



Design and Culture

The Journal of the Design Studies Forum

ISSN: 1754-7075 (Print) 1754-7083 (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rfdc20>

Sifting the Trash: A History of Design Criticism

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To cite this article: Anneke Coppoolse (2019): Sifting the Trash: A History of Design Criticism, Design and Culture, DOI: [10.1080/17547075.2019.1651115](https://doi.org/10.1080/17547075.2019.1651115)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17547075.2019.1651115>



Published online: 21 Aug 2019.



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Book Reviews

Sifting the Trash: A History of Design Criticism, by Alice Twemlow

Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2017,
296 pp. HB 9780262035989. \$34.95

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DOI: [10.1080/17547075.2019.1651115](https://doi.org/10.1080/17547075.2019.1651115)



Design critics make “distinctions between things” (1). They negotiate design objects’ positions between trash and treasure. They assign value to these objects as they sift through an ever-expanding pool of things that will – sooner or later – be resigned to the dump. *Sifting the Trash: A History of Design Criticism* begins by arguing that much of this sifting has been done according to an interest in manufacture and retail, but also highlights other instances of design criticism in which the systems of production and consumption, as well as the structures of criticism that endorsed these systems, were questioned. Writer, lecturer, and curator Alice Twemlow, currently Lector Design at the Royal Academy of Art in The Hague and Associate Professor at Leiden University, specifically considers the ways in which critique happens contextually. She sees critical documents as “nodes in larger networks comprised of writing, designed objects, ideas, and people” (6) and explores “the political, social, and economic pressures” (8) that frame design criticism. To understand these pressures, she looks at the interactions between writers, audiences, stakeholders, and other

opinion formers. Twemlow probes figures such as Jane Thompson and Deborah Allen, the first editors of *Industrial Design* magazine, but also landmark publications (e.g. *Blueprint* magazine) and other platforms for criticism (e.g. the exhibition “Stealing Beauty”) that shaped design discourses between the 1950s and 2000s. She treats them as representative of larger developments and highlights them to chronicle five moments in which design criticism in the UK and US changed course or challenged conventions.

The book makes a substantial contribution to the little-developed area of research dealing with histories of design criticism, providing detailed accounts of significant examples. More importantly, through its contextual application, it offers a particular way of looking at the field. Yet, at times, it stumbles in its approach. By narrating exclusively UK and US case studies – however rigorously detailed and intertextually negotiated – a lot remains unaddressed, such as other significant cases, but also potential relations to, and developments in, other socio-cultural and geographic contexts. Furthermore, presenting five distinct moments in five corresponding chapters, the book does not tell a single history, as its title suggests, but five individual accounts of different “self-reflective interruptions” (12) in design criticism. Despite allusions to Walter Benjamin’s ideas about “constellations”, which questioned the accepted notion of linear history and therefore support Twemlow’s approach, the five accounts are presented chronologically and thus chart linearity, while articulated connections between them are few and far between.

That said, the book delivers a wealth of insight. “‘A Throw-Away Aesthetic’: New Measures and Metaphors in Product Design Criticism, 1955–1961” begins with the heyday of capitalism, when critics such as Reyner Banham and the artist Richard Hamilton reckoned with mass production. While some writers on design (e.g. sociologist C. Wright Mills) expressed concern about the “misleading conflation of culture and commerce” (88), Hamilton, in particular, admired the manufacturing of both consumer products and consumers. “‘Conflicting Definitions of Key Terms’: An Ecological Protest at the International Design Conference in Aspen, 1970–1971” highlights an ideological confrontation when student designers and environmental collectives contested the conference format and protested on behalf of an alternative that would open up opportunity for political conversation. As per Twemlow’s suggestion to understand design criticism contextually, her inquiry exceeds the written medium to consider conferences and exhibitions. Yet, it remains concerned with language (diction, mode of address, etc.) and concepts. “Style” was a concept of the age of Thatcher, as addressed in “Designer Celebrities and ‘Monstrous, Brindled, Hybrid’ Consumers: The Polarizing Effects of Style in the British Design Media, 1983–1989”. Designers such as Eva Jiricna and Neville Brody became style icons and their lifestyles public aspiration. Cultural critics such as Dick Hebdige and Judith Williamson critiqued the celebrations of style

and, in the case of Williamson, drew attention to the poor labor conditions of factory workers who were increasingly located in Asia.

This passing mention of labor conditions triggers curiosity about workers, shifting industrial centers, and the consequences of this development in these centers. However, because of its narrow focus on the UK and US, *Sifting the Trash* overlooks these issues and instead elaborates on the consequences of diminishing manufacturing industries in these locales. Indeed, the UK's introduction of its creative industries in the 1990s forms the context of "Please Touch the Criticism: Design Exhibitions and Critical Design in the UK, 1998–2001". The exhibition "Powerhouse::uk" promoted the design industry, while the Institute of Contemporary Art's "Stealing Beauty: British Design Now" critiqued the power structures underlying the manufacturing and consumer industries and challenged the practice of criticism. Moving into the digital era, the final chapter delves into the emergence of the "amateur" blogging culture to elaborate how open source technology in the 2000s led to a reconsideration of editorial values. The Internet ushered in an era of criticism that is instantly available, increasingly pluralistic, and "popular". In response to this, the chapter seems to beg for a discussion about critical publics. However, only a short concluding section mentions how these critical publics – i.e. us – ought to become both sifters of design and of the "digital detritus" (252) of our time.

Sifting the Trash is more than a history of design criticism, it is a cultural inquiry into rhetoric and message, narration, and power, and the contexts in which these become meaningful. Twemlow fluently moves back and forth between meta-level perspectives of socio-political contexts and minute details of language and tone of voice. The inquiry is largely based on criticism, visual records, and interviews with critics. A history of design criticism requires in-depth study of such data, but, given that design criticism responds to the industry and, therefore, involves society, it would have been interesting to extend the inquiry by also investigating how period publics followed design trends. Twemlow seems to agree; in the Introduction, she mentions the relationship between criticism and publics and argues for a consideration of a variety of different actors, including audiences and other "organs of opinion" (8). Yet, outside of the final chapter, these publics receive little attention. Had research examined sales or public records, or even deployed ethnographic methods, *Sifting the Trash* might have offered an even more nuanced inquiry.

Even without this, the five eloquently written chapters will appeal to not only historians of criticism but also critics themselves, design practitioners, and students of design history. The book allows critics to understand how their work participates in larger networks of ideas, objects, and people. It offers designers a view of the politics involved in their practice, and it gives students of design history a unique model for their own inquiries into design discourses. Twemlow has researched and described her case studies with great precision, but other relevant magazines, events, and contexts are left unaddressed.

While the book appears to cover six decades of criticism, it actually addresses a number of significant interruptions. Twemlow has done her own sifting, a kind of sifting that allowed her to chronicle moments in which design criticism challenged established practices of writing and thinking about design; a kind of sifting that allowed her to produce stories about how critics and other opinion formers addressed the value of design objects, the accompanying problems of consumption, and the structures of criticism.

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