



The Critic as *Artist*

A Conversation with Critic and Educator Johanna Keller

CHRISTINA DAVIS

Christina Davis: You recently founded the nation's first Master's degree program in arts criticism (or "arts journalism," as you're calling it). Do you consider criticism to be a distinct genre? Would you say that a three-page film review in the *New Yorker*, a one-paragraph book blurb in *Publisher's Weekly*, and an academic thesis about the architecture of Frank Gehry are equal contenders for the title of "arts journalism"?

Johanna Keller: Yes, these examples all fall within the scope of arts journalism, which I think of as being defined primarily by the fact that the object of contemplation is art. It's that simple—and therefore that complicated because there is a vast distance between the Siskel and Ebert newspaper review and Walter Pater's description of the Mona Lisa. Sometimes I think Anthony Lane is writing film reviews in the *New Yorker* and other times I'm convinced he's doing stand-up comedy.

When a writer grapples with complex ideas in art and uses language in a fresh way, arts journalism achieves the excellence of literature; but it can also grovel about in hack-writing in the slicks with the worst kind of thumbs-up, thumbs-down reductionism. So much depends on the writer and the audience. I write differently for *Antioch Review* than I write for the *New York Times* and neither is the same in tone as what I write for *Symphony* magazine. Years ago, I wrote a rather commercial column for *Stagebill* magazine; it was fun actually, crafting snappy superficial prose, but like eating cotton candy, it isn't fit for a steady diet.

When we developed the Goldring Arts Journalism program, we debated the terms “criticism” versus “journalism.” We came to the conclusion that for us “journalism” is a broader term, encompassing critical writing in newspapers, magazines and arts journals, as well as reportage on the broader issues of the arts such as economic, political, historical, cultural and social trends. We want students in this program to be able to critically examine a work of art aesthetically but then to go beyond that whenever possible to examine broader implications.

CD: Do you believe that an arts journalist needs to be a specialist in a particular artistic discipline in order to assess it? Or, is it your opinion that a writer can acquire the tools to assess any artistic discipline?

JK: In the end, a great arts journalist needs a profound knowledge of the art as well as writing skills. But great critics have come there by different paths. For instance, Anne Midgette, a music critic at the *New York Times* had her training as an opera singer and spent her early years traveling in Europe. Later she found her way to writing about music. On the other hand, Paul Goldberger, the architecture critic at the *New Yorker*, was a writer who conceived a passion for architecture.

There is often, I find, a singular moment of inspiration when an arts journalist discovers that he or she has fallen in love with writing or with an art form. For me, with music, it came at the age of ten when I heard the Denver Symphony doing a rehearsal of Beethoven’s *Sixth Symphony*. I don’t know exactly how it happened, but all of a sudden it was as if I had been deaf up to that point. I heard the structure of the music—the blocks of melody and harmony organized by another human mind. Rather than being something merely enjoyable, it became something mysterious, awe-inspiring. You could say, I’ve never recovered from that moment.

CD: Would you say that “truth” and “beauty” are still legitimate criteria in the assessment and analysis of contemporary works of art?

JK: Personally, I do. But my personal aesthetics are not governing the Goldring program. This is not a program where students come to have someone else tell them what’s Good and what’s Bad, Amen. That kind of close-mindedness is the death of criticism, which is an ongoing lively inquiry. So, for instance, I very deliberately included some faculty members who find Beauty utterly beside the point—even detrimental!

Now, one of my personal beliefs that is essential to the program is this: a good education awakens the mind. You can only come to know what you really find Good if you explore all the options—Is Beauty Truth? Or is Beauty Dreck? I don’t believe all opinions are correct. But,

as a great-great grandchild of the Enlightenment, I do agree with the sentiment (misattributed to Voltaire) that I may disagree with you but I defend to your death the right to say it.

CD: I wonder if you could talk about the making of a critic....

JK: I don't want to sound cavalier but *all* of us are critics in that we do all have a response to art (if absolutely no one has any response, it's not a piece of art—and I can say that absolutely).

What is a critical response after all? It begins with our feelings, which are stirred through the stimulation of the senses...sight, hearing, and so forth. We must feel something—desire, fear, pain, joy, even rage or envy! Without feelings, the art is nothing and the critic is impotent.

Now, even this is an aesthetic statement—there are those artists and critics who would argue that feelings are not necessary for art—here I fully admit my bias. Feelings come first. Then comes the analysis: How did the composer make me feel this? How does this building define its expectations and meet them or fall short? Where does this play belong in the oeuvre of the author's works? This is where knowledge and experience kicks in.

For me the best critics are deeply knowledgeable and may even be artists themselves in some cases. But far more important than that knowledge even is the passion for the art that they bring to their writing, and a lifelong struggle with their own definition of the “good.”

I think for instance of a music critic who died a couple of years ago named Harold Schonberg. Now, Harold was a salty, hard-bitten newspaper man at the *New York Times*. His bias—for him, the ultimate good—was a big swooping Romantic sound with rubato and heart and verve and he was the proponent of pianists like Jorge Bolet and Arthur Schnabel. But he never stopped listening and having his ears opened.

In Harold's heyday, in the 1960s-1970s, he did not respond positively to the Apollonian style, the kind of intellectual and structural players like Alfred Brendel or Maurizio Pollini. These were players I admired. I met Harold in 1980 and for many years afterward, we would have lunch and argue about this. I don't flatter myself that our conversations made any difference, but over the last decades of his life, sure enough, he began to write more admiringly and sympathetically of the kind of clarity in this style of pianism. And—funny enough—I became more of a fan of the kind of Romantic sweep Harold had always loved.

CD: What, in your opinion, are the benefits for society as a whole in cultivating an aesthetic sensibility in the young? How do you think grade schools and high schools could begin to encourage such a sensibility?

You Be the Judge

A Brief Exercise for Students (Grades 1-3)

A fun way to encourage the articulation of opinion is to have your students choose three or four of their favorite or least favorite picture books, videos (Disney, “Spiderman,” etc.), music CDs, or structures (they can take pictures of interesting houses/buildings on the way to school) and spend a class session creating little pamphlets featuring a drawing or photo of what they’re critiquing on each page. For the next step, make it fun by allowing the children to create their own rating icons. Instead of grades or stars, let them use ice cream cones, sunshines, or anything else they can think of. Ask them to choose which icon applies to each work of art and once they’ve put one on each page have them write a sentence beneath it that asserts their personal preference: “I like it because...” or “I don’t like it because...” —T&W Staff

JK: There has been a lot written about the effects of art on children—the so-called “Mozart effect.” And the way that Richard Florida has promoted the rise of the creative class and the role arts communities play in local economic development. These are undeniable.

But—call me an idealist—wouldn’t it be wonderful if our society saw arts criticism as a model for how we could talk to one another—through art, through ideas? If the Mapplethorpe debacle of the Culture Wars could finally be understood as a dialogue of values rather than a polarizing issue in which someone had to be right and some else had to be wrong?

What is wrong in our times is the loss of Enlightenment values, the loss of civil discourse, the loss of true respect for one another’s opinions—and I’m not talking about the shallow political correctness that is often a convenient mask. Writing about art opens up this dialogue of ideas in the best possible way, and its value transcends mere aesthetics.

CD: In my experience, young students love to write film and music reviews, do you have any favorite exercises or strategies that you could recommend for high school/grade school students?

JK: One exercise is to have the students choose a film or CD that they feel very strongly about. Then, have them write a review praising it as well as one that tears it apart. Have the students read one another's work and the student gets the highest mark if the readers can't tell which way the student really thought and if the reviews are equally compelling. This teaches the student that, whatever they personally believe, a cogent argument can be made for the opposite opinion. And in fact, to write strongly on one side of an argument, you have to understand the other side.

While a critic is ultimately opinionated, the best critics are conscious of just exactly where that opinion is located and how it is expressed.



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