighed in, calling me “a perve”, “a fucking paedophile” and someone with either “an obsessed diseased mind” or “latent pedophiliac tendencies.” One of my internet critics detected homosexual and bestial overtones to my writing: “Mr Tookey suck's [sic] donkey dick, who's fav film is prob *The Chipmunks take it up the chocolate speedway*. This guy needs to get a life and man up to the real world.”

Another concerned citizen wrote: “Personally, I wouldn't leave Mr. Tookey alone with anyone's kids or pets. I highly suspect he might think a dog is inviting sexual assault if he sees it licking it's [sic] own balls.”<sup>lxxviii</sup>

Two Facebook groups sprang up in order to insult me: *Christopher Tookey is full of shit* and the catchily titled *Tookey, Everyone at the Daily Mail and All Its Readers are Idiots*. When I last looked, the latter group had no members and the first group had dwindled to 26, two of whom were me and my son; but every mass movement has to start somewhere.

Interestingly, other critics who called attention to the film’s unsavoury sexual overtones – including Roger Ebert<sup>lxxix</sup>, Peter Rainer<sup>lxxx</sup> and Anthony Lane<sup>lxxxi</sup> in America, Nigel Andrews<sup>lxxxii</sup>, Tim Robey<sup>lxxxiii</sup> and Mike McCahill<sup>lxxxiv</sup> in the UK – hardly received any hate mail at all. That’s one of the joys of writing for the *Daily Mail* – it’s so easy to become a left-wing hate figure.

On another occasion, I was portrayed in a *Guardian* cartoon as a fire-raising member of the Ku Klux Klan, complete with white sheet and a burning cross. This struck

me as surprising since I am not particularly right-wing, nor racist, nor sympathetic to any kind of terrorism.

The offensive cartoon arose from pieces I had written in the *Daily Mail* about David Cronenberg's 1996 film *Crash*, which had acquired an 18 certificate from the British Board of Film Classification despite falling foul of the BBFC's own guidelines about depictions of people enjoying non-consensual sexual mutilation. I wrote "*Crash* is a landmark in cinematic pornography because it will encourage those who have a sadistic sexual bent (or discover they have one as a result of seeing this movie) to feel that they are not alone, that attractive people feel the same way, and that no significant harm will come to others as a result of sado-masochistic acts. The film preaches, whether intentionally or not, a damaging and irresponsible lie - and one never promulgated before in a mainstream feature film... If censors allow this art-house film an 18 certificate, how can they refuse one later to some equally decadent movie along similar lines, made by a more populist, entertaining film-maker?"<sup>lxxxv</sup>

I never received any coherent reply to this question, either from the BBFC or from anyone who disagreed with me. All the attacks on me were *ad hominem*, like that *Guardian* cartoon.

A couple of cultural commentators, critic Mark Kermode and media studies academic Julian Petley, concocted a conspiracy theory in the British film magazine *Sight and Sound*.<sup>lxxxvi</sup> They claimed that Alexander Walker and I, who were both employed by different arms of Associated Newspapers, had colluded before we wrote our reviews<sup>lxxxvii</sup> and were bent on threatening freedom of speech (untrue on both counts). We had done so under pressure from the capitalist swine who run Associated Newspapers (also false).<sup>lxxxviii</sup>

Despite his lack of research, especially disconcerting in an academic, Petley was so sure of himself that he made an official complaint against Alex and myself to the Press Complaints Commission<sup>lxxxix</sup> - even accusing me of prejudice against disabled people having sex (also untrue, and nowhere to be found in anything I had written).<sup>xc</sup> The Press Complaints Commission threw out his claims, saying they had "no merit". Alex Walker and I did discuss suing Kermode and Petley for libel but decided it wasn't worth it, financially. And besides, both of us believed in freedom of speech, even if they didn't.

Mark Kermode later turned into an accomplished ranter about film on BBC Radio 5 and, on Philip French's retirement in 2013, rose to become film critic of the *Observer*. He still dislikes my stand on *Crash* (a film he has described as "pretty much perfect"), but then I regard his claim that *The Exorcist* is the best movie of all time as conclusive evidence of idiocy. But mostly we get on well.

Like me, Mark enjoys the way the internet has turned film criticism into a conversation, but he regrets that it has enabled people to abuse each other anonymously, "which I think is a very bad and dangerous thing. You say 'I love *Twilight*' in the pages of the *Observer*, and the torrent of anonymous abuse is extraordinary."<sup>xci</sup>

Michael Coveney, a former theatre critic for the *Financial Times*, *Observer* and *Daily Mail*, was shocked by the online reaction to a favourable review he wrote of Andrew

Lloyd Webber's musical *Love Never Dies*, and a piece in which he questioned the commercial success of another musical, *Legally Blonde*:

"I blogged about the fibs people were telling about how many seats it had sold and I got a lot of responses saying I didn't know what I was talking about, but also saying I should go away and die. It's the anonymity of the web that allows people to say these things."<sup>xvii</sup>

Coveney acknowledges that we are all entitled to our opinion, but says that the mere expression of an opinion "is not criticism". He regards the fans of certain musicals as the most vicious bloggers. He is often accused of being "up himself", and replies:

"Well, I answer, it is because I am a professional. It is my life and has been my whole career. I don't think that just having opinions is so valuable. You need a sense of historical memory. I am sure there will be online critics who have this, but not everybody."<sup>xviii</sup>

Andrew Lloyd-Webber points out that the ethics of bloggers are not nearly as refined or reliable as professional critics. Whereas critics will wait for the press night to praise or condemn a musical, bloggers will lay into the first preview:

"It's a very worrying situation for anyone who's opening any kind of play or musical. I dread to think what anybody would have said about the first preview of *Cats* or, frankly, *Les Misérables*, which was a huge undertaking and wasn't right at the beginning."<sup>xix</sup>

David Benedict, *Variety*'s theatre critic, points out that word-of-mouth has gone viral, but that "bloggers are dealing in unfettered opinions. True criticism is analysis, and it gives you an understanding of the form. Ideally, a critic doesn't just tell you something didn't work; they tell you why."<sup>xx</sup>

Andrew Keen, author of the book *The Cult of the Amateur*, laments the fact that "today a book or play is treated like a car that you might want to buy". He believes that the world of professional criticism is in crisis:

"There is a general rebellion against the cultural critic... The web is a platform for that rebellion, but it is also the cause of it. There is something in online culture that lends itself to rebellion."<sup>xxi</sup>

There's another good reason why critics' tastes differ from those of the general public, as the acerbic American theatre and film critic John Simon pointed out in 1982:

"The critic is primarily concerned with how much lasting, artistic value there is in a film; the paying customer is principally interested in having a good time... The critic's apparent negativism sets him off from the happy-go-lucky (or, better, eager-to-be-happy) crowd, and makes him look intolerant, mean and deserving of isolation... Let a critic say that a movie the reader loved is worthless (which, of course, never means more than 'worthless to the critic', but somehow always gets misconstrued), and the reader feels insulted and threatened: 'This man considers me to be an idiot.' And then, either insultedly, 'I am not an idiot!' or intimidated, 'My God! Am I an idiot?' So the tough critics end up being rejected, not merely with indignation or scorn, but actually with hate and fear, which condemn him to greater aloneness. No help for this."<sup>xxii</sup>

## ***Are Critics Human?***

The word “critic” comes from Greek word “kritikos” which means “able to discern”, which is in turn derived from the word “krites”, meaning a person who offers reasoned judgment or analysis, value judgment, interpretation or observation. Sometimes you’d never guess that the word has such a respectable pedigree, for scornful attacks on critics are far from new. Critics have long been reviled as ignorant parasites, even by those with good reason to be grateful to them.

Alexander Woollcott, a former drama critic of the *New York Times*, was candid about the number of his enemies, saying “If I were found dead with a dagger through my heart, the next morning three hundred actors would be arrested on suspicion of murder.”<sup>xcviii</sup>

Playwright Brendan Behan, a convicted bomber for the IRA during his impetuous twenties and a notoriously belligerent drunk, likened critics to eunuchs in a harem:

“They know how it is done, they’ve seen it done every day, but they are unable to do it themselves.”<sup>xcix</sup>

That strikes me as more than a little ungrateful to Kenneth Tynan, who had the balls to support Mr Behan when hardly anyone else would. The young critic of the *Observer* gave the Irishman’s breakthrough play *The Quare Fellow* a crucial boost in 1956 by writing that the playwright was fulfilling the Irish duty to “save the English theatre from inarticulate glumness”.

Tynan’s less well-known successor at the *Observer*, Mervyn Jones, also helped to make a hit of the Irishman’s play *The Hostage* in 1959. Sadly, Mr Behan died of drink in 1964 before he could pen any penitent thank-you letters to the splendidly thrusting, virile critics who had helped fund his drink habit.

Another angry young man, but one who lived long enough to become a bad-tempered old fart, was John Osborne. He hated all reviewers with a passion. “Asking a working writer what he thinks about critics,” he snarled, “is like asking a lamppost what it feels about dogs.”<sup>ci</sup>

This too strikes me as unfair to Mr Tynan, who - however much in person he may have resembled a pampered pooch fresh from the poodle parlour - was the only critic to see the merits of Osborne’s patchy theatrical debut, *Look Back in Anger*. There can be little doubt, even if Mr Osborne never chose to acknowledge the fact, that without Tynan’s timely rave Mr Osborne’s own writing career might have ended in the gutter after a universally panned flop.

Derek Malcolm, former film critic for the *Guardian* and *Evening Standard*, once received a black eye from “a well-known actor” and recalls that Charlton Heston tried to have him fired:

“Heston told my editor at the *Guardian* to get himself a new, more intelligent critic after I had reviewed his *Antony and Cleopatra* badly, with the remark that it was the greatest asp-disaster in the world. Only a few months later, when I observed that Heston was still a major Hollywood star, he wrote again to the editor saying what a good critic I was.”<sup>cii</sup>

Former *Telegraph* theatre critic Charles Spencer well remembers a verbal slap in the face in 2009 from the usually saintly Dame Judi Dench. He had been brutally dismissive of her performance in the play *Madame De Sade*:

“Frankly this imperious turn is becoming a bit of a bore and I think Dench must know

she's landed herself in a dud because she isn't nearly as fluent with her lines as one might expect."

Dame Judi replied that she wished she could give Charlie a kicking:

"I've always rather admired you but now realise you're an absolute shit."<sup>ciii</sup>

Actor John Hurt<sup>civ</sup> used to recall with rueful amusement how he reacted in 1965, to a review by *Daily Express* theatre critic Peter Lewis:

"Those were the days when you would leave the party at 4am to read the notices. So I read it, asked someone for a pen, and wrote him a note. 'Dear Mr Lewis, Whoooooops! Yours sincerely, John Hurt.' Then I foolishly sent it."

He received a reply a few weeks later. "I opened this beautifully typed letter, which said, 'Dear Mr Hurt. Thank you for your short but tedious letter. Yours sincerely, Peter Lewis'."

John drew a moral that should probably apply to all actors momentarily afflicted by hatred of a critic:

"Never write to a writer. Especially if you're a bit pissed"<sup>cv</sup>.

Virtually every critic I have talked to has received a large amount of hate mail and knows of attempts by executives, producers, directors, actors and publicists to get rid of them professionally.

Former *Sunday Times* film editor George Perry speaks for many when he recalls his own mailbag:

"Most journalists are familiar with those letters written in green ink on lined paper, sometimes entirely in block capitals, claiming that the opinions expressed that have provoked outrage are a manifestation of the Zionist conspiracy that holds the British press in thrall or are commanded by the forces of anti-Semitism that permeate our parasitical capitalist industry. I have had both and more. It's best not to answer, although in the blissful pre-Murdoch days when the nice Canadians were our owners we had a rule that all readers who wrote in should receive a reply."<sup>cvi</sup>

Whenever I see restaurant critic Giles Coren, I am reminded of the American humourist P.J. O'Rourke's aphorism "the C student starts a restaurant; the A student writes restaurant reviews"<sup>cvii</sup>. An incorrigible smart-aleck, Coren claims to have lost count of the number of readers who have tried to have him fired, but is reluctant to name names:

"Yes, many times. Can't really say who. But a couple of restaurateurs, a couple of cabinet ministers and my next door neighbour."<sup>cviii</sup> The response from the editor of the *Times* was always that he is sorry I have caused offence but that he seeks to represent a broad range of opinion blah blah blah... and he is always very supportive of me generally. This is probably because I am popular with readers and perform well in focus groups. If the readers stopped reading me, I'm sure I'd be out on my ear."<sup>cix</sup>

Rupert Christiansen, Opera Critic for the *Daily Telegraph*, recalls:

"I once wrote an article in the *Telegraph* questioning the over-inflated reputation of the soprano Lesley Garrett, who at that time was enjoying phenomenal success in the cross-over market. It provoked a huge postbag, including violent anonymous abuse promising bloody vengeance. But I felt that on the whole readers agreed with me: her fame and fortune had gone much further than her modest talent merited."<sup>cx</sup>

He also received an avalanche of hate mail when, in a review of *Der Rosenkavalier* at Glyndeborne, he accused opera singer Tara Erraught of being “dumpy”. One email to the *Telegraph* said “Mr. Christiansen appears to be an unattractive, balding homosexual, casually throwing stones from his glasshouse. But of course, no offence meant - please take this as a helpful critique.”

Did he respond? Well yes, he did write a column of self-justification, complete with a note of regret to the singer:

“I am distressed to learn that Miss Erraught, who is only 27, has been upset by the hoo-ha around the reception of her performance, though I am sure she understands the value and necessity of disinterested criticism. So let me make myself clear: she is a very pretty girl with a delightful smile and an endearing stage presence. I would love to hear her sing Rossini’s *Cenerentola* or *Rosina*. But she cannot visually embody any conventional idea of Octavian, and I feel the production has wilfully, perhaps ironically, cast her against type. I do not think this is fair on her, and the costuming and wigs (not least a frumpy pink dressing gown) she has been assigned are not flattering.”<sup>cxii</sup>

Christiansen says, however, that he has learned to ignore hate mail:

“I never respond to anything except *bona fide* questions, or pure errors of fact. My opinions stand, and I stand by them.”<sup>cxiii</sup>

Tempting though it is for professional critics to savage those who offer nasty or ignorant criticism of their work, or indeed their personal habits, it is better to treat them with care and concern, the way Paul Rudnick (in his persona of Libby Gelman-Waxner) does, in his/her column in *Entertainment Weekly*. Here’s one reply to a reader’s email:

“Thank you for being so sweet, because I know that sometimes readers who post online can become a little feisty, if not downright psychotic. But whenever a reader says something mean, I always try to be forgiving and compassionate. I try to picture that person, using their ragged fingernails to chip the dried nacho cheese off their laptop, and nibbling the results. I want to hug that person, because I know that whether they’re a man or a woman, they’re wearing pleated khakis, tube socks, and yesterday’s underwear. I want to tell that person, I completely understand your rage, because it can’t be easy, being habitually ignored by your tropical fish, and knowing that, even though you can’t prove it, those rotating chairs on *The Voice* were your idea, and wondering why Joss Whedon hasn’t written back, after you sent him those 50 pages of detailed notes on why Buffy should be in the next *Avengers* movie. I want to help that person, by assuring them that if someday, we can harness the bitterness and envy of the internet, the planet won’t need any alternative fuels.”<sup>cxiii</sup>

More sound advice on how to deal with this kind of nuisance comes from former music and theatre reviewer George Bernard Shaw, who long before the internet advised critics to turn the other cheek and not fight back:

“I learned long ago never to wrestle with a pig. You get dirty. And besides, the pig likes it.”<sup>cxiv</sup>

Giles Coren takes a different view, but then he does receive an awful lot of hate mail:

“I have had hundreds of hate mail letters, although over the years it has migrated first to email and now largely to twitter. Much of my writing causes that reaction, I think because

I take extreme positions and/or express myself in an unrestrained way. Supporters of a cuisine/chef/country/region of Britain generally point out that I have had no ‘training’ whatever the hell they think that means and then attach other personal things to my lack of entitlement to the job (this was true when I was restaurant critic of the *Independent* and of *Tatler* and when I had a film review TV show on channel 5). In the early days they focused mostly on my having a famous father and on my Jewishness in the hate mail. And also on Rupert Murdoch. Of late, with the changes in the world and with the emergence of twitter their main line of attack is my ‘privilege’ – i.e. white, male, middle class, public school, Oxbridge. My response used to be to ignore, but now I reply in vile foulmouthed diatribes with threats of violence and it does seem to shut them up.”<sup>cxv</sup>

### *Self-Loathing Critics*

One reason critics rarely enjoy popular esteem is that they can hardly ever bring themselves to speak well of each other.

The famous comic novelist P. G. Wodehouse once wrote “Has anybody ever seen a drama critic in the daytime? Of course not. They come out after dark, up to no good.”<sup>cxvi</sup>

The line is much quoted, often by those who don’t realise that Wodehouse was being self-deprecating. During his first years in New York, up to and including the First World War, he earned a living largely by writing theatre reviews for *Vanity Fair*.<sup>cxvii</sup> Among his critical colleagues of the time were such talented writers as Alexander Woollcott<sup>cxviii</sup>, George S. Kaufman<sup>cxix</sup> and Dorothy Parker<sup>cx</sup>. So in disparaging the drama critics of his personal acquaintance, Wodehouse was being, at least partially, ironic. Woollcott was just as comically insincere about himself and his colleagues, describing all critics as “ink-stained wretches.”<sup>cxxi</sup>

Kenneth Tynan<sup>cxii</sup> wrote another of the most-quoted humorous jibes at his own profession: “A critic is a man who knows the way but can’t drive a car.”<sup>cxiii</sup>

But, although Tynan accomplished other things in later life, including theatrical production and feature journalism, he never surpassed his early work as a theatre critic. Nor, when he was in his critical prime in his early twenties, did Tynan allow his belief that he could not write plays inhibit him from expressing opinions about those who believed they could. And, when you come to think about it, isn’t knowing the way as important, in its way, as being able to drive a car?

Another of the twentieth century’s sharpest wits, George Bernard Shaw, came up with arguably the most celebrated put-down of critics:

“He who can, does; he who can’t, teaches.”<sup>cxxiv</sup>

Hollywood actor Burt Reynolds<sup>cxv</sup> added the malicious pay-off line:

“Those who can’t do either, criticise.”<sup>cxvi</sup>

Doubtless, Burt was emotionally scarred by the reception of films such as *At Long Last Love* (1975), in which one critic<sup>cxvii</sup> described him as singing like Dean Martin with adenoids and dancing like a drunk killing cockroaches.

However, once again Shaw’s slur on critics should not be taken at face value. Shaw was a celebrated music and stage reviewer before he became a playwright, and as a theatre

critic he was one of the first men in Britain to champion the then controversial work of Henrik Ibsen.<sup>cxxviii</sup>

Shaw's subsequent career as a playwright neatly disproves his own thesis about critics, for it was his admiration for Ibsen's ability to mix comedy with tragedy that made Shaw believe this was a new kind of theatre to which he could contribute creatively as well as critically. Shaw wrote an essay called *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*<sup>cxxix</sup>, which reads today as Shaw's own, passionately argued theatrical credo. It was only after encountering Ibsen's work as a critic that Shaw found the courage - and the ability - to try and emulate him as a creator. In short, teaching as a critic gave George Bernard Shaw the impetus to do, as a dramatist.

### ***Revenge of The Artists***

Artists of all kind are entitled to ignore professional reviewers or, indeed, the public, if all they care about is self-expression. Mozart<sup>cxxx</sup> claimed "I pay no attention whatever to anybody's praise or blame. I simply follow my own feelings."<sup>cxxxi</sup>

Lesser geniuses, especially in the so-called popular arts, may take a more populist or commercial approach. Walt Disney<sup>cxxxii</sup> said "we are not trying to entertain the critics. I'll take my chances with the public."<sup>cxxxiii</sup>

It is hardly surprising, however, that some creative artists, injured by critical barbs, have taken umbrage at those who have hurt them. The Victorian poet Alfred, Lord Tennyson<sup>cxxxiv</sup> famously described critic John Churton Collins (1848-1908) as "a louse in the locks of literature."<sup>cxxxv</sup> That is much quoted as a witticism about critics, but it is not an altogether fair description of John Churton Collins.

Collins had a distinguished career as a journalist, essayist and lecturer, publishing learned volumes on the artist Sir Joshua Reynolds, Dryden, Voltaire, Swift and Rousseau. He was instrumental, for better or for worse, in pioneering the study of English within British universities, and in 1904 was appointed to the chair of English Literature at the new University of Birmingham. So he wasn't only a parasite.

The maligned Collins incurred Tennyson's hatred with three articles in the magazine *Cornhill*, which were republished in book form as *Illustrations of Tennyson* in 1891. Collins wrote that Tennyson's verse was guilty of "commonplace thought" and "commonplace sentiment". The critic also dared to point out that the poet was indebted to various sources, ancient and modern, though Collins stopped well short of accusing Tennyson of plagiarism.

His tone was, by modern standards, deferential:

"It would be absurd and presumptuous to conclude that the analogies which have been traced between the ideas and expressions of Lord Tennyson and those of other poets and writers were in all, or indeed in most cases, deliberate or even conscious imitations. In his own noble words, we moderns are 'the heirs of all the ages.'"

The Poet Laureate was notoriously sensitive about adverse criticism, however, and chose to ignore the numerous passages in Collins' work that praised the poet's rhythm

and imagery. So nowadays Collins is unjustly remembered only for Tennyson's cruelly ungracious description of him.

The playwright David Mamet<sup>cxvii</sup> wrote equally scathingly of the influential New York critics Frank Rich<sup>cxviii</sup> and John Simon<sup>cxviii</sup> that they were "the syphilis and gonorrhoea of the theatre."<sup>cxviii</sup>

Mamet's feud with John Simon ran and ran. In 2005, Mamet penned a premature celebration of Simon's departure from theatre criticism: "I have just heard that John Simon has been fired from the post he long disgraced at *New York Magazine*. In his departure he accomplishes that which during his tenure eluded him: he has finally done something for the American Theatre."<sup>cxix</sup> In 2008, Mamet returned to that theme, lambasting Simon - who was still writing theatre reviews professionally - for his "stunning amalgam of superciliousness and savagery".<sup>cxli</sup>

Simon was by no means an uncritical admirer of Mamet's work. In 2008, Simon wrote:

"That Mamet can write, he proved early in *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* and recently in *Romance*. But in between, things became iffy, hairy, and sometimes just plain poor. Mamet's procedure is fracture of the language. He may start with sentences, which become shorter and shorter, and tend to devolve into sentence fragments. Forthwith they may be reduced to mere words, which, in turn, are apt to break off into forlorn syllables, sometimes single vowels or consonants interrupted by another speaker. Often there are only pauses, but those, to be sure, are bequests from Harold Pinter, like so many other questionable devices drawn by Mamet from that insalubrious well."<sup>cxlii</sup>

But Simon's judgments of Mamet mellowed over the years. Ironically, it was Simon who leapt to the defence of Mamet's much-panned play *Race* (2009) at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre. Though it was described as "a bewildering muddle" by the *New York Post*<sup>cxliii</sup>, "slick but hollow" by *Variety*<sup>cxliv</sup> and "smug cynicism" by the *Financial Times*<sup>cxlv</sup>, Simon gave it a complimentary review, calling it "a high-voltage melodrama that is unafraid to raise painful questions while dispensing prickly ideas and provocative dialogue amid steady suspense".<sup>cxlvi</sup>

Simon also found much to like in the 2009 Broadway revival of *Oleanna*, saying it "has lost none of its power to provoke."<sup>cxlvii</sup>

Mamet's opinion of Simon does not seem to have softened, however; of the two men, Mamet appears to be the more unreasonable hater.

Mamet's description of Frank Rich as a social disease is even more surprising, for the long-serving *New York Times* critic praised Mamet's *American Buffalo* as a "brilliant...violent vision of the dog-eat-dog jungle of urban American capitalism."<sup>cxlviii</sup> Rich acclaimed Mamet's *Glengarry Glen Ross* as "ferocious comedy and drama, a top American playwright in bristling form."<sup>cxlix</sup> When Madonna appeared in *Speed-the-Plow* in 1988, she was universally panned - except by Frank Rich, who enjoyed her "intelligent, scrupulously disciplined comic acting". He called the play "hilarious and chilling... the culmination of this playwright's work to date... riveting theater."<sup>cl</sup> And he had nothing but praise for

*Oleanna*: “As usual with Mamet, the vehicle for that combat is crackling, highly distilled dialogue unencumbered by literary frills or phony theatrical ones.”<sup>cti</sup>

So, like Behan and Osborne before him, Mamet strikes me as having been rather too quick to condemn critics who have, whether he cares to admit it or not, helped his work reach a wider public.

### ***Does It Take An Artist To Criticise An Artist?***

Actress Rosanna Arquette<sup>ctii</sup> is frank about why she despises critics:

“Critics are usually frustrated artists and they criticise other people’s art because they can’t do it themselves. It’s a really disgusting job. They must feel horrible inside.”<sup>ctiii</sup>

Ms Arquette is in good company. Former Conservative Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli<sup>ctiv</sup> aired his view of reviewers in his novel *Lothair*:

“You know who the critics are? The men who have failed in literature and art.”<sup>ctv</sup>

American President Harry S. Truman<sup>ctvi</sup> wrote one of the most vituperative letters ever to a critic, Paul Hume<sup>ctvii</sup>, music critic of the *Washington Post*, who had written of the president’s only child Margaret Truman<sup>ctviii</sup>’s concert in the capital on December 5<sup>th</sup> 1950 that “Miss Truman cannot sing very well. She is flat a good deal of the time. And still cannot sing with anything approaching a professional finish.” Truman wrote indignantly:

“I’ve just read your lousy review buried in the back pages. You sound like a frustrated old man who never made a success, an eight-ulcer man in a four-ulcer job, and all four ulcers working. I have never met you, but if I do you’ll need a new nose and plenty of beefsteak and perhaps a supporter below. Westbrook Pegler, a guttersnipe, is a gentleman compared to you.”<sup>ctix</sup>

Film director Alan Parker<sup>ctx</sup> believes film-makers and film reviewers are very different kinds of being:

“On the average film, you’re generally up to your waist in slush or mud for eighteen hours a day, six days a week, for three months at a time. Around you the crew are falling apart from exhaustion, dysentery, malaria, divorce or nervous breakdowns — all so we can be shit on by some film critic whose greatest sacrifice is to switch off his mobile phone in a Soho preview theatre.”<sup>ctxi</sup>

He’s annoyed by the flippancy with which some critics approach their job:

“Critics are part of the filmmaking process and there’s a serious responsibility there. Let’s be honest, it’s not just a smart arse review we’re talking about from some dick-head on TV with gelled hair and a shiny suit — it’s someone stopping you making a living. That’s not funny if you have kids and a mortgage.”<sup>ctxii</sup>

Parker has especially harsh words for critics who are snobs or don’t like anything unexpected or original:

“Ultimately, critics aren’t the guardians of art. Artists are. When we made *Pink Floyd The Wall* most film critics were of a certain age and refused to even review it. They thought rock music was about as intellectual as a Jan and Dean record. Critics hate it when the boxes they have created are climbed out of and lines drawn, stepped across. A critic is like a dog. If they don’t know what something is they encircle it, sniff it, pee on it and walk

away.”<sup>clxiii</sup>

Star ratings have also helped to bring critics into disrepute. How does one compare a challenging, somewhat depressing art-house film that is attempting to explore death and bereavement (such as Michael Haneke’s 2012 film *Amour*) with a carefree musical bent on entertaining (such as Stanley Donen’s 1952 masterpiece *Singin’ In The Rain*)? My answer would be that both films are classics of their kind, and each deserves five stars.

Most reviewers I know have a love-hate relationship with star ratings. Many worry that lazy readers will look at the ratings and won’t bother to read the critique. Others, like me, feel that having to use a star rating is a discipline that enables one to work out in one’s own mind how far to recommend something.

For me a five-star rating means “classic”, four stars denote “very good” or “very entertaining”, three stars mean “good” or “enjoyable”, two stars indicate something that’s seriously flawed but has redeeming characteristics, and one star is a recommendation to avoid. In addition, I used a “Tookey’s Turkey” graphic to suggest something that I find aesthetically and morally repellent.

In Roger Ebert’s review of *Shaolin Soccer*, he wrote a justification of the star system in movie reviews:

“The star rating system is relative, not absolute. When you ask a friend if *Hellboy* is any good, you're not asking if it's any good compared to *Mystic River*, you're asking if it's any good compared to *The Punisher*. And my answer would be, on a scale of one to four, if *Superman* (1978) is four, then *Hellboy* is three and *The Punisher* is two”<sup>clxiv</sup>

Star ratings may seem a recent phenomenon, but they date back to 1926, when the influential *Michelin Guide* to restaurants started to allocate between one and three stars to fine dining establishments.<sup>clxv</sup> The idea was taken up in the 31 July 1928 edition of the *New York Daily News*, where film critic Irene Thirer began evaluating films on a scale of zero to three stars.<sup>clxvi</sup>

The practice spread in the 1950s and 1960s to such would-be intellectual magazines as *Cahiers du Cinema* and *Sight and Sound*.<sup>clxvii</sup>

Jay Scott, of the *Toronto Globe and Mail*, objected when he was ordered to use a four-star system of rating. He recalled “the scene from Bob Fosse's *All That Jazz* in which the director-hero, in hospital after a heart attack, watches a TV critic assign balloons to indicate the value of the director-hero's latest film. We know what the director-hero has sacrificed to get the movie into theatres - everything. And we know what the critic has sacrificed to get the review on air - nothing. That's why my first reaction to the idea of introducing any sort of symbolic evaluation system - stars, balloons, numbers, letters, apples, oranges, thumbs or condoms - was to object; the star system got no stars from me.”<sup>clxviii</sup>

He has a point, of course. Star ratings are no substitute for words. All the same, they can be a comprehensible guide to readers in a hurry. And part of a critic’s job is to be useful.

Most of those who will detest you for being a critic will regard themselves as creative. It is a common belief among artists of all degrees of ability, including none, that critics are merely wannabe artists or failed artists, and therefore have no right to criticise. The implication is that great creative artists would make the best critics. This is, regrettably, far from true.

There is, for a start, such a thing as professional jealousy between artists - not to mention incomprehension between artists whose aims, tastes and techniques differ. Anyone who reads the literary pages of newspapers today will know how bitchy and ungenerous authors can be to their contemporaries, and that is no new development.

The great Renaissance painter Titian, for instance, wrote about the scarcely less talented Tintoretto “he will never be anything but a dauber.”<sup>clxix</sup>

Even the Impressionists, little loved by the professional critics of their day, were far from supportive to each other. In 1864, Edouard Manet went so far as to say that Pierre-Auguste Renoir “has no talent at all, that boy. Tell him please to give up painting.”<sup>clxx</sup>

Composers are no different. Ludwig van Beethoven said of Rossini “Rossini would have been a great composer if his teacher had spanked him enough on his backside.”<sup>clxxi</sup> Hector Berlioz wrote that “Wagner is evidently mad.”<sup>clxxii</sup> In a similar way, Giacomo Puccini failed to see any good in Igor Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring* (1913), calling it “the work of a madman.”<sup>clxxiii</sup>

Lord Byron so disliked John Keats’ poetry (which, frankly, has stood the test of time rather better than Byron’s) that he called for Keats to be beaten to death:

“No more Keats, I entreat: flay him alive; if some of you don’t, I must skin him myself: there is no bearing the drivelling idiotism of the Mankin.”<sup>clxxiv</sup>

In 1748, Voltaire condemned that second-rater William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* as “a vulgar and barbarous drama, which would not be tolerated by the vilest populace of France, or Italy... One would imagine this piece to be the work of a drunken savage.”<sup>clxxv</sup>

The great Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy took a dim view of Shakespeare’s entire output, describing it as “crude, immoral, vulgar and senseless.”<sup>clxxvi</sup>

Oscar Wilde, usually regarded as one of the greatest comic playwrights who ever lived, was derided as a mediocrity by many of his writer contemporaries including Edmund Gosse<sup>clxxvii</sup> and Arnold Bennett<sup>clxxviii</sup>. Henry James wrote to his brother William in a letter dated 2 February 1895, just after seeing Wilde’s play *An Ideal Husband*:

“The thing seemed to me so helpless, so crude, so bad, so clumsy, feeble and vulgar.”<sup>clxxix</sup>

The American writer and humorist Ambrose Bierce, wrote of Wilde in 1882:

“That sovereign of insufferables, Oscar Wilde, has ensued with his opulence of twaddle and his penury of sense. He has mounted his hind legs and blown crass vapidity through the bowel of his neck, to the capital edification of circumjacent fools and foolesses, fooling with their foolers. He has tossed off the top of his head and uttered himself in copious overflows of ghastly bosh. The ineffable dunce has nothing to say and says it – says it with a liberal embellishment of bad delivery, embroidering it with reasonless vulgarities of attitude, gesture and attire. There was never an impostor so hateful, a blockhead so stupid, a crank so variously and offensively daft.”<sup>clxxx</sup>

He went on to condemn “the limpid and spiritless vacuity of this intellectual jellyfish”. So not much comradely spirit there.

Marcel Proust<sup>clxxxi</sup> may be considered one of France’s foremost literary talents, but British novelist Evelyn Waugh<sup>clxxxii</sup> didn’t think much of him, writing in 1948:

“I was reading Proust for the first time. Very poor stuff. I think he was mentally

defective.”<sup>clxxxiii</sup>

Waugh took an equally mean-spirited view of the British author and poet Stephen Spender:

“To see him fumbling with our rich and delicate language is to experience all the horror of seeing a Sevres vase in the hands of a chimpanzee.”<sup>clxxxiv</sup>

Robert Graves<sup>clxxxv</sup> had no time for Dylan Thomas<sup>clxxxvi</sup>, calling him “a demagogic Welsh masturbator who failed to pay his bills.”<sup>clxxxvii</sup>

If you’re looking for a hater of James Joyce<sup>clxxxviii</sup>, look no further than his fellow-novelist D. H. Lawrence<sup>clxxxix</sup>. The author of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* sounded off about the depravity of Joyce’s *Ulysses* in 1928, denouncing it as:

“The dirtiest, most indecent, most obscene thing ever written... My god, what a clumsy *olla putrida* James Joyce is! Nothing but old fags and cabbage-stumps of quotations from the Bible and the rest, stewed in the juice of deliberate, journalistic dirty-mindedness.”<sup>cxc</sup>

You might expect a fellow-modernist such as Virginia Woolf<sup>cxi</sup> to be more appreciative of Joyce, but she wasn’t. She called *Ulysses* “the work of a queasy undergraduate scratching his pimples”.

Even writers who have suffered their own run-ins with unsympathetic critics cannot be relied upon to produce kindly critiques when asked for their own opinions. Here, for example, is Charles Dickens’ merciless dissection of a play at the Theatre Royal, Haymarket, in December 1837:

“On Thursday night an original domestic drama (advertised in the bills as the work of one Frederick Lawrance) was produced at this house, and was received in play-bill phraseology with ‘roars of laughter’ – meeting, in short, with a reception which would have been most delightful to the author’s feelings if the piece had been intended to be funny, but which (his intention apparently being that it should be very affecting) was calculated to awaken feelings of quite an opposite description in his mind – if he has such a thing about him, which we rather doubt.”<sup>cxcii</sup>

Dickens may well have been right to be contemptuous of Mr Lawrance’s work, which was taken off after only two performances and has long since been forgotten. But even a versatile and highly creative man of the theatre such as Noel Coward<sup>cxciii</sup> could be wrong in his estimation of genuine dramatic talent. Even though he never saw *Waiting for Godot* he read it and pronounced Samuel Beckett’s work to be “pretentious gibberish, without any claim to importance whatever.”

Theatre critic Irving Wardle recalls with a shudder the period when one much less witty playwright had a brief try-out as theatre critic on the *Observer*:

“For lazily opinionated arrogance and disregard of the critical basics (e.g. reporting on an actress’s looks instead of her performance) it would be hard to beat the notices John Osborne wrote during his guest spell on the *Observer*.”<sup>cxciv</sup>

And it should be remembered that not all creative artists are intellectual powerhouses. Here, for example, is Gene Simmons<sup>cxcv</sup> of the rock group Kiss, expressing his feelings about Shakespeare’s musicality, his populism and rhythm:

“Shakespeare is shit. Absolute shit! He may have been a genius for his time, but I just

can't relate to that stuff. 'Thee' and 'thou' - the guy sounds like a faggot. Captain America is classic because he's more entertaining."<sup>excvi</sup>

The obvious conclusion is that being an artist - of whatever quality - does not necessarily qualify one to be a critic of sound judgment and measured expression.

Indeed, anyone who thinks at all seriously about criticism must realise that it cannot and should not be left to practitioners. To say that only poets should judge the work of other poets is as stupid as saying that a judge shouldn't sentence murderers if he has never committed a murder. Judging and doing are separate skills. A fine poet may also be a fine critic of poetry. But he might not be. And a truly rotten poet might turn out to be an excellent critic.

Michael Coveney, former theatre critic for the *Financial Times*, *Observer* and the *Daily Mail*, is scornful about the view that you have to have done something if you are going to criticise it:

"It's an odd notion that someone who writes about football should have played in the Premier League in order to be an authentic critic. The best football writers - Geoffrey Green, Brian Glanville, James Lawton - had no such experience. And anyone who watches exceptional ex-football players such as Alan Shearer or Michael Owen pontificate on television knows instantly that they cannot string two or three words together, let alone a few paragraphs."<sup>excvii</sup>

That's a bit tough on Shearer<sup>excviii</sup> and Owen<sup>excix</sup>. And for my money, some of the most revealing pundits on football have been ex-players Alan Hansen<sup>cx</sup>, Andy Gray<sup>cxi</sup> and (now) Gary Neville<sup>cxii</sup>. But Coveney has a point. And it's worth remembering that two of the most analytical football managers of recent years, Arsene Wenger<sup>cxiii</sup> and Jose Mourinho<sup>cxiv</sup>, weren't much cop as players.

There is much to be said for the view that many critics don't know how to create artistically, and that mitigates their credibility. There's an old Native American proverb, to the effect that "Don't judge any man until you have walked two moons in his moccasins."

But creation and criticism are two skills rarely found in the same person. As Dr Samuel Johnson once wrote:

"You may abuse a tragedy, though you can not write one. You may scold a carpenter who has made you a bad table, though you can not make a table. It is not your trade to make tables."<sup>cxv</sup>

### ***Threats Of Death And Violence***

Most creative people want to be critiqued. They may not enjoy hearing negative things about their work, but - especially years later - they know very well that not everything they've done has been of imperishable greatness. And, contrary to received opinion, creative people are often appreciative of good reviews.

Hans Keller<sup>cxvi</sup> could be an exceptionally pugnacious music critic, but he had extremely good relationships with composers whose work he argued had been undervalued

or misunderstood. As a consequence, several of them – including Benjamin Britten and Benjamin Frankel - dedicated works to him.<sup>ccvii</sup>

I too have received many letters of thanks, especially from supporting actors, cinematographers, casting directors and technicians happy that their contributions have been noticed and appreciated.

Quite a few talented people have thanked me for reviews that helped them find an audience, including Jamie Bell<sup>ccviii</sup>, Richard Curtis<sup>ccix</sup>, Stephen Daldry<sup>ccx</sup>, Julian Fellowes<sup>ccxi</sup>, Nicole Kidman<sup>ccxii</sup>, Mike Leigh<sup>ccxiii</sup>, Sam Mendes<sup>ccxiv</sup>, Peter Morgan<sup>ccxv</sup>, David Nicholls<sup>ccxvi</sup>, Rufus Sewell<sup>ccxvii</sup> and Quentin Tarantino<sup>ccxviii</sup> (to all of whom I've given bad reviews, as well as good).

All the same, it may not surprise you that a lot of people involved in entertainment and the arts have super-sized egos and a festering sense of grievance if they feel, however wrongly, that you have something against them or their loved ones personally. Several might agree with artist and director Man Ray<sup>ccxix</sup>, who once said “All critics should be assassinated”.<sup>ccxx</sup>

On 3 April 1909, Charles-Henry Hirsch<sup>ccxxi</sup> wrote a panning review of the new play *King Hoot* at the Theatre Marigny in Paris, accusing it of vulgarity. This was only one of many negative reviews but it proved too much for the author, Italian futurist Filippo Tommaso Marinetti<sup>ccxxii</sup>. The excitable playwright sought Hirsch out at a public event, slapped him across the face, and challenged him to a duel. Hirsch survived the encounter but left the field, bleeding profusely from a wound in his forearm.<sup>ccxxiii</sup>

Ironically, Marinetti then became a highly immoderate critic himself. He claimed that to admire an old picture was to pour sentiment into a funeral urn, “instead of hurling it forth in violent gushes of action and productiveness.”<sup>ccxxiv</sup> In keeping with his turbulent personality, Marinetti demanded that every work of art must bear “the stamp of aggressiveness... We will glorify war, the only true hygiene of the world.”<sup>ccxxv</sup> You may not be surprised that, in later life, Marinetti became an enthusiastic Fascist.<sup>ccxxvi</sup>

In 1962 the diminutive journalist Bernard Levin<sup>ccxxvii</sup>, a regular contributor to the satirical TV programme *That Was The Week That Was*, was attacked on camera in front of 11 million viewers by a member of the studio audience. The assailant turned out to be Desmond Leslie<sup>ccxxviii</sup>, the outraged husband of an actress (Agnes Bernelle<sup>ccxxix</sup>) whose performance Levin had criticised in a theatre review. Some newspapers the next day assumed this was a publicity stunt, but Levin assured me years later that it was genuine; he really was punched in the face, and he was hurt and shaken.

In 1971, after Alexander Walker's uncomplimentary review of *The Devils*<sup>ccxxx</sup>, which he called “monstrously indecent”, the *Evening Standard* movie reviewer was also attacked live on television, this time with a rolled up newspaper by the director Ken Russell<sup>ccxxxi</sup>. Russell always maintained he was sober at the time but did express regret of sorts; he told reporters “I wish it had been an iron bar.”<sup>ccxxxii</sup>

On December 15th 1971 American novelist Norman Mailer, having imbibed a few cocktails too many, attacked Gore Vidal in a television green room, six months after