

PERFORMANCE AS CRITICISM – CRITICISM AS PERFORMANCE

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Abstract

Through his exposure to Western performing arts during several decades, the author, also steeped in the performing culture of his own country, has come to realize that criticism does not always function as an independent discourse communicated by the critic, but that works of art themselves do criticize each other. By way of analyzing concrete examples drawn from the fields of literature, theatre, music, radio and television, he has come to the conclusion that criticism inherent in the performing arts possesses a suggestive power that can awaken a critical reception from the public, a power that should be exploited to the full in the media age that tends to stultify creative and critical sensitivity in the people. As far as theory formation is concerned, these concrete experiences have prompted the author to propose a theory of “approximative communication” that can strengthen the hermeneutic capacity of a society, as supremely exemplified by the metamorphosis of semantics into phonetics in the parody, *Phra Malethethai*, by the lady poet, Khun Suwan, in the reign of Rama III.

Keywords: Criticism; performance; performing arts; reception; media; hermeneutic society

Preamble

The present paper is based on a lecture given at the International Research Centre “Interweaving Performance Cultures” of the Free University Berlin on 12th September 2017. The author has been a Research Fellow of the Centre since 2008 and has benefited from an annual residency of 6 weeks, during which he never fails to imbibe the rich cultural offerings of the host city, particularly those related to performance. As has always been the case with the author, research and scholarly activities are intimately linked with the experience of works of art, and the Berlin residencies have not yielded only research findings subsequently presented at various scholarly gatherings or published in academic journals and volumes of collected essays, but they have also borne fruit in the form of reviews of concerts, operas and plays, which the author has experienced first-hand and on which he has recorded his immediate reactions, primarily on the *Website* of the TRF Research Project on Criticism (www.thaicritic.com). It is worth noting that some of the reviews have later been published by the Berlin Research Centre in its e-journal *Texturen* or have been printed in volumes of collected essays and reviews by the author.

To be involved in a series of research projects supported by the Thailand Research Fund (TRF) for as long as 18 years, the author cannot but find himself in a privileged position, not only to practise criticism himself, but also to reflect on the nature and mechanisms of criticism that can be regarded as an act of theorizing. The subject of theory has preoccupied the academic world, first in the West and then in other parts of the world including Thailand. That theory has sharpened our perception and reception of works of art and has enabled us to generalize rationally on the arts (and society) cannot be denied, but the kind of theory that has become fashionable in academic circles does not necessarily emerge from the contact with the work of art and the reflections that ensue, but has become a wholesale adoption of (ready-made) sets of theories concocted by individual scholars in the West, especially in France, to the surprise and bemusement of the originating academia itself, as expressed in the work in French with the English title *French Theory* by François Cusset (2003). Theories for smug end users, now imposed willy-nilly on graduate students in most countries without consideration of the cultural,

intellectual and artistic environment at the receiving end cannot avoid creating havoc.

The author has tried to be helpful – whether his opinion is accepted by colleagues or not – in doing two things. First, he has tried to prove that theory can best thrive if underpinned by the capacity to think theoretically, which ought to be cultivated through the actual apprehension of, and reflections on, works of art or other social and cultural phenomena. At the lecture in Berlin on 12th September 2017, the author sought leave to remind his colleagues that theory can arise at different stages of our research endeavours. This includes 3 stages. First, it takes the form of an adoption of existing sets of theories, which serve as a research tool. This approach is found to be too rigid by the author. Second, a theory or theories may crop up *along the way* (the term coined by the late Professor Suthiwong Phongphaibul of Thaksin University in Thailand), while the scholarly pursuit is still on-going, and in this case, concrete experience might contradict the gospel-like theoretical directives adopted by, or imposed upon, the researchers at the beginning stage of the research. Such flexibility is often forgotten, and by so doing, researchers are deprived, or deprive themselves, of finding ways to make meaningful discoveries. But the most significant theorizing usually happens at the end of the journey, as the researcher has already arrived at his/her destination, has accumulated data and analyzed them, and besides, should have reflected on the entire process of research and derived some general conclusions that can be developed into a theory or theories. Theories can be the outcome not only of a research project, but a series of such projects, as exemplified in the author's "theories from the native soil", which have been developed further by other colleagues. The session at the Berlin Research Centre was marked by a lively discussion on this topic of research and the ensuing theories.

In actual fact, the topic of the lecture, "Performance as Criticism – Criticism as Performance", is a theoretically oriented subject. The author's direct contact with certain performances he has experienced in Berlin are revelatory in the sense that they communicate well with the audience and at the same time convey critical messages directed at those in their respective

professions. One has to be familiar with the artistic landscape of Germany, and also of the West, to be able to cull from those works potent messages which are of a critical nature. Germany has been, for the past few decades, notorious for innovations in theatre and opera, known as the *Regietheater* (the director's theatre), in which theatre directors stage productions, (mostly) of works from the past, in such a way as to make them address cultural, social and political issues of the present, thereby deliberately ignoring the originating cultural background or convention. The original practice initiated in East Germany under the Socialist Regime was well meant: it wanted works of the past to speak to the present, and those insightful theatre and opera directors, such as the famous Walter Felsenstein (1901-1975), the founder of the "Komische Oper" in East Berlin, did succeed in this mission without distorting the original works. The opera productions by Felsenstein were reputable cultural exports from East Germany, appreciated in the West, and the author, while studying at Tübingen University, did have a chance to see 2 opera productions of his when the Komische Oper visited Stuttgart in the early 1960s. Alas, many German directors of the past 30 years have ignored the good sense, the conscientiousness and the artistry of those early pioneers, and have been reveling in provoking the public just for the sake of provocation. Furthermore, unfortunately, academia and many critics have provided a chorus of approbations which have helped to create a fad that is extremely difficult to combat. If the public, the critics and the scholars are incapable of distinguishing between true and false, it is incumbent upon *the artists themselves* to caution their own colleagues that they have misused the freedom of the arts for a pursuit of self-serving innovation. The present paper sets out to deal with the phenomenon of *art criticizing art* (specifically, opera criticizing opera and music criticizing music) in the Western world. Yet there must be a point of connection.

Being a Thai steeped in this own cultural roots, the author can relate the experiences from his homeland to those of the West without much difficulty. As far back as 1999, the research team under the author's leadership, in its analysis of classical Thai music, discovered that the musical contest, especially that among "Piphat" ensembles, could be considered a phenomenon that encourages *music to criticize music*. The research team

posited even further that non-verbal criticism is germane to Thai art such that it can qualify as an option to the familiar form of verbal criticism. Thai traditional culture does not cultivate criticism as an independent activity, and the practice of the various arts contains elements of criticism directed at the art work itself. Having been involved in a research project that yields such an innovative insight has served as a good nurturing ground for the author's search and discovery of comparable phenomena in the Western arts. The Berlin lecture moves between Thai and Western cultures by allowing works of art from both cultures to enter into a fruitful dialogue. The following sections of the paper will demonstrate by way of concrete examples how such dialogue works.

Lesson from the Berlin *Fidelio*

The production of Beethoven's *Fidelio* at the Staatsoper Berlin which premiered on 3rd October 2016 and which the author had the opportunity of attending on 7th October turned out to be enigmatic. The veteran director, Harry Kupfer (a former Assistant to Walter Felsenstein), who for the past 50 years had had many distinguished opera productions to his credit, seemed to be conveying a message that baffled both the audience and the critics alike. The opera opens with a prologue depicting a ceremonial scene set in the sumptuous, gilded Musikvereinsaal of Vienna, familiar to people around the world thanks to the annual television broadcast of the traditional Johann Strauss concert on 1st January. This time, a grand piano was standing there with a bust of Beethoven on it. Every singer had a roll of paper, being the score of the work, in one hand. In the programme notes, the Director somehow or other misled the public by speaking of a "seminar", and all critics took his word for it. The author, for one, was not to be duped by this trick. The backdrop suddenly changes to that of a dungeon, and the opera continues on its normal course, only to revert to the Musikvereinsaal again in the *finale*. Through the entire opera, all singers, soloists as well as chorus members, went on singing and acting with a roll of paper in their hands, as though they were engaged in a *concertante* performance. The music and the drama were so absorbing that the singers did not seem to show any inhibition at all, and the audience did not

find the presence of the score in the hands of the singers to be distracting either. How are we to interpret this strange phenomenon?

The author has been familiar with theatre and opera productions that deliberately aim at confusing the audience, playful in a way, but contemptuous of the public whom the director can lead or mislead in whichever way he wants. But certainly not *this* production. The director invited his audience to think critically along with him, but of course, he expected them to be knowledgeable about what was going on in the world of opera and theatre, in Germany and Austria in particular. The author is not going to mince his words: the *Regietheater* was and is getting out of control. Hence, the veteran must have felt a need to prick the conscience of his colleagues. “Let’s be serious, for once”. And to be serious was to start with the score, that is to say, the music and the text, no more nor less. In that evening, the conductor, Daniel Barenboim, whose incurable jet-setting had resulted very often in sloppy performances, awakened to the call of his colleague Kupfer. The orchestral performance was more distinguished than what I had ever experienced from this pianist-conductor. Thus the director succeeded in proving his point. “Trust Beethoven and *Fidelio* will show itself as a masterpiece.” That the singers were carrying the score in their hands was more than symbolic.

Now that he had taught his unruly colleagues (the contemporary theatre directors) a lesson, Harry Kupfer could not dispense entirely with a jibe. If his colleagues loved to fool their audience, he too could do it. To locate the ceremonial scenes to the Musikvereinsaal was an anachronism.



Figure 1: *Fidelio*, Staatsoper Berlin, 7. October 2016

The concert hall had not been built yet. The première of *Fidelio* took place at the *Theater an der Wien* (where Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte* was also premièred). Who among the audience knew it? It was a quiz with a historical slant to it. How sophisticated, one would say, unlike those boulevard tricks often adopted by the most fashionable of directors!

When it comes to the phenomenon of the *Regietheater*, we ought to know that Harry Kupfer hailed from the “school” of Walter Felsenstein. There was nothing outlandisch about Felsenstein's work. His aim was to stage an opera that originated in the past in a way that it would communicate more succinctly with a modern audience. The aberrations of the opera and theatre directors of the past 30 years cannot be attributed to the pioneering work of Felsenstein and his pupils. If Harry Kupfer and Götz Friederich, who were assistants of Felsenstein, saw the necessity to sound a warning to their younger colleagues in opera houses, the spoken theatre too has known very distinguished directors, who were once identified with the *Regietheater* and who can no longer tolerate the excesses of their fellow directors: Peter Stein and Claus Peymann have been very vocal about their disapproval of those self-serving theatre men, who tend to distort the originals just for the fun of it.

Music above All Else: Case Study of Monteverdi

The successes of the performances of the three surviving operas by Monteverdi, (*L'Orfeo*, *Il ritorno d'Ulisse in patria*, *L'Incoronazione di Poppea*) performed by the English Baroque Soloists and the Monteverdi Choir, under the direction of John Eliot Gardiner, in 2017, have been unprecedented. Gardiner is a conductor with rich experiences in opera houses. His directorship of the Opéra national de Lyon (1983-1988) contributed towards turning it into one of the leading opera houses of Europe, recently crowned by the award of the “Opera House of the Year 2017” by the magazine *Opernwelt*. His decision to “half-stage” these operas was a deliberate strategy – and the author is interpreting him here – in order to give no chance of any excesses and aberrations by uncontrollable directors, although a professional director was engaged to oversee this business of “half-staging”. Half-staging means that the singers were still encouraged to enhance the musical expression

by way of physical movements, and they did move about the stage and perform physical action (such as Charon falling asleep under the spell of Orfeo's singing). But there was no scenery, and lighting played an important role. The Orchestra was in full view, divided into 2 halves to allow the singers to move up and down mid-stage. The conductor, standing on the right-hand side of the dividing line, was still in control of the performance, but did not want to give prominence to himself.



Figure 2: Orfeo (half-staged), Philharmonie Berlin, 2th September 2017

To *see* how the orchestra and the singers conspired to create a memorable musical experience was for the author a special treat. He had not realized before how a huge Baroque orchestra with its varied complement of instruments could create such a unique emotional impact. The variety of instruments used in this performance proved that the composer Monteverdi knew how to use which instrument(s) to underpin which emotion(s). The research into Baroque music, initiated and practised by Nikolaus Harnoncourt (1929-2016) and by John Eliot Gardiner and his British colleagues, had paved the way for significant revivals. How much research had gone into the reconstruction and re-editing of the score? How much research and workmanship had gone into the reconstruction of the various instruments? A man like Gardiner, who began to take interest in Monteverdi while a student (of history) at Cambridge, took over half a century to come this far. The sound from the singers and orchestra that the author heard in the evening of 2nd September 2017 in the Philharmonie Berlin had enough drama in it that

required no superfluous seasoning which contemporary staging is all too eager to provide. Before coming to Berlin to perform in the famous gigantic concert hall, the ensemble had already appeared in celebrated opera houses such as La Fenice in Venice, and no complaint had ever been heard that the sumptuous facilities of the theatre were “underused”. In Thai, to follow King Rama IX’s favorite dictum, we would say that we have here a “sufficient” opera, adequate in every way to do justice to the masterwork. The author has no way to know whether John Eliot Gardiner and his director were thinking of an antidote to the *Regietheater*, but he can read from this productions a message that can serve to curb the extravaganzas of the “director’s theatre”. *Orfeo* can be taken as a critique of the excesses of present-day opera staging which tends to disregard the supremacy of music, and at the same time as proof of how a great work of the past can be fully appreciated in the present. *Opera criticizing opera!*

Enough is Enough

Concertante performances of operas have in recent years brought about excellent results, especially in musical terms. But the author cannot help but feel uneasy at seeing female singers in exuberant evening dresses and male singers in black tie singing their parts from a voluminous score. Some enterprising conductors and directors have managed to “half-stage” operas with success, but perhaps not of the same calibre as the three Monteverdi operas as presented by John Eliot Gardiner in the year 2017. A radical case has been made by the German (of Polish extraction) conductor, Marek Janowski, at home in the opera house as well as in the concert hall, who has served long terms as music director in France for 14 years and another 17 years in Germany until his retirement this year. Highly acclaimed as an opera conductor, especially Wagner, he (several years ago) decided to stop working in opera houses altogether, having made an honest confession that he could no longer tolerate any further collaboration with stage directors of today, especially those advocates of the *Regietheater*.

In an interview in English,¹ he did not hesitate to speak of the “dictatorship” that had dominated the world of German performing arts. In the early 20th century, it was the conductor who reigned supreme, also in the opera house. Now that supremacy had been transferred to the director, and the conductor has had to play a secondary role. Janowski went even further: a conspiracy between the sensational operatic stage and the sensational press had come about that had strengthened the prestige of the *Regietheater*. His mission as a musician and an opera conductor was to go back to the essence of drama that is embedded in the music. And at this particular point he elaborated his musical conviction that no other conductor had had the audacity to express. Citing Wagner’s operas, Janowski maintained that apart from certain scenes from such works as *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* and *Der fliegende Holländer*, most of the works are “static”, in the sense that they contain dramatic elements within themselves that do not require much physical action on stage. They thus lend themselves to *concertante* performances, and Janowski, of late, has allowed them to be half-staged (in the same manner as John Eliot Gardiner). Of course, Janowski admitted that some operas *cannot* be presented in a *concertante* form, such as Richard Strauss’s *Der Rosenkavalier*, which requires a great deal of physical movement and action. In this sense, Janowski is a highly competent recording artist, and his complete recorded *Ring Cycle* from 1980 still ranks among the finest. We shall have to conclude that Janowski not only criticizes the *Regietheater* by way of a verbal discourse, but that his practice as a musician, both outside the opera house and in the recording studio, more than adequately counters the desirability and justification for the existence of the *Regietheater*, which, by his own admission, has lived much longer than he had expected.

Having absented himself from opera houses for many years, he finally accepted a challenge to conduct the complete Wagner’s *Ring* at Bayreuth in 1916 in a production by Frank Castorf which had been regarded as the extremity of the *Regietheater*. He could do nothing to change what was to be seen on the stage of Bayreuth, but he was intent on probing the depths of

¹ The interview is accessible via Youtube. Retrieved on 3 July 2018 from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_hl28N_gQYI&t=65s.

Wagner's music and text and to convince the audience of their emotional impact. The critics were unanimous in their praise of the restoration of the supremacy of Wagner's music, but quiet about the conflict between what was heard and what was seen. Not having had first-hand knowledge of what transpired, the present author has to accept what was reported – in spite of its shortcomings and quaint reticence – as an admission of past guilt by the sensationalizing press.

The above concrete examples of art criticizing art may be apparent to most people who are accustomed to criticism expressed *in verbal form*. On closer scrutiny, verbal criticism can often lapse into casual expression, not well argued or rationally thought through or underpinned by reliable substantive evidence. How many critical acts are mere exchanges of invectives? A work of art that sets out to be critical of other works of art is, by its very nature, a creative act that has to engage in the creative process and follow the rules of the game. One may even go so far as to claim that non-verbal criticism by way of a work of art reflects the sophisticated nature of a particular society, which is always ready to get involved in hermeneutic activities, for such criticism is not explicit and its message is in many cases merely suggestive, demanding reflective and interpretative response. In a way, it may be regarded as an attribute of a civilized society.

All Is Not Quiet on the Western Front

What has hitherto been discussed pertains to the much-overlooked function of art to maintain its quality or viability by way of a critical attitude towards itself, which in our particular case, manifests itself as art criticizing art. The degree of consciousness on the part of the artists may vary from case to case, sometimes more explicit, sometimes merely implicit. What is not so apparent is the self-reflective or self-critical discourse expressed by the artists themselves, especially in the form of a manifesto, or a quasi-manifesto. The following remark by Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971), unquestionably one of the leading Western composers of the 20th century, merits serious attention.

I believe, with Auden, that the only critical exercise of value must take place in, and by means of, art, i.e., in pastiche or parody; *Le Baiser de la fée* and *Pulcinella* are music criticisms of this sort, though more than that, too. [...] No critic understood this at the time, and I was therefore attacked for being a *pasticheur*, chided for composing ‘simple’ music, blamed for deserting ‘modernism’, accused of renouncing my ‘true Russian heritage’. People who had never heard of, or cared about, the originals cried ‘sacrilege’: ‘the classics are ours. Leave the classics alone.’ To them all, my answer was and is the same: You ‘respect’, but I ‘love’. (Mitchell, 1993: 98)

That Stravinsky mentions W.H. Auden in this connection is of great significance, for the latter too creates works in the “neoclassical” vein that is well-recognized in the history of literature of the 20th century. It needs to be said that both the composer and the poet possess a vast as well as a deep knowledge of the “classics” to such a degree that they are in position to innovate, and not just imitate, their classical antecedents. When Stravinsky talks of “pastiche”, this has nothing to do with thoughtless imitation, but an act of recognizing the model and at the same time distancing oneself from it, so that one can create anew. His method becomes even clearer when he combines “pastiche” and “parody” together. The author has on an earlier occasion written on parody and demonstrated how parody functions as a vehicle of artistic creation or re-creation (Nagavajara, 1996). That Stravinsky describes two of his important works as “criticisms” tends to support my own and my colleagues’ contention that art criticizing art is an important aspect of artistic creation.

That two like-minded brethren should have decided to collaborate on a creative project was a boon to the artistic world. The three-act opera, *The Rake’s Progress* (premiered in 1951) with the music by Stravinsky and the libretto by Auden (with the support of Chester-Kallman), is definitely a supreme vindication of neoclassicism in art. The American Comparatist, Herbert Lindenberger, has demonstrated how Auden’s literary “neoclassical” virtuosity spurs Stravinsky on to create an opera of distinction. He also

pinpoints the artistic virtue of this operatic masterpiece as the “distancing (which) is a hallmark of neoclassical style”, whereby the audience is kept “at a distance sufficient enough so that it may evaluate what is going on.” It is quite ingenious on the part of Lindenberger to explain the neoclassicism of the Stravinsky-Auden enterprise in terms of the Brechtian “*Verfremdung*”. And I would not hesitate to add that “*Verfremdung*” itself is meant to engender a *critical* attitude towards one’s own experience. Consequently, *The Rake’s Progress* can be regarded as a confirmation of the principle of art criticizing art and substantiates Stravinsky’s appraisal of his own creative works as “criticism” (Lindenberger, 2016: 283).

Experts do concur that *The Rake’s Progress* is an operatic masterpiece, but seem to be at a loss for an explanation of its relative neglect. Perhaps a side-glance at Brecht-Weill’s *Dreigroschenoper* might be able to clarify the issue. Both Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill are definitely more “folksy” than, and not as sophisticated as, the neoclassicists Igor Stravinsky and W.H. Auden. Let us face it: there are various approaches to “*Verfremdung*”, and Brecht and Weill, consciously or unconsciously, are much nearer to “the people”!

Thai Art and Its Critical-Dialogic Aesthetics

The author has, on a number of occasions, brought into discussion of how much the Thai, from a very distant past, love to engage in contests, especially in the form of verbal repartee, in order to entertain themselves and the public. Here we have to do with a “staged” performance, whereby the opposing protagonists could in real life be good friends or even married couples. The relationship in real life does not prevent them from staging a saucy, piquant and critical duel, which must be considered a work of art, being one of the mainstays of oral literature. Since the contest is improvised in verse, every protagonist must be a poet in his/her own right, producing a verbal work of art that aims to outdo that of the opponent. Though one can describe it as art criticizing art, language remains the weapon used in the repartee.



Figure 3: A musical contest between 2 “Piphat” bands

What is going to be presented here lies in the domain of music, whose “language” can be profound and suggestive. In the video recording,² two orchestras (known in Thai as “Piphat” orchestras, consisting of percussive and wind instruments, with no strings), are pitched against each other in a contest. The rules of the game are that they have to play 2 set pieces. One orchestra starts first, playing the beginning part of the piece, which is then picked up by the second orchestra. The pattern of taking turns improvising on the set melodies continues, moving from the first set piece to the second set piece. In the traditional ambience, either the audience or a jury will decide who the winner is. The “duel” illustrated here is a friendly one, with no adjudication. It will be noticed that both orchestras begin by warming up in a way unusual to Western listeners, as though a short *cadenza* precedes the main body of the composition. Even at this early stage, the competitive spirit already comes to the fore – with the second orchestra trying to outshine the first one.

It does not take long before we can appraise the characteristics of the two orchestras. The first orchestra stresses more the structure of the set pieces, and their way of impressing the audience and, at the same time, of criticizing the other orchestra, is to prove that they are intellectually superior to their rival,

² The contest organized by the College of Music, Mahidol University, is accessible via Youtube. Retrieved on 3 July 2018 from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YmNKZ3cM0FE>.

for even their virtuosity is not exhibited for its own sake, but serves to bring out the compositional structure of the pieces. The second orchestra is more cheerful, more folksy: the musicians use a great deal of ornamentations, especially *glissandos*, as if they were trying to tease their opponents out of their conservative reticence. What is admirable can be seen from the first orchestra's adherence to its own dignified style, refusing to fall into the trap set by the second orchestra. It responds briefly to the virtuosic exhibitionism, as if to make known to its opponent that they are not going to stoop down to the level of their fellows, who are mere country bumpkins. The second orchestra, not only via its own playing but by way of certain physical gestures and facial expressions, sends out a critical message to the effect that its rival's affected solemnness is certainly to be ascribed to its lack of technical prowess. (The author has to admit that it would have been extremely difficult, if he would have had to decide who the winner should be.)

What is certain in this case is that the pleasure principle dominates the entire contest. Not only does the audience derive pleasure from the performance, but the musicians too seem to be enjoying themselves in the process. The dialogue between the two orchestras can, beyond any doubt, be appreciated in terms of reciprocal *criticism*: artists criticizing artists; artists creating works of art to criticize works of art; art criticizing art. Such a phenomenon could not have happened, had the musicians not possessed a high degree of virtuosity, imagination and inventiveness, marked by the power of improvisation, which is the hallmark of traditional Thai classical music. It is not stressful like international music competitions we are experiencing today, either at the individual or ensemble level. The author does not want to sound chauvinistic, but find it necessary to make the point that only a culture marked by a high level of sophistication can produce and sustain such a tradition. The musicians are in themselves critics: they must learn to listen attentively to their opponents, to gauge their strengths and weaknesses, and to make use of their own critical sensitivity in responding to the challenges of the other party. Beyond that – and that is the highest point of any critical culture – they must be able to be *critical of themselves*, must know what they themselves can do or cannot do, and in what way they can outdo their competitors. The history of Thai classical music has it that in some contests in the past, when one orchestra

realized that the other orchestra was superior to it, the musicians of that orchestra just stopped playing, packed up their instruments and went home. To be able to admit defeat in public requires a high degree of what is known in Buddhism as “mudita” (pleasure at the well-being or success of others).

Of course, there have been aberrations perpetrated mostly by the aristocratic “owners” of orchestras, who punished their own musicians when they lost a contest. But to take losing and winning to such a paroxysm as to be able literally to murder one’s opponent, as presented in the otherwise worthy film *Homrong* (The Overture), is perhaps a jazzed up version of the Thai musical contest for marketing purposes.

When Criticism Takes the Stage: A French Example

Those of us familiar with the “Classical” age of French literature will not fail to notice that it was not only rich in terms of literary and dramatic masterpieces, but also in terms of aesthetic and critical debates that gave rise to critical and poetological writings of distinction. The creation of the “Académie Française” in 1635 did not only gave rise to regulatory measures that may have accounted for the “purity” of the French language and the “good taste” that underpinned French art, but also at the same time set the trend for normative criticism that the artists themselves found to be oppressive and felt obliged to combat. Even a poet like Racine, who from the vantage point of today, appears to be the supreme representative of Classicism or even classical correctness, did feel the weight of such a normative straightjacket and gave expression to those “Préfaces” to his plays that can be considered today as gems of criticism, although much of his criticism is in self-defence.

Molière, being a practitioner of the theatre, was even more susceptible to criticisms from various quarters, not only from artistic but also from moral standpoints, all the more so because he used his comedies as a vehicle for social criticism and at times went as far as unmasking religious hypocrisy. In this respect, he was fortunate to enjoy the favours of Louis XIV, who was a theatre lover. He was perhaps not as intellectually self-assured as Racine who could defend himself well in argumentative discourse. The theatre man Molière must have found the form of “Préfaces” inadequate and at least twice

resorted to the dramatic form, through which the pro and con of an argument could be dramatically presented, and of course shaped to his own advantage. Hence the two comedies, namely, *Critique de l'Ecole des femmes*" (premièred on 1st June 1663) and *L'Impromptu de Versailles* (premièred on 14th October 1663).

As for the first play, its title more than betrays the author's intention, namely that of defending his comedy, *L'Ecole des Femmes* (premièred on 23rd December 1662) against its critics. Without any doubt, the play is a masterpiece that has been able to capture the attention of the audience through the past three and a half centuries. It confirms Molière's preeminence as a writer of comedies that are both entertaining and instructive. For the contemporary audience, the play must have appeared revolutionary in its critique of social bigotry and became an immediate success with the public, and also an unprecedented financial success. Yet it was criticized for bad taste and (covert) indecencies. Last but not least, the charge of plagiarism was levelled against the author, to which he never responded.

His usual response was to expose and pinpoint the inability of his opponents to argue their case rationally. For example, the Marquis condemns the play in the following terms. "Elle est détestable, parce qu'elle est détestable". (It is detestable, because it is detestable.) This is a rather facile trick used by the author to nullify the credibility of his critics. Molière goes one step further in employing a socio-political stratagem against hostile criticism. As the play was appreciated highly by the "parterre" (groundlings), those who opposed it, according to Molière, did so out of social or class prejudice, quite an ingenious pre-Marxist trick, considering the fact that Molière himself had to rely on patronage, including that of His Majesty! From the technical point of view, the pros and cons are not judiciously apportioned, the negative criticism being given fewer opportunities than the defence. Naturally lengthy self-defensive tirades are allowed, which turn the play into a one-sided counter-criticism. All in all, Molière made no serious attempt to use the dramatic form, or more precisely the dialogic form, adroitly enough to allow a lively debate to arise naturally. A dramatist of his stature could have endowed both sides with more intelligent and piquant arguments and staged

the “critical” debate in such a way as to make those in his favour win the day in a more convincing manner. *La Critique de l'École des Femmes* is both bad criticism as well as bad play. (The author can confirm it from his own experience of seeing the play performed at the Comédie Française: it was boring to him and to the audience on that occasion, whom he could observe first-hand.)

L'Impromptu de Versailles fares a little better, as its main purpose is to expose the plight of professional actors who have to work under stress in order to meet almost impossible deadlines imposed arbitrarily upon them. They are not ready to perform for the King, as they have not had sufficient time to rehearse, and it is none other than the King who on this occasion is full of understanding and allows them to put off the performance. The eulogy of His Majesty is thus not a mere flattery, but a well-deserved eulogy.

We can see that this play functions as a critique of the social demands on professional artists, very succinctly presented so as to engage the sympathy of the audience / reader. On the whole, *L'Impromptu de Versailles*, in spite of its title that hints at the improvisory character of the work, paradoxically contains much substance in terms of dramaturgical and aesthetic considerations. The idea of criticism is present throughout. A professional troupe is by its very nature exposed to criticism from the public and must be sensitive to it. There are references – both overt and covert – to various plays by Molière, such as *Les Précieuses ridicules* and, of course, *L'École des femmes*, and their critical reception. One most interesting aspect of “criticism” is the players’ consciousness of the rivalry between theatrical troupes. We learn that the play *Le Portrait du peintre* staged by the company of the Hôtel du Bourgogne has criticized Molière for being disrespectful to religion, and Molière’s own players are urging him to respond to that criticism by way of retorting to their rivals in the text of their new play. So, theatre criticizing theatre was also a 17th century practice!

On the whole *L'Impromptu de Versailles* is richer in ideas on the theatre, its role in society and its technical aspects than *La Critique de l'École des femmes*. And this consciousness of the role of the theatre is definitely made more acute by its exposure to criticism. As in several of his “Préfaces”,

Molière professes a supra-personal treatment of social mores without getting down to individual identities. Its aim is to “peindre les mœurs sans vouloir toucher aux personnes” (paint social mores without touching on [real] people.) The ideal theatre functions at two levels, namely at the universal as well as social levels. “... l’affaire de la comédie est de représenter en général tous les défauts des hommes et principalement des hommes de notre siècle”. (The task of comedy is to depict in general terms all the foibles of people and especially people of our own times). This “umbrella” self-defence should serve to disarm people from taking Molière’s comedies as an attack on individuals or groups or sects in the name of the “universality” of human weaknesses. If this is an excuse, it is well manipulated.

We can well observe that when Molière thinks beyond his own self-defence and indulges in discussing general and philosophical principles, his theatre can become an arena of meaningful “criticism”. The difference between the two comedies should serve to emphasize the point that an artist can become a more convincing social or philosophical critic, when he can free himself from the prison-house of his own self.

Criticism in the Media Age

European culture once thrived on social gatherings known as the “salon” which contributed much to the intellectual life from the late 17th century onwards. Though the idea came from Italy, it was in France that the salons, especially in the 17th and 18th centuries, were flourishing, hosted mainly by cultivated ladies. Naturally the arts, and especially literature, were discussed at such gatherings, and informal criticism of works of art (including readings or presentations by the artists) arose out of such intellectual ambience. It is impossible to agree on any strict definition of the literary salon, but it is the author’s contention that whatever form it might take, the critical spirit prevails. Thus, the metamorphoses of the salon in subsequent ages have become so varied that its more modern manifestations can hardly be traced back to any particular recognizable origin. The author maintains, however, that the spirit that helped engender the earlier salons has survived into the media

age and, if well managed, can serve as a vehicle of public education by way of an enrichment of the critical culture.

The author himself experienced, while a student in the UK, one of these modern transformations in the form of a radio programme called “The Critics”, broadcast every Sunday morning on BBC radio from the late 1950s to the mid-1960s. Every week, four critics met on the programme, after having read a book, seen an exhibition, a film and a stage play. They first took turns to make their critical presentations, each being responsible for a particular genre. Then came the cross-generic discussion, which the author found extremely stimulating because a kind of mutual illumination of the arts arose out of this second part of the programme. All the discussants acted as *amateurs* in the best sense of the word (which etymologically derives from the Latin “*amāre*”, that is “to love”) because each was encouraged to express an opinion beyond the (imposed) specificity of his or her “genre”. The author learned much from this broadcast, not only in terms of critical substance, but also in terms of the viability and desirability of a critical culture based on cross-generic “love” of the arts. (Let us remind ourselves of Stravinsky’s emphasis on “love” rather than “respect”, as quoted above.) It was the origin of the author’s interest in various art forms, the interaction among them as well as among their respective criticisms, which he has pursued for several decades. He vividly remembers that those critics did not aim to arouse controversies, and when their views differed, they knew how to argue their points with much civility. The radio is a medium not primarily conducive to histrionics, and the act of listening without seeing the “actors” seems to be supportive of imagination and reflection. The BBC, a public radio supported by public money, did not have to exploit sensationalism in order to attract the public (and income from advertisement!) The advent of television changed all that.

If the literary salon flourished first in France, criticism on television was a French invention too. The programme “Apostrophes”, initiated and directed by the distinguished literary critic, Bernard Pivot, was televised on French Channel 2 from 1975 to 1990. In consonance with French literary culture, the organizers knew well that when they pitched, for example, two authors with irreconcilable views against each other, a heated debate would

certainly flare up. One specific broadcast can well illustrate the point. Two writers on China came on the same programme in 1983: Maria-Antonietta Macciocchi, the author of the book *De La Chine* (On China) of 1970, tended to idealize Communist China under the rule of Mao, whereas the other discussant, Simon Leys, the author of *Ombres chinoises* (Chinese Shadows) of 1976, maintained that he had witnessed inhuman atrocities with his own eyes, and with concrete evidence such as photographs did not hesitate to annihilate the former with very harsh words. If the issue had simply been who outplayed whom on the programme “Apostrophes”, it would not have mattered so much. But the French public always took their literature very seriously. The television debate encroached upon real life. One day after the transmission, the sale of Macciocchi’s book dropped dramatically and her reputation suffered a serious setback. Would the same thing have happened after a radio programme? Perhaps it would, to a much lesser degree. Television, in this case, proved itself to be a more potent medium to drive home the message. This is not a choice between a medium or a message. It is the case of the medium intensifying the message.

In any case, the author would add that the medium and the message as such would not have the power to change things overnight. Much depended on the receptivity of the public in matters of public concern. Criticism coming from the critics could not have created such a result in a society in which the public itself is devoid of critical spirit. The author is not speaking as a Francophile, but as an impartial observer. A country that had known several bloody revolutions that made Frenchmen butcher so many Frenchmen, a country that had engendered the philosophy of Enlightenment, could not have taken a television programme that treated of the veracity or lack of veracity concerning the fate of a whole nation – however remote or foreign – as mere entertainment or mere intellectual stimulus. Criticism is culture, impregnated with critical consciousness. If we use the media well, they will serve our noble, and not our base, instincts.

A German television programme of similar type called “Das Literarische Quartett” enjoyed perhaps as much popularity as its French antecedent. (It is strange that the German channel never acknowledged its debt to the French “Apostrophes”!)



Figure 4: The German television programme, “Das Literarische Quartett” (<https://www.google.com/search?q=Das+Literarische+Quartett&source:>)

It was transmitted on German Channel 2, from 1988 to 2001. Four critics took part in the televised broadcast, with Marcel Reich-Ranicki as moderator, with two other regular members, while the fourth member changed from time to time. Unlike the French model, the four critics remained the permanent constituents of the programme, with occasional guests invited for specific broadcasts. The author had the opportunity to watch this programme several times and would like to offer his appraisal of it. One great strength of the programme was that the discussants were definitely critics of great acumen, but the main drawback was that they had to read too much in a very limited space of time. They were not allowed to go on the air with recourse to any written notes, had to act as if they were engaged in a normal conversation, something akin to the original “salon”. But a salon of yore was a friendly gathering with no audience. There was too little time for the members to do research on the works to be discussed, which were usually the latest appearances on the book market. When the Quartet had to address translations, often from languages that the discussants themselves did not master and whose

cultural and literary background was unknown to them, their presentations were bound to be somewhat superficial.

The author could sense that the moderator, who also functioned fully as a discussant, was too domineering. The official statistics confirm that he consumed about 50% of the broadcast time, and did not really perform the role of a normal moderator at all. Again, too conscious of the potential of the medium of television to create impact on the viewers, Reich-Ranicki tried too hard to be controversial, and it could be noticed that the controversial points did not always emerge from the works discussed, but were sensationalized by the moderator himself. His judgements might in many cases be right, but he very often used very harsh language to censure those works which he found to be weak. We may question whether he was conscious of the role of a good critic, which is to praise or to condemn in such a way that would allow the author to learn from his deficiencies and to do better on future occasions. In other words, criticism should ideally strive to help the author to continue his task in the literary arena with some dignity and conviction. Nothing of the sort was encouraged in the programme, "The Literary Quartet". One could not help questioning whether the moderator's histrionics was genuine or whether it was a ploy to create some form of sensationalism.

How long could such a comedy have gone on? In actual fact, it did not do too badly, until one member of the original quartet, Sigrid Löffler, had exhausted her patience after an incident, in which the moderator was rude to his lady colleague; she decided to leave the programme in 2001. She later put her criticism of Reich-Ranicki in writing, which contains a very judicious observation on the task of the critic.

In the case of Reich-Ranicki, television was an instrument to serve the conceit of the fortune or misfortune of his existence. It has, at the same time, as never before, popularized and jeopardized him. He is today more prominent than the authors and the books on which he expresses his opinion³

³ Quoted in article "Das Literarische Quartett", in: Wikipedia Retrieved on 3 July 2018 from http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Das_Literarische_Quartett.

That is a straight-to-the-point *criticism* of a *critic* by a *fellow critic*. Viewed against the historical background of German criticism, Löffler's censure is justified. Most students of German literature must have (been forced to) read criticism by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-1781) and will realize that the founding father of German criticism did exactly the opposite of what, according to Sigrid Löffler, Marcel Reich-Ranicki was doing. Criticism, in principle, is to serve the work and its creator and should never lapse into a platform for self-serving arrogance on the part of the critic.

How could such excesses on the part of a critic have occurred? My answer is fairly simple: *the public* is not critical enough towards the critic and falls prey to sensationalism. Is the medium at fault too, even partially? We cannot be so sure. But at least we can learn a lesson from the German case: technology is but an instrument manipulated by man. The medium should never become the message. Critics die of bad criticism. The lure of “performance” turning itself into histrionics could indeed damage the integrity of criticism.

Parody as Criticism and the Uses of Approximative Communication

It is once again appropriate to recall the insightful remark by Stravinsky “that the only critical exercise of value must take place in, and by means of, art i.e. in pastiche or parody.” If the observation (and the actual practice) of the Russian composer can prove the viability of parody as criticism, the “performative” character of parody too merits attention. The author has in an earlier paper, “Parody as Translation” (1992), concluded that parody “seeks to impress: in a way it is a *performing art* with its histrionics, cheerful or acerbic, light-hearted or serious, as the case may be.” (Nagavajara, 1996: 248) This final chapter of the present essay, I propose to analyze a Thai literary and dramatic gem dating from the mid-19th century, the verse drama *Phra Malethethai*, by the lady poet, Khun Suwan, which defies normal theorizing on the subject of parody. As a literary text, it is more radical than nonsense verse. As a dramatic text for classical dance theatre, it challenges the choreographer in ways that surpass the usual difficulties faced by choreographers and dancers. The artistic principle underlying this verse drama

is that lexicographical meaning of a word is a mere child's play; a real poet should be ambitious enough to convey meaning through the sounds of words, some of which are fresh inventions that do not correspond to any lexicographical corpus. In this respect, she is trying to prove that the richness in sounds of the Thai language (with 44 consonants, 32 vowels and 5 tonal registers) can be exploited to create a verse dance drama, whose meaning is at the level of being *suggestive* rather than overt. Her innovation is supportive of what we may call an approximative communication. Certain verses contain words that do not exist in any dictionary and are mere sounds. But if Khun Suwan chooses to show her prowess as a poet, she can write lines of exquisite beauty in poetic Thai language that can rival any classical literary masterpiece. The all too facile conclusion that the lady was mentally deranged certainly cannot be readily accepted. A close reading of the text, and especially loud reading and *not* silent reading, will reveal that this text is a subtle parody and is intent on criticizing the dramatic conventions of the day. The target is none other than the dance drama *Inao* by King Rama II, which is considered till this day to be the paragon of dramatic literature in the Thai language.

Looking back one and a half centuries, it is amazing to find that some women in those days were so well educated. Khun Suwan was a noblewoman attached to the royal court. Although little is known about her personal life, the literary works that she bequeathed to posterity bear testimony to the high quality of education that Thai women of the upper class did enjoy. Khun Suwan exhibited an immense erudition that certainly outclassed many of the educated men of her days. She had composed a verse tale entitled, *One Hundred Versions of Unaruth*, starting from the very popular Indic tale appropriated by the Thai called "Unaruth", and then setting about weaving those other literary works into her narrative. That feat of erudition still baffles Thai literary scholars of today, as they can no longer identify many of the literary compositions mentioned by her, partly for the simple reason that these have never been printed and must be considered as lost treasures.

The author would like to introduce her parodic masterpiece, *Phra Malethethai*, by way of an English translation of the opening scene of the drama.

It comes to pass
 That the slippery Prince Malethethai,
 Seated on his decrepit golden throne,
 Being so happy in his waywardness,
 One day makes a momentous decision,
 To visit the forest and to enjoy the flora and fauna,
 And whatever pleases his sight,
 Relishing absolute freedom akin to drunkenness.
 Having made his plans, he shakes himself out
 Onto a pitiably tiny path,
 That affords him quick access to
 The palace of King Pola.⁴

An average reader of Thai literature will not fail to recognize that this is a deliberate account of a *conventional* opening scene, with a prince seated on his throne, ruminating on what to do next, and for want of any serious concern with the affairs of the state, deciding to undertake a pleasure trip to the forest. What follows the quoted passage is a series of compulsory scenes to which most dance dramas have to conform, including taking leave from His Majesty, bathing ritual, dressing up, assembling a procession of retinue, etc. Once this high-ranking personage enters the forest, a long list of fauna and flora is offered, so poetically wrought and so exhaustive as to become both a model literary composition as well as a biological taxonomy. The high personage has of course left his beloved behind and begins to long for her in tirades describing her beauty, including their sexual relationship veiled in metaphorical language of great beauty. Khun Suwan adheres to all these conventions, but the way she expresses them is merely through words that

⁴ The Thai translation is by the present author. Admittedly, it cannot capture the phonetical virtuosity of the original, which is inimitable, even in the Thai language itself.

suggest meaning via sounds, and a native Thai should not find her mode of expression to be beyond comprehension. Sometimes she would run off a series of names of Indic gods just for the fun of hearing their sounds (not unlike Milton's hitting dignified tones by way of unfamiliar, high-sounding personal names and place names!) But the most ingenious way of using the sound of the Thai language to serve her parodic purpose becomes a process of "devaluation": high personages lose their dignified status, and important events or activities required for courtly drama are made to appear trite and insignificant. Even the very name "Malethethai" suggests that the prince is a wayward person, incapable of leading a life in a dignified way as befitting his status. Some virtuosic lines consisting of mere sounds with no fixed meaning insinuate that the Prince's way of life cannot be taken seriously. Indeed, parody functions as social criticism here.

Luck was on Khun Suwan's side that she wrote her parody during the reign of King Rama III, a deeply religious monarch, who probably shared some of her critical stances. His royal father, King Rama II, was a versatile artist of distinction, adept in poetry, music, drama and sculpture alike, but was prone to worldly preoccupations and conservative in matters of taste. He would not have tolerated an artistic affront like *Phra Malethethai* which is a parody of his own dramatic *opus magnum*, *Inao*. Rama III was also literarily gifted, did compose poetry of great virtuosity, and besides introduced significant innovations to classical music (stressing more the preeminence of instrumental music). What surprises his fellow countrymen until today was his decision to disband the all-female royal theatrical troupe that was the mainstay of Rama II's dramatic creation. It might be possible, from our vantage point, to explain this courtly reform: the new king, being a devout Buddhist, would have found it difficult to continue to maintain a troupe closely linked to the practice to polygamy!

To sum up, Khun Suwan's radical innovation can be described as a *metamorphosis of semantics into phonetics*. The sound takes over the communicative process, functioning as *signifier* rather than *signified*. Thus her parodic project enjoys greater freedom of expression than a normal text-oriented drama. Parody here relies on an approximative communication

between the performance and the audience. It leaves much to the audience to construct its own meaning on the basis of what it hears. The transmission of the critical message depends too on the intellectual alertness of the public. *Phra Malethethai* is a work that should endear itself to our modern audience who attaches greater importance to the role of *productive* rather than *reproductive* reception.

Epilogue: The Critical Function of the Arts

The present paper was originally intended to illustrate the contribution of the works of art to the strengthening of criticism. In that process, the author has discovered how the arts themselves are inherently imbued with a critical spirit that can serve as a voice of conscience to society. While researching for this essay, it has become apparent to him that criticism as a corollary to artistic creation is weakening, and that the artists themselves have felt it necessary to use the artistic medium itself to criticize the excesses and aberrations of their fellow artists. The performing arts, in particular, lend themselves to such a critical act, and the practice of art criticizing art is now more relevant to the needs of contemporary society than hitherto. The case studies analyzed in the present essay tend to confirm that it is no longer adequate to leave criticism to the critics, and for that matter, to the public, who are, more often than not, stultified by the present-day media to the extent that they have all too easily fallen prey to sensationalism. The arts, therefore, have a critical function to perform. The critical potential has always been there: they only have to awaken it. This essay has dealt with the achievements in the past as well as the present which can bear witness to that process of awakening.

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