

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

Grant Blank, *Critics, Ratings and Society: The Sociology of Reviews*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007, 218 p. + index.

Sociologists operate in a world full of critics, reviews and rankings in both our professional and personal lives. The criticism and cold logic of peer review for publication, grants and tenure/promotion, job candidates, department rankings; and the reviews we use as we choose schools for our children, holiday resorts, or movies to watch permeate our lives. Not simply an academic affair, reviews are an important part of market transactions and consumer behaviour in the broader society outside the university, a topic central to any serious economic sociology. Yet the sociology of reviews is remarkably underdeveloped.

Grant Blank's *Critics, Ratings and Society* is a nice introduction to the emerging literature on the sociology of reviews. Surveying a range of scholarship in the sociology of culture, professions, organizations and the economy, Blank offers theoretically well-chosen case studies on restaurants and statistical software. This is not a narrow case-study-based piece of research, however; Blank opens up a range of issues to scholars interested in more than sushi and statistical packages for regression analysis. He has developed and outlined an extremely useful typology that will allow us to think about reviews in a comparative context. Reviews can generally be broken down into two major types: connoisseurial and procedural. Systematically analysing the differences between these two types of reviews allows Blank to say something interesting both about his specific case studies and the larger social processes at play in the dynamics of rankings and the social organization of reviews.

The standard connoisseurial review is a literary text written by an individual author which helps discerning eaters, moviegoers, book readers or art lovers make decisions about what cultural production to consume, value or purchase. The stakes are high, as chefs have been known to kill themselves because of the declining fortune of their restaurants and cuisine. The fate of soufflés as well as the careers of chefs can be significantly affected by reviews written by credible and influential critics employed by major newspapers, magazines or other widely circulated but relatively high-status media outlets. Reviews written in the connoisseurial genre have literary style and involve an element of individual creativity based on highly developed cultural judgement and authority. Procedural reviews are far more standardized as they are often based on the work of collective reviewing teams, focus on specific technical questions and are

more clearly linked to market forces as mobilized by corporations such as software producers. No one reading software reviews, for example, expects the same level of artful writing or a personalized account of an experience that one would typically encounter when reading the latest restaurant review in *The New York Times* or *The Globe and Mail*, for example.

Despite the differences between these two types of reviews, each is rooted in and created by similar social and organizational processes. Blank's paired case-study design is thus of theoretical interest. Credibility is key in both cases – no one will believe restaurant reviews written by writers who get free meals at the establishments under review. This issue of credibility and conflict of interests, in turn, creates the need for a six figure expense budget for *The New York Times* restaurant review process and has lost some journalists their jobs (for accepting money for positive reviews). Potential conflicts of interests are even more serious and consequential in the case of procedural reviews; major software producing corporations have vast resources and scores of staff involved in trying to influence the reviews, and thus the sales of their products. Contemporary market and consumer pressures as well as the rise of the internet, of course, have created hybrid forms of reviews, as in the case of the Zagat Surveys and other consumer written reviews of restaurants that go beyond the elite restaurant focus of the connoisseurial genre. These hybrid forms cross into the territory of procedural reviews without the team work, as when consumers themselves rate restaurant chains online. One can also see this kind of hybrid form in the case of book reviews associated today with Amazon.com and other internet-based book distribution networks.

Blank offers a theoretically informed argument for a “sociology of choice” that moves beyond simplistic economic models. His case studies illuminate both restaurant and statistical software markets and reviews, and his work opens up possibilities for further research on the topic by Canadian sociologists. Blank does not really discuss the Canadian case, so there is room to develop the sociology of reviews north of the border building on but perhaps complicating his model. In addition to being theoretically interesting, this research agenda might even help us think analytically about our own book reviewing, department governance and consumer decisions. Nice book, well worth reading. Trust me on this one!

Neil McLaughlin, McMaster University.