WINTER 2013 VOL. 66 NO. 4

Nieman Reports

TO PROMOTE AND ELEVATE THE STANDARDS OF JOURNALISM

{CURATION AS CRITICISM}

{CONSUMER RETORTS}

THE ILLUMINATION BUSINESS

THE ACTIVIST CRITIC

REVIEWING THE USER REVIEWS

CRITICAL CONDITION

WHY PROFESSIONAL CRITICISM MATTERS

ROBERT CHRISTGAU — MUSIC

BRETT ANDERSON — FOOD

KIMBERLY D. KLEMAN — CONSUMER

JULIA KELLER — BOOKS

BLAIR KAMIN — ARCHITECTURE

PAOLA ANTONELLI — ART

JOHN LAHR — THEATER

MARIA POPOVA — INTERESTINGNESS

“WHEN CRITICISM PAYS PROPER ATTENTION TO THE CRAFT ... THE EXPERIENCE CAN BE AS EXHILARATING AS IT IS VIVID.”

—JOHN LAHR, The New Yorker, page 36

COVER STORY CRITICAL CONDITION

4 **Concision and Clarity**
Robert Christgau reflects on his life in music. *Interview by Brett Anderson*

10 **Consumer Retorts**
Is there still room for the professional reviewer? *By Kimberly D. Kleman*

14 **The Reviewer Reviewed**
A critic-turned-novelist on reading her first reviews. *By Julia Keller*

16 **Minimize Description, Maximize Observation**
Pulitzer-winner Blair Kamin on the craft of the critic. *By Dina Kraft*

20 **But Is It Art?**
Making the roles of curator and critic complementary. *By Paola Antonelli*

22 **The Illumination Business**
Why drama critics must look at and look after the theater. *By John Lahr*

24 **Select, Shape, Celebrate**
The critic's calling is to elevate the good. *By Maria Popova*

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{ARCHITECTURE IS THE INESCAPABLE ART}

—BLAIR KAMIN, architecture critic, Chicago Tribune

The promise of the critic-as-celebrator [is] to inform and shape culture by virtue of elevation.

—MARIA POPOVA, founder and editor of Brain Pickings

TO BE AN INTELLECTUAL ENTERTAINER, A COMMAND OF VOCABULARY, SYNTAX AND RHYTHM IS ESSENTIAL.

—JOHN LAHR, The New Yorker

There's room in the universe, indeed, an important place, for both personal and professional reviews.

—KIMBERLY D. KLEMAN, editor in chief, Consumer Reports

I got to do what I did because I got into the field before anybody could tell me I was wrong. I wanted to write really well. I wanted to write like myself. I wanted to have a lot of ideas. I'm interested in ideas.

—ROBERT CHRISTGAU, B&N Review and MSN

{PUBLISHING A NOVEL... HAS MADE ME A BETTER BOOK CRITIC}

—JULIA KELLER, a 1998 Nieman Fellow and 2005 Pulitzer winner for Feature Writing

WE ARE TESTING SOMETHING NEW, EXPOSING NEW IDEAS TO CRITICISM AND SCRUTINY.

—PAOLA ANTONELLI, senior curator, MoMA

CRITICAL CONDITION

WHY PROFESSIONAL CRITICISM MATTERS

BY JAMES GEARY

"If you are counting full-time critic jobs at newspapers, you may as well count tombstones." That was the response of Johanna Keller, director of the Goldring Arts Journalism Program at Syracuse University's S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications, to a Nieman Reports query about the number of professional critics employed at dailies around the country.

The figures on newspaper critics (News flash: They're not good) are one indication of the state of criticism today, but they are not the only one. Study Arts & Letters Daily or Metacritic.com if you want proof that there's still plenty of quality professional criticism out there. The challenge is, as Keller points out, "there are new genres of arts journalism that make the old forms of print criticism obsolete. While it is easy to count jobs lost, it is almost statistically impossible to get numbers on jobs created because they do not look like the old jobs and they are not at the same institutions."

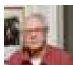
This shift in critical mass is illustrated by the stories that bookend our cover package: Iconic rock critic Robert Christgau, in conversation with Times-Picayune restaurant critic and current Nieman Fellow Brett Anderson, started out in the 1960s—in print, of course—at The Village Voice but now writes primarily for two online outfits, the Barnes & Noble Review and MSN, while Maria Popova created a job for herself as founder and editor of the website Brain Pickings, where she mashes up aspects of criticism and curation. The complementary and sometimes combative roles of critic and curator are also the subject of the essay by Paola Antonelli, senior curator in MoMA's Department of Architecture and Design, who writes about the critical reception of the Museum of Modern Art's controversial recent acquisition of 14 video games. Julia Keller, a 1998 Nieman Fellow and 2005 Pulitzer winner for feature writing, addresses another creative nexus: her dual identity as novelist and book critic.

Many blame crowdsourced review sites for crowding out the voices of professionals. But Kimberly D. Kleman, editor in chief of Consumer Reports, describes how she uses user reviews to extend and enhance her staff's rigorous reporting and testing. And our profile of Pulitzer Prize-winning architecture critic and current Nieman Fellow Blair Kamin explores how he schooled Harvard students in the critical thinking skills we all need, as consumers and as citizens. Finally, John Lahr, longtime drama critic for The New Yorker, makes a passionate argument for the critic as cultural caretaker.

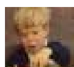
T.S. Eliot described criticism as the "instinctive activity of the civilized mind." As we trust our cover stories show, criticism's condition is critical—to informing and inspiring the public and to keeping our cultural conversations alive.

CONCISION AND CLARITY

REFLECTIONS ON THE ART OF WRITING WELL ABOUT MUSIC



ROBERT CHRISTGAU AND
BRETT ANDERSON



Rock criticism was not a profession, much less an art, when Robert Christgau returned to New York after graduating from Dartmouth College in 1962, at the age of 20. The son of a Queens fireman would go on to do more than anyone to change that.

A string of freelance gigs ultimately led to a staff job at The Village Voice, where Christgau worked from 1974 to 2006. His Rock&Roll& essays read like street dispatches filtered through the mind of an insurgent, slang-spouting academic, setting the agenda for an influential wing of rock criticism that regarded pop music as a portal to provocative intellectual inquiry.

Even more influential were Christgau's Consumer Guide columns, each comprised of pressurized, letter-graded capsule reviews that articulate—and, at their best, simulate—the excitement of the music itself.

Christgau, now 70, sat down with current Nieman Fellow Brett Anderson, restaurant critic and feature writer for The (New Orleans) Times-Picayune, at his East Village apartment to discuss his career and the state of the profession he helped create. A full transcript and video of their conversation is online at www.niemanreports.org. Edited excerpts follow:

PHOTOS BY BRAD DECECCO

BRETT ANDERSON: *Bob, if we could open with you talking a little bit about how you started in this business. There's an assumption, perhaps not entirely unfair among outsiders, that people get into rock criticism because they want to hang out with rock stars.*
ROBERT CHRISTGAU: That is the last thing that has ever interested me. And once I was sufficiently powerful/autonomous, because I wasn't ever really powerful, to stop doing profiles and interview pieces, I stopped doing them. It was partly just that whole hanging out lifestyle has never really appealed to me. I prefer being at home with my wife or, as [critic] Dave Hickey said, standing up in the back and telling everybody what I saw. I prefer to work as a fan. Now, of course, I'm not a fan. I have all kinds of access, all kinds of expertise, and I spend 15 hours of my day listening to music, which very few fans who are employed can possibly do or want to do. It's too much, actually, but I can do it. My test for when I write about a record is when I get that feeling in my belly that says, 'Ooh, this is really good. Ooh, I really like that one.' And if it doesn't happen, then in my view, the record is not good enough to write about.

What was the idea for the Consumer Guide?
The idea was that there is more product, let's call it, than there is space and time to write about it. This is high hippie era and the hippie movement was anti-consumption. So I decided I would call this column where I did these capsule reviews of records the Consumer Guide. And that I would do another thing that hippies weren't supposed to do and offer letter grades at a time when pass/fail was at its peak.

And both these things were quite specifically intended to get in the face of my supposed confrères in the counterculture. It was just a way to be contrarian. But it was also to acknowledge the breadth of what was there, and that has always been my interest. The idea of any record I give an "A" or above to is that, should I need to, there's enough there that I can sit there and write 1,500 words detailing it. That content is not necessarily on the surface or the reason that we listen to the record. It underlies the record.

And the first thing I care about is the brute sensual pleasure of hearing the music, which usually involves enjoyable, obviously enjoyable, surface enjoyable melodies. This has become an extremely disreputable notion in this century. I would say that most serious critics now believe that what is called an earworm [a piece of music that you can't get out of your head] is a bad thing. I like earworms.

This notion that you were going to write that short: You kind of stumbled onto a style here. Is that fair to say?
When I was first interested in journalism, I would read the Herald Trib. There were always these bits columnists; you know, witty little anecdotes about famous people, that's usually what it was. The Herald Tribune in particular really encouraged people to write with some style. And I always thought that was cool. So, the notion of trying to be epigrammatic? No, that was fine with me. Those early Consumer Guides are on my site (www.robertchristgau.com), God help me, and I'm not especially proud of the writing in them. Because I still had this attitude, 'You're paying me 40 bucks? To hell with you.'

Could you talk a little bit about how editing a critic might be different than

{ Circa 'Let It Be,' Bob Stinson's guitar was a loud, unkempt match for Paul Westerberg's vocal, only he'd juice the notes with a little something extra and probably wrong, defining a band whose idea of inspiration was crashing into a snow bank and coming out with a six-pack. }

–Review of "Don't Tell a Soul" by The Replacements, The Village Voice, 1989

editing other types of journalists?
I actually don't think it is any different, so I can't do that.

Well, expand on that.
Because I think the idea is always to help the writer say what he or she wants to say as well as possible. That usually means that you let them have their own ideas. But if the ideas are patently contradictory or, in some cases, unfactual or just too stupid to abide, then you find every soft adjective, every cliché. If you see a way to say in 12 words what that person has taken 16 to say, reversing clauses or taking out a passive … Concision, always concision and clarity, even though some people would read my knottier sentences and say, What are you talking about?

What guidance can you give young people who want to become rock critics, knowing they also have to pay rent?
My professional guidance to rock critics, since before the Internet, was: Don't become one. It's a useful thing to tell people because the ones that really don't want to will fall by the wayside, and the ones who do want to will defy you and get better anyway. Of course, I'm being somewhat comic. I wasn't quite that absolute. But this is a very hard way to make a living, that's what I would tell people, especially if you want to write well, because the good stuff is getting squeezed out. And it far precedes the Internet, but the Internet just put wheels on it.

Talk about the process.
I got to do what I did because I got into the field before anybody could tell me I was wrong. I wanted to write really well. I wanted to write like myself. I wanted to have a lot of ideas. I'm interested in ideas. Some say I'm a public intellectual, but I'm not a highbrow, so...

You don't consider yourself a highbrow?
No. I don't think I have those credentials. I haven't read enough. I don't know enough. I read a lot, but I don't read as much as Harold Bloom. So I got to do all of this kind of weird stuff, and I got to be very political. I've always been very straightforwardly left leaning/leftist in my criticism. I make moral judgments. I moralize, which you're not supposed to do. I do it, as well as being sometimes very unkind, vulgar, highbrow in diction. I use academic words, and I say 'fuck' a lot. At the Voice, I could do both of those things. Most places, you can't do either. I always did what I believe artists should do. Why is popular culture good? Is it good because the formulas are good? Well, sometimes the formulas are useful. However, formulas tend to be deadening. What usually happens in the best art is that somebody pushes the formula in some way, the envelope, as is now the cliché. I always kept my eye on people who I felt were working within the form but stretching the form. I thought that was the ideal for myself as well. Push the formula.

Of criticism?
Of criticism. Do what you can. Get away with what you can. I do a lot with tone. I sometimes assume a vulgar tone, just to piss people off. Or to juxtapose it with something entirely different.

I just got back from South Africa. I did a lot of driving around there, and when the road got long, my wife would read to me. One of the things I asked her to read to me was your piece about Paul Simon's "Graceland" from 1986.
Oh, I'm so touched.

And as it happens, she loves Paul Simon. "The Indestructible Beat of Soweto" is one of the best pieces of music I ever heard, and it's thanks to you I got turned onto it as a teenager. And so she read me this piece about "Graceland" that you wrote. And in it, you interviewed Paul Simon and at least a dozen people who were associated with South Africa in some way who might have an opinion. The amount of effort that went into that was very obvious.
It was a reported piece, a reported critical piece. I'm a political person. So if I'm going to write directly about a political subject, that is something I'm going to take very seriously, indeed. I don't believe in mouthing off. I believe in doing your research. I'm really not one of these spouters. I'm never going to be on Twitter, ever.

Why not?
Because I don't spout, because I rewrite. And Twitter is not a rewriter's medium. It's a place where people say stupid things.

Twitter offers a segue into talking about the economics of journalism and how it affects critics. I'm ensconced at Harvard this year around a lot of conversations about business models. You can find people who will argue this particular period of time in journalism is a good thing for journalists, for journalism, for readers. And the reason would be ...
Oh, really? They think that the market should get what it wants. OK. No.

The market should not get what it wants?
No, the market exists to be fucked with. When I say push the envelope, when I say push the parameters, when I say pop forms are good for people, that's the market, right? So what do I do with the Consumer Guide? I gave them, early on, brevity and some laughs. That was the idea. What did I get to do? I get to tell people that their favorite artist was full of shit. I got to express ideas that were not popular ideas. And I was working in a newspaper [The Village Voice] which at that time was conceived to do that very thing, to serve a market, get advertising, but put out provocative and unconventional opinions. Moreover, what publishers are there to do is to tell you what the market wants. What editors are there to do is to protect you from publishers, and try to get you to do good work. Then there's also the question of advertising, and the limitations of basing your journalistic business model on selling advertising. That's the way the Internet has really killed us.

But the other way the Internet has killed us is that it has reduced the value of the written word, the cash value of the written word, because there are more of them and because there are certain people who are so eager to spout that they will happily do so for free or almost nothing. While many of them are crap, that doesn't mean they are not going to siphon off a great many readers. Most people who buy the newspaper do not buy it to read the movie reviews. That has never been true.

So why should publishers publish criticism if people don't buy the publications to read criticism?
Because they care about good writing. I work for the Barnes & Noble Review these days, and Barnes & Noble used to be a bête noire among book lovers because they were killing the independent bookstore. I'm a socialist. But does that mean I think capitalism is bad? No. I always tell my socialist friends rock 'n' roll would not have happened without capitalism. It is a capitalist form, and it's [one of] the best things about capitalism. Being socialist doesn't mean there's nothing good about capitalism, far from it. But I will tell you one thing I really like about capitalism: The people who make things and really care about what they make. And the guy who owns Barnes & Noble cares about books. Similarly, the people who own magazines and newspapers should care about words.

When you're writing your Consumer Guide or Expert Witness reviews, beyond turning people onto cool, new music, what are you trying to do?
Well, the main thing I'm trying to do is to write well. That's number one.

> { Just how much American myth can be crammed into one song, or a dozen, about asking your girl to come take a ride? A lot, but not as much as romanticists of the doomed outsider believe ... If 'She's the One' fails the memory of Phil Spector's innocent grandeur, well, the title cut is the fulfillment of everything 'Be My Baby' was about and lots more. }
>
> –Review of "Born to Run" by Bruce Springsteen, The Village Voice, 1975

Which means you're entertaining and stimulating people.
That's right, and pleasing myself. I like to look back on my own reviews and say, 'Oh, that was a good line.'

You do read your own stuff?
Absolutely. It's good. Why not? It reminds me of what I can do. It reminds me of things I thought that I forgot. It's very useful sometimes. It can really be inspirational, too, when you're stuck on something.

Yeah, I do that. A lot of criticism that I read, that I don't find as enlightening as I'd like it to be, it's personal, but it's only personal, and there's nothing else to it.
Yes. There's a lot of that. That's definitely a blog-era phenomenon. It's not that it didn't exist before, but it's the lingua franca of the blog era.

Talk a little bit about how you use the personal in writing, without tipping over into this phenomena you're talking about. I reread a piece you did about Thelonious Monk back in '09, about writing about first listening to "Misterioso."
That's a good one, but that one was exceptional in that respect. It began with a few tales from my youth. I don't usually do that. With jazz, I feel a necessity to deflate my authority a little bit. It's the reason I began with those personal things, because I know I don't have the authority in jazz.

In any case, what do I tell people? First, figure out what records you really like, then figure out why you really like them, both of which are difficult things to do. Not what you *should* like, not why you *should* like it. What is it that's actually giving you pleasure about this record? I've got to get that feeling in my stomach before I go to the next place. What gave you that feeling in your stomach? Then figure out a way to explain that clearly. Now, none of that answers your question. That sounds like it's completely personal. So what's the answer? In the case of an artist who is not familiar, you have an obligation to situate that artist in the world. That's especially true with world music, but it's true with a lot of young bands. You want to know where they come from, how many of them there are, what they play.

Writing a capsule could take a long time. Sometimes, it just sort of comes to you. You sit there, and you wait, and you listen, and you listen, until some detail or word or turn of phrase or joke that's new, that's original to this specific instance, comes to your mind, and you build off of that. Usually, you need two to make a capsule. If you care about good writing, and you've reviewed 13,000 records in your life, you want to try...

Is that where your number is?
Yeah, it's somewhere over 13,000. You want to try not to repeat yourself, and that obliges you to find a different way to express something. My guess is that impression you get of my objectivity is partly tied up in that need to specify.

There are many more hours of music released in a year than there are hours in a year. How do you, as a critic, budget your time wisely under these circumstances?
For one thing, I don't listen to singles. I'm not interested in Web-based music, except insofar as it's recommended to me, so that I only write about CDs that I actually get in the mail or that reading about them encourages me to download from Rhapsody and put on my Sansa player and play and then decide it's good enough to go buy. I don't do what the MP3 bloggers do. And I don't have this daily need to find a song I love to pieces and will forget existed three days later.

Can you talk a little bit about how age impacts your work? Rock 'n' roll is considered a young man's game.
It's not. An enormous number of really good records are being made by people over 50, 60 and even 70. Because it was once the music of youth, it is now the only popular music that I know of that's ever really addressed aging as a major issue in one's life, the only one. It's not the music of youth. In fact, for various formal reasons, good records by people under 30 are becoming more and more unusual. That's because, I think, the creative part of that subculture is caught in the contrarian mindset to which I referred before, and is making stuff that isn't something else. And that's a much harder way to make something good. Not impossible, but harder. Not a good place to start, with the negative.

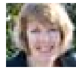
Can you ever imagine being alive and not reviewing records?
Sure.

You can?
Absolutely. If somebody isn't going to pay me, I'm going to stop. And somebody will stop paying me eventually, I assume, maybe, probably.

You've got 15 hours a day of listening to music. You write seven days a week. Do you think it's a reasonable thing to expect that someone else would follow in your footsteps?
No, I don't see how. My fear about criticism in general is that it's gonna turn into an amateur's game again, the gentleman amateur. The original critics were gentlemen amateurs. And that really sends me. I think it should be a job. I think you should get paid for it. And I think that you get different kinds of people when you get gentlemen amateurs, with different standards. I think you're better off with an editor. I think you're better off with a format. For all the problems I have with the way the dailies do things, I think it's something to stretch against and to try and figure out how to do right. But, you know, it's not practical. I'm very lucky. I'm fortunate. And, you know, it's quite possible that nobody will ever do anything like this again. **NR**

CONSUMER RETORTS

WHEN EVERYBODY'S A CRITIC, WHAT'S THE ROLE OF A PROFESSIONAL REVIEWER?



BY KIMBERLY D. KLEMAN

GREETINGS FROM 50 TESTING LABS HUMMING WITH SPINNING washers and dryers; illuminated with newfangled light bulbs and supersized TVs; ambrosial with the aroma of hundreds of just-baked cookies from dozens of ranges and wall ovens; chilly from the steady blast of room air conditioners; striped and splattered from assessments of paints and stains; and buzzing with trained tasters sampling chocolates or beef jerky or sparkling wine. In other words, the Yonkers, New York headquarters of Consumer Reports, which puts to the test more than 3,000 consumer products each year.

I know, I know. That sounds nothing like your newspaper, magazine, Web operation or the spare bedroom where you write your reviews. But an important lesson Consumer Reports has learned from user reviews—namely, how to use them to become stronger—is applicable to a range of professional reviewers, I believe.

You might think that an organization like ours would react in one of two predictable ways to the proliferation of user reviews you can now find for pretty much anything you want to buy:

Dismiss them as trivial and unscientific. After all, we're the organization that spends more than $7 million each year buying not only products—from Audi sports sedans to ZVOX home theater systems—but also making or buying the testing equipment and sourcing ancillary supplies.

ISTOCK

Off
Pulse
Chop
Mix
Grate
Blend
Liquefy

The latter includes cotton swatches identically stained with chocolate ice cream, grass, sebum, and other blots to assess laundry detergents; Maine Coon cat fur to test the pet-hair pickup claims of vacuums; cherry-pie filling, eggs, and tapioca we use to create the "monster mash" we paint on the innards of ovens to rate their self-cleaning claims, and much more. Compare that level of testing rigor to Concepcionz and her five-star impressions on Amazon.com of her American Standard elongated two-piece toilet: "The product arrived as described, pretty good price and it arrived very safe. ... Everything is as described and I love the product."

Fear user reviews as our nemesis, a potential assassin of the professional tester. Let's face it: Free reviews are more appealing than those you have to pay for. (For access to our ratings, you have to buy a magazine subscription or a subscription to our website.) We know that younger consumers, especially, think advice from friends or even strangers is often all they need to make buying decisions. Years from now, as those buyers grow up, will most consumers consider user reviews to be good enough for everything they buy?

Actually, I've come to the conclusion that there's room in the universe, indeed, an important place, for both personal and professional reviews. I don't pretend to understand the fine points of movie, restaurant or theater reviewing. What I know about product reviews, however, suggests that readers will pay for information they consider valuable and that you do better than anyone else. User reviews—what real consumers focus on, gripe or rave about—can help inform that coverage.

PRODUCT TESTING HAS BEEN THE backbone of Consumer Reports since its founding 77 years ago, in 1936. We're a nonprofit group, we buy every product we rate, we take no advertising from manufacturers—our founders wisely believed that our product ratings could be seen as suspect if they were sandwiched between various manufacturers ads—and so subscription sales largely fuel the revenue of our organization. (Grants and donations account for a small percentage of overall revenue.) You could say we were among the first publishers to adequately value our content.

Our immense surveys of readers, the basis of our exclusive brand reliability information, and our ratings of service providers such as hotels and cell phone carriers, are second in size only to the U.S. Census, we believe. So we've actually embraced user reviews for many decades.

In some circles, the rap on Consumer Reports is that we're dream killers. That cherry of a sports car—the one you hope to buy when you finally "arrive"? Consumer Reports says it's unreliable! That pro-style range you have your heart set on, the one the Joneses already bought? Consumer Reports says there are far better and cheaper choices!

> Is there even such a thing as an impartial user review? ... By contrast, our main concern is that our tests are fair and repeatable; we're not invested in how any particular model performs.

Our readers, however, see us differently. We work for a group of consumers—4 million print subscribers and 3.3 million Web subscribers—who some of

ISTOCK

us describe as "value enthusiasts." Many of them could afford pretty much anything, but they delight in getting a great deal for their money, not overpaying, and not falling for hype or gotchas. They also love to research what they buy.

Here's what we try our best to deliver that individual user reviews can't:

Depth of testing. When we rate a dishwasher, for example, we're comparing it to hundreds of other models we've tested the same way. For an individual user, his reference is typically only the machine he bought versus the one he's replacing. "Dutchie" from Tennessee, another Amazon reviewer, may be heartfelt in his assessment of his Amana ADB1000AWW dishwasher: "I must say truthfully that the appliance is of very good quality and performance."

Oh, Dutchie. Had you read us, you would have seen that this Amana model, while very inexpensive, is incredibly noisy, only fair for cleaning, and rock-bottom overall in our ratings of 207 machines. For a few hundred dollars more, you could have bought a Consumer Reports Best Buy from a more reliable brand. The depth and breadth of our testing, a big differentiator from other product reviewers, is the main reason millions subscribe to Consumer Reports. It's our "gold content." A fair question for reviewers of all stripes is,

Why should people read you? What does your audience value that you can do better than anyone else?

Impartiality. I'm sure the motivations of many user reviewers are aboveboard. And the idea of a national network of consumers helping consumers warms the heart of a consumer advocate like me. But you'll never really know the identity, goals or qualifications of individuals penning a review—or whether they actually own the product they're reviewing.

Is there even such a thing as an impartial user review? Your new refrigerator either met or exceeded your expectations (which can be quite low, if the appliance you're replacing is decades old), and so you LOVE it. Or it didn't, in which case you HATE it. By contrast, our main concern is that our tests are fair and repeatable; we're not invested in how any particular model performs.

Takeaway advice. Professional reviews like ours give you guidance. "The new Cuisinart costs more than many toasters, but its solid performance and sleek design might be worth the investment, especially if you plan to use it every day," we noted about the $80 CPT-420 model.

A high price gets you nowhere, however, when it comes to the $107,850 Fiskar Karma luxury sedan, which was "plagued with flaws," according to our review. "Compared with other luxury sedans, its tight confines and limited visibility can make the cabin feel claustrophobic; a lack of conventional buttons and the worst touch-screen system we've seen make the dash controls an ergonomic disaster; and acceleration lacks the oomph you'd expect from a sports car."

If you rely only on user reviews to make your purchases, you're on your own to figure out how to synthesize dozens of discordant comments. Does one super-negative review annul numerous glowing squibs? Do 10 positive reviews mean a product is likely worth buying?

Granted, there's much less to lose when you're seeking counsel from users about everyday products that cost a few bucks, rather than big-ticket appliances, electronics or cars. And for sure, they can be hilarious to read. (The Consumer Reports review of the very good Oh Boy Oberto Original beef jerky noted that it's "a tad spicy, with well-blended smoke, brown sugar, garlic, and fruit flavors." Antimattercrusader's Amazon review of the brand's thin style jerky: "Omg … this stuff is an orgasm in a bag.") But even for reviews of small-potatoes products, it can be tedious to wade through scores of comments.

That said, user reviews can be a real boon to professional testers like Consumer Reports, and we encourage readers to share their experiences with us. (You have to be a subscriber to post a review on Consumer Reports.org, and only subscribers can see them. That doesn't eliminate the chances a reviewer isn't who she says she is, but the bar is somewhat higher than with anyone-can-post reviews.)

A key way we've been helped by user reviews is that they flag problems with products our testing didn't uncover. We often can't test models long enough in our labs for durability concerns to emerge.

Moreover, consumers collectively have many more samples of a product than we test, and the size of the group can help unearth problems. That was the case several years ago with the Braun PowerMax MX2050, a blender we rated highly. Then we heard from a dozen readers that the plastic gear-tooth assembly was prone to breaking. So we developed a tougher test and encountered the same problem with the blender model that our readers experienced. Bottom line: The manufacturer gave consumers a free replacement blade and gear assembly and vowed to fix the problem. We kept testing, and a new Braun PowerMax MX2050 became a Consumer Reports Best Buy. So consumers' voices improved the marketplace.

We regularly review our subscribers' reviews. I encourage other reviewers to do the same, not to pander to their readers, but to understand what matters to them and to ensure that you address their questions and concerns.

For example, when there's a significant gap between our overall score for a product and the average score our subscribers gave it in user reviews, we investigate whether our readers are on to a potential problem.

Readers' comments also help us plan tests, so that we're addressing real-world consumer insights and concerns, and making our ratings all the more relevant. In the future, we hope to be able to synthesize the wider world of online user reviews into our product research.

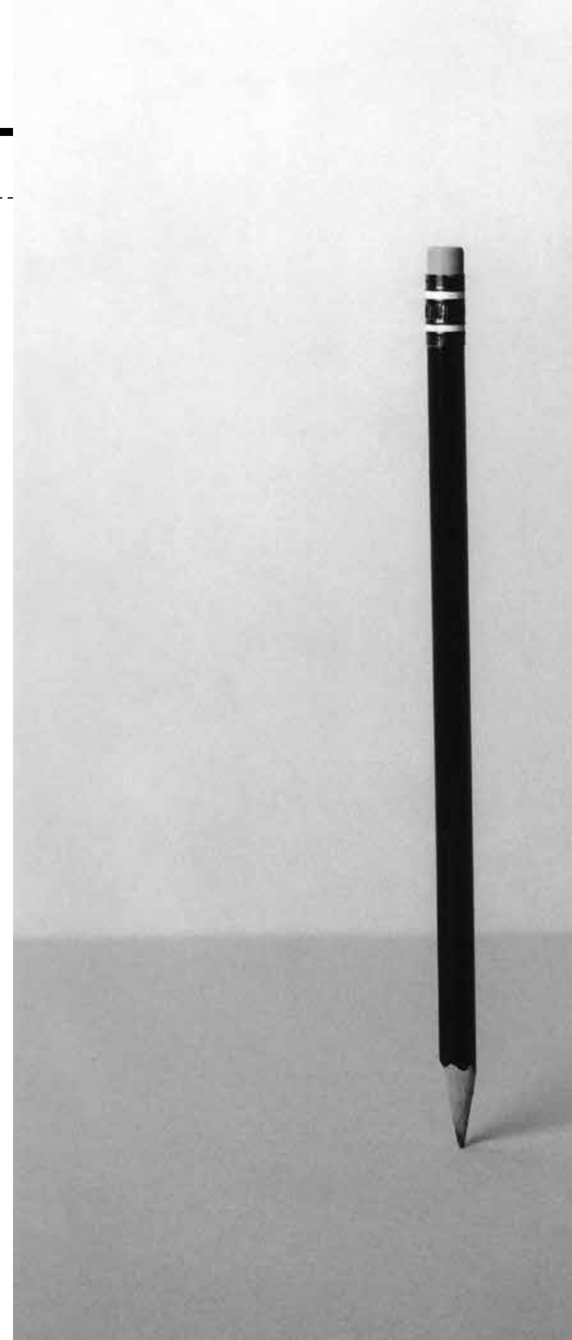
All of which is to say that, yes, I'm banking quite a lot on the ongoing and much needed role of the professional reviewer. Ironically, for the smartest professionals, that role will be cemented in part by user reviews, which they'll use to help define and refine their unique value to readers to better offer reviews that matter.

__Kimberly D. Kleman__ is the editor in chief of Consumer Reports magazine and an adjunct associate professor at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism. She lives in Pleasantville, New York, in a home replete with Consumer Reports Best Buy appliances.

THE REVIEWER REVIEWED

A CRITIC-TURNED-NOVELIST EXPLORES THE BORDERS BETWEEN JOURNALISM AND FICTION

BY JULIA KELLER



In "The Blue Cross," a 1911 short story about a canny detective and a wily crook, G.K. Chesterton serves up a nifty analogy: "The criminal is the creative artist; the detective only the critic." Like so much of Chesterton's work, that line first made me smile. Then it made me think.

In fact, it made me think entirely too much about a subject I'd come to dread: the difference between writing fiction and critiquing it. Between participant and onlooker. Between creator and critic. When I came across Chesterton's story in an anthology I'd unearthed in a used bookstore, it made me stop in my reading-tracks. If you re-read the line I quoted at the outset, you will note Chesterton's deft insertion of the word "only." *Only* the critic. A lesser status is definitely implied. And Chesterton—a writer of marvelous mysteries as well as an eloquently incisive literary critic and biographer—ought to know.

For a dozen years, until the fall of 2012, I was a critic at the Chicago Tribune. I wrote a weekly literary column, along with book reviews and cultural essays. I loved my job.

But as much as I appreciated my job as a critic, I was aware, in the back of my mind, of the distracting presence of a small tendril of dissatisfaction, unfurling just a tiny bit more each day. Because my original ambition had been quite different: I had dreamed of being a writer, not a critic. I wanted to produce my own books—not evaluate other people's books.

As a 10-year-old growing up in Huntington, West Virginia, I'd hoarded old notebooks and stubs of pencils and, when nobody was looking, huddled in a far corner of the living room and wrote my own mystery series, one that featured a cool, resourceful detective named Christopher Lee Carson. His adventures had titles such as "The Clue of the Card Tip" and "The Clue of the Caller's Whistle."

Once I grew up and faced the depressing necessity of getting a paying job, that job turned out to be journalism. I had eagerly read biographies of authors—Charles Dickens, Ernest Hemingway, Katherine Anne Porter, Thornton Wilder—who used journalism as a springboard into fiction writing, and thus it seemed promising. Newspaper work offered glimpses into lives other than one's own, and it taught you how to write amid distractions. Somewhere along the way, the profession I had always regarded as a temporary stopgap, a way station, an interlude, became a career. My career.

Last August I published my first adult fiction novel, a mystery titled "A Killing

PHOTO BY FREDRIK BRODEN

in the Hills" (Minotaur), the first in a series featuring a single mother who returns to her West Virginia hometown to combat the scourge of prescription drug abuse. And then, with trepidation but also with an ever hopeful heart, I sat back to await the reviews. After having written about other people's books for so long, now I was the one whose book would be written about.

Perhaps, at this point, you are expecting to hear that my novel was critically savaged and that the most important lesson I learned was to respect writers' tender feelings in my future reviews, and to resist the flinging-about of clever putdowns in lieu of thoughtful analysis.

That's not what happened. "A Killing in the Hills" garnered starred reviews from all four major reviewing services—Publishers Weekly, Library Journal, Kirkus Reviews, and Booklist—and the evaluations in newspapers and magazines were, for the most part, fair, thorough, and gracefully written. I've been very pleased.

The lesson was something else entirely, a lesson that may sound trivial, but isn't. For years, I had ridiculed the notion of "spoiler alerts" in book, movie and TV reviews. Then I wrote a novel, one with several hairpin turns—and not just because it's set in the mountains of West Virginia. To my frustration and disappointment, a few spoilsports revealed these surprises in "reviews" that were mere plot summaries. I'd wanted my readers to be entertained; a novel, like life, ought to contain a few elements that you just don't see coming. And these killjoys had robbed my readers of the simple pleasure of a jolt of surprise.

Aside from laziness—it's far easier to write a plot summary than to write a genuine critique—why do some critics give away the goods? Hubris, I think, is a big part of it. I know from experience that the foremost temptation for critics is to believe they are not "just" readers, that they are the creative equal of those whose works they judge. This isn't to say that critics are egomaniacs (although some certainly are); it is to acknowledge the great challenge of maintaining a careful balance between writing with authority and confidence—and not doing what my West Virginia relatives call "rising above your raising," i.e., getting the big head. To be passionate but not pigheaded is a tricky business.

What may cure this annoying minority of critics who write reviews that read more like high school book reports is—perversely—the same entity that threatens to destroy criticism as a profession: the Internet. The proliferation of online reviews—and the increasing quality thereof—has been chipping away at the hegemony of the so-called establishment critic. And competition is a terrific taskmaster. If readers get ticked off, they have lots of other choices these days.

Yet the initial response of many newspaper arts editors to the challenge posed by the Internet consisted of little more than false bravado and ignorance-based disdain. Had these editors understood earlier just how online reviews would upend the traditional relationship between audiences and the creative products that people want to know about, the current dismal plight of newspapers might be—if not exactly rosy—then at least not quite so dire. In the present environment, where the best and freshest and most intriguing reviews often can be found in blogs, no newspaper critic should harbor any illusions about her or his indispensability.

Nowadays I teach and write novels full time, but I still supply the occasional book review to the Tribune and other publications. Indeed, many of my literary idols also found themselves going back and forth betwixt journalism and fiction. Some of our best novelists were—and are—also some of our best critics, such as Virginia Woolf, John Updike, Iris Murdoch, Robertson Davies, John Banville, Cynthia Ozick, Thomas Mallon, Joyce Carol Oates, and Zadie Smith.

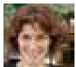
Should every book critic publish a book, in order to know what it's like on the other side? Well, no. I do believe, however, that it might behoove critics to look up from their laptops every now and again to remind themselves that works of art have lives independent of critics. Movie critics should see movies outside of advance screenings. Book critics should hang out in bookstores.

Publishing a novel, I like to think, has made me a better book critic. Perhaps that shouldn't be a surprise; as Chesterton himself would hasten to remind us, hooking a chubby thumb in his vest pocket and lifting a bushy eyebrow, crooks make the best detectives.

***Julia Keller**, a 1998 Nieman Fellow, teaches writing at Ohio University in Athens, Ohio.*

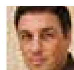
MINIMIZE DESCRIPTION MAXIMIZE OBSERVATION

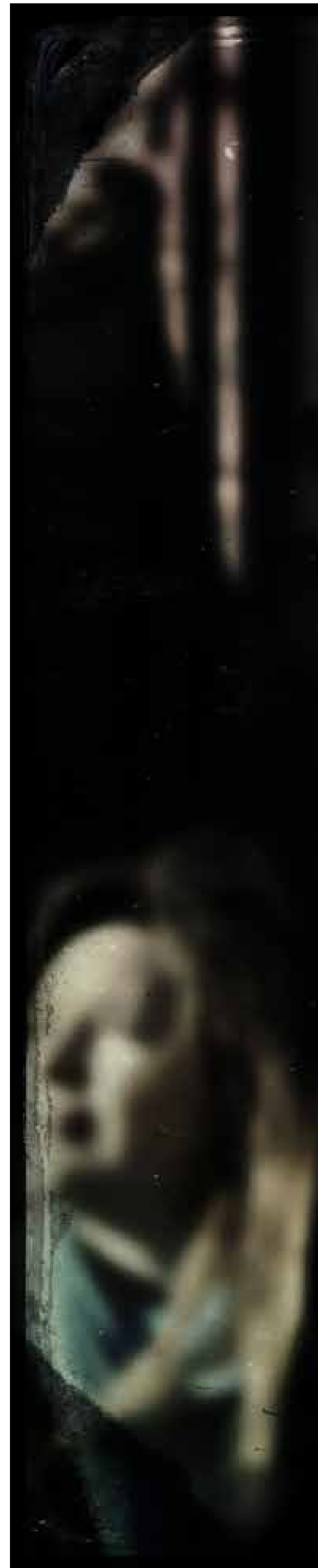
PULITZER-WINNER BLAIR KAMIN SCHOOLS HARVARD STUDENTS IN THE ART OF ARCHITECTURE CRITICISM



BY DINA KRAFT

PHOTOGRAPHS BY FINBARR O'REILLY





BLAIR KAMIN, THE PULITZER Prize-winning architecture critic for the Chicago Tribune and a current Nieman Fellow, once described architecture—for better or worse—as the "inescapable art." One can avoid the play, film or restaurant a critic just trashed, he argued, but not our built surroundings.

And at Harvard nothing is as architecturally present as the iconic gates that surround the Yard. Kamin calls them "the architectural DNA" of the university. With "Rate the Gates," a one-week course that he co-taught at Harvard this past January, his aim was to instruct students how to think and write like a critic.

"In the Internet age, everybody, it would seem, is a critic because everyone has the capacity to express an opinion and post it on the Web, via a comment box or a blog. This shift presents a challenge to traditional critics from the pre-digital age. Why should their voice

count more than other voices? Are they out-of-touch elitists? How should they assert authority?" said Kamin.

Criticism starts with close scrutiny. On the first day of class, Kamin took the students on a tour. "Just stop a second and look at the play of light on this floral medallion and imagine someone getting this piece of wrought iron and hammering that out," said Kamin, gazing up at the Class of 1886 Gate on the northwestern edge of the Yard.

A foundation of facts must be amassed before a strong critique can be built. "The story does not start with you," Kamin told the students that first day in preparation for the two essays they were required to write for the course. Research begins with old-fashioned digging, he instructed them, not only for backstories that help breathe life into the writing, but also as a way to understand the design ideas behind architecture. "Don't just review the gate," Kamin wrote in a message to the class. "Review the idea *behind* the gate. That's the *substance* of criticism."

Melissa Simonetti, a graduate student of design at Harvard, wrote in her essay on the Class of 1877 Gate, also known as the Morgan Gate, next to Widener Library, that it appears too grand for its location on a busy hub of Massachusetts Avenue. In her research she discovered why: Architects originally planned a boulevard leading from the Charles River to the Yard. She put that incongruity into perspective in her essay, comparing it to viewing Berlin's Brandenburg Gate without the Unter Den Linden, the graceful boulevard that leads to it. Simonetti's essay adhered to what Kamin told the class: "Your job is to minimize description and maximize observation."

In teaching about observation, Kamin noted that architecture critics don't just observe with their eyes. They use their ears to listen to the users of buildings and learn how they interact with the space, sometimes in unexpected ways.

Two fellow Niemans from the 2013 class co-taught with Kamin. Finbarr O'Reilly, a Reuters photographer, taught students about composing photos of the gates that accompanied their essays. These critiques were written with the help of Jeneen Interlandi, a magazine writer and the class writing coach.

Kamin engages in "activist criticism," a term coined by Allan Temko, the late Pulitzer-Prize winning architecture critic at the San Francisco Chronicle. Temko disparaged an America being ruined, he said, by strip malls and soul-less subdivisions. Known for his acid-pen descriptions of structures he loathed, he managed to force the hand of city officials and architects to redesign, as Kamin once noted, "everything from Bay Area bridges to cathedrals to office buildings."

Kamin described to students how in his own work he, like Temko did, evaluates building plans long before construction starts. "In other words," he said, "before it's too late." The watchdog role, as someone who "protects the public,"

Harvard's massive Bacon Gate, far left, contrasts with the delicate ironwork of the Holworthy Gate, left and above, a major entryway to the Yard.

is an important one for a critic, he said. In fact, he added, there is a long line of activist architecture critics who made bold calls and influenced how cities look and work as public spaces. Foremost among these is the late Ada Louise Huxtable, who in 1970 won the first Pulitzer Prize awarded for criticism.

Kamin's most controversial columns centered on Chicago's Lakefront, what he calls "the sacrosanct point of pride in the city." In a 1998 series of articles, he linked the decrepit swaths of the Lakefront with a policy of neglect in areas that were mostly poor and black. And those articles certainly lit political fires.

Some 15 years after the series was published and after the years of pestering and prodding that followed, there has been an investment of millions of dollars and dramatic changes, with a brand-new marina, restaurants, playgrounds and better bike paths. "It's now what it should be, a mixing chamber where people of different backgrounds can share the same space, something rare in our increasingly polarized world," Kamin said.

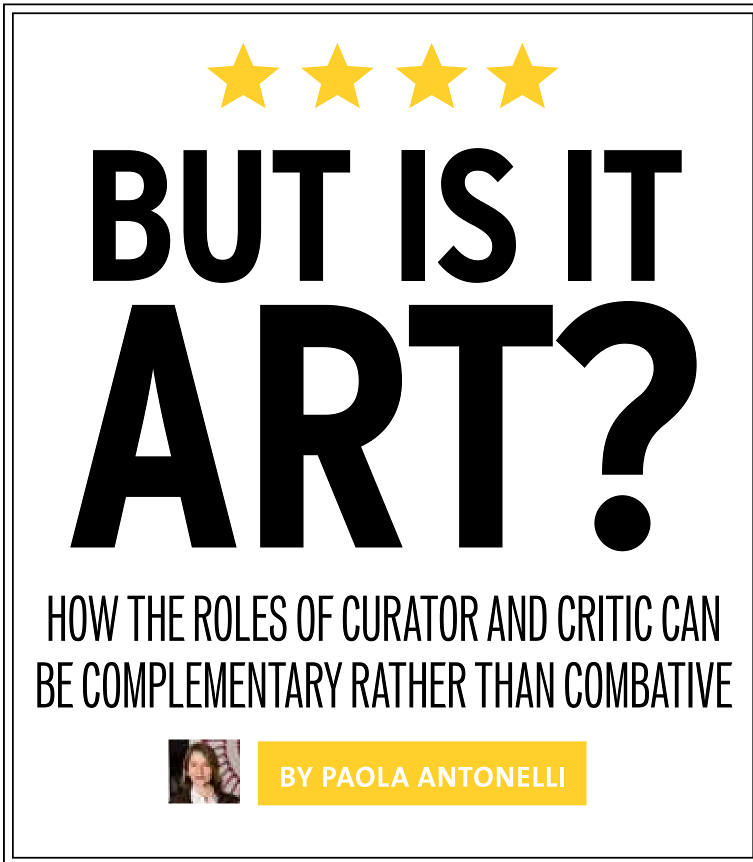
He was an outspoken critic of the renovation of Soldier Field stadium, home of the Chicago Bears, from the early debate about the plan to the project's completion in 2003. He derided plans to put a tall modern seating bowl inside the classical building, arguing that it would be out of character and out of scale with its surroundings. He suggested the stadium be built elsewhere and in the process got his share of hate mail.

Colorful writing is part of a critic's arsenal and in Kamin's battle to halt the stadium's reconstruction he came up with some entertaining names for the project including, "The Eyesore on the Lake Shore" and "Klingon meets Parthenon." While he lost the war to stop the stadium, he won a smaller battle when the federal government stripped the new Soldier Field of its National Historic Landmark status.

Heeding the class lesson that arts criticism must be forcefully and passionately written and with an eye to change, Lily Sugrue, a 19-year-old freshman, offered a compelling argument for the reopening of the Class of 1870 Gate, which has long been locked. She compared it to the locked portal of Frances Hodgson Burnett's children's classic, "The Secret Garden": "It is the gate that could use a little Mary Lennox of its own to breathe some life back into it."

Sugrue's call to open the gate along with other student suggestions have been sent for Harvard officials to review. Their careers as activist critics have begun.

***Dina Kraft**, a 2012 Nieman Fellow, is a recovering foreign correspondent, based most recently in Tel Aviv.*



BUT IS IT ART?

HOW THE ROLES OF CURATOR AND CRITIC CAN BE COMPLEMENTARY RATHER THAN COMBATIVE

BY PAOLA ANTONELLI

NOT LONG AGO, I PUBLISHED A post on the MoMA website announcing the acquisition in the museum's collection of the first 14 video games. I tweeted it and then went about my business. The post has received some 200 comments and my words have been retweeted 500+ times.

My colleagues and I knew that MoMA anointing video games would provoke a stir. We had been using peculiar criteria to appreciate video games not as popular and historical artifacts or as animation and illustration masterpieces, but rather as interaction design, a fairly obscure new discipline concerning the communication between humans and machines.

In the name of interaction design, we had left out some enormously successful titles, and we were aware of how touchy avid gamers can be when you pass on their favs. Also, we expected that several embarrassingly out of touch individuals—I could bet you, some card-carrying critics among them—would thunder against the heresy of considering video games Art. We were expecting pushback, gratuitous criticism, and a good dose of snark. We were pleasantly surprised instead by the constructive debate.

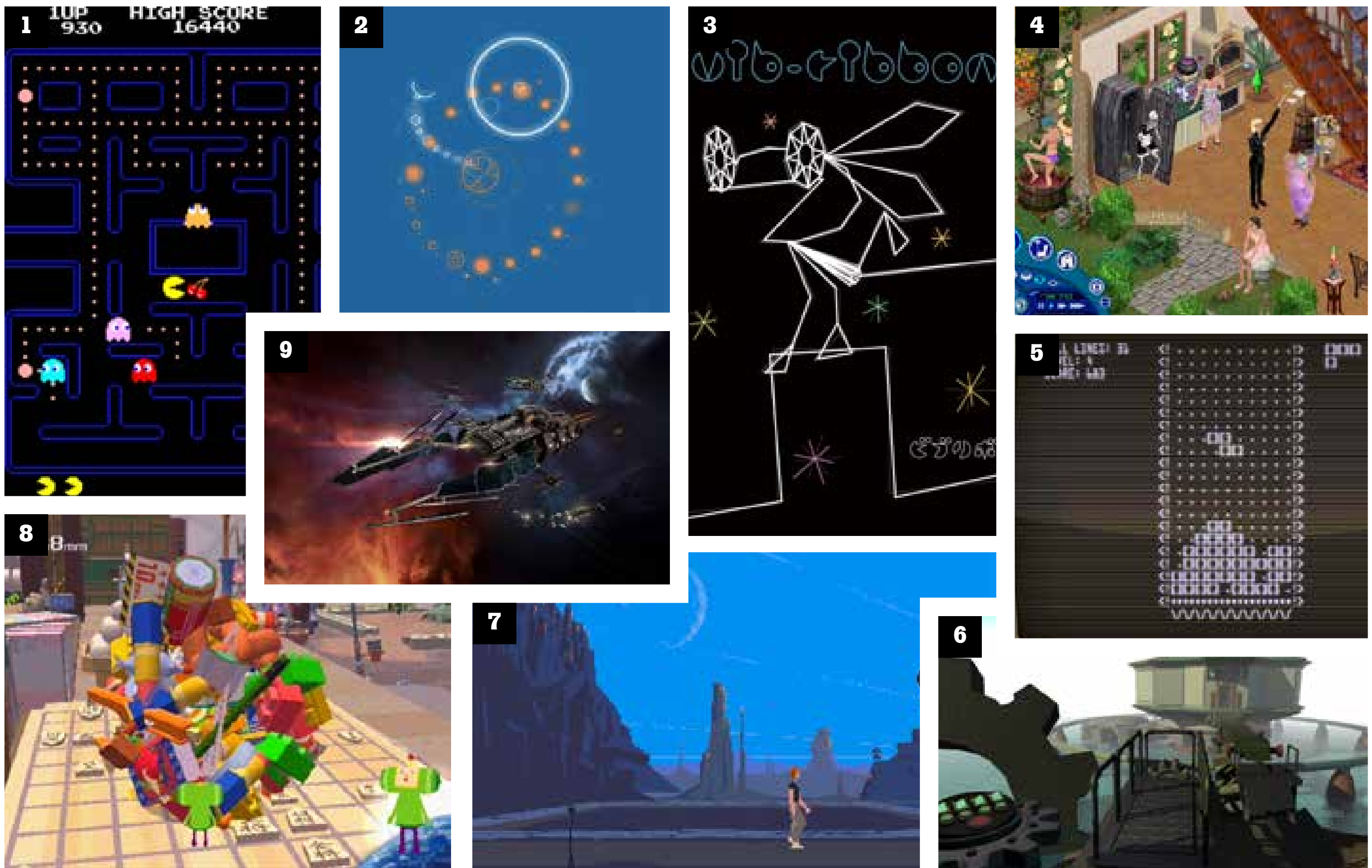
Writing in Wired.com, graphic designer and author John Maeda heroically stood up for us in the face of a diatribe from the Guardian's art critic Jonathan Jones. Maeda's post was followed shortly by a rebuff from the Guardian itself, in the person of Keith Stuart, a journalist covering the video-game industry. Curators—like artists, directors, and choreographers—receive critics' valiant efforts to make the world a better place, even though they often feel the world might be better without certain curators, artists, directors and choreographers. It is easy to think of some critics as birds of prey who gratuitously undercut the creative efforts of others. Some of them feel their official role is to thunder, and they sometimes get so boxed in inside their prisons of negativity and personal taste that they become caricatures rather than critics.

There is, however, great respect for those critics who have the courage to make themselves vulnerable, as some do when they go out on a limb for what they believe. That is when they become creative authors themselves.

We consider it our duty as design curators in a major museum of modern art to render the connection between art and life through design by selecting and displaying the best possible examples. To do that, we clearly had to expand our typological categories to include, for instance, typefaces, interfaces, Web design, film titles and, yes, even video games.

In the catalogue of a 2008 exhibition about design and science, "Design and the Elastic Mind," I wrote "designers stand between revolutions and everyday life … [They] have the ability to grasp momentous changes in technology, science, and social mores, and to convert them into objects and ideas that people can actually understand and use." Museums are providers of functional theory. Museums that tackle design, in particular, exist to preserve selected objects that together will build a consistent ensemble and support and communicate a strong idea. Exemplary objects are the tools that these museums use to educate the public and thus stimulate progress.

Ettore Sottsass, the great architect and designer, saw design as a way to discuss life: "It is a way of discussing society, politics, eroticism, food and even design. At the end, it is a way of building up a possible figurative utopia or metaphor about life." Since design in all its forms has a tremendous impact on everybody's life, and a better under-



A selection of video games acquired by the Museum of Modern Art's Department of Architecture and Design. 1. Pac-Man; 2. flOw; 3. vib-ribbon; 4. The Sims; 5. Tetris; 6. Myst; 7. Another World; 8. Katamari Damacy; 9. EVE Online. Photos courtesy of MoMA

standing of it will undoubtedly work to everybody's advantage, an art museum with a design collection becomes a very powerful cultural and social agent.

In this light, it is important for curators, whether they study contemporary or historical design, to be very aware of the culture within which they operate. The same is true for critics, if they really want their work to point out new, worthwhile directions, to sharpen the audience's critical tools.

Design is about people and life. It thrives on change and, as such, it is in continuous mutation. Collections are instead permanent records, or at least they used to be. Contemporary curators, however, feel compelled to reflect their time and therefore design collections that are open, their essence self-assured enough to embrace change and pluralism.

We want our practice to change as well, and we would like our museums' collections to include multimedia design and information architecture, interfaces and biomimicry, as well as examples of experimental design that project the consequences of new technologies. I personally also dream of expanding our reach even wider and celebrate even food and scents as forms of design. Our trouble, if anything, is to know when and where to stop.

We've moved relatively quickly to realize this vision. We acquired several interfaces, starting with John Maeda's 1994 Reactive Books, as well as examples of visualization design, celebrating the work of Ben Fry and Martin Wattenberg and Fernanda Viégas, among others. We have acquired 23 digital fonts and our first film title sequence, by Robert Brownjohn for Goldfinger. We also experimented with what I hope will be the first of several "impossible" acquisitions, one of which I am particularly proud: the @ sign. The @ sign crystallizes an astonishing number of the positive attributes we seek in contemporary design. If our job as curators is to present a list of objects that support an idea, we will go to any length to do so, even if these objects cannot be possessed because they are in the public domain.

The comments on our video games acquisition keep coming. We expect a second wave of discussion with the opening of the new installation of the Architecture and Design galleries featuring them. The games will be deliberately mixed with other design objects—from visualizations to furniture and safety equipment—in an exhibition entitled "Applied Design" (March 2-January 31, 2014) that highlights the extraordinary diversity and range of contemporary practice.

We are testing something new, exposing new ideas to criticism and scrutiny, trying to move us all a bit towards a deeper public understanding of design through great examples. In other words, we—curators and critics alike—are doing what we think is our job.

***Paola Antonelli** is senior curator in MoMA's Department of Architecture and Design.*

THE ILLUMINATION BUSINESS

WHY DRAMA CRITICS MUST LOOK AT AND LOOK AFTER THE THEATER

BY JOHN LAHR

LET ME POSE THE PROBLEM OF American drama criticism by quoting what passes for it nowadays. In a recent, enthusiastic review of Lincoln Center's outstanding revival of Clifford Odets's 1937 play "Golden Boy," New York magazine's current man on the aisle wrote: "There are, walking around today, whole generations of theatergoers with no firsthand experience of Clifford Odets's plays—not in-performance, anyway. Count me among 'em. Having grown up in the Jewless, right-wing suburbs of Reagan's South, I can sum up my precollege knowledge of Clifford Odets in two words: Barton Fink. … Odets himself was relegated, by academia and the marketplace both, to the artless wastes of polemic."

The reviewer proclaims his ignorance, then blithely practices it. His chirpy tone is the voice not of a critic but of a "cricket," the derogatory label theatricals sometimes apply to the critical enterprise. The writer makes noise but not meaning. He's full of energy but not information. He knows that what he's looking at is good; he just doesn't know why. He makes the reader feel his opinion, but he doesn't have the stylistic wherewithal to make the reader feel the play. His article is not criticism; it's bluffing.

Odets, far from being forgotten after his meteoric rise to fame in the late 1930s, in addition to co-authoring the outstanding film "Sweet Smell of Success" (1957), went on to write popular non-polemical plays, such as his 1950 Broadway hit "The Country Girl," which was made into a successful 1954 film with Grace Kelly and Bing Crosby, and "The Flowering Peach" (1954), which the 1955 Pulitzer drama jury reportedly favored but the Pulitzer board awarded the prize to Tennessee Williams's "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof."

Even "Golden Boy" was adapted into a musical, in 1964, which ran for more than 500 performances. Since Odets's

death, in 1963, his children have shared royalties of around $4 million, making him hardly a talent forgotten by the marketplace or the public.

The reviewer and the critic have opposite objectives. Criticism treats the play as a metaphor; it interprets it and puts it in a larger historical, psychological and theatrical context. The critic is in the illumination business; the reviewer, by contrast, provides a consumer service.

Reviewing assumes that the plot is the play; criticism, on the other hand, knows that the plot is only part of a conversation that the playwright is having about a complex series of historical and psychological issues. The job of the critic is to join that conversation, to explore the play and link it to the world. The job of the reviewer is to link the play to the box office.

A drama critic has a historical and descriptive function; his job is to look at and look after the theater; a reviewer's job is to look after the audience. With the shrinking of newspapers and the shift in cultural tastes, there is less theater coverage than ever before, and almost no drama criticism—a parlous situation that is compounded by the deplorable loose talk and lazy writing of the blogosphere.

Discussion about theater and the ideas of theatricals has all but dried up in the public arena. In the American whispering gallery, most of the people dishing out judgment about plays have no working experience of the theater. They are creative virgins. Everything they know about theater is secondhand. Most of what they have to say is cultural gas. These are the "crickets."

In criticism, there are two dramas on display: the play under examination and the mind of the critic engaged with it. In criticism, there is no right or wrong, just good argument; in the review, there is no argument at all. The drama in a review is the drama of the marketplace: Will it make money?

Once the reviewer has delivered his judgment, his job is done; there is rarely sufficient narrative vigor to continue on. Some seasons ago, for instance, the British screenwriter and playwright William Nicholson's "The Retreat from Moscow" was mounted on Broadway. The play dramatizes how destructive parents transmit the contents of their unconscious lives to their child: to me, it was a subtle and thrilling evening. Here is how The New York Times critic began his response: "Brrr. An early, unforgiving and highly symbolic winter has descended upon the stage of the Booth Theater, where a dreary domestic drama called 'The Retreat from Moscow' opened last night."

That's essentially the review. Since the writer hasn't set out the stakes of the play or the psychology of its characters, once he announces his judgment there's no more to discover. He gives the conclusion before the hypothesis. The reviewer doesn't think about what the characters are thinking; his only interest is in what he's thinking. He hasn't seen the drama, so he can make no drama out of what he's seen. He doesn't command a vocabulary; he commands a readership.

The critic's purest impulse is not to scourge or to reform but to "make an articulate noise in the world," as H.L. Mencken wrote. Although criticism may be one of the "lesser arts"—Mencken again—the critic, like any artist, has something to express; he does it through the subject he writes about. He has a personality on the page. He also has a style and a word horde. To be an intellectual entertainer, a command of vocabulary, syntax and rhythm is essential.

Theater is transient, which is its delight and its tragedy; no moment is repeatable, no performance is 'in the can.' Even the greatest stage performances and productions finally vanish. The theater's joys are collective, alchemical, elusive and spiritual, which is why writing well about it is so challenging, so important, and so rare. Criticism is the only real record of the passing show.

When criticism pays proper attention to the craft, when theatrical knowledge and literary panache coalesce, the experience can be as exhilarating as it is vivid. Take, for instance, Kenneth Tynan's pitch-perfect description of Vivien Leigh as Shakespeare's Cleopatra: "Taking a deep breath and resolutely focusing her periwinkle charm, she launches another of her careful readings: ably and passionlessly she picks her way among its great challenges, presenting a glibly mown lawn where her author had imagined a jungle."

The wit of Tynan's dissection, which is itself a bravura performance, traps a special dimension of Leigh's performing energy. You see, you learn, you are amused, and you come away with a sense of the play, the player, and the critic.

One of the impediments to improving the state of criticism today is newspaper management's fantasy of "objectivity." To protect against any claim of vested interest, a sort of institutional glass wall has been raised between the critic and the theater world. The critic must not fraternize, befriend, associate, collaborate or be involved in any way with those he reports on. This policy not only insults the notion of intellectual integrity, it dooms drama reportage to ignorance.

The idea of critic-as-objective-amateur is a bias that flies in the face of historical reality. Over the decades, the major drama critics on either side of the Atlantic have been professional practitioners, either as writers, directors or producers. They have known what they were talking about, and they've had a vivid idiom with which to express it.

"If the critic … produces a piece of writing that shows sound structure, and brilliant color, and the flash of new and persuasive ideas, and civilized manners, and the charm of an uncommon personality, then he has given something to the world that is worth having," H.L. Mencken wrote. Amen.

*For 20 years, **John Lahr** was the senior drama critic of The New Yorker, for which he still writes profiles. He is the only critic to win a Tony Award, for co-writing 2002's "Elaine Stritch at Liberty."*

SELECT, SHAPE, CELEBRATE

THE CRITIC'S CALLING IS TO ELEVATE THE GOOD AND IGNORE THE BAD

BY MARIA POPOVA

Reading criticism clogs conduits through which one gets new ideas: cultural cholesterol," Susan Sontag wrote in her diary in 1964. "In certain kinds of writing, particularly in art criticism and literary criticism, it is normal to come across long passages which are almost completely lacking in meaning," George Orwell cautioned in "Politics and the English Language." Zadie Smith lamented "the essential hubris of criticism," noting, "When I write criticism I'm in such a protected position: Here are my arguments, … here my rhetorical flourish. One feels very pleased with oneself."

Bedeviled by these pitfalls as traditional criticism might be—an echo chamber of ideas, vacant verbosity, protected preciousness—online criticism has arguably only exacerbated the issue.

But in conceiving of criticism as a value system for what is "good" or "bad," worthy or unworthy, there is another, implicit shape "criticism" can take—a celebration of the good by systematic omission of the bad. To put in front of the reader only works that are worthy, and to celebrate those with a consistent editorial standard, is to create a framework for what "good" means, and thus to implicitly outline the "bad," the unworthy, by way of negative space around the good. The celebrator then becomes a critic without being critical—at least not with the abrasive connotations the term has come to bear—yet upholds the standards of "good" and "bad" work with just as much rigor.

Despite the baggage of misuse and overuse by which the term "curation" has come to be weighed down, the nature of this type of "criticism" is thus both curatorial, in its selection of what to celebrate, and editorial, in asserting a strong and consistent point of view.

T.S. Eliot understood this curatorial, relational aspect of criticism when he observed: "No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists."

Today, this model of online criticism is, unsurprisingly, nothing new. It harks back to Marshall McLuhan, who arguably laid the groundwork for New Criticism as a foundation of media theory. By seeking to borrow, as Henry Fielding wrote, "wit or wisdom from any man who is capable of lending us either," he became a celebrator of ambient ideas with his own original editorial point of view, channeled through the curatorial selection and mashing up of these ideas.

I don't identify as a critic, for the role of the critic is to provide an analysis of the negative and the positive in a specific work, but the very etymology of the term invariably prioritizes the negative. I write about books, but I don't write reviews. I write recommendations, based on my own taste. I have no interest in putting in front of my readers books that I myself have found lacking in merit. Instead, when readers are presented with a steady stream of "good" works, over time these help develop an understanding of goodness itself, or at least of the subjective criteria for merit against which a particular writer measures works. What emerges is an osmosis of positive reinforcement and negative space through which each subsequent celebration of the worthy spurs a richer understanding of how to recognize and shield against the unworthy.

Ultimately, as E.B. White reminds us, "a writer has the duty … to lift people up, not lower them down. Writers do not merely reflect and interpret life, they inform and shape life." That is the promise of the critic-as-celebrator—to inform and shape culture by virtue of elevation.

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