# Is there something between you and me?
# Critics and their role as cultural mediators

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Resumen:

La importancia de los críticos ha sido una materia usualmente negada en los estudios de Cultura Popular. En el presente artículo, proponemos su caracterización como guías culturales que median entre la Alta Cultura y Cultura Popular, así como entre la industria del entretenimiento y el público general. A través de distintas estrategias retóricas, los críticos legitiman su accionar en el conocimiento de la forma artística al tiempo que formulan su objetivo esencial de acercar la misma al gran público. Mediante el análisis de algunos textos de crítica fílmica, examinamos las distintas formas en las que esta tarea de mediación cultural se realiza.

Palabras clave:

Crítica- Cultura Popular –Retórica- Film

*Abstract:*

*The role of critics has been usually neglected in the Popular Culture field. In this article, we characterize them as cultural guides that mediate between High and Popular Culture, and between the entertainment industry and the public. Through different rhetorical strategies critics base their legitimacy on the knowledge of the artistic form while they try to make it accessible to the big audience. We analyze some texts of film criticism to study the forms in which this cultural mediation is performed.*

*Key words:*

*Criticism- Popular Culture- Rhetoric- Film*

## Introduction

By August 1st 2006, *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest* has had worldwide incomes for $665,738,343 in his almost 4 weeks of exhibition. The popular success of the second part of the saga starred by Johnny Depp sharply contrasts with the critical reception of the reviewers. This situation was the one that A. O. Scott, the *New York Times'* chief film critic, had in mind when he asked himself: "… the discrepancy between what critics think and how the public behaves is of perennial interest because it throws into relief some basic questions about taste, economics and the nature of popular entertainment, as well as the more vexing issue of what, exactly, are critics for? Are we out of touch with the audience? Why do we go sniffing after art where everyone else is looking for fun, and spoiling everybody's fun when it doesn't live up to our notion of art? What gives us the right to yell "bomb" outside a crowded theatre?" (Scott, 2006). Although this is a recurrent pondering, it has not attracted the attention that it deserves from the academic field of Popular Culture. On the one hand, *Culture Industry* tradition relies heavily on media's mighty power to integrate audiences from above (Adorno, 2005), implicitly reducing critics' role to an acquiescence with their dictates. On the other hand, *Audience Studies* (Fiske, 2005) assume the same thesis yet, by stressing the audience power to strategically process mass products, reverses its outcomes. The statement, most of the times unspoken, is that critics are not a valuable actor in the Popular Culture dynamics.

In this paper, we will sustain the contrary position, arguing in behalf of the importance of their role as cultural mediators. As Scott states in his newspaper article, the question about the role and nature of Popular Culture critics is deeply intertwined with our conceptualization of the field. This means that, in order to reach an understanding of the functions of critics, we will have to formulate larger questions regarding how we think about Popular Culture. In this sense, one of the premises that guide this inquiry is that the absence of treatment of this issue in Popular Culture literature is not by chance but rooted on a theoretical frame that ignores the

role of mediating institutions. Split as the field is by a dichotomical focus on industry and audiences, there is a need to appreciate the way in which the diversity of the products created by the former are incorporated by the latter. As media studies had evolved in a middle way regarding both the importance of the media and the audience activity in the study of media in everyday life (Alasuutari, 1999), we consider that we must follow that move and transcend rigid categorizations that impede looking into the real condition in which the system operates. Affirming the role of critics as cultural mediators, implies giving them a defined function in the production of cultural meaning.

As they participate in a field characterized by the crossing of boundaries (Hall, 2005), Popular Culture audience need to be guided in their explorations. They could not navigate by their own in the wide sea of products that the industry offers them. They need some hints about where to spend their time and their money in their search of meaning. Moreover, they need to understand some of the deeper layers of significance that are hidden in some Popular Culture works. In a complex field, characterized by the blurring of the former divisions between High and Popular Culture (Seabrook, 2002) there is also the need of mapping a terrain that has lost most of their former signals. Critics, then, are not enforcers of a given order but constructors and performers, at the same time, of the categories that they make. As in Otto Neurath metaphor, they "are like sailors who on the open sea must reconstruct their ship but are never able to start afresh from the bottom. Where a beam is taken away a new one must at once be put there, and for this the rest of the ship is used as support. In this way, by using the old beams and driftwood the ship can be shaped entirely anew, but only by gradual reconstruction." (Neurath, 1944) In their work, then, critics navigate between High and Popular culture criteria and mediate between these worlds exercising their cultural authority. Yet their legitimation is not more institutionally taken for granted, nor based in the enforcement of the rules of the art, but in their connection with the audiences themselves and in their capacity to be significant to them.

Most of the functions of the critics have been formulated in a scattered literature that originates in a number of different fields, ranging from marketing to sociology. Most of the academic interest has been devoted to elucidate the influence of critics in the economic suc-

cess of a movie (Holbrook, 1997; Gershoff, Broniarczyk & West, 2001; Basuroy, Chatterjee & Ravid, 2003; Reinstein & Snyder, 2005). More recent attempts have investigated their role in the configuration of a cultural field, life film art (Allen & Lincoln, 2004; Baumann, 2001; 2002). All of these studies have taken either a theoretical stance or a more empirical one, based in the quantitative analysis of longitudinal sets of data. But no one of them has tried to link the functions that critics perform with the rhetorical means by which they perform them. In this paper, we will propose the need to take a step in that direction by analyzing the communicative functions that they perform. Although we will make general statements, our focus point will be film criticism, in the understanding that it adequately represents some of the epistemological problems that we have noted before, in two different ways. First, because of the same nature of movies as a physical medium (Hall & Whannel, 1967) and its capacity to arouse emotions, there is a perennial debate about their entertainment or art nature. Second, because of the peculiar configuration of the academic field (Bordwell, 1989), film has developed its own categories somewhat stranded from those of Popular Culture studies. Thus, we think that it would be useful to check how the task of mediating between the categories of High and Popular Culture are expressed in a field that does not formally recognize the theoretical foundations of the rest of the discipline.

## 1. Ruling out High/Popular Culture; embracing Mass Art

> *"The modern blockbuster –the movie that millions of people line up to see more or less simultaneously, on the first convenient showing on the opening weekend- can be seen as the fulfillment of the democratic ideal that movies are born to fulfill. To stand outside that happy communal experience, and worse, to regard it with scepticism or with scorn, is to be a crank, a malcontent, a snob"* (Scott, 2006)

As we mentioned before, there are two major trends in Popular Culture studies: one that looks the phenomenon with fear and distrust, and other that celebrate its advent because of the democratic appeal of the field. With different arguments, coming both from the right

(F.R. Leavis, 2005) and the left (McDonald, 2005; Adorno, 2005), the former sees Popular Culture as a means of numbing the spectators and turning them into passive receptors of the messages enacted by the media industry. To the contrary, more recent approaches tend to contradict those statements, showing how the Popular Culture audience discriminate between different products and use them strategically and functionally (Fiske, 2005; de Certeau, 2005; Jenkins, 2005). Both positions have implicit assumptions that are connected with the development of media studies. On one side, the conceptualization of the media as all-powerful by the hypodermic needle theory (Severin & Tankard, 2001) works as the scientific paradigm (Kuhn, 1970) where the defensive view is embedded. On the other side, reception studies initiated by Hall in the 70's and developed during the 80's with the concept of "interpretative communities" (Alasuutari, 1999), transferred the power from the providers to the receptors of the cultural product.

Although we can trace the scientific context in which these theories where enacted, we cannot reduce them to the state of the arts of media studies, since they imply a theorization that recognizes other sources as well. In this sense, the same concept of Popular Culture is built in a constructive dialogue with the categories of folk art, mass culture, and avant-garde (Hall & Whannel, 1967; Williams, 2005; Mc Donald, 2005, Jameson, 2005) that leads to a fluctuating configuration of the field. What we are succinctly describing here leads to the current situation in which there is a gap between the realities that we try to study and the theoretical foundations upon which we are supposed to base our findings. We can see this in the number of contemporary studies that question the relevance of the distinction between High and Popular Culture (Crane, 1992) or in syncretic definitions like this one by Real: "The popular culture competes with and incorporates every other cultural source…The result is a form of everyday life today that is culturally impure, that is, a life that is neither traditional culture nor modern culture, that may uncritically combine the elite, the folk, and the mass, and that is postcolonial and post-modern in its essence" (Real, 2002: 171). In such intellectual environment, then, there is a call for growing apart from categories that do not define anymore the limits of the field and look directly unto the reality of how Popular Culture works.

The first implication of the former principle is that we must understand why some notions, like the one referred to criticism, are not being given much attention in contemporary studies. The answer to this lies in two concurrent and intertwined developments. The first one responds to the heavy conditioning that Cultural Studies theory have upon the field and the populist stance that pervades their approach (McGuigan, 1992). For Williams, one of the founders of this school of thought, "culture is ordinary" (1958) and this implies a deep commitment with the democratization of culture that tends to turn upside down the categories of the former "high brow" organization of the field. From an approach that heavily relates cultural categories with class stratification (Bourdieu, 1984), Cultural Studies uses marxist and gramscian categories as a frame for the analysis of cultural products, thus incorporating the concepts of struggle and cultural hegemony as central traits of their constructions (Hall). This move leads to a mistrust of the formerly existing institutions, which are supposedly pulled down by the empowered people. The line of thought that we are describing intersects with a larger trend that mistrusts formal structures as opposing the development of life (Simmel, 1968), whose recent developments have been shown in a decreasing of the importance of institutions in public life (Inglehart, 1998). The combination of these two trends explains why critics, a category that survived from the former order and that is supposed to mediate between the public and the artists, is largely ignored in the realm of Popular Culture studies.

The assimilation of critics as part of a High Culture schema is exemplified in the influential H. Gans' *Popular Culture and High Culture*, when he characterizes High Culture as the field that "differs from all other taste cultures in that is dominated by creators –and critics- and that many of its users accept the standards and perspectives of creators" (1999:100). Adopting a perspective that celebrates Popular Culture as an effect of cultural democracy, he differentiates the two fields by their orientation: while High Culture is built on the belief that creator's intentions are crucial and the values of the audience almost irrelevant, Popular Culture is user-oriented and exist to satisfy audience values and wishes (1999:76). In his view, then, critics are on the creator side and contribute to the creation of meaning through the enforcement of artistic standards. "Critics are sometimes more important than creators, because they determine

whether a given cultural item deserves to be consider high culture, and because they concern themselves with the aesthetic issues which are so important to the culture" (1999:103). Because of the lack of adequate standards for evaluating Popular Culture, Gans argues that "lower taste publics become their own critics, disseminating their criticism in conversations with family members, friends, and fellow workers" (1999:144). As we can see, then, in his view the two fields are clearly differentiated, having the critics a decisive role in High Culture and a non-existent one in Popular Culture.

Shrum, in *Fringe and Fortune* (1996), maintains Gans' distinction but stresses the role of cultural mediators that critics have instead of using the class frame analysis to whose permanence they are supposed to serve. He affirms that the distinction between High and Low Culture, expected by post-modernists to be vanished, persist nowadays. Seeking to explain that, he found that these differences are "neither intrinsic to the art itself, nor simply an effect of the kinds of people that produce and consume cultural objects. Rather, they are a function of the discursive practices that mediate the relationship between art and its public." (1996:7). The problem, then, is not located in the social composition of the audiences but in their response to evaluation: "it is within the process of evaluation involving spectators, performers, and critics that the difference between high and popular culture may be located. To participate in high art is to forgo the direct and unmediated perception of the artwork itself. The principal consequence is the dependence of one's own judgement of artistic quality on the judgement of others (…) Serious works are those about which critical talk is relevant" (1996: 9). The dependence of the spectators is based on the existence of perceived standards used by the experts-critics. Conversely, for Popular Culture, "judging is unmediated in the sense that an expert's opinion is no better that anyone else's –not in the sense that people do not care about the opinion of significant others." (1999:40). Shrum's work is a turning point in this kind of studies, because it problematizes the interaction between producers of artwork, critics and public, showing how the "process of mediation encompasses the way that talk and text change the differentiation, perception, and assessment of cultural objects" (1999:195). Critics, then, are taken to the centre stage of the system of production of meaning.

Notwithstanding the great merits of his work, we found some aspects of it problematic. The first one is related with his empirical evidence, as he bases all his study in the performance arts at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. The selection of an object as theatre performances, that are not mass produced (Carroll, 1997), allows him to maintain his rigid separation between high and low art. As we will show in the next paragraphs, this distinction teeters when we take into account the processes of mass reproducibility (Benjamin, 2002) that characterizes mediums like television, films and photography. A second aspect that must be taken into account is his straightforward statement about the need of criticism as a criteria of definition, which is based on the consideration 'that there is nothing inherent in cultural objects that permits us to determine their status as "high culture' or "low culture". Cultural hierarchy is constructed, not discovered" (1999:28). This statement could be problematic since most of the times it is something inside cultural objects what makes them difficult to reach. That, for example, is the case of *vanguardism*. As McDonald states, avant-garde movements "made a desperate attempt to fence off some area where the serious artist could still function. It created a new compartmentation of culture, on the basis of an intellectual rather that an social elite" (McDonald, p. 42). Hence, there is a barrier that is created by the producer of the work –thus, it is "in' the artwork- that separates them of the public and makes critics' work necessary. Finally, a third aspect to note is related to the essentially ephemeral kind of art he is referring to, where the critics' work in some sense "reproduces" a form that is no longer there. In this sense, the mediation of the critic is materialized by a sort of testimonial function that is not necessary regarding forms of mass art, which main characteristic is reproducibility.

These problematic aspects of *Fringe and Fortune* lead us back to the definitional issue of Popular Culture and force us to find some distinctions upon which our inquiry about critics could be fruitful. As we have already seen, the theoretical foundations of the field focus the process in the differentiation of Popular Culture from High Culture, but do not carefully performs the same task regarding Folk or Mass Culture. In this sense, the definitional problems noted by Williams (2005) survive underneath the agglutinant effort of combating elitism. To overcome these difficulties, we will choose to pursue the line of inquiry opened by Benjamin

in the first third of the 20th century. In his seminal article *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, the German thinker stated: "Earlier much futile thought had been devoted to the question of whether photography is an art. The primary question –whether the very intention of photography had not transformed the entire nature of art –was not raised." (Benjamin, 2002:VII). His concern about the evolution of art forms under the new technical conditions produced by contemporary industrial society raises the question about the existence of a new art form, not easily conceptualized as a highbrow or a lowbrow one. Concentrating more in the characteristics of the phenomenon than in its political implications, this approach, I think, will help us to focus on what could be labelled as objective traits of the reality rather than in a conjunct of different objects and methodologies that result from a change of focus in scholarly research (about the difficulties of constructing Popular Culture as a cohesive field, see Mukerji & Schudson, 1991).

The concept of Mass Art, as developed by Noel Carroll, seems accurate to group films, TV programmes, photographs, songs, pulp novels, fiction magazines, comics, and broadcasts under just one label (Carroll, 1998). This concept cover less objects that Popular Culture usually do, concentrating on the core of what we call the art of mass society or, in McLuhan's words, "the folklore of the industrial man" (McLuhan, 1951). In this sense, it is differentiated from historical understandings of Popular Culture, that responds to the dialectic between High and Low culture but are not typical of our time. Generally, mass art evolves of already existing popular art, but there are forms –such as cockfighting- that does not have been transformed for mass consumption, and there are some mass art forms, as music video, that derive directly from pre-existing mass forms as film (Carroll, 1997). The main characteristic of mass art is that it is designed for mass consumption, and it is produced and delivered by mass media. This design does not refer only to the technical medium in which it is produced and delivered, but to the same language in which it is expressed. "While avant-garde art is designed to be difficult, to be intellectually, aesthetically, and often morally challenging, to be inaccessible to those without certain backgrounds of knowledge and acquired sensibilities, Mass art, in contrast, is designed to be easy, to be readily accessible to the largest number of people possible, with minimum effort" (Carroll, 1997:190). That explains its predominantly

choice of visual –where viewers recognize referents immediately and automatically simply by looking- and homogenous forms – e.g.: the development of formulaic genres that cues viewers' attention.

By circumscribing our field of inquiry to this definition, we overcome the difficulties posed by the definition of Popular Culture, ruling out the ideological constraints that impede us to understand how the system works. By this statement, we do not mean that the field does not have political relevance, but one thing is to find the political in a given reality and other very different to construct one with a political objective as a frame. In our opinion, Cultural Studies tend to adopt the latter view. Conversely, adopting the former, we could look with new and dispassionate eyes a field whose relevance is increasingly rising in our days. This perspective would make us capable of approaching both the field of production and reception with a more nuanced view, far from an hegemony-biased stance that only leave audiences the moral choice of resistance. As reception studies of mass media had allowed us to have a more colourful palette for the analysis, there is need to have the same approach regarding the production and transmission system. Embedding our inquiry in the frame of Mass Art, we will be able to explore the role of critics as mediators of a system that is much more complex than just a separation between high and low categories. In this sense, film represents a field where the technical devices used to its production and the industrial organization that is required poses the questions of the relationship between mass production and art, a question that is at the core of our investigation.

As variegated the scope of Mass art is, we must be aware of the uneven development of the different cultural systems that constitute Mass art and the role of critics in each of them. While in some of them –e.g.: soap box operas- critics do not exist as such (Bielby & Bielby, 2004), in others, their presence is very powerful and the standards applied are widely discussed (Baumann, 2001, 2002). Although the inquiry about this development would require a specific investigation about the historical conformation of each field, probably part of the explanation would lie in the fact of their later recognition as an art worth of such critical activity. Moreover, the existence of related fields could explain the assimilation of new, more popular forms, phenomenon that could be easily seen in the literary supplements of the newspapers

with the review of more commercial forms. In this sense, the blurring of boundaries that pervade the new books makes them worth of criticizing precisely for the sake of establishing new standards. The old organization, then, receipts the new products and adapts its standards. When this process does not have the same institutionalized presence, as it is the case of TV, the process is slower. This temporal length could be exemplified by the emergence of the set of standards used for analyzing films, which emerged just during the 50's though the appearance of the first artwork was forty years before (Bordwell, 1989).

This point is relevant because in the scarce literature regarding Popular Culture -which usually, as we stated in the introduction, leaves out of the field Film Studies because of its academic autonomy- the lack of an institutionally established set of standards has lead to the consideration that the experience is unmediated and could not be aesthetically evaluated. In opposition to this view, Bielby & Bielby state that "what makes a popular culture art both "culture" and "popular" is that appreciation and evaluation are mediated by a widely shared and understood aesthetic, and both the art form and the aesthetic are accessible to an engaged audience that invests in acquiring the requisite knowledge without deferring to cultural authorities." (2004: 310). Fiske also recognizes the existence of this aesthetic expertise in the person of the fan but his rigid ideological dichotomy forces him to find him a middle-of-the-road position: "Fandom is poised between popular culture and high culture, so the fan works with features of both popular and aesthetic discrimination" (Fiske, 2005: 220). For him, the aesthetic belongs to the high culture and not to Popular Culture. Thus, critics could never be part of the system. With our definition of Mass art, we hope that we have overcome this objection, and, moreover, we expect to have underscored the historical nature of the configuration of each critical field.

## 2. Critics in Mass art

*"Film criticism –at least as practiced in the general-interest daily and weekly press- has never been a specialist pursuit. Movies, more than any other art form, are understood to be common cultural property, something everyone can enjoy, which makes any claim of expertise suspect. Therefore, a certain estrangement between us and them –or me and you, to put it plainly- has been built into the enterprise from the start."* (Scott, 2006)

Walter Benjamin statement that "it is inherent in the technique of the film as well as that of sports that everybody who witnesses its accomplishments is somewhat of an expert" (2002: X) is at the core of the definition that we gave of Mass art. Yet it does not make the role of the critics useless. While the accessibility of Mass art could make every person feel a sort of an expert –and that constitutes the most powerful democratizing trait of the theory- Popular Culture critics still have some place on the system. That something is accessible -meaning both materially available, e.g.: by watching a TV, and culturally, e.g.: understandable by the receptor- does not mean that it is actually reached and understood by the public. In other words, Popular Culture products do not reach directly the consumers, firstly, because there are more products than what the people could actually consume and they have to select among them, and, secondly, because mass products have different layers of meaning that are not easily reached by the unprepared receptor. In the first aspect, mass products are branded –e.g.: by the existing of sequels, like Star Wars- and classified –e.g.: by the participation of a star or a film director- to the public in a number of different ways. Here, the critics compete with those forms of classification, constructing their peculiar ones. In the second aspect, interpretation is done by the appropriation of the roles of experts through a legitimating process that does not imply the existence of formal standards but the acquisition of critical discrimination (Fiske, 2005). Here, fans and formal critics compete for the establishment of meaning.

In Mass art, then, critics function differently than in academic arts, primarily because in this kind of art there is an already given set of standards that are enforced by them. In Mass art, to the contrary, this set of standards are not given but constructed by the same actors. We can say, indeed, that the configuration of a critical schema depends on that building activity (Hsu & Podolny, 2005). In this sense, Mass art critics works as Certeau's city walker, actualizing only a few of the possibilities fixed by the constructed order, thus increasing the number of possibilities and prohibitions. They appropriate the artwork and present us a version of it, a way of walking through their multiple layers of meaning (de Certeau, 2005). Thus, critics construct the standards at the same time that they construct the artwork. This trait is enhanced by the fact that they are usually dealing with new products, opening new paths, not walking through repeated

versions of a classic one. Mass art critics then, in opposition with that of performative arts, evaluate a new work as a whole, without a formal point of comparison. The creativity implicated in his work, then, is greater than in seemingly similar fields.

Yet this creativity could not be assimilated to the one formerly practised by the artists. In Gans' terms, critics are not more in the creator side but are user-oriented (1999). Their legitimacy derives of the functionality of the critical schemas to the audience needs and not of the dictates of the creators allied with the academic establishment. In this sense, it is useful to remember here that emotions are at the core of Mass art experiences as the cement that keeps audiences connected (Carroll, 1998). This used to be seen as a debasing trait of these cultural products, mainly because emotions were considered as an irrational force. Contemporarily, a much more nuanced vision of the emotional realm regards it as "1. An intrinsic and continuous dimension of human functioning, not an optional or episodic response (…); 2. Complex and multilayered, and at times contradictory and obscure (…); 3. Not just expressive or cathartic but also reflexive (…); 4. Increasingly recognized as the ground of self-identity." (Richards, 2004) Audiences incorporate artworks in their lives primarily as special life-experiences and they often judge them according the same criteria and values that they apply to their non-cultural lives (Long, 1997). To the contrary, highbrow commentaries are based on a "cultivated detachment" (Bielby & Bielby, 2004), being the critics distanced from audiences' experiences. If Mass art is functional (Fiske, 2005) the legitimacy of the critics would derive from their recognition of the emotional content of that experience as the primal material upon which they would build their critics. If not, they would be useless for them. As "honest brokers" of the cultural market, critics try to make our decision both rational and pleasurable (Zukin, 2005).

The acknowledgement of this emotional aspect connects the labour of the critic with what is really important for audiences. Yet, although it sets the tone for his activity it is not enough to define it. The critic must give the audiences something they cannot easily obtain by themselves. In this sense, the critic gives the audience information that helps them contextualize the work in the broader scope of cultural production –be it regarding the whole production of the creator or the general trends of the Mass art - and discover technical details that allow

the audience get a deeper understanding of the artwork. The critic, then, is an expert on the field that he is reviewing. His expertise, although not being institutionalized as in the case of high arts, is different from that of the fans. In her study of Popular Music criticism, Klein stated that "as the critics described the qualities that set them apart from fans, it became clear that, even if there are no enforced requirements, there are requisites elements to being a skilled music critic. According to the critics I interviewed, popular music critics should be proficient writers, should have a breadth of knowledge, and should be able to make studied judgements regardless of personal preferences" (Klein, 2005:5). In the case of films, two traits must be added to the knowledge of the critic: the technical understanding of the creative process and the relationship between the artistic production and of the commercial side of the enterprise.

If the work of the critic is to mediate between the artwork and the audience, his or her mediation has to be useful to the consumer. That is the reason why he or she should be aware of the emotional value of the product, and why the critic must provide the audience with elements that are not easily seen in the artwork. The critic's work is to help the audiences enjoy the experience –sometimes, by recommending not to consuming it- and they do this not by replacing audience judgement but by improving the elements that they count on to evaluate the work and proposing interpretations to it. Critic works both as a provider of information and as an interpreter himself/herself, but in either case they are supposed to enhance viewer's interpretative activity and not to substitute it with authoritative statements. In this work of cultural mediation, critics –especially film ones- deal with two antinomies that characterize Mass art: the power of the commercial industry vs. the individual artist, and the art quality of works vs. the mere and empty entertainment –understood in the sense of acting upon a passive audience. These concepts are endogenous to the history of film criticism, being them expressed in the dialectic between the power of Hollywood studios in front of the individual creator, in the discussion about the nature of cinema, and in the use of technical improvements for the sake of artistic expression or just to impress the public (Scorsese & Wilson, 1997).

The function of the critic is not just to be in the middle of the culture industry and the audience. They must be there, but what matter is not its spatial position but the function that

they perform. Critics mediate between the products of the industry and the experiences of the consumers, and they so by performing a "buffering" function that distances themselves both from the two but simultaneously keep the necessary proximity to communicate meaning. In this sense, the critic is autonomous from both. Mediating between the goals of economic success of the industry and the needs of fulfillment of the audiences, they push the former to offer better products and the latter to develop a critical capacity. They are not mere transmitters of information but producers of a new cultural product: the review. As such, this cultural form could perform different functions –and usually complete many of them-: it is a source of information and classification, and it is a means of interpretation and evaluation. In the fulfillment of these tasks, it also has educational and entertaining roles. As some of these functions overlaps and some of them runs through them as a condition of success –critics must be interesting and appealing, entertaining the reader (Elisahberg & Shugan, 1997)-, we will classify them in three different ones. Critics could work as providers of information, as evaluators, or as teachers.

One of the forms in which critics mediate between the industry and audiences is by providing information upon which the audience could decide. Although this aspect is somewhat difficult to separate from the interpretation and evaluation of the film -from now we will talk exclusively about this art form-, the distinction is fruitful to be used as a gradual one. Thus, we can talk of a review that is predominantly informational, though it can also have a quick and not heavily reasoned evaluation. Generally, this kind of critical work functions in the initial steps of the consumption process and is typical of the general interest magazines and newspapers. A central part of the informational task is done by classifying the film in a genre and a category that make the audience take a quick grasp of its content and quality. In this sense, they work as a mechanism of reducing the complexity of the system (Nowotny, 2005), providing the information that the audience need to frame the movie in a way that helps them decide if it is of their interest. By giving information about the movie –e.g.: a summary of the plot-, critics help to contextualize the product. In this sense, they perform the same kind of cultural mediation that other sources do, like the celebrities participating of the film (Moeran, 2003) or the awards won by it (Ginsburgh, 2003).

When the information that the critic provides is only a previous step in the interpretation and evaluation process, it works in a different way. In this case, the data provided transcend the mere aim of informing the audience and tries to influence them with an interpretation of the film. Here, the information would be focused in transmitting sources–technical aspects, backgrounds of the production process, etc- that are not easily known by the viewers and that could allow them to penetrate in layers of meaning that are not on the surface. Moreover, as we stated before, the critic will appropriate the movie in a particular way and he will provide the information necessary to support that interpretation. The form in which the interpretation and evaluation of the film is performed marks the position of the critic in the system. As we have been saying, Mass art is a cultural product of the industrial capitalism. Thus, Mass art products belong simultaneously to the world of McDonaldization (Ritzer, 2000) and to the world of artistic creation. Critics could stress the former traits or the latter, underscoring the decision-making process aspect or the communication of meaning.

In the first sense, for example, evaluations could be reduced to a mere quantification of the critical process. This trait is clearly typified in www.metacritic.com, a web page that transforms all the newspapers and magazine critics of a movie in a single number, ranging from 1 to 100. Here, the distinctiveness of the movies encompassed is erased as a consequence of the commensuration process (Espeland, 2002). To the contrary, the cultural approach to the critical review stresses the absolute individuality of the work of art and generally adopts a nuanced view of different aspects of the movie, refusing to quantify his evaluation. Its mediating nature has made some scholars said that critics "applies the aesthetic judgments of high culture to products of mass culture" (Zukin, 2005: 173). Although this statement reflects some categories that we have already rejected as useless, it graphically shows how the critics gives audiences something that they lack, blurring the differences of two worlds that were supposed to be completely separated. This way, critics teach the audiences how to view films, both by giving them information they do not have and providing guiding interpretations and evaluations. This educational aspect of the critics' work empowers them to fully enjoy the experience and to develop a critical appreciation by themselves.

### 3. Film critics' as guides

*"…the judgments of critics almost never make the difference between failure and success, at least for mass-release, big-budget movies like "Dead Man's Chest" or "The Da Vinci Code". So why review them? Why not let the market do its work, let the audience have its fun and occupy ourselves with the arcana –the art- we critics ostensibly prefer? The obvious answer is that art, or at least the kind of pleasure, wonder and surprise we associate with art, often pops out of commerce, and we want to be around to celebrate when it does and to complain when it doesn't. But the deeper answer is that our love of movies is sometimes expressed as a mistrust of the people who make and sell them, and even of the people who see them. We take entertainment very seriously, which is, to say that we don't go to the movies for fun? Or for money. We do it for you."* (Scott, 2006)

Critics mediate between the industry of entertainment and the audiences, giving them an itinerary of consumption that they can choose to follow. They also accompany them, providing an explanation and an interpretation of that itinerary that helps audiences understand what they are seeing and confront their evaluations with the ones by the critic. In this process, they receive information and learn how to appreciate the artwork by themselves. Regarding all these traits, we like to propose a comparison between the critic and another cultural mediator, the tourist guide, that could be useful to illuminate several aspects of his work and position in the cultural system. The role of the tourist guide developed from two different antecedents: one, the pathfinder, which leads the way through an environment in which his followers lack orientation; the other, the mentor, which embodies the role of guiding a person in his way or conduct. "The role of the modern tourist guide combines and expands elements from both antecedents, that of the pathfinder and that of the mentor. The two, however, do not necessarily merge harmoniously: rather, there exist incongruencies and tensions between these two major components of the modern role, which at least partly account for its developmental dynamics as well as its further differentiation." (Cohen, 1985: 9) If these are their roots, contemporarily, the tourist guide is conceptualized as working in a double sphere: as a leader and as a mediator.

As a leader, he accomplishes two different tasks: he is responsible for the smooth accomplishment of the tour as an ongoing social enterprise and he guards the cohesion and morale of the touring party. As a mediator, he is a middleman between this party and the local population, sites and institutions, as well as tourist facilities. More importantly, he performs a communicative task –that is deemed the most relevant to the modern guide- composed of four principal elements. a) Selection: he selects from the multivarious stream of impressions impinging upon his party those which he considers worthy of their attention. b) Information: he disseminates correct and precise information about the sites of the tour. c) Interpretation: the guides play a prominent role in mediating the encounter between cultures, and they do this by an act of interpretation. In its general form, this takes the form of a translation of the strangeness of a foreign culture into a cultural idiom familiar to the visitors. d) Fabrication: this consists of outright invention or deception, which most outstanding example is that or the guides who present fake antiques, encountered in the shops, as if they were genuine. Obviously, this latter function is a deviated one, but one that is usually associated with tourist guides (Cohen, 1985).

The film critic is also a leader, though his/her work lacks much of the instrumental and social traits of the tourist guide. Notwithstanding this difference, he metaphorically guides audiences through unknown territories and grants them right of entry to places that otherwise they would not have access to. In this task, he is supposed to maintain the morale of their group of readers and act as an animator, making their critics appealing and encouraging the audience to take new risks in their viewing activity. The critic, as the pathfinder, leads audiences into new territories and provides them a controlled and guided experience. As an intermediary between the audience and the cultural industry, critic mediates the experience in different ways. As we stated in the former point, he/she provides information that helps them move in a new environment and interpose between the audience and the environment making it non-threatening. Like the tourist guide, part of his work is to bring together the two parts but at the same time to keep them differentiated. Getting to their communicative tasks, the resemblance between the tourist guide and the critics is clearer. Critics select visions of a movie, provides information that enlightens the viewers, and interpret and evaluate

the artworks. Fabrication represents the situation when the critic looses its intermediate position and allies with the cultural industry.

Critics do not have the monopoly of meaning and knowing, as tourist guides do not have the monopoly of access to places. They embody a privileged way of entering these new fields, transmitting knowledge, providing translations, setting the limits of the experience. In this sense, their position as cultural mediators depends of the contexts in which it is executed. In this sense, "a tourist system can be conceived as having a touristically well-developed central region, surrounded by touristically poorly developed peripheral areas. Then central region possesses a developed infrastructure, with good and well-marked roads and tourist facilities, which the marginal areas lack (…) In contrast, in the periphery of the system, attractions are as yet not well defined. The further one advances into these margins, the stranger and more chaotic one's surrounding are perceived: they eventually attain the character of the undifferentiated, dangerous, but fascinating, Other, and their penetration is, in many respects, analogous to mythical and adventurous travel." (Cohen, 1985: 25)

This characterization metaphorically describes different approaches to criticism and their relative position in the cultural system. The central system, represented by blockbuster, shows the minimum point of critic's influence, who have to compete with many different cultural mediators. Here, the informational aspect of criticism prevails. Notwithstanding this situation, critics will generally try to push their public to a less defined area, by providing new interpretations and evaluations, thus assimilating these movies to a more nuanced experience. As Scott say in the opening paragraph to this section, film critics will try to be there when "art pops out of commerce" and this means to transit the already known with new criteria, to walk the hustled and bustled central tourist area with the peripheral attitude. Although critics could always ascribe different meanings and discover new layers in works that are supposedly formulaic, their main field of activity would be in the periphery of the system, where they could mediate between the mere entertainment and the art, the commercial and the creative. As they go far of the centre, they would also stress their educational approach, introducing viewers to new sensations and hidden places.

The different traits of cultural mediation are expressed in the critical reviews that are usually published in the major media. To see the mediational performance that we have described, we will briefly analyze three critical reviews of the film *King Kong* (2005). This movie, clearly a blockbuster, had total incomes of 549 millions. It was directed by Peter Jackson after his *Lord of the Rings*' huge success, and it was starred by Naomi Watts, Jack Black and Adrien Brody. It was the second remake of the 1933 classic, filmed by Cooper and Schoedsack –the first one was done in 1976-. We will analyze three different critics of the movie, from two newspapers –*The New York Times* and *Chicago Sun-Times*- and one magazine –*Variety*-. With different styles, and in a reduced extension, these reviews show the traits that we have described as characteristic of the cultural mediation performed by the film critic. The three critics –Todd McCarthy, A. O. Scott, and Roger Ebert- present a partially different reading of the film, though all of them coincide in the appreciation and central interpretation of the artwork. As the movie is a remake, all of them use the comparison with the original version as a way to articulate their interpretation.

In the *Variety* review, critic Todd McCarthy (2005) follows the magazine's forms: an opening paragraph makes the general interpretation and evaluation of the film, forecasting the possibilities of economic success -essentially, the magazine is oriented to the entertainment industry. In these first lines, McCarthy gives us his interpretative frame, the perspective through which the film is better seen: "… but no matter how spectacular the action, "King Kong" is never more captivating than when the giant ape and his blond captive are looking into each other's eyes". The capacity of the film to communicate emotions, with a subordination of the technical advances to this objective, is recurrently praised by the critic: "Crucially, the emotional content is just as potent as the enormously impressive visual effects, as Kong's sad solitude and embrace of companionship are conveyed with simplicity and eloquence". Or in this paragraph: "The Empire State Building climax is spectacular, dizzying, even vertigo-inducing. Kong's farewell to Ann atop the landmark's spire is a tad protracted, but authentically moving". This way, the critic constructs his own version of the movie, signalling what is the real focus of value. Do not be deceived, he seems to tell us, go deep under the spectacular surface and get the real meaning.

To perform this task, McCarthy has to help us pass through some parts that may seem somewhat extended to the general viewer. By teaching us the significance of the narrative strategy for the whole meaning of the movie, he tries to make us understand that we need a preparation to be fully prepared to emotionally commit to the plot. "Taking 70 minutes -70% of the original's entire running time- just to get to Kong will be too much for some viewers, especially impatient youngsters. Leisurely though it is, the opening stretch does a solid job of welcoming one into the story". Yet this approach is balanced with a devoted approach to the needs of the audiences that make the critic be very strict with the usefulness of some technical devices. This way, he sometimes praises technical innovations - "…something we've never seen before –what it's like from Ann's point of view to be carried in Kong's hand as he bounds through the forest"- but other times he criticizes the director's excesses. In doing this, the original film works as an authoritative argument: "As if this weren't enough (and it actually is), immediately thereafter follows the film's ickiest sequence (…) Cooper and Schoepsack filmed a Spider Cave sequence for the original "Kong" and, deeming it excessive and extraneous, immediately cut it. One can see why". Through the acknowledgement of technical merits, historical comparisons, a detailed summary of the plot –almost 50% percent of the review- and an analysis of actors, McCarthy never looses his focus on the capacity of the film to enact deep emotions in the audiences.

In *The New York Times*' review, A. O. Scott (2005) sets a different agenda. Here, the connection with the 1933's King Kong is at centre stage, taking the place of the metaphor from which he theorizes about cinema. In that sense, in the opening paragraph of the critic, Scott told us that the reason why the original movie "has retained its appeal over the years is that it reminds audiences of the do-it-yourself, sea-of-the-pants ethic of early motion pictures". Moreover, the original directors "understood the alchemical convergence of gimmickry and sublimity that lay at the heart of the medium's unrivalled potential to generate spectacle and sensation." The real value of Peter Jackson's remake, then, is that although it is impossible to re-enact the novelty of the original, "in throwing every available imaginative and technological resource into the effort, Mr. Jackson comes pretty close". Although sometimes Scott –much more than McCarthy- develops a highly informed and florid style that could

be seen as "highish", he never loose sense to whom he is writing. He praises the movie for not being pretentious: "The picture wears its themes lightly, waving away the somber, allegorical sententiousness that too many blockbusters ("Lord of the Rings" included) rely upon to justify their exorbitant costs. The movie is, almost by definition, too much –too long, too big, too stuffed with characters and over-the-top set pieces- but it is animated by an impish, generous grace." Scott's review also constructs an ideal movie, where some scenes are not worth being there –"… human Skull Islanders, whose grunting, wild-eyed savagery is one bit of nostalgia Mr. Jackson might have forgone"- and other are underscored –"scenes are so madly inspired that they are likely to become touchstones: … a battle involving fanged worms and giant vampire crickets". A hint to show us how different movies the critics construct is the fact that the last scene described –and praised- by Scott is the same that McCarthy thought should be erased.

In this review, the "original view of cinema vs. technological developments" frame that Scott poses in the first paragraph structures his whole argumentation. For example, "the rapport between Ms Watts and Mr Serkis –King Kong- is extraordinary, even though it is mediated by fur, latex, optical illusions and complicated effects. Mr Serkis, who also played Gollum in the "Lord of the Rings" movies, is redefining screen acting for the digital age, while Ms. Watts incarnates the glamour and emotional directness of classical Hollywood". Interestingly and according to these postulates, Scott will close his critic with the film director in the central role of the system: "According to Denham –the film director inside the film-, Kong's captivity and display prove the power of show business to make the mysteries of creation available to anyone with the price of admission. In his mouth, this sounds both appealingly democratic and grossly cynical, which is fitting enough, since that is precisely the paradox Mr. Jackson embraces. He intuitively understands that the machinery of mass spectacle has the power to despoil and demystify whatever it touches and, at the same time, the ability to endow easy pleasures with a durable and genuine nobility. The climax of King Kong –one of the most familiar sequences in movies, and one that never grows old- exemplifies both tendencies. It is shameless and exalted, absurd and sublime, vulgar and grand. It's what movies where made for."

Roger Ebert's (2005) strategy represents a middle point between the two former critics. In a much simpler language than A.O.Scott and in a less detailed way than McCarthy, Ebert, too, set its interpretative frame. In his first paragraph, he states, "one sequence, relatively subdued, holds the key to the movie's success. Kong has captured Ann Darrow and carried her to his perch high on the mountain. He puts her down, not roughly, and then begins to roar, bare his teeth and pound his chest. Ann, an unemployed vaudeville acrobat, somehow instinctively knows that the gorilla is not threatening her but trying to impress her by behaving as an alpha male –the King of the Jungle. She doesn't know how Queen Kong would respond, but she does what she can: She goes into her stage routine, doing back flips, dancing like Chaplin, juggling three stones." Ebert considers this scene crucial, because "it removes the element of creepiness in the gorilla/girl relationship in the two earlier Kongs, creating a wordless bond that allows her to trust him". As Scott, Ebert structures his critic on the comparison with the original movie – and its first remake of 1976-, and, as McCarthy, he heavily stresses the emotional factor. However, the structure of this review, though it has all the components of the two former – summary of the plot, background information, evaluation of the actors- keeps them at the level of the mere commentary. The interpretative path that he constructs is loose and so it is his conclusion: "I think the film even has a message, and it isn't that beauty killed the beast. It's that we feel threatened by beauty, especially when it overwhelms us, and we pay a terrible price when we try to deny its essential nature and turn it into a product, or a target." Ebert informs us, interprets and evaluates the movie, but he seems somewhat reluctant to teach us how to do it in our own.

In this manner, the three critics exercise their role with a very different style, though within a common frame. They create a discourse that constructs meaning, and, this way, they rhetorically mediate in the cultural processes of Mass art. All the three could sign Scott's statement in the opening quote of this section, "We do it for you" (Scott, 2006). Nevertheless, they are not part of the audience or their representatives. They perform a self-conscious task, positioning themselves as the eternal outcasts with only a commitment to the art form. This is where their legitimacy comes from. Thus, they embrace a position that is far away of the institutionalized power of the high art critics and, as such, their authority must be earned everyday. In

this sense, a democratic appeal that tries to reconcile the taste of the mass public with the complexities of artistic creation profoundly pervades their function. Critics consider public as deserving the best that it can get from the industry, but also believe that the audience has to make an effort to improve his capacity of appreciation. They invite the public to transcend the surface and go into deeper layers of experience. Critics' understanding of the democratization of taste embodied in their work, thus, is far away from cultural populism and we could not grasp it under that frame.

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