

Julian Meyrick, Robert Phiddian and Tully Barnett, *What Matters?: Talking Value in Australian Culture* (Monash University Publishing, 2018)

What Matters? is a product of the Laboratory Adelaide, a research project that began with the task of finding better ways to communicate the experience of culture (attending/curating/making an exhibition/concert/library/performance/museum/etc.) to policy makers in Australia (deciding how to, how much, and why?). The authors respond to the rise of ‘metric power’ (vi), where cultural experiences are measured quantitatively, or ‘datafied’ (viii). This approach is only a few decades old, and has come to limit thinking about culture because it views its value ‘functionally’ (130). While their research project was underway, former federal Arts Minister George Brandis announced the National Programme for Excellence in the Arts (NPEA) (see xvii-xxvi). The announcement of the NPEA in 2015 was widely criticised and the resulting Senate Inquiry saw an outpouring of ‘articulate statements that truthfully and movingly communicated what [cultural] practitioners did and why ... Australian culture was *of value* to Australia’ (xxv-xxvi). The Senate Inquiry revealed how the ‘experience of culture is distant from its means of support’ (xxvi). These events galvanised and set the ambition of *What Matters?*, whose authors aim to fundamentally change the conversation around culture and value. While the authors’ research emerged from a regional Australian city, and its intended audiences are those with ‘operational interests’ there, they suggest its scope is ‘glocal’ (xxix). They invite readers to reflect on wider contexts – Brexit, Trump, and public value’s ‘demented twin ... political populism’ (61).

The book is divided into two parts. The first provides definitions for the concepts of culture and value alongside three case studies. The second part offers conceptual and pragmatic solutions to ‘the problem’ of cultural value. It describes the *meaningful* use of language, discusses how narrative can be used as a tool for reporting in the cultural sector, and offers an adaptation of the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) and Integrated Reporting (<IR>) as alternate reporting strategies. *What Matters?* also features ‘boxes’ throughout that distill the key ideas or offer ‘how-to guides’.

What Matters? presents a toolkit. The first chapter’s relatively agnostic approach argues that ‘just as you cannot solve the problem of culture’s meaning by haggling over definitions, you cannot solve the problem of its value with more measurement techniques’ (18). Nevertheless, the footnotes provide a gateway for further research and will be useful as a teaching resource in universities. The working definitions provoke critical engagement and encourage readers to work through a series of thought experiments. These come in the form of ‘parables’. The second chapter’s parable shows that raw data around Patrick White’s theatre productions is meaningless without evaluation. By referencing a sketch from *That Mitchell and Webb Look*, where two contestants on a quiz show arbitrarily call out numbers until they are told by the host ‘that’s numberwang!’ and everyone reacts as if the right answer is given, the discussion shows how ‘numbers’ have been ascribed meaning(lessness).

Digital humanities scholars are likely to be drawn to the third chapter. Its parable of ‘digital disruption’ shows how audiences’ values are determined by the curatorial capacity of Netflix, Spotify, and, more unsettlingly, Cambridge Analytica (45-51). As capital moves from

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the cultural sector towards the technology sector (59), and audiences are viewed as passive consumers, less effort is made to evaluate or participate in cultural production. This provocation offers a bridge to the fourth chapter which discusses the renegade Adelaide Festival of Ideas. This event undermines the notion of the 'marketplace of ideas'. It describes the creation and maintenance of a free biennial festival, where citizens rather than consumers participate in the co-creation of public discourse (66-67).

Practicing artists, arts managers, producers and policy makers are likely to find the second part appealing. Chapter five promotes the need to get better at talking about culture, not as experts, but as 'enthusiastic and well-informed amateurs' (85). It calls bullshit on buzzwords and offers a nine-part writing guide (92-93), suggesting 'It is better to win support honestly when it is won at all' (92). Chapter six proposes that narrative is key to describing the experience of culture more accurately. This is because narrative can organise experience over time and better represent the impact of arts and cultural organisations (99). Frustrated artists, including myself, may find this less persuasive – we want change now, but the authors offer no silver bullets. However, the final chapter is particularly pragmatic. It adapts GRI and IR, two accounting theories, to suggest that 'Reporting reform and culture are natural allies, and a closer relationship between them could be conceptually and practically fruitful in both fields' (121). The authors argue that the box-ticking exercise of reporting can be turned on its head. Honest, narrative-driven reporting that reflects the experience of culture could realign cultural values.

What Matters? is earnest, rigorous and also very funny. The authors' balance between head and heart will likely appeal to the wide audience that it seeks. (Buy a copy and pass it on, or post it to your MP). Writing at a time when cultural stakeholders are exhausted with and by quantitative methods that fail to articulate what matters, the authors point out how often tools of evaluation are mistaken for the actual act of evaluation. They articulate how information is confused for understanding, and argue that grappling with questions of value can have a transformational impact (133). They encourage their readers to work at evaluating cultural practice, to speak honestly and accurately. While they encountered cynicism, frustration and outrage among cultural practitioners, *What Matters?* 'aims to wake us to the problems of value, to stimulate the sense of value we need to have – do always, in fact, have, in our own hearts and minds – to grace and inform not only our choices in arts and culture, but in the world beyond' (136). In its quiet and gentle way, *What Matters?* is radical.

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