Belligerence, Booty, and Boosterism:

ON ETHICS AND ARTS JOURNALISM
BY CARLIN ROMANO
Since virtually no arts reporters or critics rise to the administrative top of American journalistic organizations—the industry would be shocked if, notwithstanding their Pulitzer Prizes, book critic Michiko Kakutani of The New York Times or Washington Post music critic Tim Page were named executive editors of their papers—virtually no one who ends up a journalism-ethics pundit by this route focuses much on the arts.

A second group of ethics experts might be called the “Peripateti.” Like their Greek namesakes, they get around. They advise media organizations on ethical issues, and often organize workshops for newspapers and TV stations. This group is typified by Michael Josephson and his California-based ethics institute. The raison d’être and often the business of the Peripateti is to enlighten working journalists about ethics, usually on onsite visits that stir dollops of Kant and utilitarianism with case-studies of ethical dilemmas taken from everyday practice. Since most journalists are not arts journalists, little quality time goes to arts journalism.

Finally, there are the “Professori,” university intellectuals who may, like N.Y.U.’s Jay Rosen, boast some reporting experience, or may not. Almost uniformly, and happily, they cast issues of journalistic ethics against the big picture of political philosophy, against journalism’s place in the state and its relation to democracy. Those interests naturally lead them to the same territory covered by the Emeriti and the Peripateti—privacy vs. the public’s right to know, the proper (if any) uses of journalistic deception, and other traditional cubbyholes of the field. Among the Professori, too, the ethics of arts journalism suffers from the lack of an academic jobs program geared to arts journalists.

So much for the sociological incubi that constrain the subject. Philosophically, further obstacles loom. The notions, principles, and concerns that emerge from these three groups aren’t easily adaptable to arts journalism. Consider the way experts in journalistic ethics talk about their field.

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Occasionally, a contrary voice is heard. In his against-the-grain study, *Good News, Bad News: Journalism Ethics and the Public Interest* (Westview, 1998), Jeremy Iggers notes how the issues in one handbook of journalism ethics, published by three experts in the field, are “largely the same ones that have dominated the institutional conversation for decades: accuracy and fairness, conflicts of interest, deception, plagiarism, and source/reporter relationships.” Iggers asks: “Could it be that an increasingly irrelevant conversation within journalism about professional ethics distorts priorities and diverts the attention of both journalists and the public from the more serious institutional failures of the news media to fulfill their responsibilities?”

Iggers’ advocacy of a less top-down, less ideologically narrow, less corporate slant on journalism ethics is a *cri de coeur* worth hearing—a few echoes of it will resound further on. Yet his vinegary tone only confirms the static feel of journalism ethics, where the definitions and the public from the more serious institutional failures of the news media to fulfill their responsibilities?”

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In fact, almost all approaches to journalistic ethics over the past twenty years share a strategy that trains largely on the activities of the street-level mainstream reporter or editor (rather than on those of the owner, publisher, or dance critic), largely accepts the goals and imperatives of mainstream news organizations (rather than questions the ethics, for instance, of giving sports more coverage than foreign news), and largely accepts and operates with the industry’s own murky ethical concepts, such as “conflict of interest.”

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Most elevated ideals for the critic since Arnold maintain this utopian combination of expertise, taste, and leadership, and while most articulations specifically concern the literary critic, ambitious critics of the other arts have assumed the job description as well. By the heyday of Northrop Frye after World War II, the critic ranked as “the pioneer of education and the shaper of cultural tradition.” If, for Frye, the literary critic sees the triumphs of his art as “phenomena to be explained in terms of a conceptual framework which criticism alone possesses,” then we should expect critics of the other arts to do no less. The critic necessarily becomes a philosopher, historian, and public relations whiz, on the level of Edwin Denby in dance, Arthur Danto in art, or Eric Bentley in theater. No wonder that the scholar of criticism Wesley Shrum, Jr., in his *Fringe and Fortune: The Role of Critics in High and Popular Art* (Princeton, 1996), concludes, “Critics are not objective referees of the best and worst, standing outside of the art world and judging its output, but participants in a stream of discourse that defines the cultural hierarchy.”

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Journalistic Ethics.

Today, in late 1990s America, Maurice Berger, editor of an alarmist anthology entitled *The Crisis of Criticism* (The New Press, 1998), bemoans the supposed loss of authority by critics in determining cultural quality (Berger sees the job as now done by “sales records, gross receipts, top-ten lists, Nielsen ratings” and other indexes “of consumer interest and satisfaction”). Yet he

in the Philadelphia Orchestra “thin” in a particular symphony, or who finds the conception of a new opera “uninspired,” or a violinist’s playing “clinical” in her debut recital, is unlikely to get called on the carpet for inaccuracy. Neither is the theater critic who derides a supposedly cutting-edge troupe’s performance as “tired,” or a book critic who judges a first novel “derivative.”

In all these cases, an artist bent on attacking the critic’s ethics by charging “inaccuracy” would likely have to settle for a letter—make that an e-mail—to the editor. Exactly what counts as the “truth” of the artworks and situations described would be considered too uncertain, too amorphous, too interwoven with the critic’s own aesthetic, to sustain an ethics charge about it for inaccuracy. One could argue that the core obligation of getting the names of the concert venues correct puts the virtue of accuracy in arts criticism on all fours with mainstream news reporting, but the attenuated scope of the accuracy standard is plain.

The standard journalistic virtue of avoiding a “conflict of interest” also quickly runs aground on the subtleties of arts criticism. Again, crude cases analogous to mainstream journalistic corruption permit some congruence with ordinary journalistic ethics. The theater critic bribed by the playwright to write a rave on opening night will be bounced. But the very understanding of a critic’s tasks and duties—characteristically left murky in the hurried environment of newspapers—upsets greater isomorphism with the kinds of virtues Klaidman and Beauchamp extol.

The word “criticism” evolved from the Greek *krinein,* which meant to separate, to cut apart, and—metaphorically—to distinguish. The most influential explanation of the cultural critic’s role in the Anglo-American tradition remains Matthew Arnold’s famous view in “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time” (1864): its task is “simply to know the best that is known and thought in the world,” and by “making this known, to create a current of fresh and true ideas.” Criticism, according to Arnold, prepares audiences for important new art, “the promised land, towards which criticism can only beckon.”
acknowledges that it is the critic who “often supports or analyzes culture against the grain of popular tastes, indifference, or hostility. In the best of circumstances, the critic serves as a kind of aesthetic mentor, introducing an audience to challenging, little-known, or obscure works or offering insights that might make a work more accessible, engaging, profound or relevant.”

Calling for a revival of forceful criticism in his introduction to the volume, Berger concludes that the “strongest criticism today…is capable of engaging, guiding, directing and influencing culture, even stimulating new forms of practice and expression. The strongest criticism serves as a dynamic critical force, rather than as an act of boosterism. The strongest criticism uses language and rhetoric not merely for descriptive purposes but as means of inspiration, provocation, emotional connection, and experimentation.”

Now let that closing crescendo of encomia to criticism subside, and recall the Klaidman/Beauchamp virtues of journalism. Suddenly, they’re not so obvious, not so consensual. “Reaching for Truth”? Whose truth—the naturalist playwright’s or that of the avant-garde theater critic, committed to smothering conventional realism on stage? “Avoiding Bias”? Could any critic beckon toward an Arnoldian promised land if not biased toward some version of the better, the new, the next? Mencken defined criticism as itself “prejudice made plausible.”

“Avoiding Harm”? Isn’t it the obligation of the critic to trash the utterly meretricious and draw blood when necessary? To fire off lines like Dorothy Parker’s “Theodore Dreiser/Ought to write nicer,” or Yeats’ judgment that Wilfred Owen was “all blood, dirt and sucked sugar stick,” or Carlyle’s that Swinburne was “a man standing up to his neck in a cesspool, and adding to its content”? Should Stravinsky have apologized for harming Leonard Bernstein when he called him “a musical department store,” or Twain withdrawn his acid judgment on Henry James: “Once you’ve put one of his books down, you simply can’t pick it up again”? Do we hope or believe that turn-of-the-century music critic James Huneker burned twice in hell for his famous double whammy: “After a week of Richard Strauss at Stuttgart one begins to entertain a profound respect for the originality of Richard Wagner”?

Belligerence, like the policeman’s nightstick, seems part of the critic’s assigned equipment. If we recall Belsey’s virtues associated with ethical journalism—“accuracy, honesty, truth, objectivity, fairness, balance, respect for the autonomy of ordinary people”—they need, at the very least, to be wholly reconsidered and re-understood when ethical journalism comprises criticism as well. Criticism thus shakes up the standard conceptual architecture of journalistic ethics. Making room for it in journalistic ethics suggests that a Ciceroan virtue like integrity—being true to oneself—might matter more than the Klaidman/ Beauchamp virtues. The great critic might be one with a character, as Seneca put it, that could “not only act rightly but could not act without acting rightly”—at least according to his or her own lights.

Criticism also helps reveal, because the complexity of the psychology behind it is so obvious, how a core concept of mainstream journalistic ethics—conflict of interest—is philosophically worthless as a moral touchstone. As Dewey might have said, conflicts of interest, like coincidences of interest, occur every time a human agent encounters a problem in his environment. The political reporter may resent Clinton because Clinton is the same age and has gotten further in life, but if the reporter has—dare we say it—integrity, then he won’t let that interest affect his copy. The theater critic may remember that the lead actor in tonight’s opening snubbed her at a private party, but—if she has integrity—her interest in retribution will not affect her evaluation.

What journalists, like many professionals, condemn are not really conflicts of interest but inappropriate judgments—judgments made according to inappropriate criteria. It’s not as snappy and familiar a phrase as “conflict of

Arts coverage…[is] the neon sheep of the journalistic family.
interest,” but it’s a more accurate one that fits the crime. Making journalistic ethics encompass activities outside its normal ambit—such as arts journalism—can lead to an inspection of some of its standard equipment as well.

Conceptually speaking, arts criticism might be seen as the submerged part of an iceberg—arts journalism—that threatens the smooth voyage of the good ship “Journalistic Ethics.” It’s a philosophical stem-shredder that awaits this ever-growing pedagogic liner should it venture past such familiar ports as obligations to “Deep Throat” and the sins of Janet Cooke. A variety of floating objects, conceptually speaking, should also trouble. Among them:

1.) How does one fold the endless booty that arts critics receive—books, tickets, CDs, catalogues—into the standard theories of journalistic ethics? While different media organizations handle their booty differently—giving leftovers to charity, selling them to staff, allowing employees to hawk their booty as extra perks—the ethical lay of the land, industry-wide, is an anarchic mess.

2.) Setting aside the activity of criticism to look at arts reporting, how does the arts reporter assigned to a beat—say, covering a local orchestra or theater company vital to the community—weigh the wish of almost all in the community, perhaps including newspaper bosses, that such institutions flourish? How does he factor that attitude—what might be called “atmospheric boosterism”—into his obligation to report damaging news about the institution? Political and general assignment reporters, typically operating in an environment adversarial or neutral toward local officials or organizations, rarely face this problem.

3.) How—to echo Jeremy Iggers’ point that journalistic ethics ought to assess the corporate agendas of media organizations and not just the activities of its plebs—should one evaluate the decision of newspapers to produce lots of insipid movie copy to support and construct sections stuffed with movie ads, but little dance copy because the dance companies are broke?

4.) How, finally, in a world where art is always both art and commerce, can the arts journalist do justice to both?