



Mommy,
I WANT TO BE
A CRITIC
by
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That is never how it starts though.

Criticism as a career is something you stumble upon. Over the months leading up to this article, I had been dedicated to the critical study of graphic design history. In that capacity, I developed a comprehensive assessment of the books published and had to, in the course of my research, review the majority of (accessible) English language books that dealt directly with the history of graphic design.



This process led me to look more deeply into critical theory in its general academic sense, but also to explore the act of criticism. Daniel Mendelsohn's 'A Critic's Manifesto', written for The New Yorker late last month, expresses his own development and motivation as a critic, bringing to light the history of the Critic in its journalistic manifestation. Most of what I am saying here effectively acts as a summary of his own ideas, from my own point of view.

There are numerous branches, or definitions, of criticism as an activity. There is critical analysis in the tradition of post-WWII French academia, there are the food and cultural critics of magazines and newspaper, and there are the more specialised, falling somewhere between the two, variants of critics: those who write with an academic inclination using a journalistic voice. One thing, however, they all have in common, is that they have become less critical in the years succeeding the so-called Web 2.0 'revolution'. With the spread of social media and the enhancement of multi-purpose and multi-channel communication, with Facebook and Twitter,

everybody is now a critic or a curator. Mendelsohn argues that we should always have mixed reviews, because there is good and bad in all that we discuss. Michael Bierut, of Pentagram and Design Observer fame, had his own statement about criticism, as he related it to his field:

"My favourite kind of criticism takes what we do and puts it into a larger cultural context in terms that an intelligent, interested layperson could understand. I also like it when it's tough and even mean."

This statement, made in 1997 in an interview with Steven Heller, in essence holds the critic to the same standards that Mendelsohn is endorsing. Except, it's never tough and mean these days. Yes, feminist critiques are abundantly potent. Dissections of presidential campaigns consistently roam the Internet, almost to redundancy. How Spain, Greece, and Merkel have, or have not, failed the Eurozone is in perpetual critical debate, and everybody has a take on what should happen next. Most of these subjects are criticised, and their words are very much "tough and even mean".

So where, then, have the critics of arts and culture gone? The pioneers of criticism were literary, most notably through the efforts of writers such as Oscar Wilde and T.S. Eliot. Criticism is an activity that was defined and governed by those of us who produced culture, those of us who defined art, and it has now become a tool applied to every facet of human existence, but we have abandoned it. We are now, when it comes to art and design, satisfied with Likes on Facebook and Retweets on Twitter, pushing what we deem to be valuable to our 'followers' and ignoring what we do not. Rarely does anybody share an item that they find needs to be explored for its failures not its successes.

I do not pretend to be innocent of this habit, either. Over the years, I have adapted to what one of Mendelsohn's friends and a colleague, Laura Miller, referred to as calling attention to things they find praiseworthy. I do that. Most people I know do that. It makes sense: there is so much out there, that we should 'curate' the work for others.

Except the Critic is not a Curator. Their paths might cross, one can do the other's job, the same person

can do both jobs, but it is not one and the same thing. Curators are important, increasingly important, in today's overly populated digital landscape. Even in the non-digital landscape, there is never a shortage of exhibitions, workshops, lectures, events to attend and learn from. Except, important as the curator is, her mission is different from that of a critic - her output must be distinct, when acting as curator from when writing as critic, since, by its nature, it is an exclusively non-mutual activity. Mendelsohn misses this, instead focusing on defining what the critic should actually commit to doing:

"In the end, the critic is someone who, when his knowledge, operated on by his taste in the presence of some new example of the genre he's interested in—a new TV series, a movie, an opera or ballet or book—hungers to make sense of that new thing, to analyze it, interpret it, make it mean something."

Writing casual criticism is easy, although I would wish it were not. Good criticism is a tricky, delicate dance that should begin and end with having given the reader something important, given the reader an expert's opinion, not an opinion.

If all I wanted was an opinion, I could ask a friend. So, then, my pledge to my readers now is that I will no longer give you my opinion: I will meticulously give you expert advice, and if I cannot do that, then I will keep my mouth shut, or I will curate. I suggest other critics do much of the same.

