



Understanding Criticism Part 2 of 3: Responding to Criticism

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The criticism that I take to heart is from other writers that I respect. - Steve Earle

1 – Do Not Accept Criticism Blindly

The purpose of part one is to describe what motivates criticism. In part two we are going to look at how we can respond to criticism.

First, do not accept criticism blindly. Always ask yourself why someone criticizes your work. Criticism falls into different categories and criticism is made for various motives. Some of these motives are valid and you need to pay attention to them. Others are invalid and should be of no concern to you.

It is therefore important is to know what motivates someone to criticize your work. For example, some of my photographs are criticized for being “manipulated” in Photoshop, meaning that I modified the original image either by changing the colors, modifying the contrast, cropping, changing the format of the photograph by stretching the image vertically or horizontally, changing the shape of elements in the image through warping or distortion and more.

However, doing all this is intentional. It is not an error on my part. What some call “manipulation” is simply the reflection of my personal style, of my approach to photography. I do not consider the image finished when it comes out of the camera. Instead, I consider it finished when the image expresses what I saw and felt, not just what the camera captured. Therefore, in order for the image to express my feelings, I have to modify what the camera recorded. This is done deliberately and purposefully and I have no intent to stop doing it.

Reflecting on the nature of the criticism you receive and on the motives that people have for critiquing your work will go a long ways towards understanding criticism. When this reflection is completed, take valid criticism into account and make the necessary changes to correct what was pointed out to you. However, let invalid criticism fall to the wayside and pay no further attention to it. Only let criticism improve what you do. Do not let criticism change who you are. As the saying goes, let the dogs bark and drive on by. The dogs barking is not sufficient to cause your car to stop. You decide to stop your car, not the dogs.

2 – Do Not Argue Unnecessarily

I used to argue with my critics until I realized that their minds were made up and they did not want to be bothered by the facts. My arguments had little effect, and eventually I got tired of wasting my time.

Today I respond to criticism only if I find something interesting or new in it. Otherwise, I let it go. Because I have heard my share of criticism, new criticism rarely comes my way anymore and this saves me a lot of time. Experience pays off eventually.

I also do not respond to insulting criticism, interesting or not. In that regard I approach it like I approach negotiation when I am selling my work. I am open to negotiating, as long as the offer is not insulting. If someone offers me \$200 for a \$2000 piece, there is no point making a counter offer. I cannot give 90% off, not even close. Same with criticism. If something is insulting, it goes in the trash. I am open to criticism, but only if it is respectful. No matter how much someone may dislike my work, there is no need to be rude. Being rude is a personal choice, not a necessity.

One of the things I look for are questions. Most critics like to hear themselves talk and have little interest in asking me for my opinion. However, occasionally a question pops up. If so, I do respond to it. In my mind, questions deserve answers,

unless the question is rude, in which case it goes where the computer image goes when you switch off the monitor.



Fall, Eastern Sierra Nevada, California

3 – Do Not Be Defensive

Being defensive is perceived as a sign of weakness. Most people believe that someone who needs to defend their position or their beliefs has problems. Either this person is not strong enough to stand on their own, or they have something to hide, or they have an ulterior motive that has not been revealed.

Solid positions are transparent. They are what they are. While certain things may need to be explained, these explanations take the form of teaching, not of defending specific choices. This is particularly important when selling because when arguments are being put forward to defend a product, customers often feel that it is because there is something wrong with this product.

It is better to teach than to defend. Teaching means explaining why you do things the way you do and revealing the techniques and the philosophy behind your approach. Teaching is about facts. Facts can be checked and proven scientifically. They do not change from one person to the next.

Defensiveness is about closure and darkness. Defensiveness is about obscuring facts by presenting opinions. Opinions cannot be checked. They cannot be proven scientifically and they vary from one person to the next.

4 – Do Not Be Your Own Critic

Do not be the critic of your own work. Your personal judgment for your work is based on considerations that are different from those of your audience. Personal emotions and memories are attached to the work that we created. Plus, creating artwork involves a significant amount of time, money, and effort. Therefore, we are understandably biased when it comes to

our own work: we tend to think highly of it because of how hard we worked on it.

On the other hand we may also feel that no matter how much effort we put into our work the outcome falls short of our expectations. In that case we may not think much of our work, not because of what the work actually looks like, but because we are looking at the difference between what our original goal was and what we ended up with. Here too, we are biased, but this time in a negative way.

Don't do it. Instead, let people decide if they like your work or not. If you sell your work, let them 'vote with their money.' It works great and the answer is accurate and measurable. By keeping an open mind when it comes to the evaluation of your work, and by listening to your audience, you will learn valuable things that you may have missed if you only listened to your own opinion. People not involved in the creation of the work do not know what we know and did not experience what we went through. However, eventually, none of that matters. What matters is how our work comes across, and whether or not it successfully communicates to our audience the vision we want to share.

5 – Do Not Expect Everyone To Be Pleased

There are many reasons why people may not like your work. First, some viewers may simply not connect with your work. What people like, and what we like, is a matter of personal taste. Because not everyone has the same taste, you have to expect some people to like your work and some people to dislike it. This has nothing to do with you.

If you sell your work you have to expect only part of your audience to be interested in buying it. I sold my work at the Grand Canyon for 5 years. During that time I estimate that about five million people looked at my photographs. Not all of these people liked my work, and among those who liked it only a small percentage actually made a purchase. I did not find that offensive. It is, quite simply, the nature of art. We must expect a small number of people to like what we do and an even smaller number to buy it.

Second, some viewers expect to find perfection in art. This is a rather commonplace expectation. Unfortunately, perfection is not of this world and perfection is definitely not part of art. No matter how careful we are, imperfections are bound to creep in from time to time. This is a normal aspect of art and of life and it cannot be totally avoided. Those who expect perfection in all things are simply unrealistic.

Third, some people can never be pleased. I had a customer once who complained that the molding on my wood frames looked different on all four sides. At first I did not understand so I asked what he meant. He pointed to the wood grain on the frame and showed me how the grain was different on all four sides. I explained that wood comes from trees and that trees are not a manufactured product. They grow naturally and therefore the wood pattern is different from one tree to the next and in different areas of the same tree. Such variations are what makes wood attractive: no two frames are exactly the same. Each is unique. However, no matter how I explained things to him, he wanted a frame that looked exactly the same on all four sides. Eventually I had to tell him that I could not satisfy his request. This person simply could not be pleased. Here too, this has nothing to do with me. I have no control over how trees grow! Instead, this has everything to do with the customer having misplaced expectations. This person needed to learn more about trees.

6 - You Don't Have To Be Rude

Just because someone acts in an insulting or belligerent manner when critiquing your work doesn't mean you have to act in a similar manner when you respond.

In fact, you shouldn't. You should respond in a way that is respectful of yourself and of the other party. How people address you is in their control and therefore you cannot change it. But how you address people is in your control and therefore you should do your best to be polite and courteous.

This means learning the skills necessary to handle sensitive (and at times explosive) people and situations. It also means being tactful and diplomatic. These skills are necessary when you become a public figure because your actions become the model for other people's actions (you become a public figure when you exhibit or sell your work). You want to be someone others look up to, not someone others look down at.

In other words, it's OK to be criticized by someone who doesn't like your work, but it's not OK to be criticized because you were rude when responding to that person's comments!

7 – Seek An Audience Who Likes Your Work

A lot of artists believe that deciding who is their audience is in not within their control. This is inaccurate. Artists control who sees their work by their choice of subject matter, personal style, medium, venues, and more. People who like Henri Cartier Bresson are not the same people who like Robert Mapplethorpe. These are two very different audiences, and who likes what is based on subject matter, the artist's style, where and how the work is shown and sold, etc.

All these are variables that fall within the artist's control. For this reason it is important to first decide who is your audience, and second to focus your efforts towards an audience who likes your work, not on an audience who does not like your work. Whatever you do, whatever your subject, approach, style, etc. might be, some people will like what you do and some people will dislike what you do. Ignore it and keep going. Listen to the yes-sayers, not to the no-sayers.

8 – Don't Disregard Positive Comments

It is easy to remember only negative comments and to overlook positive comments. I made the mistake for a long time of taking favorable comments for granted and of focusing my attention solely on critical comments. I realized over time that by doing so I underestimated the importance of favorable comments. I also did not reward or congratulate myself for the part of the job that had been done well. Instead, I kept beating myself for not being able to please everyone.

There is a lot to be learned from favorable comments. For example what you did well and who was pleased by your work. It is also important to congratulate yourself and to acknowledge what you succeeded in doing well.

Certainly, there is a lot to be learned from critical comments as well. For example what you did not do so well and what you can improve upon. However, it is not always a good thing to focus solely on trying to improve things. There is a time to focus on improving things, and there is a time to focus on acknowledging what was done right. Learning how to balance the two is important.

9 – Move On

We tend to be more sensitive to criticism when we are first subjected to it. The first time we read it, or the first time we hear it for example. Over time, our sensibility to this criticism may change. Certainly, we may remain resentful of unfair criticism for a long time. However, what we originally felt to be insulting may come to pass. Our feelings may change. We may 'get over it,' or we may come to think of it as less important than we originally did.

As the saying goes, "Only truth hurts." Often, criticism points to something true that we either ignored or chose to overlook. As we face this truth, and as we come to accept it as valid, the criticism attached to it fades away. Over time it may become meaningless. Or, it may come to stand for what we did at a specific time in our lives, as a marker that points to a place where we no longer are. We have moved on and the criticism we received back then is not as meaningful as it once was.

There is a certain level of pleasure in looking back at criticism that once felt poignant but that no longer does. We feel as if we graduated in a sense, as if we passed a significant obstacle, one we did not think we could overcome.

10 – Conclusion

Nobody is perfect. We all do certain things well and other things not so well. This means that we are all, at some point, subject to criticism.

For most of us this criticism remains private. It takes place at home, or in the workplace and it rarely becomes public knowledge.

However, when you decide to show your work publicly, be it on the web, in books or magazines, through shows or in galleries, you open the door to public criticism. Anyone can take a shot at you and your work and many people will do so. Knowing how to respond to this criticism is important but it is not always enough. Regardless of how skilled you may be, you may find yourself discouraged and possibly depressed.

How to handle discouragement and depression is the focus of part three. In it we are going to look at how we can remain motivated regardless of the criticism we receive.

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Alain Briot creates fine art photographs, teaches workshops and offers DVD tutorials on composition, raw conversion, optimization, printing, marketing photographs and more. Alain is also the author of *Mastering Landscape Photography* and *Mastering Photographic Composition, Creativity and Personal Style*. Both books are available from Amazon and other bookstores as well from Alain's website.

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