

Weighing poetry

Exploring Funding criteria for assessing artistic quality

Introduction

All shall be judges

Throughout most of European history, artists have not needed to worry about the quality of their work: assessments were not slow in coming. It may seem odd today, but Athenian drama was forged in a crucible where each year the spectators voted for the best new plays. Aristophanes, in making Aeschylus and Euripides weigh their poetry in a huge pair of scales to determine which was the greater poet, was satirising the normal convention of his time.

Whether artists worked for an audience of fellow citizens in a city state, for royal, aristocratic or religious patrons or simply to sell their wares in the marketplace, the question of quality was quickly settled: quality was, by and large, what people liked. That later generations sometimes saw things differently, overturning their grandparents' judgements, mattered little to the artists or their publics, since both were long gone.

In many ways and for many artists those straightforward approaches to judgement still operate. The voluntary and amateur arts preserve a relationship with their audiences which is essentially that of Athenian dramatists without the voting, while artists working in the commercial sector, whatever their medium, perpetuate that challenge of trying to give people not just what they like but perhaps what they will like next. (Of course, artists continue to judge their own work according to their own unique, internal criteria but we have always recognised the limitations of such personal assessments, in the arts as every other sphere.)

But some judges are more equal than others

Judgements of quality become much more complicated when they are being made by one person on behalf of another. This happens all the time of course: one of the pleasures of art is trying to persuade our friends of our own enthusiasms, hoping that they will enjoy this book, that film or those musicians as much as we do ourselves. In a busy world, stuffed to the gills with more art than any of us could possibly appreciate in a lifetime spent in galleries, theatres and between the covers of books, we need recommendations and so the role of the critic or cultural commentator has grown in importance. It works because we, mostly, do not think that critics are 'right'; instead we see them expressing opinions based on their experience and, crucially, their taste. Integrity, in a critic, is being true to one's own values, so that readers can form their own judgements by taking a bearing from a fixed point of view.

Things are more difficult with academics, because they tend to argue that their judgements are not based on personal taste, but on objective criteria established over time through professional discourse. We may accept that view, or not. But even if we do, we are able to make our own judgements about those of professors by situating their perspective of the work within the range of current theory, while they themselves are required to follow basic standards such as the provision of references. Admittedly, the sophistication of cultural theory, and the mass of primary and secondary material in the arts, probably puts this beyond the intellectual or temporal capacity of most of us. But we can console ourselves with the thought of how rarely academic judgements pass into posterity and how few of their authors are remembered outside their families.

All shall not have prizes

The real problem faced by arts funding systems in the modern world is that, unlike the critics and academics who have only laurels to confer, they have cheques to give to those who are judged to possess artistic merit. At this point, the ethical and critical problems become so unutterably difficult, that European arts funding agencies tend to avoid talking about quality at all, except in asserting their unswerving commitment to it.

When the British Arts Council was established in 1945, its supporters argued that the best way to make the necessary judgements of quality about art was to involve artists themselves. Somewhat extraordinarily, government accepted, presumably because it had no alternative approach to propose. But it is by no means clear that artists are better judges of others' work than of their own: Van Gogh's supporters were his brother and his doctor, while great artists like Samuel Johnson have been passionate about the importance of forgotten ones like Savage.

More problematically, the close involvement of artists and then of arts administrators in making judgements about funding has opened up all sorts of possible conflicts (and mutualities) of interest which would look distinctly uncomfortable in other fields. The system is sometimes referred to as peer review, perhaps in the hope of gaining credibility by association with the principles which guide decision-making in science and academic publishing, but anonymity, the critical element in real peer review, is necessarily absent from the discussions of the Arts Council. The result has been to arouse scepticism among many people about the whole basis of the Arts Council's judgements—doubts which, whatever the actual integrity of its conduct, it has no means of allaying because it cannot explain how it reaches its decisions. (One unexpected side-effect of this inability, or reluctance, to publish criteria for assessing artistic quality is a proliferation of criteria for assessing other things—the management efficiency of organisations, their equal opportunities practice, the standard of their marketing and so on.)

Clearly, it is not easy to agree the criteria by which artistic quality should be judged. Given that artwork is inseparable from the values of its creator or audience, and given the lack of much consensus over values in 21st century European democracies, it is evident that any proposed criteria are likely to be contested. But, in a 21st century European democracy, that is much preferable to the present situation for two reasons.

First, because the good conduct of a democratic decision-making, and the continued support for it by the people in whose name and with whose money it is undertaken, depends on transparency and the appearance of fairness: as we know, justice must not only be done, but be seen to be done. Secondly, we have to understand that debating our values through the language and forms of the arts is actually a good thing, perhaps the vital place of the arts in a democracy. We should relax, accept that artistic values, like all human values, are relative and contingent, and enjoy the debate.: at least we'll have something to talk about.

Possible criteria for assessing artistic quality

The benefits of criteria for assessing artistic quality

The two principal reasons for Arts Councils and other cultural funding agencies to publish and use criteria in assessing artistic quality touch on the core values of art in a democratic society. But there are other more practical benefits of adopting a clearer and more formal approach in this area. It would bring funding decisions more closely in line with policy priorities, or at least make the link between them more evident. It would improve the consistency and quality of the decisions made, and allow clear guidance to be given as to why work was not considered of sufficient quality to be funded.

It must be acknowledged, however, that such an approach would require institutional from the Arts Council because for the first time, artists and arts organisations will be told, publicly, that their work is not of a high enough standard. Although there will be clear reasons for that assessment, and it cannot be in any sense definitive, there will be some who will respond by questioning the right and competence of the Arts Council to make it at all. So be it: a funding body operating with limited funds in such a personal and subjective area as the arts can only expect to have its judgements called into question. The difference is that with clear funding criteria, the way in which those judgements are reached can be properly justified.

Towards criteria for assessing artistic quality

In discussions with Mary Cloake and other officers, five possible kinds of criteria for assessing artistic quality have emerged. They might be applied to a single piece of work, a programme, a company or even the artistic life of a town or larger community. They naturally reflect the values and preoccupations of our own time: originality, for example, would not have been similarly prioritised in the eighteenth century. They should not, therefore, be seen as definitive, but as the beginning of a process to clarify what this Arts Council,

arts profession and society considers artistic quality to be: they are something to begin debating.

In opening that debate, it may be worth asking some basic questions such as:

- Are there aspects of artistic quality which are not covered by these criteria?
- Should a work of high artistic quality score well across all five criteria, or would an outstanding score in two or three and a much lower score in others be adequate?
- Are all five criteria equally important? If not how should they be weighted?
- Is it possible or desirable to offer a quantifiable response to any of these ideas?
- Should a distinction be made between assessments of experienced arts professionals and those of audiences or other people? If so, on what basis and in what way?

Technique

Technical competence or sophistication is still one of the qualities which distinguishes much professional from amateur arts activity, although it is less valued today than in the past (particularly in the professional world). Technique can be assessed relatively clearly, although it may take a high level of expertise to go beyond a general view. For example, most people will be aware that the technical level of a community play is lower than a production by a company of trained actors, though they may find it harder to explain where the weaknesses of the first lie.

Originality

Originality, as a concept, has been rather overtaken by the more fashionable idea of innovation, but it seems a richer and more useful term. It can embrace the technically-based notion of innovation, while recognising the importance of the new utterance alongside the new mode of expression. In other words, it is possible to be an original painter, even while not making any claim to be innovative; likewise, it may be that some developments in the arts—for instance in early film or, at the moment in digital art—are more innovative than original.

Ambition

Not all art is ambitious: there is a valued place for the small-scale, the decorative, the simply enjoyable, and for work which has no intention of changing the world. But in terms of the highest quality work which might have a legitimate call on scarce public resources, a high degree of ambition seems important. The work should aspire to stand alongside the best of the past and the international present and challenge both creators and viewers to the extend themselves beyond the norm.

Connection

Some sense of connection with the concerns of society may seem an odd thing to connect to artistic quality: indeed some will argue that artistic quality is independent of society by definition and that ideas of relevance represent instrumentalisation of the arts or simply political correctness. But the opposite of relevance is irrelevance, not independence or artistic integrity: art of

real quality will always have something significant to offer its audience, will always make connections with the world beyond the artist.

Magic

Our responses to art will always be individual and personal, shaped by our values, experiences, dreams and desires. Art cannot be wholly explained by the intellect, any more than people can be considered purely rational beings. One of the tests of artistic quality is its ability to provoke non-rational responses in us, inexplicable and inexpressible reactions which may stay with us for far longer than the most eloquent and lucid exposition. Great art triggers change in us which stays, long after direct contact is over: it becomes part of our selves, a ghostly presence, haunting and not always entirely friendly.

The inescapability of judgement

In short, the definition of artistic quality proposed here is technically-excellent work which is both ambitious and original, connects to people and their concerns and leaves audiences changed in some lasting way. No doubt this is incomplete; it certainly requires focused thought to be practical perhaps in the form of some specific questions to help guide the assessor's thinking. But even with clear, useful criteria which have broad agreement, the need to judge art against them will always remain. People are in charge.

François Matarasso
15 August, 2000