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In Appreciation of 'Mis-' and 'Quasi-': Quasi-Experts in the Context of Live Theatre Broadcasting

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Abstract

This article shifts the hegemonic hierarchy that prioritises experts over non-experts in the context of cultural criticism and explores the potential of the 'quasi-expert,' understood as a positive figure that contributes to the theatrical discourse. The prefix 'quasi-' puts the focus on the temporariness and playfulness of the endeavour; it aligns the form of criticism with the heightened liveness of performance when it is broadcast. The article suggests the necessity for a further dissection of the power structures within the discourse of 'critique' itself. Taking up Nicholas Ridout's concept of the mis-spectator (2012), it considers the notion of quasi-expert appraisal taken from Walter Benjamin (1935) and transfers and applies this to the context of twenty-first century criticism and livecasting. The livecast experience forcibly diminishes the distance between the spectator and the spectacle. What this is supposed to create is higher levels of intimacy, control and engagement, to speak to spectators who are enthusiastic and valuable in uttering their opinion of their theatre experience. The article, thus, assesses this turn to the experiential in light of recent considerations of spectator-centrism in theatre and sheds light on the interplay between communality and the individual in the emergence of a 'feeling I' as a form of criticism. Put differently, the quasi-experts' main impetus is their feeling I rather than (merely) their (acquired) knowledge.

Contrasting the 'extremely backward' attitude of the masses toward Picasso with the 'highly progressive' one toward Chaplin, Walter Benjamin in 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Mechanical Reproducibility' (1935) characterizes the latter as 'an *immediate, intimate fusion of pleasure in seeing and experiencing* with an attitude of *expert appraisal*' (29, emphasis added). What he describes here is linked to the effect the reproduced work of art (the copy) can have on the viewer, namely produce an increased closeness. Thinking about film and cinemas where the masses seek and find entertainment, he characterizes the viewing situation as one of '[r]eception in distraction

[…] which is increasingly noticeable in all areas of art and is a symptom of profound changes in perception' (34). That is, the copy of the work of art and film change the ways in which perception is performed and make its parameters shift. Benjamin holds that while concentrating before a work of art means being absorbed by it, being distracted by a work of art (which is something he links to the masses' relation with the cinema especially) means absorbing it into oneself.

In the twenty-first-century, however, I would argue that to concentrate on and be distracted by a work of art are not mutually exclusive anymore. Hybrids between performance and film such as live theatre broadcasting provide a realm in which phases of distraction (in the form of responding to it, for instance) and concentration (silent watching) alternate in waves. Thus, while the historical context is a very different one, questions raised by Benjamin are relevant again in the context of this phenomenon that has been popular since 2009 with the National Theatre making a start (with NT Live). Certainly, theatrical performances have been telecast to private homes before and British and American television were built upon foundations of live telecast theatrical drama. Those latest livecasts (a neologism introduced by Martin Barker [2013]) are both a reproduction (a two-dimensional copy of the three-dimensional production) *and* film; they are also firmly enmeshed in social media as the space in which they are advertised and then commented on, thus presenting a fruitful ground to think about how experiencing, perceiving and critically assessing a work of art changes in the context of these new developments. As Michel Foucault has put forward, critique can be 'the art of not being governed quite so much' (2007, 45). In my argumentation, this resistance to 'government' is understood as conventions and automated patterns of evaluation and appreciation, a 'consensus around value' (Ridout 2012, 173). A form of expertise on social media uttered in response to livecasts that takes on the form of a disruption of this consensus shall be investigated in the following.

When Benjamin, as quoted in the passage above, describes the relationship between consumers and art, he prioritises the visual

quality of this encounter. It is an encounter based on a one-sided act of looking for which no further expertise is needed – this suggests, as Dominic Johnson has compellingly put forward in the context of theatrical performance, an insistence on the cultural experience as depending on complex relationships between vision and other forms of sensory perception (see Johnson 2012). This insistence combined with an attitude (personal positioning) of expert appraisal creates an immediate and intimate fusion of pleasure. What is an *attitude* of expert appraisal? If you are not an expert, are you a quasi-expert? This article wants to shift the (hegemonic) hierarchy that prioritises experts over non-experts in the context of cultural criticism and explore the positive ramifications of this latter concept/persona. Foucault defines critique as a mechanism that lays bare power structures and that is – problematically – a 'natural law', an 'indefeasible right' (46). What I'm suggesting is the necessity for a further dissection of the power structures within the discourse of 'critique' itself. Taking up Nicholas Ridout's concept of the mis-spectator (2012), I will think about quasi-expert appraisal and transfer and apply the thrust of Benjamin's argument to the context of twenty-first century criticism and livecasting. The prefix 'quasi-' puts the focus on the temporariness and playfulness of the endeavour of being an expert; it aligns the form of criticism with the heightened liveness of performance via the broadcast.

This performative playfulness also contributes to an elimination of distance between artwork, that is, broadcast performance, and spectator. Digital Theatre, a platform that works with several major British theatres and makes their livecasts available for download, describes its aim as bringing 'the live theatre experience to your screen by instantly streaming the best theatre productions from around the world anytime, anywhere' (cf. DT homepage). It, thus, forcibly diminishes the distance between the spectator and the spectacle. What this is supposed to create is higher levels of intimacy, control and engagement, to turn spectators into willing, enthusiastic and valuable quasi-experts and mis-critics – their opinion matters, at least potentially. What form of criticism do they produce? The key questions this essay puts in

parallel are, thus, what kind of spectator/critic emerges through social media and how this figure and process is shaped by live broadcasting as a new form of mediation and mediation of liveness especially.

Spectators and Quasi-Experts: Immediacy vs. Afterlife

Apart from their expertise as experiencers (a term suggested by Nelson 2010) when taking part in pre- or post-livecast assessments online, quasi-experts also bring another dimension to the table: their own liveness. This is because livecasts are primarily marketed as immediate experiences. Thus, they need to be actualized by those watching them, even more than traditional theatrical performances *in situ*. Yet each live transmission *is* being recorded and thus turned into a document, which is constantly re-shaped by those watching it, for instance, when they review it. In line with Toni Sant's specification of documentation as a (powerful, creative) process rather than 'mere' fossilization (2017), even those livecasts that are archived can never be static or finished. Livecasts are inherently dynamic: they are not only made up of the filmed content of the theatre performance but also the (informal) texts surrounding them and the feedback loop they create in the virtual space in which audiences can talk about them and especially their experiences of them. In this sense, it is through the participation of quasi-experts that the liveness of the performance can be prolonged and shaped even after its 'now' has passed. It is for this reason that a close examination of this peculiar figure of the quasi-expert is called for.

In 'mis-spectatorship, or, "redistributing the sensible"', Ridout argues for a re-distribution of the (non-)sensible by the mis-spectator which I'm reading partly as a revaluation of the seemingly banal/private experience. He uses the compound figure of Marcel (from Proust's *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu,* YEAR) to develop the figure of a spectator who – self-reflectively, laboriously – shifts those (evaluative) terms dominating especially the critical consensus, a kind of consensus that bears worrying similarities to habit/habituation, conforming and 'imaginary yardsticks' (2012, 181). The mis-spectator ignores those yardsticks and therefore makes 'mis-takes' which enable

them to disrupt 'the consensus which masquerades as collectivity in the folklore of the institution of the theatre' (2012, 182). According to Ridout, '[t]his inexpert figure closely resembles Rancière's 'emancipated spectator,' who … emerges as the producer of meaning upon whom the theatre does not exercise its powers of educational reform' (2012, 174). What Ridout and Rancière (2009) put to the fore – and which crucially contrasts with Bertolt Brecht's 'expert spectator' (1964, 44) – is the appreciation of a kind of spectator who does not *need* or does not *want* (educational) support. As Kirsty Sedgman has pointed out, the use of the word 'expert' is not unproblematic within an arts context as it seems to suggest that those writing about theatre from 'highly invested positions' are something other (better) than 'mere' audiences (2018, 309). Referring to Paul J. Sylvia, Sedgman draws attention to the fact that recently in arts research the distinction between the 'emotional physical and cognitive responses of 'experts' – those whose knowledge has been gained variously 'through training, formal study, and experience' – and those of 'novices', who, 'in contrast, generally lack such knowledge and hence apply … personal experiences when judging art' (309) has opened up.

To speak of 'novices' is to add another term to the list of describing a non-conforming way of assessing art; in order to provide some continuity, I find it more fruitful – and more embedded in the nomenclature – to talk about mis-critics and quasi-experts in this context. Recent work acknowledging the development(s) toward spectator-centrism in contemporary British drama provides a context here. Andy Lavender detects a shift from *mise-en-scène* to *mise-en-sensibilité* in twenty-first century performance in general, and especially, but not only, immersive performance. This is also relevant when thinking about mis-critics. According to Lavender, in new theatre the play no longer takes place 'over there' (on the stage) but 'with us inside it'. This (re)arrangement of affect:

> implicates the *matter* of theatre – what it is about, deals with, dramatizes – with its *mediation*. When we are within mediation, as participants or immersants, we are

> differently response-able. […] The power at stake here is a mixture of agency, authentic feeling, witness from within and – not least – the power to withdraw, not to participate. (Lavender 2016, 100, emphases in original)

Mise-en-sensibilité describes how the spotlight is more and more on spectators – at least potentially – but the term 'response-ability' is even more interesting: for to be response-able means to matter and be an important and central element of a performance. One has the ability to participate by responding. In order to do so, the spectator, as Spence and Benford emphasize, needs others and their (bodily) presence and his/her participation in that group combined with his/her internal experience and autobiography. Yet the *implied* presence of other spectators can have a similar effect on the individual spectator-as-centre: it can fuel the wish to articulate one's part of the event, even if only in one's own eyes. Thus, the above considerations can be applied as well when examining the reactions to livecasts that are explicitly advertised as inviting a direct response from audiences via social media and enabling them to participate in this event from their 'local venue'.

Coinciding with this spectator-centrist awareness, there is an acknowledgement of what Oona Hatton sums up fittingly with the term 'crowdsourced theatre criticism' (2014) and that Duška Radosavljević thinks about as the potential of 'the democratizing and creatively empowering technological developments of the twenty-first century' to free the idea of criticism from 'the constraints of pre-Enlightenment structures of authority and power hierarchies'. The possibility this opens up is that 'the idea of criticism [can] redeem itself of its association with power and authority' (2016, 29).

In an age of user-submitted web content livecasts allow their audiences (the feeling of) a key role in determining its shape, and theatres reach out to audiences to engage with their shows on social media. This new paradigm of spectatorship with its emphasis on what Eglinton calls 'first-person experiences' (2010) in the context of immersive theatre, is, I want to argue, crucially linked to a new paradigm of criticism. With regard to livecasts, it seems to particularly foster and enhance

the manifestation of the 'feeling I', one's own and personal position with regard to the cultural product witnessed and particularly one's emotional rather than balanced/rational response. Despite reminders by, for instance, Erin Hurley, who in *Theatre & Feeling* emphasizes that 'feeling is what is most consequential about theatre' (Hurley 2010, 9), the feeling spectator who shares his/her (perhaps banal) emotional response has not yet been given enough attention in a scholarly context. More specifically, a placing on the map of the value of such leisurely critics is not explicit enough and attempts in this direction do not sufficiently link these roles with criticism. Exceptions in this regard are Michelle MacArthur's article in Radosavljević's *Theatre Criticism. Changing Landscapes* and brief essays by Linda Hutcheon[1]. Hutcheon's claim that 'in the digital age experience has replaced expertise as the prime criterion for critical authority' (MacArthur 258) is very much to the point but she talks about this in a very short essay in the context of consumer culture.

Liveness and After-Liveness Enabled by Social Media

In an audience survey conducted in 2018 by the RSC after the live screening of *Romeo and Juliet* 69% of respondents found the livecast 'totally absorbing' and 71% felt an emotional response to it. Some of the reactions on Twitter regarding *Macbeth* (collected on the @NTLive page as 'Moments') indeed attest to that: the livecast is described as 'Blimey @NTLive my heart is hammering out of my chest #Macbeth #NTLive' by @scrufflove and all @Jenstra1 can write is 'OMFG Goosebumps #macbeth @NTLive'. After the livecast of *Antony and Cleopatra* on 6 December 2018, @VibhutiJPatel tweeted 'This was just all sorts of brilliant. Ralph Fiennes and Sophie Okonedo are dazzling. And the fact I was able to watch it from my local cinema @CamPicturehouse because of @NTLive still amazes me. #AntonyandCleopatra #Shakespeare'. @PhilofBeeston thought that '#AntonyandCleopatra from @NTLive was superb. Fast moving production inhabited Hildegard Bechtler's

1 Hutcheon, Linda. 'Reviewing Reviewing Today'. *Literary Review of Canada* (2009): 6-8.

amazingly versatile set. Verse speaking was perfectly articulated by whole cast. Sophie Okonedo gave an outstanding Cleopatra – no wonder Ralph Fiennes' Antony was so love-struck'. And @BethanMedi summed it up as: 'I am absolutely blown away by the @NationalTheatre broadcast of #AntonyandCleopatra. It was exciting and full of passion from start to finish. There is nothing quite like theatre!!'

First of all, one notices different degrees of seriousness – some users go into more detail than others. Secondly, the format of the tweet posted casually from one's smart phone brings about a – certainly also performative – colloquialisation of responses, something that Ong, with regard to the digital age more generally, has fittingly described as 'secondary orality' (Ong 1982/2002) and which we now, given how drastically the implications of 'the digital' have changed since the early 1980s, might refer to as tertiary orality. This casualness increases the immediacy of the experience because the responses reflect spontaneous responses to the performance right after leaving the cinema (they were all posted on the night of the show). It is crucial to note that the social dimension of theatre-going extends to/differs from the social dimension of the online space: both have their own (behavioural, linguistic) etiquettes. The online space allows for a more fragmented, catchy way of reacting to something which both increases the ambivalence (and thus can relativise any 'absolute' statements) and the playfulness of the engagements, when, for instance, emojis or gifs are used.

Thinking about whether the spectator's agency is limited or expanded in the livecasting context, Bernadette Cochrane and Frances Bonner argue that live broadcasts deprive audience members of 'the ability, indeed the right, […] to select and compile his or her own edit of the proceedings' (2014, 127). Being forced to look at particular spots on the stage can completely change the impression of a performance. An extreme example for this is the NT's livecast of *Macbeth* on 10 May 2018, where the focus was mostly on the protagonists' faces (played by Ann-Marie Duff and Rory Kinnear) instead of giving a permanent sense of the stage design. Yet it seems that if a spectator accepts and perhaps even wished for a mildly 'guided' show in the first place, they

can thoroughly plunge into it and they do not mind the 'tunnel vision' of the livecast.

What else is entailed in this purported closeness of the performance to the recipient? In order to approach this question, it is necessary to think about the connection between response-ability, liveness and Twitter as a form of personalized live-feed that all are part of the closeness or plunge experienced. The parameters according to which liveness is assessed shift. While there is not enough space here to dwell on this issue in detail, a brief reminder of Peggy Phelan's definition is due: she focused on the temporal dimension of liveness, saying that '[p]erformance's only life is in the present' (1993, 146), meaning that 'performance is so radically 'in time' (with time considered linear) that it cannot reside in its material traces and therefore 'disappears'' (Schneider 2012, 66). Rick Altman usefully argues, however, that for an event to be perceived as live it does not necessarily have to happen at the same time as it is viewed. What matters is whether 'the television experience itself is […] *sensed* as live by the home viewing audience' (45, emphasis added). As Hitchman paraphrases, in the livecasting context liveness is not seen in the nature of the original but 'as a condition of *viewing*' (2018, 176, emphasis original) This means that being part of an audience and being an audience member at the same time with others attending a film, a performance, or a film of a performance, defines liveness and not the relation between oneself and the work of art. Social media such as Twitter contribute to this loosening up of parameters since they create an after-liveness that enables the user to operate much more independently. Twitter also emphasizes the individual viewing experiences in constituting, in many instances, the only documented form of one's memory of a performance. I would, thus, agree with the statement that 'social media enables the experience of liveness to travel outside the confines of physical co-presence' (Bucknall/Sedgman 2017, 124) but the *sense* of a co-presence of audience members is still crucial.

We Are In It Together: Critiquing the Experience Online

'In the case of crowdsourced theatre criticism,' MacArthur points out,

'there is no need to hide one's inexperience' (MacArthur 261). The same holds true for livecasts. While MacArthur describes instances where social media users would assess a review somebody else had written while admitting they had not seen the show, this unabashedly personal, experiential dimension of the 'feeling I' dominates responses on social media to livecasts. When on 25 December 2017 followers of the NT Live Facebook page were asked to share their favourite livecast of 2017, the call was answered with over 400 mostly elaborate responses. After naming the title of the play and commenting on the actors' performance most users added descriptions of their personal circumstances when watching it: from where they had watched the livecast, with whom and, especially, what it felt like for them (for instance, to have the 'intimacy of the theatre' transported onto the 'big screen'). While there were several comments on the atmosphere in the cinema, there was no interaction between the respective users, apart from occasional likes of what others had posted.

With regard to *Yerma*, for instance, phrases come up such as 'I felt like I was living a life and not just watching a show. […] I couldn't believe someone's acting could actually make me feel such a spectrum of emotions. (…)' (Alexandra Bonita) and 'Thoroughly engrossing, provocative and affecting production with an extraordinary central performance from Billie Piper … Absolutely loved the modern, innovative stage design … Won't forget' (Matthew Floyd). With regard to *Angels in America*, one user (Amber Bytheway) reports being left 'aghast with amazement and vulnerability and hope' and after watching *Millenium Approaches* (the first part of *Angels in America*), Kit Rafe Heyam wondered how she 'was going to emotionally get through the next week'. Several commentators would also insert biographical information and context for how they came to watch their favourite livecast and, in the case of *Angels in America*, members of the LGBTQ community reported being especially grateful to have seen the play. After the livecast on 20 July 2017 @NicLeeBee wrote on Twitter that 'Andrew Garfield has broken my heart tonight. Amazing stuff. Incredible performances all round but Andrew kills me. #NTlive

#angelsinamerica' and @floridiangoblin felt that 'Andrew Garfield's portrayal of Prior Walter is honestly outstanding. I was deeply moved by his very raw performance #NTlive #AngelsinAmerica'. The comments are mini-reviews, yet not only with a focus on the plays themselves, or the quality of the livecast (occasional complaints about glitches in the transmission), but on the experience of attending them.

A survey of these responses presents one with a huge collection of private glimpses and emotional perspectives on a given livecast. On their Facebook page, the NT Live's prompt was to name the favourite production and say why, and *not* how it had made them feel but this for the majority seemed to be synonymous. These comments do not so much present attempts to engage in an act of sharing and of experiencing a 'we' but rather to be an 'I'. And this is a danger inherent in the specific (technological) format the responses are solicited in and the fact they can only be given from one's computer or smartphone. As Jen Harvie puts it, it can 'isolat[e] individuals in silos of blinkered attention to personal mobile communication devices. The kind of self-interest evident in that scenario is actively cultivated by dominant neoliberal capitalist ideologies which aggressively promote individualism and entrepreneurialism (…)' (Harvie 2013, 2). We can connect this with the above mentioned remarks about what Benjamin referred to as 'reception in distraction' for his time and how these are no longer mutually exclusive in our context. Indeed, being attentive to one's smartphone distracts the user; it isolates them from the artwork/theatrical performance they are experiencing and creates a distance. At the same time, it can focus one's attention when one goes online to check what others are saying about a play, for instance, or to tweet about it. Then reception can happen *via* distraction and so can (a new form of) attention.

Thinking back to the effect of the implied presence of other spectators, one must note that there is a friction between the 'we', or the communal viewing situation, and the 'I' that *is* created. Looking at cinema audiences, Hanich argues that, first of all, being a spectator is being active and sharing an activity with others, which is based on a

we-intention even if it is not spelled out (2014, 339). Thus, in addition to acting in the form of perceiving – Hanich aligns his argumentation with the enactivist approach of, for instance, Alva Noë (2004) – the spectators are also acting – and this is my take on Hanich's elaborations – in the form of forgetting the physical co-presence of other spectators but at the same time retaining a sense of their co-presence. Quite rightly, 'they have simply receded to the fringe of the field of consciousness. What is more, throughout the film this [...] prereflective *acting* jointly may be supplemented by *feeling* jointly' (Hanich 339-340, emphasis original). And thus, despite the mutual forgetting in exchange for a focus on the film/broadcast watched, and despite the fact that levels of attention vary, in its communality all these perceptions 'contribute their individual share to the joint action of the attentive audience' (Kennedy 2009, 14). This is why social media when used as channels for post-show reflections actually do not increase levels of individuality – even if the tweeting act as such is a solitary one – but prolong the being part of an audience out of which a given individual experience has materialized.

Just Feeling It

To reiterate what was stated above, I argue that it is necessary to strip considerations of spectator-centrism and quasi-expertise of any negative shade and speak of the manifestation (and rightful place) of the 'feeling I:' the experienced but inexpert happy commenter, whose response has its own validity. The responses on Facebook and Twitter are united in their cheerfulness, it brings the commenters pleasure to see, which makes us rethink what it means to speak of the social dimension of theatre. For instance, Anne Ubersfeld (see also McAuley 1999) holds that

> [t]heatrical pleasure is not a solitary pleasure [...] The spectator emits barely perceptible signs of pleasure as well as loud laughter and secret tears–their contagiousness is necessary for everyone's *pleasure*. One does not go alone to the theatre–one is less happy when alone. (1982, 128, emphasis added)

Here we are back at Benjamin's description of the masses' reaction to Chaplin as 'an immediate, intimate fusion of *pleasure* in seeing and experiencing with an attitude of expert appraisal'. The responses reflect the joys of a first-person encounter with theatre and a solitary reflection, no matter how casual and perhaps banal it may be. While the experience of a 'we' manifests itself implicitly and it is this framework of joint attention that enables the individual response, it is not more valuable than the experience of an 'I' and certainly not a greater source of pleasure: on the contrary, one gets the impression that for viewers it is quite pleasant to have experiences of their 'feeling I' and to verbalize them because they know there is a forum for it. One can link this to a freeing from rules and hierarchies that Radosavjlević observes when thinking about the secondary orality of the digital age:

> When it comes to writing, the hierarchies of the publishing world have demanded that we abide by certain orthographic standards. Even the pedagogies of literacy have been governed by the same rules. However, with the removal of those editorial hierarchies in the digital world we have been freed to revert to more personal, more creative and more conversational means of expression. (2016, 18)

The centrism on one's personal experience and feelings in livecasts is also reflected in the phrasing of the questions in online questionnaires following some of the RSC's livecasts that are veered toward eliciting assessment of the experiential component of being an audience member – something everybody can relate to and something that one does not, for instance, need to have a particular educational background for in order to understand.

Thus, livecasting, with its inherent – and, as I argue, *constitutive* – invitation to audiences to be a part of it and to *feel* it, can remind us that texts are not dead things, and can elicit responses from viewers that may not be according to the standards of the ATCA but are still an equally valid part of the discussion. With their appeals to follow and comment on their livecasts and contribute to their paratexts, the

involved theatres do encourage something like a slight shift with regard to 'who has the say': of course, the audiences do not (yet) have a say in choosing which show staged in either the NT, the RSC or other theatres will be livecast.

Yet, in entering and participating in this space on social media created for them, the spectators in a way have the final word. This is a kind of emancipation that demands activity on the part of the spectator and provides visibility. Quite importantly, this activity is purely self-regulated. During the livecast of *Romeo and Juliet* the presenter Suzy Klein repeatedly reminded the audience to fill in the above online questionnaire after the show but this was voluntary. And this is precisely where the potential lies: the spectator has the option to engage in and share both one's opinion of the play and simply the experience of being there. When theatre is made available to growing numbers of audiences, for instance through livecasts, they are not anonymous masses. While their faces and names may not be visible, their individual voices are audible. They want and can be heard. This way, a new understanding of the purpose of criticism as a (re)living of the excitement of theatre can continue to emerge.

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