

What Can A Literary Critic Do? Thoughts on a Universal Design for Criticism

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If you have a child with an intellectual disability, as I do, you probably feel deeply ambivalent about the concept of “function.” In the worst case, function is a measure of how well a person meets normative standards of behavior and mental acuity. I try to be forgiving when people ask if my son is “high functioning,” but I find such questions rude and ignorant. This use of function implies the proscriptive dictionary definition, “to work or operate in a proper or particular way.” If there is a high, there must be a low on a hierarchy that gauges how far any particular person falls from the ideals at the top. And, of course, the standards for what counts as “proper or particular” are established by ableist norms of intellect and embodiment. The emphasis lies on the limitations and dysfunction of individual bodies, rather than the social environments that obstruct access. In the most classic example, stairs prevent a wheelchair user from entering a building, but the blame is directed at the failure of her legs to function properly. This definition is closest to what Matthew Arnold meant when he described the critic’s function as seeking out “the best that is known and thought in the world” (6). By extension, literary criticism functions by identifying and evaluating works of art according to universal standards of high aesthetic and moral value.

A less ableist definition of function is “an activity or purpose natural to a thing.” Here the emphasis is on the capacities of particular persons or objects, rather than whether they meet a preestablished expectation.¹ This understanding of function energizes Sara Hendren’s recent book on disability and design, *What Can a Body*

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Do? How We Meet the Built World (2020). Hendren proposes a design practice that starts with the potential of a given body rather than a proscriptive understanding of how it should function. A chapter called “Limb” introduces us to Cindy, a quadruple amputee who loves to send handwritten letters to her friends. Unfortunately, most pens are designed with the assumption that handwriting requires the presence of a hand. Cindy’s desire to write inspired her to design a more functional pen adapted to the capacities of her particular body (62–63). Instead of an irrelevant outlier, Cindy is a model for a design practice that aims to construct environments and objects that allow bodies and minds to live up to their full capacity, whatever that may be.

Where Hendren focuses on designs tailor-made to particular bodies, the practice of universal design also considers function as a spectrum of activity rather than an ideal. In this definition, universalism connotes an ideal of accessibility, rather than the absolutist “order of ideas which are universal, certain, permanent” idealized by a critic like Arnold (4). For architects, universal design refers to modifications like curb cuts, ramps, and electric doors that enable access to streets and buildings.² In education, it means curricula conducive to a wide range of learning styles and cognitive abilities, minimizing the need for individual accommodations (Adams). Where Arnold’s universalism was a constant but often unattainable ideal, the “universal” in universal design is always understood to be partial. It means accommodating a maximally diverse range of functionality, while recognizing that it is usually impossible to accommodate everyone. The assignment posed by this forum prompts my effort to imagine whether there could be a universal design for literary criticism. Taking my lead from Hendren and the premises of universal design, I try to imagine the function of literary criticism in terms of what it *can* do, as well as a *functional* literary criticism, one that accommodates the widest possible range of texts, modes of reading, and interpretive practices.

In borrowing Hendren’s question to ask, “What can a literary critic do?” I also consider the temporal frame of this forum, which, following Arnold, is concerned with “the present time.” In what follows, I’ll identify three familiar critical activities I see as most salient to our time and place: formalism, cultural analysis, and syllabi-building. But any account I can give of “the present time” would be incomplete without acknowledging that, for over a year, my present, perhaps like many others’, has been defined by cycles of bubbles, lockdowns, remote learning, remote teaching, the space of a two-bedroom apartment, and other unsustainable entanglements of domestic and professional life. In making such confessions, it probably goes without saying that I find Arnold’s call for a disinterested

criticism implausible as either an ideal or a practice. Where Arnold sought to transcend the vulgar headlines proclaiming, “Wragg is in custody” (9), I cannot write from any position other than fully embedded in the world of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Rayshard Brooks, Daniel Prude, and a tragically long list of others. My knowledge is situated and, recently, it has been situated at the dining room table in between managing my two sons’ remote learning, screen time, hygiene, levels of depression, the delivery of groceries, copious washing of hands, donning of masks, and daily health screenings. Because I am interested and because the only critical practice I can imagine for this present is fully interdependent with my nonprofessional life, this essay moves between an account of how literary criticism functions in my work as a teacher and a writer, and how it might function to account for my neurodiverse son’s rebellious, creative, and total living through and with narrative.

Perhaps the most self-evident, but also distinctive, function of literary criticism is its nuanced understanding of form. Where certain formalisms work better in some cases than in others (the New Criticism, for example, favoring difficult lyric poetry or Vladimir Propp’s concentration on fairy tales), a universally designed literary criticism would accommodate the widest possible spectrum of forms. Formalism has sometimes been claimed as the highest accomplishment of the field, but it has also been a reason to dismiss literary criticism as irrelevant and quietist. In the 1980s and early 1990s, as the last great pandemic (HIV/AIDS), raged and cultural studies was in its ascendancy, a concern with politics and history was often framed as rejecting formalism (and often preceded by the adjective “mere”) that saw attention to genre, imagery, voice, and other structural matters as distinct from context. The narrowness of this critique by now goes almost without saying. Formal analysis does not preclude, and can often facilitate, understanding of how and why texts engage with events around them. Arguing against the false dichotomy between formalism and cultural studies in 1997, Elizabeth Maddock Dillon called for a recognition of forms as inherently historical and material, and thus “eminently political” (47). A decade later, Caroline Levine made a similar claim, introducing the concept of “strategic formalism,” which acknowledges “literary forms participate in a destabilizing relation to social formations, often colliding with social hierarchies rather than reflecting or foreshadowing them. Literary forms, that is, trouble and remake political relationships in surprising, aleatory, and often confusingly disorderly ways” (626).

I had this more socially conscious formalism in mind when I designed my literature course on Pandemic and Social Inequality in

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Spring 2021. I wanted students to consider how forms reflect but also engage critically with their historical and material contexts. In a unit on AIDS, we compared the formal features of epic and literary minimalism. Students read Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* (1991) alongside Rebecca Brown's short story collection, *Gifts of the Body* (1994), so that they could study how the former used epic to depict the sublime calamity of mass death, while the latter represented the small gestures of caregiving in the narrowing worlds of gravely ill people. In another unit, I assigned recent novels about fictional pandemics that employed a range of genres and narrative perspectives. Colson Whitehead's zombie thriller, *Zone One* (2011), Ling Ma's immigration narrative, *Severance* (2018), and Emily St. John Mandel's realist *Station Eleven* (2014) led us to ask how literary form could cast similar stories of deadly contagion as sublime, horrifying, darkly comic, or even banal. These discussions gave us tools, in the last weeks of the semester, to turn to literary efforts already emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic: Charles Yu's "Systems," focalized by a search engine trying to explain humans through their Internet use; David Mitchell's "If Wishes Was Horses," a magical realist account of a quarantined prisoner suffering from COVID-19; and close readings of comics collaboratively written by healthcare activists, patients, medical providers, and artists.

In the functional literary criticism I'm envisioning, the same interpretive tools I use in my teaching and writing also make sense of my 13-year-old son's reading preferences. Henry lives with and through fictional narrative with exceptional intensity and endurance. For years, he had his most prolonged and animated conversations with a particular cup and spoon. He couldn't explain the substance of their discussions, but these implements were clearly as satisfying to him as any human interlocutor. Many children experience such a vivid interdependency of lived and imagined realities before the prioritizing the everyday over the make-believe that we call "maturity." But as Henry enters adolescence, his capacity for imaginary world-building grows more intense and more articulate, even as he clearly understands the more tedious functions assigned to favored objects by us boring neurotypicals. There is no question that he knows the difference between a biological pig, a stuffed animal pig, and Miss Piggy, but all are equally real. He is an avid reader, as well as a consumer of film, television, YouTube, and video game narratives. I can't dismiss the strategies I use to make sense of the narratives in Henry's pantheon as "mere formalism," since they help me to understand his preferences and drives, to participate in the worlds that are most important to him, and to create the ground for us to have meaningful dialogue.

Because the world around him is often confusing, Henry is drawn to the familiar characters and events of fictional worlds that spin out across multiple narratives: sequels, prequels, serials, and episodes. Favorites include the *Star Wars* canon, the Muppet shows and films, and the universe of Disney movies, with its loosely interchangeable princes and princesses, villains, and plotlines. Formal analysis helps me to recognize consistent themes and imagery within and across texts: the color *green*, the eating mouth (with or without teeth), the chaotic explosion, the conflict between good and evil. A universally designed formalism is adaptable to a broad range of texts, genres, and media, recognizing complexity and nuance through such familiar literary devices as irony (Kermit the Frog's disdain for other animals, animals that speak to each other in English but can't be understood by humans, the menacing snow monster named Marshmallow, the hideous beast with a heart of gold, the vulnerable exhaust port in the otherwise impenetrable Death Star), paradox (the snowman who loves summer, Cookie Monster teaching a lesson in self-control), and ambiguity (is Darth Vader victim or villain? Can Elsa live happily ever after? Is Jason Segel in *The Muppet Movie* a Muppet of a man, or a very manly Muppet?). I witness Henry's pleasure at the predictable narrative arcs supplied by genre, but know he likes it even better when those conventions are broken in fan videos that turn Darth Vader into a comic buffoon or give alternative endings where Disney protagonists don't live happily ever after.

A pandemic favorite has been the stage play and film, *Little Shop of Horrors* (play, 1982; film, 1986), which has two different endings that dramatically transform the narrative's generic and affective texture. The story is set in the Skid Row environs of the kind Matthew Arnold wanted his literary critic to transcend. While Arnold decried the working-class redolence of names like "Wragg, Higginbottom, Stiggins, and Bugg," *Little Shop* delights in the ethnically coded cacophony of Krelborn, Scrivello, and Mushnik. The narrative's alternative endings play out each side of Arnold's opposition of sullied immersion versus transcendent sweetness and light. The original version is comically horrific, with the dying heroine, Audrey, asking that her true love, the nebbishy Seymour Krelborn, feed her to the carnivorous plant initially nourished on his blood. "If I'm *in* the plant," she sighs in her squeaky Brooklyn accent, "then I am part *of* the plant, so in a way, we'll always be together." When translated into film, this tragic ending proved unpopular with preview audiences, prompting the creation of a Hollywood happy alternative. This time, Seymour defeats the monster he has created, allowing him to marry Audrey. Instead of a world greened by the unstoppable reproduction of flesh-eating plants, there is "somewhere

that's green," the perfect suburban ever-after where the loving couple escape their grimy origins.

As suggested by these readings, as well as corrective accounts of formalism such as Dillon and Levine provide, another prominent function of literary criticism is to recognize how narrative meaning is shaped by medium, consumption practices, and other aspects of cultural and historical context. The more expansive our view of culture, the more universal the function of our critical practice. In the evenings, as my son toggled between the film versions of *Little Shop*, videos of stage productions, and multiple comic book adaptations, I could see that each version bore different meanings that did not require prioritizing one authoritative edition. By day, I assigned my students to read the print version of *Angels in America* while keeping in mind that original audiences would have seen it performed on a Broadway stage. As context for the play's first run in 1991, I taught them that it brought new prominence to the brutal wages of a pandemic, the gross negligence of the government and public health institutions, and the suffering, humor, and creative networks of care emerging in affected communities. I then asked them to consider how it acquired different meanings when packaged as an HBO miniseries in 2003 or revived on Broadway in 2018. Students reading in 2021 had particular difficulty with Belize, the play's lone character of color, who they found clichéd and underdeveloped. We tried to temper that view by thinking historically about what he might have meant to audiences in the early 1990s, the same moment when Jennie Livingston's important but problematic documentary film, *Paris is Burning* (1991)—about the trans-of-color underground ballroom scene—became a sensation.

The critical tools that I offer my students to interpret medium and context are also functional for making sense of Henry's reading practices. Much as he loves books and movies for the stories they contain, he is also interested in their status as material objects. He delights in the modernist art of defamiliarization, sometimes reading a book upside down, refracted through a drinking cup, or while wearing different colored sunglasses. Sometimes he watches TV as it is reflected in a window or glass picture frame. Sometimes he watches the TV monitor through the screen of his iPad and sometimes he watches the iPad reflected through the TV screen. Henry's teachers and therapists don't condone these reception practices; they encourage him to read books from beginning to end and to study concepts like chronology, transitions, and cause and effect by recounting favored narratives in their original sequence. But his preferred approaches to narrative are, I believe, ideally suited to the rhythms of pandemic. Confined as we've been to our apartment, reading this way leads him to make familiar narratives strange,

rearranging their modes of delivery and the environments where they are typically consumed. At night we drown out the constant wail of sirens (we live a block from a hospital overflowing with COVID-19 patients) by watching YouTube, where grotesque fan-made montages turn Disney's Princess Elsa into a demonic fury. We remember the experience of seeing the animated film *Frozen* at our favorite movie theater with the reclining seats, and as a live Broadway show, which surprised us with an extra song celebrating the Danish concept of *hygge* and paper snow falling on the audience. Our lived reality confirms that medium and context shapes narrative meaning.

But the deranged *Frozen* fans do more. (Are these the same people behind the looping montage of Jabba licking Princess Leia intercut with oiled swimsuit models?). They are participants actively engaged in creating meaning, not merely passive consumers of culture. And I can see this thanks to the cultural studies methods that were diffusing into English departments when I was in graduate school. I remember the eye-opening revelations of my first semester graduate seminar on "cultural criticism," taught by the brilliant Jonathan Freedman. We moved from Arnold's elitist view of culture as "the best that has been thought and said" to the Frankfurt School's disdainful account of pop culture and the open-mouthed dupes who consumed it, to the refreshing insights of Stuart Hall, Raymond Williams, and Richard Hoggart. Culture was not about rarified aesthetic transcendence or pacifying mass audiences; it was a terrain of arduous contestation. Culture became meaningful through the dynamic interaction between narratives and their consumers. This past spring, I returned to these insights with new appreciation while teaching enduringly rich essays from the special 1987 issue of *October* on *AIDS: Cultural Criticism/Cultural Analysis* edited by Douglas Crimp. These essays are evidence that the AIDS pandemic produced some of the smartest, most influential importations of British cultural studies into the US. Paula Treichler's, "AIDS, Homophobia, and Biomedical Discourse," also helped us to recognize continuities between literary and social representation by explaining how an "epidemic of signification" created the conditions of possibility for prejudice, disease transmission, and catastrophic health disparities. But where cultural studies may favor context over texts themselves, a functional criticism for the present time must include an understanding of culture as a domain of "signifying practices," one enhanced by the elegant tools of formalism that literary analysis supplies. Together, these equip critics with the most universally adaptive tools to confront opposing stories about what the results of an election mean, what difference it makes if I wear a mask, and whether humans can influence climate change. Was the

death caused by a foot on a neck or because the victim tried to use a counterfeit bill or sometimes took drugs? Was the gathering a riot or a protest? Is the vaccine a defense against infection or a government conspiracy? Once we recognize these partisan disputes as struggles over signification, narrative theory and cultural studies leaven our understanding of how and why they become meaningful.

In my son's version of universal design for criticism, narrative is useful for making sense of the present: Donald Trump as any number of villains from the tyrannical Emperor Palpatine to the boorish Gaston of *Beauty and the Beast*; #MeToo in the impropriety of unwanted advances by the villainous Frollo of *Hunchback of Notre Dame*, Miss Piggy, or Jabba the Hutt, and the injustice of discriminating on the basis of origins or appearance. Watching in horror as the insurrection of 6 January 2021 unfolded on our TV screen, I explained the mob to Henry by comparing it to the crowds that assault the gentle Quasimodo in *Hunchback* or storm the castle in *Beauty and the Beast*. Henry's incessant viewing of *Little Shop of Horrors* speaks to many other aspects of our troubled present. Most obviously, it is about a gain-of-function experiment that threatens to unleash a global pandemic capable of destroying all humanity. Henry would not describe it in these terms, but I'm certain he finds comfort in navigating between happy and unhappy outcomes in the space of our living room as a frightening and unpredictable pandemic rages outside.

For me, the visual and thematic prominence of green in *Little Shop* is a prompt to think further about the meaning of color as a signifier for both racial difference and environmental calamity. Although the protagonists are white ethnics (vaguely gesturing to Jewish or Italian origins), their inner-city origins are coded black by the bluesy tones of musical numbers, the chorus of black women, and the voracious flesh-eating plant, voiced in the film by Levi Stubbs, lead vocalist for the iconic Motown group, The Four Tops. By this account, the two endings are a study in the racialization of genre. The happy ending upholds a darkly comic version of white supremacy, with the destruction of the predatory monster allowing Seymour and Audrey (whose blonde whiteness is reinforced by her all-white costume) to escape the diversity of the ghetto for the suburbs. In the horror version, the voracious plant, coded as a Black male, consumes the white woman as a precis to world domination. The narrative also works as a handy allegory for environmental catastrophe, a cautionary tale about the dangers of human attempts to tame the natural world.

Using literary criticism to make sense of the narratives that fill my son's world gives me pleasure and insight, but its functions extend beyond analysis of individual texts. A functional literary

criticism can also supply methods and organizational concepts for syllabi-building. In the past decade, the syllabus has shed its identity as a simple outline of class content to become a vibrant political genre. Reading, in this context, is not antithetical to action, but rather a means to promote informed activism, particularly among the progressive Left. Recent social movements have inspired classes like #MeToo Shakespeare,³ but the activist syllabus has also floated free of the traditional classroom in projects like #TheBlackLivesMatterSyllabus movement, which calls for “teaching as a radical form of *community organizing*,” and the #FergusonSyllabus, which used Twitter to promote the concept of devoting a school day to the history of racism and protest in the US. In response to the current pandemic, literature professors Sari Altschuler and Elizabeth Dillon built the open-sourced “Humanities in the Time of Covid Syllabus,” and Alondra Nelson, President of the Social Science Research Council, curated a #coronavirussyllabus featured on the organization’s website. The online literary magazine *Public Books* regularly features syllabi on such topics as pandemic, imperialism, the Internet, gun violence, the Trump regime, and rape culture. To be sure, the syllabus is not the privileged domain of literary critics, but literary criticism, with its capacity to identify genres and themes, invent schemes of classification, and interpret a wide range of texts, can make an essential contribution to the political and intellectual work of syllabi-building and the new forms of knowledge and action it promotes. It is no accident that many of the syllabi described above emerge out of literary studies, and nearly all contain materials written or frequently studied by, literary critics.

Inspired by universal design, the syllabus has potential beyond even its current expanded ambit. If I were to create a syllabus for Henry’s spring semester, it would look nothing like the syllabus for one of my literature classes or the activist reading lists of contemporary protest movements, but it would have a core set of texts, reading methods, interpretive practices, and rules of conduct. Henry’s canon is an interdisciplinary mix of genres that include epic, musicals, comedic vignettes, romance, and tragedy. Where more traditional syllabi are built on the assumption that knowledge and skills should be acquired in a particular sequence, Henry’s syllabus is chaotic, redundant, and associative. His learning happens in eddies and networks, never in a straight line; through repetition, rather than revelation or accretion. His gateway into the *Star Wars* canon was Yoda, a character voiced by the brilliant Frank Oz, who was also the puppeteer behind earlier favorites like Miss Piggy, Fozzy the Bear, and Cookie Monster. His understanding of that epic evolved from watching isolated scenes of Yoda on YouTube to movies and books that included Yoda, to his current encyclopedic knowledge of events and

characters. Where classroom syllabi assume that the purpose of reading is to acquire knowledge, and the activist syllabus treats reading as an avenue to political consciousness and informed practice, my son, like many other people, reads for comfort, recognition, and delight. Literary critics are ideally positioned to identify this diversity of reading styles and purposes, and to build syllabi that recognize the acquisition of knowledge and understanding need not happen according to a strict chronological sequence, but can also be repetitive, episodic, or regressive. By this account, the syllabus is something like the doorbell of academic knowledge: once the minimally designed auditory feature suggested by its name, now doorbells have become much more universally adaptable. The presence of a visitor can be cued by a wide range of sounds, lights, and video images, with the option for verbal and visual communication between inside and outside, as well as networks that connect to police and security services. It is an illuminating thought experiment to imagine the syllabus as a similarly expansive form, one that functions both to plan acquisition of academic or political knowledge, and to access other ways of knowing and being. A functional syllabus can be an archive to document what was read in a particular time and place, as well as a plan for the future. For Spring 2021, mine would include one reading of Alan Barnett's short story "The Times as it Knows Us," MK Czerweic's graphic memoir *Taking Turns: Stories from HIV/AIDS Care Unit 371* (2017), and the poems "We Wear the Mask" by Maya Angelou and Paul Lawrence Dunbar, and a hundred viewings of a YouTube video of Steve Martin singing "I Am Your Dentist." Someday, a list of how and when I experienced these narratives might help me to make retrospective sense of this past year.

"To have the sense of creative activity is the great happiness and the great proof of being alive," Arnold writes, in a rare moment when I might agree with him. Here he identifies criticism with joyful vitality that, he insists, is just as significant as artistic creation itself. But there is a melancholy cast to his account of the critical function: the era of great art and literature was long gone, leaving the modern critic fated to "die in the wilderness," having gestured to the accomplishments of a nobler past (15). I can't be nostalgic for a promised land that always excluded people like my son and me, and I think our exhausted planet needs more wilderness. Nor do I think that the critical sensibility is so easily separated from the work of creating narrative. Literary critics tell stories all the time, about what texts mean, what they say when they talk to each other, and how they relate to the contexts that surround them. A universal design for literary criticism would tell stories about narrative suited to our present time and place, and it would be committed to making make sense of

a maximally inclusive body of texts. But I do find “great happiness and the great proof of being alive,” in critical activities that have sustained me and helped me make sense of a year of death and unhappiness. That is how literary criticism has functioned for me, and it is the only functional criticism I can imagine for the present time.

Notes

1. To be sure, much harm has been done with unjust understandings of what is or is not “natural” but that has to do with abusing the concept of nature, not of function.
2. A recurring complaint about architectural accommodations, particularly with historic buildings, is that they are ugly. Such accusations immediately create a conflict between aesthetics and function. Architects like Frank Lloyd Wright and Frank Geary have successfully taken access as a challenge, creating designs that are both accessible and aesthetically pleasing. See Tobin Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics* (2010).
3. See Amberdeen Dadabhoy. “#MeToo Shakespeare at Harvey Mudd College,” *HSA Blog*, web.

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