

- CATALOGUING CRITIQUES" SUBMISSION TO C. STAPLES & H. WILLIAMS
- AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE, KNOXVILLE
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- **The Four Levels of Critiquing, Based on Universal Laws of Consciousness**
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- Visual analysis and its resulting verbal articulation (critiquing) is a learned skill. It works best when it follows the natural law of human information processing, in four stages that I will discuss today.
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- First, I'd like to give some background ruminations on the challenge of critiquing.
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- As educators, what do we hope for when we do critiques in our classrooms?
- To empower the student...to help the student know how to grow... what are her goals, where is he *trying* to go? What is the student's frame of reference (not mine, or the student next to him, or the New York art world's)? And though it is so tempting, our job is NOT to tell the student what to do. I confess to being a Virgo and having an additional three planets in that sign, so I know a lot, let me tell you, and I'm eager to share it! If I simply tell a student what to do, though, how does that empower the student? It's like interpreting a dream for someone from your own experience without knowing the dreamer's significant life experience. If a dream contains a dog in a significant way and in childhood, a dog bit the dreamer, the meaning of that dream will be radically different for me, who was rescued from drowning by a dog as a child.
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- So our job is to get in the skin of our students, to empathize and understand their points of view, and offer pathways of exploration based on the wisdom we DO have, by virtue of our life experience with time and place and coming from that what I would call *sacred* place of desiring to serve growth itself.
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- I see a second primary value of the critique as preparation for working professionally with others; that would be clients and teams. Depending on what the student knows about herself and the job she will have, she will enjoy or barely tolerate working with other people. The fact is, most jobs do require good teamwork, and life certainly does. The truth that no man is an island could not be more true in our increasingly interconnected global village. This *learned skill* — of being able to offer one's point of view as a valuable commodity, and being able to listen to others' points of view — is at the core of good teamwork and a life infused with richness and meaning.
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- A quiet fact of the critiquing situation is that both teacher and student will learn from each other — we *each* have a goal. My goal as an educator cannot be left out of this equation, although when facilitating a class critique, I perceive of my self as transparent and goal-less. Truly, Einstein's theory of relativity *is* about our interconnectedness and the fact that our very presence and intention, as quantum physics shows us, DOES affect outcome.
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- And yet we have a common human experience of pain around critiques. I want to explore how it got to be painful:
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- A critique is a setting where we are intensely being listened to and talked to. Being listened to and truly heard is one of the greatest desires of the human heart. Those who learn to listen and absorb us unconditionally as we share our personal particular triumphs and struggles are loved and respected. Those who are in the habit of correcting others are often resented and avoided.

- The pain and pressure from critique happens when fear is present. It's a primal fear, of attack, the opposite of unconditional acceptance. In academia, in our environment as graduate students and teachers, there is much emphasis on being very articulate about one's work, even to the point of defense, as though there is a threat. Fear arises when there's a belief that there is not enough of something essential for survival. Our primitive brain, telling us we must fight or flee, becomes activated. All of this can grow and breed in communities of scarce resources, extreme individualism, and distrust.
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- It is impossible to be giving and loving, prerequisites for unconditional love, when caught in the grip of fear. Fear is divisive in that we become alienated within, from our expansive giving nature. Judgment arises, which leads to "non-constructive" comments and decrees of rightness and wrongness. Behind these attitudes is our social training, which must change. It starts in our families, and is pervasive in our institutions, where criticism equals control. Rebelling against this unfair control by the stronger over the weaker usually results in shame for not being listened to or taken seriously. When that is accompanied by lack of encouragement and minimal nurturing of the child's dreams and ideas, they are not sufficiently experienced in matters of soul pleasure, of self-approval, and a natural growth of self-confidence.
- Educator Alfie Kohn, which I will quote here, eloquently describes a particularly harmful stance that springs from the lack of a supportive community. The power of the individual to create positive change is denied.
- It's the "you'd better get used to it" argument. Those critiques can be brutal, but you better get used to it, cuz it ain't no picnic out there in the real world.
- - What drives this attitude? One sometimes catches a whiff of vinegary moralism, the assumption that whatever isn't enjoyable builds character and promotes self-discipline. Mostly, though, this phenomenon may be just one more example of conservatism masquerading as realism. When kids spend years doing something, (as they will in public school) they are more likely to see it as inevitable and less likely to realize that THINGS COULD BE OTHERWISE.
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  - "You'd better get used to it" not only assumes that life is pretty unpleasant, but that we ought not to bother trying to change the things that make it unpleasant. Rather than working to improve our schools or other institutions, we should just get students ready for whatever is to come. Thus, a middle school whose primary mission is to prepare students for a dysfunctional high school environment soon comes to resemble that high school. Not only does the middle school fail to live up to its potential, but also an opportunity has been lost to create a constituency for better secondary education. Likewise, when an entire generation comes to regard rewards and punishments, or rating and ranking as "the way life works," rather than as practices that happen to define our society at this moment in history, their critical sensibilities are stillborn. Debatable policies never get debated and "You'd better get used to it" becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.
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  - Finally there is a callousness lurking just under the surface: Your objections don't matter, your unhappiness doesn't matter. Suck it up. The people who talk this way are usually at the top of a hierarchy, issuing directives, not at the bottom, being directed. "Learn to live with it because there's more coming later," can be rationalized as being in the best interests of those on the receiving end, but it may just mean "Do it because I say so" and thereby cement the position of those offering this advice.
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- If a practice can't be justified on its own terms, then the task for children and adults alike is NOT to get used to it, but to question, challenge, and if necessary, to resist."
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- It is up to us as educators and wise adults to create communities of reverence—for the work we are engaging with, and for each other. Art's purpose, as I see it, has an indispensable role in social transformation. Social transformation occurs one person at a time, and even one critique at a time. Good crits are not about correcting others but listening and offering information on whether the artist is truly being understood in what he is trying to accomplish as a visual communicator. It is up to the student to use the information or even probe the responders to get needed information to make the communication more effective. However, as Kohn says, the ability to debate and think critically is often compromised. Setting the space and tone of the community of reverence is ours to create.
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- The four-level critique method eases a path into acceptance by the damage done to most of our students.
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- Recently I was introduced to poet, philosopher, and educator Eli Siegel's view of art: a philosophy called Aesthetic Realism. I am attracted to the principles of it because it echoes the beliefs I have come to realize about art. When I teach the foundations class and must distill to essentials, both for students, and myself I emphasize the two art elements that underlie not only every work of art, but also life itself: contrast and hierarchy. Mr. Siegel says, "All beauty is a making oneness from opposites, and this making oneness from opposites is what we are going after inside ourselves as well." Those opposites are part of life, because we live in duality. Yet we *are not* duality; we are not the black or the white, the pendulum swing to extremes, the tonic or the dominant; *we are*, and *art is*, everything in between. Everything gray, murky, transforming, confusing, and profoundly messy is striving toward synthesis, toward understanding. The Aesthetic Realism Foundation has published a series of talks in which different artworks are critiqued in categories of opposites: logic and emotion, freedom and order, grace and seriousness, continuity and discontinuity. The technical questions of art—*aesthetic questions*— that arise through these critiques, have in them the solutions to the conflicts in our lives as well.
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- This philosophy is so beautiful, bear with me!, but I must at least tell you a little more about it. This is paraphrased from a 2003 paper by Dorothy Koppelman and Carrie Wilson:
  - Aesthetic Realism teaches that the deepest desire of every person is to like the world, honestly. This is the purpose of art education, and actually, ALL education. Mr. Siegel explains that the main impediment to liking the world is the desire for contempt. Yes, a desire for contempt. It is a way for us to feel good about ourselves if we can denigrate the "other." When we can feel that other things are ugly, stupid, boring, beneath us, then we are more glorious. Contempt is the cause of all human cruelty. And the great opposition to contempt is the beauty in the structure of reality itself. Art is a necessity because it shows that beauty. Art on its way to formation is gray, murky, transforming, confusing, and profoundly messy and the four-level critique method, by producing sincere response, cuts into the potential for contempt.
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- **FOUR LEVELS OF THE CRITIQUE**
- This method was introduced to me by a very unique group of social pioneers, the Ecumenical Institute (later renamed The Institute of Cultural Affairs, [www.ica-usa.org](http://www.ica-usa.org)) founded in Chicago in the 1950s. It is called a "guided conversation," long before meditation and such were popularized. It was first used in the context of a weekend course in theology given in my family's small Presbyterian church in Vestal, New York. This course shook them to their foundations, and our family life changed forever. My parents, in midlife, had discovered the significant participation

they had been longing for through this group, and the effect on me, a teenager at the time, was equally profound. What we encountered was a true sense of freedom to create, in any capacity, and a sense of being loved and welcomed by the world and inner self, *just as it is* in all its neuroses and brokenness.

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- The Ecumenical Institute called this the "Art form Conversation." Their literature states, "The art form itself is a tool for reflection. (art form is broadly defined: it can be any experience: a novel, a movie or play, studying a concept, or a walk in the park). The art form conversation method is a progression of questions that take a group on a journey of consciousness. This method is also useful for reflecting on experiences, such as the work of a day, a village, or a celebration." And, "This method enables an experience to become part of the learner." And, "Don't ask the artist what the work of art means. Discussing art is a triologue: you, I, and the art form."
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- Another gift of the method is in allowing people so used to a frantic pace of life to exercise their capacity for reflection. We are hearing about "slow" movements (slow food, now even slow cities!) in America. We are waking up to the need for wandering, for reflection and questioning the need for a pace of life driven by the capacities of technology.
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- There are four levels of guided questions based on the structure of consciousness, or how we process information, that we use constantly to order sensory data. We experience these 4 levels so quickly, it's mostly instantaneous. As an example, (throw a paper wad at Hilary).
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- Hilary has NOTICED my motioning to her. She sees my gesture toward her; we have made eye contact. Hilary is FEELING some things about this: what is Martha doing? I'm not supposed to be participating at this point. This is a little strange, isn't it? What is going to happen next? She watches me and sees the wad of paper leaving my hand and headed in her direction and now UNDERSTANDS and INTERPRETS the events and her feelings enough to participate in the outcome of this flying wad of paper. We can call this experience complete when Hilary reaches out to catch the paper. She has DECIDED to do so, and her physical self participated. She could have just as validly decided to turn away, or bounce it back to me, or let it fall. These also would have been decisions she could have made, but the progression of her consciousness through the first 3 levels: noticing, feeling, and interpreting INFORMED her decision to respond as she did.
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- Let's go over the levels. I will pull them through a slightly different context than an art school critique so you can get a good feel for the universality of this tool. Let's say the experience we're deciding to reflect upon is your day, your average day.
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- First: OBJECTIVE
- What sounds do you recall? What scenes do you recall? What bits of conversation do you remember? What colors? What activity pops out in your memory of this day?
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- Second: REFLECTIVE
- When did you feel angry? Laughing? Tired? Full of enthusiasm?
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- Third: INTERPRETIVE
- What is the significance of this day? Why was this day important?
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- Final: DECISIONAL
- What is the name of this day? How does today affect your anticipation of tomorrow?
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- Skipping any one level or getting them out of this order causes a break in the smooth and comfortable journey to depth understanding. Have we not all been in a group of friends after seeing a movie, and someone asks, But what did it all mean? and there's dead silence? That's skipping straight to the interpretive level.
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- I love a good film, and all our lives my husband and I deeply were moved by this artform. I'm convinced this is because we were able to unpack, or crack open *such* significance and personal revelation when we took time to discuss movies in a leisurely way, with this method. Not only did we gain an understanding of the nuances of the artistic presentation, we enriched our connection to one another in sharing both our common perceptions and different interpretations due to our unique life experiences. Listening, we truly beheld the other's life for a minute, felt it, took it in, had our viewpoints expanded, and came back to our own souls immeasurably enriched.
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- So let me now apply this method to an actual living, breathing example of an art critique in a classroom setting. In the foundations level class I have been teaching for a year now, I have been very intentional in using the first two levels and then seen the final two levels emerge spontaneously from the students. I believe this is because of the safe group dynamic that gets established for the first two levels.
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- It is paramount that everyone in the room participates, and since the first level is easy, it's a wonderful starter. We gather and go around the room one by one. My job as facilitator is to graciously receive and honor all answers and make it clear there are no wrong or bad ones.
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- **First: OBJECTIVE** • *getting the facts, focusing attention*
- What do you notice first? Where is the formal contrast most pronounced? What is the hierarchy of form, color, etc.? Where do your eyes keep going back to despite your best efforts to look elsewhere?
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- **Second: REFLECTIVE** • *emotions, feelings, associations*
- What are you reminded of? What is the mood or tone? Where were you aware of emotions in yourself? Where are you surprised? What angers, excites, intrigues, or frightens you? What past associations do you have? What part of you is like this? What part of your life came to mind?
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- **Third: INTERPRETIVE** • *values, meaning, purpose, beliefs, underlying truths, association of personal relations to the art form with ordinary life content*
- What color would you add (where)? Take out? Same for objects. What noise do you hear coming from the art? Make the noise. Where do you see conflict at work in this piece? What word is coming out of this picture? What word would you say to this picture? Where would you place this artwork in your home? How would you divide the artwork into two parts? Which part would you keep? Where is the "aha" for you?
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- **Last: DECISIONAL** • *future resolves as a result of serious grappling with the imagery*
- What title would you give this piece? Where does it hit you where you live and why? What has changed in you because of your depth encounter with this work? What are you now open to as a result of this artwork? What needs to change in

this world if this work of art is true? What is the one thing you will not forget because we spent this time together talking about this piece? How will you go about differently as an artist as a result of this encounter?

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- ONE-ON-ONE CRITIQUE METHODOLOGY: Teacher and student have a pre-conference to set a purpose and harmonize and bond. They share their goals before the critique even starts. After using the model below, they come together again to reflect on how those goals were met.
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- GROUP CRITIQUE METHODOLOGY: Introduce concepts of harmonizing with one another for each person's growth and a group consciousness that is supportive. Set the tone as one of exploration and excitement about all the diversity that is always present in a group and how seeing from another's point of view enriches our own and gives us greater choice as we follow our own inner directives.
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