

## Chapter 6

# Life in elite arenas: book reviewing

*The prolonged, indiscriminate reviewing of books is a quite exceptionally thankless, irritating and exhausting job ... It not only involves praising trash – though it does involve that ... but constantly inventing reactions towards books about which one has no spontaneous feelings whatever.*

George Orwell (1968 [1946]), “Confessions of a Book Reviewer”

## 6.1 Book reviewers in the service of the good

Both the growing of online book reviewing at websites like Amazon and Goodreads, and the struggling times for print newspapers, lead many to assume that the traditional aesthetic authority of the book reviewer might be on the wane (Vassenden, 2023). In addition, book reviewers themselves think that they are ill-perceived by others and mobilise justifications in order to show how they contribute to the common good. Through interviews with book reviewers, this chapter aims at untangling these different justifications, and finds three different defences.

The three justifications that appear in the interviews are to regard criticism as (1) resistance towards commercialisation, (2) guidance, and (3) peer-review. The first is a defence for a pure art against a profane economy, the second a help offered to people in an ever more information-filled society, and the third a creative response to artists that hopefully help them in their artistic careers. These different constructions help the reviewers in upholding their task as highly important within society in general, and not only within a sector. It also shows that they do not take their professional position for granted, but

that they view it as something they have to actively make sense of in order to gain public legitimacy. In other words, this chapter shows how book reviewing is deeply rooted in culture. It ends by encouraging more research on aesthetic authorities and the assumptions about whether they are on the wane or not.

Reading, evaluating, and writing about books for newspapers are the core activities of a book reviewer, but how is this task made meaningful when met with criticism? (Fine, 2018, p. 108; Eyerman & Ring, 1998). The increasing development of digital media platforms and recommendation services, seem to cast the status of the book reviewer as an authority on aesthetic matters in question. Why would we need to pay for an expert opinion when we can check evaluations online? Internationally there is a strong notion of criticism being in decline due to the proliferation of lay opinions on the internet, promoting an “everyone’s a critic” discourse and “more ‘horizontal’ cultural recommendations” (Debenedetti & Gahriani, 2018). Hanrahan (2013, p. 74) stated that our “increasingly evaluative culture” co-exists with “the collapse of professional criticism”. In a recent example from Norway, publishing houses are criticised for producing magazines that blur the distinction between criticism and promotion. According to the book reviewers interviewed for this project, their moral character is also being put into question, as representatives for elitism and cultural hierarchy, and, in the end, mostly preoccupied with their own status.

Whereas these challenges and the consequences have been studied in detail for professional news journalism, there has been few studies of how this affects criticism. Previous research on book reviewers describes underlying and/or contextual aspects of the practice (Bourdieu, 1996, 2000; Chong 2011, 2013, 2015, 2018, 2020; Glynn & Lounsbury, 2005; Roberge, 2010; Van Rees, 1987; Verboord, 2010), such as how subjective meaning is “made objective” (Chong, 2013, p. 266) or how background variables such as ethnicity influence the review (Chong, 2011). This chapter draws inspiration from the new cultural sociology (Larsen, 2019) and looks at book reviewing from another angle, that of the book reviewers. The chapter examines the explicit arguments put forth by the literary critics themselves for the continued relevance of their practice, and, thus, how they meet the challenges in the media landscape. Instead of pointing to a single variable influencing reviewing practices, I show how the literary critics mobilise different conceptions of the positive impact of their judgments, and how they contribute to the common good (Boltanski & Thevenot, 2006).

Cohen and Dromi (2018, p. 117) looked at a professional group that also perceive their moral character as questioned, namely advertisement practitioners, and found that they respond by mobilising shared views of their work as benefitting society. Contributing to the common good thus becomes providing a good service to society, as it would also be in the case of book reviewing. An example could be that a reviewer could claim that his/her work benefits authors, which in turn provide society with good literature. In contrast a claim could be that they contribute to make literature and literary careers economically profitable. Even though book reviewing is a highly individualistic undertaking, critics together form a professional community that provide collective responses to challenges through historical examples. In this chapter the following research question is posed: How do present-day book reviewers respond to the contemporary challenges to their status in Norway?

The case of Norway might highlight challenges that are more general, in that the question of cultural authority might be especially controversial in an egalitarian culture such as the Norwegian one (Skarpenes, 2007; Skarpenes & Sakslind, 2010), which has a unique literary policy where “most of the national fiction literature” (Engelstad, Larsen, & Rogstad, 2017, p. 59) is bought by the Arts Council and sent to the public libraries across the entire country. The responses by the book reviewers show an active engagement with articulating arguments for the continued existence of traditional aesthetic authority in a new media landscape, in a way that balances cultural hierarchies and egalitarianism. They nonetheless portray their profession as a defence against dispersion and/or quantification of aesthetic judgments. The assumption is that the analysis of how book reviewers meet challenges will be relevant for understanding cultural authority, and media landscapes in other national, and international contexts. Moreover, the chapter contributes to the more general literature on how professional groups address challenges. In the following, I will present previous research on book reviewers and book reviews, before I turn to an analysis of book reviewing today.

## 6.2 What is a book reviewer?

The present-day evaluation of literature might be an “invention of a reaction”, as George Orwell writes, and might not understand, or decide, what is going

to be considered great art in the future. Book reviewers have power (Steiner, 2010), and partake in consecrating activity, by awarding good reviews, but do not have the power to consecrate alone (Chong, 2020; Lizé, 2016). They are intermediaries between the creators of cultural objects and the audience receiving it, and as such resemble the position of a radio programmer (Ahlkvist & Faulkner, 2002). In addition, they can be described as “producers of meaning” (Griswold, 1987) since they participate in the definition of cultural patterns. Reviewers are however not gatekeepers, as Blank (2006) pointed out, and do not hold formal power. To be perceived as relevant for readers, book reviewers have to gain credibility. They have to convince the readers that they will provide important and trustworthy information. The reader is free to choose whether they want to follow the recommendation or not. Persuasion, in other words, becomes a key competence for reviewers, just as for advertising practitioners. The production of credible information is often threatened by questions over money and conflicts of interest. The reviewer has to make all potential problematic aspects explicit in order to not be discredited. They have this in common with gatekeepers, but whereas the decisions of gatekeepers are done with formal authority, book reviewers depend on the readers in order to become an authority (Blank, 2006). This is why this research has been inspired by the “strong program” in cultural sociology, which is articulated in opposition to theoretical programs focusing on social structure such as those of Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault (Alexander & Smith, 2003). The “strong program” is preoccupied with the study of how the inner structure of discourse produce meaning, and thus culture becomes explanatory. Rather than power being something social that influences culture, power is cultural in this perspective.

Book reviewing does not require a specific background, but reviewers in Norway often have higher education from the humanities. The exclusive expert knowledge that critics have is something one learns through practice, and this is why the critics as a fellowship are constantly in discussion with themselves over what good criticism is, and what the task of the critic actually is (Steiner, 2010). This also applies to the work ethic, such as the norm about reviewing debuts. It has been more and more common to describe it as a profession (DeVault, 1990). The classic distinction between professional book reviewers and others, are (1) that you are paid, and (2) that an editor guarantees the quality of the review (Blank, 2006; Steiner, 2010, p. 484).

Looking back, many reviewers might be considered as having made a “wrong” judgment, of which William Ritter’s (2015 [1906]) rejection of Edvard Munch’s art can be an example. In fact, being wrong is one of the critic’s core duties, according to A. O. Scott (2016, p. 168). The present situation is labelled by some as “peak criticism” (Heller, 2016), meaning that from now on the quality of criticism and aesthetic judgments will fall and, in the end, disappear as a tool of orientation for people. It can also be understood, without the attention to quality, as a situation where criticism as we know it today, formulated in lengthy texts with both readings and judgments, might go “out of fashion”. According to that description it is tempting to rewrite Marx’ (1974 [1845], p. 54) famous quote from *The German Ideology* about the communist society, where it will be possible “to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner ... without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, herdsman or critic”, in a way that shows how the latter is characterised in our present society. However, recent research shows that the “everyone’s a critic discourse” might be overexaggerated (Debenedetti & Gahriani, 2018; Verboord, 2010).

### 6.3 The sociology of book reviewing

The interest for cultural reviewing, and in particular book reviewing, within sociology has been growing the last twenty years (Baumann, 2001, 2002; Bourdieu, 1996, 2000; Chong, 2011, 2013, 2015, 2018; Glynn & Lounsbury, 2005; Holbrook, 1999; Johnston & Baumann, 2014; Roberge, 2010; Van Rees, 1987; Verboord, 2010). Several of these researchers are also focused on the strategically important positions of book reviewers: “[C]riticism is fundamental for understanding how culture and politics shape the ambiguous self-interpretation of society”, as Roberge (2010, p. 435) wrote. A lot of this research has been focused on what criteria the book reviewers apply (Chong, 2013), operating with criteria, which are not approved by the critics themselves. This chapter therefore aims at moving beyond the focus on criteria, and towards an understanding of the aesthetic judgments as explained by the reviewers themselves.

Most research on book reviewers in Norway are by literary scholars with a historical perspective (Beyer & Moi, 1990; Hagen, 2004; Forser, 2002;

Furusetth, 2013; Furusetth, Thon, & Vassenden, 2016; Imerslund 1970; Linneberg, 1990), tracing both the activity of book reviewing and writing more biographically about specific reviewers. The main thesis in these works seems to be that book reviewing is becoming more and more professionalised and detached from a public sphere, more belonging to a specific cultural sphere, alongside other developments leading to institutional differentiation. A sense of concern can be traced in these works to a loss of the role of the critic as a societal authority, or public intellectual, interpreting new developments on behalf of the rest of society.

## 6.4 The new cultural sociology

In this part, I will discuss two sociological topics that are of theoretical interest in the research on book reviewing: legitimacy and national repertoires. These are conceptual tools which are a part of the new cultural sociology (Larsen, 2019). Legitimacy is unstable, and we need a theory of performance to examine how it is achieved. Meaning-making activities have to constantly keep the legitimacy alive (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006; Larsen, 2016). To use an example from the world of book reviewing, it is legitimate to thrash a new book if you come up with substantial arguments of why it is problematic or flawed. If you thrash a book that's written by a debutant, however, you are breaking a code among reviewers, the *omerta*, as Childress (2017) calls it.

For instance, different ways of legitimising reviews and cultural authority can be by referring to one's education, or one's experience, to ensure public debate, to offer readers a guide to what and how to read, or by making a distinction between taste and quality (or between aesthetics and morals). The boundary between what is considered legitimate and illegitimate is constantly negotiated. There are also other norms regarding how to present an aesthetic judgment that need to be taken into consideration. Book reviewing is influenced by the norms of society, at the same time as book reviewers create a space for themselves to present their judgment. This negotiation is brought together in performances.

The elements of social performance are, according to Alexander (2011, p. 103; Alexander & Mast, 2006, p. 17), collective representations, social scripts, actors, means of symbolic production, *mise-en-scène*, social power, interpretive

power and audience. The actors here are influential critics, who make judgments others have to consider, or that write in a specific style that other have to consider. Other actors of relevance would be editors, leaders of artists organisations, influential individual artists and authors, researchers, political organisations and foundations providing financial resources (such as Arts Councils, Cultural Ministers and philanthropic foundations). Their means of symbolic production is their national culture (Larsen, 2016). By successfully combining these elements, an actor will be able to persuade the audience about the authenticity of the performance. A successful performance will be perceived as a genuine action, just the way as a good movie will make you forget that it actually is a movie, or work of fiction. The performance-ness of the performance is pushed aside, and the meaning of authenticity appears. In other words, for a performance to be authentic, it is important that the meaning does not come from the script, props or the audience, but from the actor (Alexander, 2011). An important part of the legitimation work of the book reviewers is thus to argue publicly in an authentic way for the necessity of “professional” criticism.

When giving reasons for an activity one often refers to different sorts of values or myths, and by doing this the concept of national repertoires becomes relevant. To exemplify this, the research on class and distinction in Norway is useful. Here, the Bourdieusian claim that the middle class tend to exert symbolic boundaries towards lower classes has been widely debated. In Skarpenes’ (2007) study, he asked middle class interviewees to give examples of what they regarded as good literature and bad literature, but they abstained from doing so. He contrasted it with the case of France, where the middle class, according to Bourdieu’s (1995) analysis, exert symbolic power towards lower classes (Skarpenes, 2007). In other words, the definition of culture was not seen as imposed from above in the same manner as in France, but rather more democratic. A hypothesis put forth by Mangset and Andersen (2007) is that those in elite positions in Norway are dependent upon appealing to egalitarian values to legitimise their position. The repertoire found specific for Norwegian society by Skarpenes and Sakslind (2010, p. 228) is moral-egalitarian, and consists of traits such as solidarity, honesty, equality, democracy, local cultural and political orientation, altruism, moral, “ordinariness”, and anti-intellectualism. This might be exemplified by a quote by the former Norwegian minister of culture: “I really hoped that the time where someone told people what is good and what is bad culture had passed” (Staude, 2017).

This was a response to a Norwegian theatre academic who claimed that the popular local plays known as “spel” were “conservative, self-centred and of low quality” (Ingebretsen, 2017). While the criticism of the plays being “self-centred” is in harmony with the egalitarian notion, and was accepted, the judgment of the plays as being of “low quality” was rejected by the minister as belonging to “another time”.

## 6.5 Talking to book reviewers

The primary sources analysed in this research are interviews with eleven Norwegian book reviewers who routinely publish reviews in nine different widely read newspapers: Klassekampen, Morgenbladet, Dag og tid, Dagbladet (2), Fædrelandsvennen, Adresseavisen, Bergens Tidende, NRK, and Varden, in addition to one freelancer that was not connected to a specific newspaper at the time. Five reviewers were male, and six female. Chong (2015) argued that interviews are especially useful when studying book reviews since these gives the reviewers time to reflect on matters that are not observable in the reviews. The interviews lasted from 1.5 hours to 3 hours and were conducted in 2014. Ten were done face-to-face at either offices or cafes, and one was done by telephone. They were contacted through The Critics Association in Norway. The conversation in the interviews had a semi-structured form, with a prepared interview guide (Kvale, 1996). The topic of interest was twofold: (1) their descriptions of the work as a critic, and (2) how they perceived their role in society more generally. There are about 7–9 full-time employed book reviewers in Norway, according to themselves, working with reviews and other cultural journalism. Most, however, are freelance workers in the cultural sphere, some are authors themselves, and some are university employees, typically in the humanities, who write reviews as well. In this sample there are some from each category. Given the small size of the population, this qualitative analysis also covers a lot in breadth, even though what is of main interest here is a deep understanding of their work. The interviews were transcribed, coded and analysed with HyperTranscribe and HyperResearch by the author.

Inspired by “the sociology of critique” (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006), a part of the new cultural sociology, the starting point of the analysis were the actors’ own claims in the interviews. The meaning categories that were used as



codes were developed after reading and re-reading the interviews. “Consumer guidance” is an example of such a code. The interviews were chosen to obtain information on how the book reviewers present themselves and what they consider to be legitimate answers in a research setting, and not in order to get to know what they actually mean. If this was the interest, another research design would have been necessary. Pugh (2013, p. 50) called this type of information in interviews honourable, and gives it a central position for social scientific research. The questions and answers in the interviews are about fundamental positions in literary criticism and the presentation of self in these matters are not subject for abrupt changes, however it might be that interviews with book reviewers today would not only use different examples but maybe also obtain new information. Further research is encouraged in order to figure this out.

## 6.6 The landscape of book reviewing

The landscape of book reviewing is constantly changing. Quantitatively some newspapers have less reviews than before and some more, but qualitatively the change is of another importance. More and more seem to regard the criticism as a part of the commercial distribution of a book, and maybe to such a degree that it has become a part of the critics’ self-conceptions (Pool, 2007). If so, the critic may not put a lot of time into the reviews and be satisfied with a “mere” presentation of the book. As Andersen (1986) wrote, the common description of critics as the first readers of books is wrong, because the books have been under scrutiny of the publishing houses and various consultants before publication. Childress (2017) described the “field of reception” as the last field a book enters, after “the field of creation” and “the field of production”. The room for interpretation by the reader is in other words closely considered before it is possible to read. I would argue that this typical depiction of publishing houses as “the producers of meaning” does not leave enough room for creative interpretations of the reader (DeVault, 1990). The publishing house and their consultants operate in another context than the book reviewers and this is of decisive importance. In other words, the audience of the consultants’ text and the critics’ text are very different, and this affects how it is written. As Eyerman (2016, p. 85) wrote about the audience of a newspaper:

Audiences are multi-layered and varied, and though journalists do have some idea about who follows their work, this idea remains an abstraction, “the general reader”. The general reader of the New York Times, however, is presumably different from that conceptualised by a reporter for the Times-Picayune. He also goes on to locate “pitch”, “tone” and which advertisement the newspapers hold as signals for what audience they conceptualise. In other words, the newspapers try to influence how they are being read, but they do not have the possibility to fully decide. Reviewers also have “the general reader” of a newspaper in mind when writing, and the analysis will show different depictions of this, as well as how it influences the reviews.

## **6.7 Views on new media and challenges to book reviewing**

The constantly changing media landscape appears differently from different perspectives. For a news journalist the challenges are different than for a book reviewer. During the interviews the book reviewers do not relate their situation to news journalists, but regard their future as tied together with the future of print newspapers. This resonates with Steiner’s (2010, p. 474) depiction of critics’ scepticism towards new media because their focus lies on “quality, informed knowledge and culture”. In recent years journalism has encountered a crisis narrative, especially regarding the digital future of the profession (Alexander, Breese, & Luengo, 2016). This media development from publishing in an old media, such as the newspaper, to publishing online, urges journalists, critics and scholars to reconsider earlier approaches. Indeed, newspapers in Norway, and the U.S. as well, have seen diminishing space for book reviews (Chong, 2015, p. 136). In the last 10–15 years we have seen a lot of independent book review websites being established, and the critics themselves also have blogs where they publish reviews. The strategy of the critics of today might therefore seem to be to publish in many different media. How does the emergence of new channels of information change the scene of influence, and how might the authority of the critics change in these circumstances? In the following I will present some of their descriptions of online criticism before we go into the different perceptions of challenges that these entail.

Some of the reviewers relate the development of print media to the loss of an elite culture. In their accounts, the history of criticism is portrayed as

proud and important, in contrast to the criticism of today, which is considered as too commercialised and oriented towards the present. One of the reviewers from a local newspaper said:

*If you take the best [book reviewing] you will find a lot that is better than it was before, but there is a loss in the status of book reviewing. In the 1890s it was on the frontpage of the newspapers; that was where the book reviewing was, large, and tons of columns. “The latest book from Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson”. It was a large cultural event. Also, the book reviewers at this time were more educated, more concerned with history, more concerned with aesthetic or philosophical questions maybe. Today, as Dag Solstad has pointed out several times, people are very preoccupied with the present, so I think a lot of book reviewers have too little knowledge of history.*

A freelance book reviewer (former editor of Profil) also gave an example of the loss of elite culture, after first being reluctant to use the internet as an arena for criticism. “There is a kind of competition, and it might be a problem, but I have to say that I write my things no matter what they write on their book blogs. The internet is a big challenge since it contains everything from the serious to commercial garbage but let them do what they want”. He/she then added concern for the classical status of high culture:

*High and low culture, there is a classic separation between those who have and those who do not have education. I do not think it is possible to avoid that separation, or if it is wanted. I actually think the opposite is a larger problem, that serious culture does not get the attention it deserves, the way it has become in the public today.*

This is a paradoxical account in that it describes a crisis, insofar as the recognition of serious literature of good quality is jeopardised by the tendency to downplay the divide between high and low, but also a reluctance towards it. Still, it makes sense if you understand it as connected to a concern for art and literature, and not necessarily for an audience or an organisation. The authority of critics becomes inseparable from the role of newspapers in our culture, and therefore a defence for newspapers has to be initiated. As one of the informants from Dagbladet said:

*Book blogs actually trick the readers. Those who are susceptible to think in deciding which book to choose, “Ok, this has gotten a good reception,” when reading the cover. There is a fair number of readers that listen to book reviewers out there, and it is confusing for them [when book bloggers and book reviewers are equalled on book covers]; they might be fooled into buying crap.*

Further, the interviewee described criticism as an act of resistance towards individualised judgments and a commercialised industry. The interviewee from NRK also described criticism published on the internet as belonging to its own circuit:

*I have an editor, and that means someone checks that I am “clean”, that I do not take my cues from anyone else, publishers or others. When you do not have an editor, you do not know where people’s loyalty lies, and the book bloggers also define their role too strongly when making recommendations, I think.*

Other reviewers appeal to authority on behalf of the common reader. Still, these interviewees do not entirely embrace the internet as an arena for criticism, as the interviewee from a local newspaper put it: “A housewife s might be a good reader and writer, but not necessarily. There is no editor or quality control [at book blogs]. I do not regard it as a challenge to the established book reviewing, rather it creates diversity”. The informant from Dag og Tid also emphasised the diversity supplied by the internet: “It opens up the conversation about literature to more people”. In this case the democratisation of criticism has a positive connotation in contrast to the earlier accounts.

According to this perspective the development of the media is to be taken care of by the institutions, not by critics, that is, they are more concerned about the distribution of the message than about which channel it is distributed through (Steiner, 2010). The critics therefore do not have to defend print media or newspapers. In fact, in this narrative the internet as an arena for criticism is regarded as initiating more reading of criticism in general:

*I think it is positive for the book industry in general, and for the authors. For them it is good that the readers discuss their literature, and it helps the sale. Book reviewers lose some authority among*

*the people who prefer reading book blogs of course, so the ability to reach out might have decreased. But I think that if they are interested, they will read the reviews in the newspapers as well.*

This account is positive towards the internet as an arena for criticism on the basis that since it is democratic and open to everyone, it could be a place for anyone to start out. In other words, the challenge of online book reviewing is regarded quite differently by the book reviewers.

## 6.8 Says who? Moral challenges

Book reviewers are at times unpopular and often contested because they are involved in questions about selection processes, power, canonisation, and literary value (Steiner, 2010, p. 486). Partly this is because it is difficult, if not impossible, to pin down the foundations for aesthetic judgments objectively (Blank, 2007, pp. 32–33). Book reviewing has an “epistemic uncertainty” (Chong, 2020). When met with criticism from the “outside” the book reviewers thus come up with general reasons for why the judgment is still for the common good. They develop cultural tools to provide a positive self-perception. When asked about how they think they are perceived by a general public, several answer that it is something they cannot consider. In other words, their writings are so specialised, for interested people, and not for a general public. As the interviewee from Klassekampen when asked about how people react to criticism as a profession: “It seems so useless to some. You have to be in the right company to say that you are a critic without getting special attention, but usually I am, so it is no problem for me”. This does not mean that people are not concerned about aesthetic judgments, but precisely that they perceive them as useless. S/he continued: “[Criticism] is, like, just one level more useless than working with art. Even more “far out”. It is weird to some; I can sense that sometimes”. Several of the critics have the impression that the value of their work is often overlooked. One of the interviewees from Dagbladet says: “The common reader, or people, are not necessarily so fond of critics”. The other interviewee from Dagbladet went even further:

*The critics are conceived as odious, and that is maybe how it is supposed to be. I am soon to be [anonymised] years old, and I am*

*thinking: was I supposed to spend my life complaining about authors in Norway writing bad books? I mean, it's an activity that's a little... It's not exactly how I imagined my life to be. So, I understand people thinking: what in the world are critics? What are they good for? But we are necessary within the literary, if not in the broader picture. When we have a literary scene, we need criticism.*

Several describe that they think criticism is perceived as “unproductive” compared to other professions. The interviewee from Klassekampen claimed that critics are “the most badmouthed profession in the world” and refers to the number of negative mails she has received. When the interviewee from Klassekampen talked about “the right company” one could assume that it concerns people with similar kinds of professions and interests as critics.

The critics do not feel particularly challenged by book bloggers or “horizontalisation” of recommendation services, but morally challenged. This means that they seem to miss a societal recognition of the value of their work, and, even further, they feel that they are misrecognised as “snobs” and having illegitimate motivations, such as status and self-interest.

When conceived negatively by the “outside”, one could imagine two strategies: (1) trying to convince others of the positive aspect of the activity, or (2) searching for confirmation and consolidation among the likeminded. For institutions to be perceived as legitimate they have to balance both, but publicly the first aspect is of vital importance. One example might be the Opera in Oslo, which actively conducts legitimation work to ensure legitimacy in the broader public (Larsen, 2016). In the interviews I found that the book reviewers actively performed arguments in order to convince a general public of the positive aspect of their activity, even though they were hesitant towards entering a discussion with people who questioned book reviewing. When talking to them three different ways of redefining criticism as a way of meeting the challenges emerged, which defined criticism as (1) resistance towards commercialisation, (2) as guidance, and (3) as peer review.

### **6.8.1 Resistance towards commercialisation**

By posing criticism as a resistance towards commercialisation the critics appeal to aesthetic authority. This is an appeal to be representatives of the general/broader public in aesthetic manners within a sphere that is becoming

ever more commercialised. Literature is posed as a sacred object against the profane economy, and also a vulgar culture. One of the interviewees were concerned about the lack of seriousness in literature, and said:

*I: There's an incredible vulgarity somewhere out there. I think it's really frightening. Not that we have to get along everybody, but I am thinking about a lack in common decency, to use an old expression, it's become acceptable to lack common decency.*

*O: Do you regard criticism as a resistance towards this?*

*I: Of course it is ... I want to give reasons for my opinions and highlight what I think it is important that people read, which is something else.*

The critic voiced a longing for common decency, which seems to be connected to a culture that acknowledges quality, and that the challenge for criticism is to defend the sacrality of literature from illegitimate interests. The challenge for this kind of legitimisation work is that it might be perceived as elitist, arguing that broader culture is vulgar. But the interviewees do not fear this, as the one from NRK said:

*Siv Jensen [former Minister of Finance, from the right-wing Progressive party] and her friends will of course find me and the likes as extremely elitist, and that argument is understandable. But if you accept that there is something called quality in this world; in carpentry, at a café and in art, then it isn't such a bad idea that some have achieved [the] competency to judge it. I have a pragmatic relationship to quality, and do not accept that populist objection.*

The populist objection the critic is referring to is the abstention of ranking cultural products hierarchically (Skarpenes, 2007). By doing this the critic is able to distinguish between what is worthy of being a part of literature on from those that are not. This critical attitude establishes canons and is preoccupied with preserving the status of classics. It is well rooted in the school system and in publishing houses. This resistance is also directed towards the publishing houses, however, since they are commercial organisations. The

critics standing outside the publishing houses therefore might function as watchdogs against the publishing houses, telling the public when they are sneaking in commercial products and not worthy literature. The interviewee from NRK says: “We are the only one who’s telling it like it is. The publishing houses are becoming more and more commercialised, and send more and more garbage to people, so we have to change that.”

In this account, people are becoming passive recipients of the books of the publishing houses, and the job of critics is to locate and clearly explain the difference between quality and lack of quality to an audience. They become cultural intermediaries between readers and publishing houses, and a part of the production process each time they review a book. This is why credibility is so important for critics. They have to stand as independent actors who have their own opinions. One interviewee from Dagbladet said: “You know that quantity rules in the market-governed popular culture, and I see [criticism] as a small counter voice to that, and then people have to take it as it is”.

### 6.8.2 Criticism as guidance

A second way of contributing to the common good is to pose criticism as curating in a world with ever more to choose between. The publishing houses launch more books than anyone can read, and the number of books to choose from, from a reader’s perspective is very broad. This is where the critic can guide the reader in a world of information overload. In this legitimation work, reading is more of a common activity and commercialisation is not posed as a threat, but more as an aspect of the industry to which one has to have a pragmatic relationship. As one of the interviewees from Dagbladet said: “The serious criticism is not so important in itself, in my opinion, but I think that reviews might help the readers”. This is a legitimation using “small words”, in contrast to the former who used “big words” (Larsen, 2016).

Asked about quality, and if one has to adjust one’s own conceptions to the audience, the critic from Bergens Tidende answered confirming:

*After a while you realise that if you are to keep your own standard you would have to write negative reviews of 90–95% of all books, and that becomes very bothersome. For everybody, right? Yes, except the readers who would be left with a really small but exquisite*



*selection. Of course I write for readers, but not the ones Skarpenes has interviewed. I write for those that actually read criticism. The big negative word in this business is consumer journalism – is that what we are doing? Well, I'd say we at least do reader guidance.*

Here the critic reformulates “consumer journalism” to “reader guidance” and gives it a positive connotation. In his/her account there is no need to resist the commercial aspect of the book industry. The important task is to evaluate literature according to quality, which correlates with economy in unpredicted ways. This critic also says that the common assumption of small publications being of high quality or having status is a myth, that at least the critics are tired of, and that the opposite often is the rule: small publications are small because they are not good enough.

The reviewer from Fædrelandsvennen is even less dismissive of the language of markets, when he says: “I am trying to address the readers of the paper, not the author or other actors within the literary field. I regard the activity also as a form of consumer guidance.” This reviewer does not even distinguish between readers and consumers. The reviewer from Klassekampen also distinguished between reader guidance on one hand, and serious criticism on the other: “I think it is important to be both. To take journalistic considerations, and do a justifiable aesthetic judgement, and to approach both educated readers as well as those have not studied literature”. This reviewer also voiced an ideal of helping out. The mission of reviewing in this perspective becomes to provide readers with suggestions and recommendations that they can trust. The critic is thus able to distinguish between what is worthy of spending time on from those that are not, and this should be an appreciated service “in this day and age with so much to choose from”. In other words, this is not an appeal to be an advocate for literature on behalf of readers as the former, but a more humble and journalistic legitimation work.

### **6.8.3 Criticism as peer review**

Criticism is also regarded as contributing to the common good by providing artists with feedback. One of the returning challenges in the interviews was the question of the intention of the author. Many literary theories address this issue, and it is not possible to deal with fully in a reviewing practice, but

it is of significance whether the reviewer is preoccupied with the question or not. One of the reviewers who explicitly are said:

*When reviewing I have been preoccupied with seriously considering, and trying to understand what the aim of the author is. That is, what it really is, where they go, what they really want to communicate, and I try to judge what I read in that light.*

This is a critic who is reluctant towards ranking and perceives that as a less important aspect of criticism. What is important in this aspect is to recognise that most authors get very few reviews, and that they matter for them. The critic that abstains from judging does it seemingly out of respect for the artist, who might have other ambitions than the critic perceives. One consequence might be that readers are confused about whether it is a good book or not. From the perspective of the moral-egalitarian repertoire of evaluation (Skarpenes, 2007) this might be regarded as avoiding stating whether it is a good or bad work because they do not want to offend those who are of a differing opinion. Another reason might be the difficulty of doing this. It becomes a paradox, since the evaluation is exactly what is expected from a critic (Blank, 2006). However, this is valued within the literary sphere, and explicitly voiced as a legitimation by the reviewers. A successful performance of criticism is one that is devoid of insecurity, because that convinces the audience that the reviewers are authentic in voicing their opinion and not just communicating it strategically. There are ways of distancing oneself from the hierarchical conception of culture with certainty, such as the Norwegian literary critic Henning Hagerup (Van der Hagen, 2016): “As a critic I do not have any wish for establishing a strict literary hierarchy. There are many rooms in the house of literature, and, in fact, I find very much of it important”. After this, he nevertheless goes on talking about the culture in general, and saying that physical training is expected of people, but that “mental training” is looked down upon. In other words, he is voicing a protest against the egalitarian notion. This is a common understanding among book reviewers, the comparison between a reader and an athlete; one of them are allowed by society to be good, while the other is not. This legitimation work is thus a search for confirmation and consolidation among the likeminded, as well as an attempt to lift the necessity of art to a more general level.

## 6.9 New areas as resources for criticism

Whether or not the ways of meeting the challenges are successful or not is up to the audience to decide, but it is important to show that the challenges are met (Larsen, 2016), and the book reviewers show this in several arenas. Book reviewers are generally best known from the texts they write in newspapers. In one way, these texts are where the reviewers perform legitimacy. Often these reviews reveal more about the reviewer than the book, and a good digression or a nice picture is often added to please the reader. The reader of book reviews is also interested in something other than “simply” a recommendation of what to read. It is acknowledged by the reviewers, and seen as a matter of writing in mass media newspapers that book reviewing contains an element of what we can call “consumption guidance”, even though it is held at some distance. As with judging, this is all about how it is done. To put a “like” on a post on Facebook, or to give stars to a movie at IMDb is judging, but it is very different from writing a book review. The decisive difference is that book reviewers have to show knowledge for undertaking the task, and that they have understood what the work aims at, while giving form to a consistent argument of their own. The publishing houses push to get their books reviewed, and this is the problem of book bloggers, who being without editors, have a bigger challenge than book reviewers in being perceived as credible (Steiner, 2010).

The legitimacy of book reviewers is also performed elsewhere, in other texts they write (opinion texts and essays) and in interviews, as a part of cultural journalism for instance. During a career of writing book reviews, for instance it is common to write a book about how this has been experienced, taking controversial judgments as points of departure (Norheim, 2012; Scott, 2016). The book reviewers also perform in radio shows, podcasts, literary events and festivals. Norwegian book reviewers have, for instance, participated in international debates on Karl Ove Knausgård and *My Struggle*, to present to the event by the country of his birth. This development of “eventification” (Lindholm, 2015) is of course also criticised among reviewers for leaving the text in the background, instead of the foreground, “where it belongs”.

Altogether, the book reviewers portray the dispersion and quantification of criticism as a challenge that will influence society in general, if not change it entirely. That is, “our” ability to understand aesthetic works of art

is in need of critics, so we at least have someone who takes it seriously. The book reviewers are a highly individualised group, but in this matter they make a case for the fellowship of book reviewers. Contrary to the content of the “elegies” performed by book reviewers themselves, and literary and media scholars (Debendetti & Ghariani, 2018), this analysis holds that successful performances, which can also be the function of the “elegies”, will uphold the legitimacy and activity of book reviewing in print media.

## 6.10 Conclusion

When met with alleged criticism and misrecognition the critics mobilise legitimisation work based on general principles, such as the quality of art, the help for consumers or feedback to artists. This chapter shows how book reviewing is performed in many arenas, and thus might ensure the continued existence of a traditional aesthetic authority by many who have assumed it to be on the wane. How literary critics talk about their practice, and what values they refer to while making judgments show the importance of moral self-perceptions in the defence of their profession. Several institutions in the cultural sphere constantly have to legitimise their practice just like the literary criticism does, by referring to certain values (Larsen, 2013). As with the opera, literary criticism seemingly might be in a tension between elite and egalitarianism, but none of them are contempt as strictly elite, and both of them are active in combining these notions in order to gain legitimacy. By interviewing literary critics about their profession, I have tried to show how they create a context around themselves. The critics have different perceptions of society, and therefore they refer to different values when they legitimise their position. Nonetheless, they are consensual in understanding their profession as a defence against dispersion and/or quantification of aesthetic judgments. Dispersion is framed as targeting very special audiences, and the criticism as addressed to “the common reader”. Quantification is framed as levelling discussions that are important for democracy, while criticism keeps it alive. By looking at the meaning-making practices of book reviewers we can see how they strive to gain aesthetic authority in a constantly changing media landscape.