

ACADEME AND DESIGN WRITING

Changes in Design Criticism

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As I'm mid-transition from journalist to academic, this seems an appropriate time and venue to reflect on some of the differences between journalistic and academic writing about design. One immediate and obvious difference is that an academic mode of inquiry tends to want to *open up* ideas for discussion, whereas the journalistic mode tends to want to *close down* the possibilities. By this I mean that the academic mode ideally seeks to propose a theory or argument about the world, usually by opening with a research question and an explicit appeal to prior arguments and evidence. The journalist, by contrast, seeks generally to explain the world using narrative tools and an implicit appeal to "common sense," which as cultural studies scholars have advised, is a set of beliefs generated and sustained by media institutions (Curran et al. 1977: 315–48). In design journalism, tastes may be challenged, but ideology is rarely scrutinized. The great irony is that much academic writing utterly fails to stimulate broader discussion whereas the

sweeping provocations and generalizations of journalistic writing often will stimulate lengthy (albeit sometimes cyclical) debate.

With acute awareness of how difficult it is to de-school oneself of a journalistic training, I will endeavor to write this short statement using research questions rather than declarative summations. That way, hopefully, the accessible style of journalistic writing can be put to the task of *inquiring* rather than *opining*.

1. What Is the Relationship between Journalistic and Academic Design Writing?

Having written countless feature articles for design magazines since 1987 (many, thankfully, forgotten), and having made occasional forays into mainstream newspaper and radio journalism before becoming a full-time academic in 2007, I would argue that the relationship between the two cultures is marked by mutual dependence and distrust. Loosely characterized, journalists view academic discourse as formalized, self-validating, and esoteric to the point that it seems designed to cut lay readers out of the discussion. At the same time, design journalists are not as far from theory as they might at first appear, often being recipients of a tertiary education and professionally required to function as cultural sponges. As Michael Rock once noted, theory is practiced by journalists and editors even when they don't know they're doing it: "The selection, description and reproduction of designed artifacts in books and magazines ... is the work of theory" (Poynor and Rock 1995).

Academics, loosely characterized, use journalistic writing as source material, the raw fodder for the writing of history and theory. Design theorists and historians scour design publications for material, along with curators of contemporary design exhibitions. But just as cartographic historians view maps as slippery, unreliable witnesses to past events (because of their inevitable partiality to power), so do academics view journalistic design writing. This is partly because design magazine writing is perceived to operate, like any specialist journalism, under the constraint of needing to support the industry it serves.

The complexities of the cozy and sometimes tense relationship between specialist journalism and its subject have been explored in cultural studies, and warrant longer discussion.¹ It seems fair to say that design journalists are not incapable of generating critical views of the professions they write about, but to date, our critical discourse is prone to sycophancy. This can be attributed to structural factors, for example, the role of the magazine's media plan to alert potential advertisers of "themes" that will be covered in future issues, in order to solicit advertising revenue based on editorial proximity. Publicists hired by those advertisers – as well as celebrity and "wannabe" celebrity designers – will relentlessly pitch story ideas to editors, some of which succeed in finding a place in the publication.

One of my own journalistic articles for *I.D. Magazine* provides an unexpected case study. A feature-length profile from 1996 of Tomato, the London-based “art and design collective,” was used by design theorist Guy Julier to support a sociocultural analysis of “high design” as what he called “apocalyptic nihilism” – played out in Tomato’s late 1990s typography. Tomato’s “simulacrum of risk, art lifestyle ... but also negation,” wrote Julier (2000: 82–4), were being played out in my article for the benefit of design students. He cited my quotation of Tomato founder John Warwicker – “We’re not easily employable” – and other examples of what he called negation: “‘The name Tomato means nothing,’ [John] Warwicker told me over coffee in the East Village. ‘You can put lots of meanings into it but there are none. A bit like our work really’” (Hall 1996). Citing Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital, and Ulrich Beck’s concept of the late Modern “risk society,” Julier noted how Tomato’s work (and attitude) seemed to be expressing an “un-meaning” while still existing within a framework of meaning-production and the parameters of the market. In design practice, wrote Julier, risk has become aestheticized: “It has become firmly entrenched into the rhetoric of high design, whether in its objects or in their mediation” (Julier 2000: 67–84).

Behind the scenes, back in 1996, there was some considerable discussion between the editors of *I.D. Magazine* and the founders of Tomato over whether Warwicker and company would be allowed to view my copy before it was published. Generally, this is not a standard practice of reputable publications, for the obvious reason that the subjects of articles may use their influence to prevent a negative representation of themselves. In my view, this tension reinforces that the article was less an accomplice in the elaboration of the Tomato brand than a visible journalistic struggle to reconcile the avant-garde posturing of the designers, and their experimental approach to typography, with the feeling that this was all quite a calculated performance, what I called “a masterful mystification of the creative process.” In the text, I tried to gently undermine their rock star hubris and posing by deploying a business journalist’s approach to describing the group’s operations. Details of battles with clients on commercial productions worth a reported \$10 billion per annum were juxtaposed with the Tomato interviewees’ allusions to Mallarmé and Wittgenstein and nonchalant grandstanding. The editorial struggle, however, is overlooked in Julier’s analysis, which implies complicity between the subjects and the journalist.

In hindsight, I can see how a grounding in the sociology of Bourdieu and Beck would have resolved some of the difficulties I had in critiquing Tomato’s rhetoric, and turned a piece of journalism torn between business and high art values into more coherent criticism. But at the same time, there seems to be something equally missing in Julier’s account of the group and its work, for all its strength and insight into the cultural conditions surrounding the production of late twentieth-century high design.

2. What Can Academic Design Criticism Learn from Journalism?

A common complaint of academic design criticism, recently revived by Rick Poynor, is that it takes place in an ivory tower, removed from the realities of practice. I would side with Poynor that the ivory tower refrain merits attention, but not for its inherently anti-intellectual sentiment. It is interesting because it identifies an absence of reporting. Lack of investigation is, of course, a symptom of both sides of the camp. Lazy editors getting the facts wrong are as familiar as ivory tower intellectuals missing the fieldwork to support their abstracted hypotheses.

An absence of reporting is particularly problematic in design writing because of design's relationship with art history. Many academics and influential design editors and critics have come to their respective design fields from an education in art history, and brought with them some of the entrenched practices of the art historian. In his recent book on design history, Kjetil Fallan summarizes the problems with a conventional "art history of design": an "excessive attention to aesthetics," which "overshadows the many other aspects of design"; a "tendency to view designers as artists or authors and products as creations or oeuvres and to consider the best of these the primary subjects of study"; and a "very restricted subject matter, largely limited to object categories that have traditionally been affiliated with art" (Fallan 2010).

While the business or news journalist might begin with a problem or phenomenon (a failure, a success, the closure of a firm, a professional debate) and proceed by interviewing the involved parties, the "art history of design" critic invariably begins in front of the finished work, or in the celebrity designer's studio. It becomes easy to see why so much design criticism, on the academic and journalistic side, is preoccupied with taste-making and identifying trends. Trends become, over time, styles, and styles become movements, which persist as the dominant mode of teaching design history in schools. While movements can be at first interesting to construct as provocations, to draw threads that bring to the surface key ideas, over time they become hungry gods unto themselves, requiring regular sacrifices to sustain their status. Their victims are details, the kinds of information dug up by reporters (or fieldwork) that doesn't fit the grand theory of the epoch. Individual practices, alliances, and attributes are seen only in terms of their commensurability with the movements.

3. How Might Design Criticism Change?

It would be naive to suggest that more reporting would solve design criticism's problems. Journalistic methods have a baggage of their own, despite an accompanying rhetoric aspiring to objectivity.² But the ongoing shift in the academic discourse of design history suggests that reporting is about to gain a renewed importance in design

criticism. In its discussion of methodologies, Fallan's study identifies several sociological, anthropological, and socio-technological approaches to design history that are in contrast to the "art history of design" approach. All of these approaches suggest that we take a closer look at the contexts of production *and* consumption in which designed artifacts emerge and circulate. This would necessitate more fieldwork, more reporting. Actor-network theory (ANT), which is gaining considerable influence in design studies, argues further for "irreduction": that we resist the temptation to explain or "read" their forms in terms of larger abstract forces. This is the shift from seeing designed artifacts as self-contained "matters of fact" to seeing them as "matters of concern," to use the terms of the philosopher-sociologist Bruno Latour.

This is where I see journalism playing a key role in developing a new approach to criticism. While ANT has been invoked more closely in discussions of product design, its applicability to graphic design is not too difficult to grasp. Take, for example, a graphic design project such as the Clearview typeface, gradually being implemented across road signs in the US. A traditional "art history of design" approach would have a hard time tackling the complexities of the project. The typeface might be summarized in terms of a larger narrative on late Modern revivals, the persistence of a functionalist faith in uniform systems built around sans serif letterforms. It might seek to lionize the typeface's designer Don Meeker. But this would miss the point that Clearview is not the product of one author, nor is it adequately understood in terms of a history of visual forms. A trade magazine reporter would first talk to Meeker about the circumstances of the typeface's conception and production. A picture would begin to emerge of a collision of interdisciplinary research: the problem of a highway system conceived as a user interface riddled with inconsistencies; the material properties of reflective metal signs under the harsh glare of quartz-halogen headlights; shifting standards of what constitutes legibility amid an aging population with deteriorating eyesight; conflicting philosophies on the effects of highway signs on psychological perceptions of safety; the impact of weather on legibility and safety; the contested boundaries between state and federal jurisdiction on highway management. A tireless reporter with a generous editor and fabulously long deadline could fill several filing cabinets of information gleaned from a wide range of experts, from typographic historians to climatologists.

Under a theoretical framework provided by Latour, however, that reporter could begin to assemble an account of Clearview that begins to depict its complexity. We would begin to see how something as seemingly simple as a sans serif typeface actually embodies an entire roomful of disciplinary experts, making arguments, devising tests, writing papers, seeking funding. We would also see how something as seemingly neutral as a highway sign embodies an entire history of theories-turned-decisions-turned-policies, from *how*

people should drive to *who* should drive, to the very idea *that* people should drive.

4. Why Would Design Criticism Need to Change?

We are amid a sociological turn in design criticism. This explains why many design academics took issue with Poynor's claim that they are not engaging enough in the public realm. A sociological turn shifts the framework of design discourse away from its art historical roots in a profound way. The emphasis changes from evaluation to investigation, from appraising to untangling, from orientation within a canon to socio-cultural-environmental impact. A case-in-point would be Poynor's 2007 essay on graphic design in Australia, which begins with the sentence, "Seen from afar, Australia has always been an unknown territory when it comes to graphic design." Afar, of course, is the UK, from which vantage point the essay delivers a verdict: "The future of Australian design, as an exploratory cultural practice, will depend upon the success with which committed designers are able to ... negotiate relationships with sympathetic collaborators." To shift the framework to a socio-technical perspective would be to problematize the whole idea that "exploratory cultural practice" is the ultimate goal of design.

The more that design practice shifts and changes, the more inadequate the conventions of design criticism seem to be. Or, more to the point, the most visible boundaries of the discipline seem increasingly arbitrary. Design in the twenty-first century is too critical to be reduced to a narrative of movements and -isms. If the perimeters of graphic design are patrolled in order to enforce its status as a kind of subset of advertising, or as a commercial version of fine art, with a canon that mirrors the movements and ideas in art, then designers can remain comfortably inured to the consequences of their design decisions. But if we begin to push at those boundaries, acknowledging design's complicity in perpetuating current unsustainable practices, we expose the causal networks within which design operates and arrive at a richer discourse.

Notes

1. See Benson and Neveu (2005); Couldry (2007).
2. See Atton and Hamilton (2008).

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