To quote or not to quote? Critics' quotations in film advertisements as indicators of the continuing authority of film criticism

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ABSTRACT

The notion that the authority and influence of professional critics are in decline is a recurring discourse in the research on criticism. Recently, this vision of decline has focused on the proliferation of lay opinions on the Internet, promoting an "*everyone's a critic*" discourse and more "horizontal" cultural recommendations. The aim of this research is to empirically test this decline of criticism by considering changes in a particular indicator: the practice of using quotations from critics in film advertisements. Our analysis of quotations on 1329 press advertisements, which were collected in France over four sample years (2007, 2010, 2013 and 2016), contradicts the hypothesis of decline. The results show that (1) the frequency of insertion of critical quotes increased significantly over the period 2007–2016; (2) the "markers of legitimacy" within quotations are stable over the period; and (3) no amateur criticism has emerged in advertisements to compete with reviews by professional critics. Rather than pointing to a decline, these results suggest that the role of criticism in cinema's "intermediation system" is being reinforced, and that its unrivalled cultural authority is being maintained.

1. Introduction

Respected, and sometimes feared, professional criticism in the news media has long dominated the establishment of cultural hierarchies and values (DiMaggio, 1987; Shrum, 1996; Verboord, 2010). The widely-shared acceptance of its authority grounded its privileged role as a "cultural intermediary" (Bourdieu, 1984), mediating between a supply of experiential prototypes, which are difficult to evaluate a priori, and audience demand. However, the notion that critics' role is in decline is a recurring discourse in the research on criticism. Recently, this vision of decline has focused on the proliferation of lay and amateur opinions on the Web 2.0, promoting an "*everyone's a critic*" discourse and more "horizontal" cultural recommendations, weakening the symbolic power and impact of professional critics (Flichy, 2010; Gillespie, 2012; Janssen & Verboord, 2015; Verboord, 2010). This is said to entail a redistribution of cultural authority (who has the power to produce artistic value?), as well as the (re)organization of the inter-mediation system,[1] to the detriment of professional critics. The objective of this article is to provide an empirical test of this widespread – though largely theoretical – view that criticism is under pressure from the Internet, drawing on the case of French film criticism in the period 2007–2016.

In order to trace the recent decline in film criticism, we look at a specific indicator: the practice of film distributors using critics' quotations. This practice, which involves the distributor placing extracts of critical reviews in an advertisement, in its own way

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  [1] Roueff (2014,190) defines the intermediation system as "a state of stability in the social division of the work of controlling the conditions for, and effects of, the reception" of cultural products.

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demonstrates the place occupied by criticism in cinema's intermediation system. As advertisements are designed to be as effective as possible, developments in the practice of using quotations can be seen as symptomatic of trends in the influence and authority of criticism with audiences (Baumann, 2002). The decline of criticism should lead to a weakening of the functions which have traditionally called for the use of quotations by distributors for marketing purposes. Since alternative judgments now proliferate on the Internet, distributors will only make use of criticism in advertising to the extent that it continues to give them a degree of market power.

Our research focuses on the decade 2007–2016 in France, a period characterised by the rapid growth of the Internet, which is disrupting the practices associated with cultural information and further exacerbating the latent crisis in criticism. How does the advertising practice of quoting critics indicate the decline of a form of intermediation said to be losing its influence and authority? Our research tests several hypotheses concerning the decline of contemporary criticism using 1329 press advertisements for films, in which all quotations from critics were identified and analysed (in terms of presence, number, size, content and source). These were collected in France over four sample periods (2007, 2010, 2013 and 2016). Far from supporting the decline hypothesis, the results provide evidence that the central role of criticism in the intermediation system is being reinforced, and that it is maintaining its cultural authority. We discuss these results, but also consider an alternative interpretation.

2. Professional criticism in cultural industries

The term "professional critic" (as opposed to "academic critic" or "amateur critic"; Kristensen & From, 2015) usually refers to a group of specialised journalists employed by news media organisations, whose task is to analyse and evaluate cultural works for audiences. These typical "cultural intermediaries" (Bourdieu, 1984; Smith Maguire & Matthews, 2012) constitute a fundamental link in cultural industries' intermediation system. More than other cultural intermediaries (such as distributors or TV programmers), professional critics (referred to in this article as "critics") are characterised by their explicit claims to expertise in taste and value within specific cultural fields. As Becker (1982) suggests, critics provide the discursive apparatus for legitimising a work, and ensuring its appreciation, by drawing on and applying the aesthetic systems constructed by aesthetic specialists and art historians. This specific knowledge and competence ground their cultural authority and ensure their legitimacy in getting the public to accept their "value judgements", which are distinct from the mere "pleasure judgments" of non-experts (Bourdieu, 1984). Another important quality of a critic is independence with respect to the suppliers of cultural goods (Béra, 2003; Hirsch, 1972). This is what distinguishes criticism (from the Greek krinein: to separate, to distinguish, to sort) from promotion (from the Latin promovere: to advance), and lends authenticity to critics' opinions. Lastly, from an institutional point of view, providing an audience with a shrewd and independent opinion about a work is not enough to be recognised as a critic: to belong to the institutional world of professional criticism, a person must be recognised as doing so by their peers (Janssen, 1997; Van Rees, 1983).

As cultural intermediaries whose expert status is widely recognised, the general role of critics is to frame how other actors, among them cultural consumers, engage with works (Smith Maguire & Matthews, 2012). In doing so, critics are involved in the symbolic, as well as economic, fate of works and artists.

First, professional critics participate in the qualification of cultural forms or works as legitimate. At the level of cultural form, or genre, criticism functions as an agent of "artification": the elevation of something to the status of art (Heinich & Shapiro, 2018). For instance, through their discursive work of intellectualisation, American film critics have contributed to the transformation into art of what was previously considered as a scientific curiosity, a fairground attraction, and later a form of mass entertainment (Baumann, 2001, 2007). At the individual level, that of the work or artist, critics also function as symbolic agents of valuation (Lamont, 2012). They establish a continuous scale of value within a cultural field, allowing works and artists to be ranked in terms of artistic legitimacy, to the point where some of them are "consecrated" and admitted into the pantheon of their art (Allen & Lincoln, 2004; Becker, 1982; Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu, 1996; Van Rees, 1983; Janssen & Verboord, 2015; Janssen 1997; Shrum, 1996).

By influencing who and what is legitimate and worthy, professional critics fulfil a second essential function: they have an impact on other actors' behaviours. Obtaining favourable critical reviews feeds one's reputation, a form of symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1996) which can be "monetised" in the short, medium and long terms with audiences (Hennig-Thurau, Marchand, & Hiller, 2012), but also with other cultural intermediaries (Allen & Lincoln, 2004; Ebbers & Wijnberg, 2012; Legoux, Larocque, Laporte, & Boquet, 2015). In cultural markets, the uncertainty characterising the "singularity" represented by cultural goods (Karpik, 2010) renders critical opinion both a valuable source of information for audiences, and an institution in terms of cultural marketing (Debenedetti, 2006).

3. The hypothesis of decline in criticism

The notion of an institution whose authority and influence with audiences are being devalued or challenged is a recurring discourse in the research on criticism (Béra, 2003). According to the researchers, this decline in criticism has different forms and origins. Criticism becoming increasingly "promotional", greater cultural tolerance and the parallel weakening of cultural hierarchies, or the rise of amateur criticism on the Internet are all said to participate – in a cumulative way – in the decline of both the authority (legitimacy in saying what is worthy) and influence of critics (their impact on others' representations and decisions).

Some attribute critics' loss of authority to the fact that criticism has had to accommodate the commercial imperatives of the capitalist press since the end of the 19th century, resulting in its "moral devaluation" (Moulin, 1967) and the transformation of all subsequent criticism into promotional material (Bourdieu & Delsaut, 1975; Habermas, 1989). By losing authenticity and independence, the ideal type of criticism, which would be capable of resisting market forces, has thus been replaced by a straightforward "objective ally" of the market (Béra, 2003).