

# MarketPlace

## Alain Briot

### How to Critique Photographs Constructively

*He who stands aloof runs the risk of believing himself better than others  
and misusing his critique of society as an ideology for his private interest.*  
Theodor Adorno



Grand Canyon Sunrise.

#### 1. Introduction

Finding and expressing our vision involves having our work critiqued in order to know where we are and how others respond to our images.

For me critiquing photographs is synonymous with reviewing a selection of prints. Of course, the subject can be extended to critiquing any photographs, including those seen in an exhibition or a publication for example. However, for the purpose of this essay I am purposefully limiting the scope of my remarks to what is commonly referred to as 'a print review.'

A print review, or print critique, can take place in a variety of contexts including a photography workshop, a photo club meeting, or an informal gathering of photographers.

A print critique is an important event in the life of a photographer. The purpose of this essay is to offer guidance to make this event constructive rather than destructive.

#### 2. Critiquing is not criticizing

Personally, I see a difference between critiquing and criticizing a photograph, or any work of art for that matter. Critiquing means looking at the work for the purpose of finding out the strong and weak points of the work. On the other hand, criticizing can also mean taking a critical look at the work for the purpose of expressing a personal opinion. While there is a gray area between the two, I view the former as constructive and the latter as destructive.

#### 3. Address the different aspects of photography

A good critique is one that addresses all the issues involved in creating world-class fine art photographs. These include the technical/artistic aspects, image processing, printing, composition, fieldwork, etc. Most importantly, a good review covers both hard skills (technical) and soft skills (artistic).

#### 4. Critique technical and artistic aspects separately

Technical aspects include focus, sharpness, exposure, processing, optimizing, cropping, collaging, HDR, printing and other technical aspects.

Artistic aspects include composition, light quality, color palette, facture, presence or absence of a recognizable personal style across a collection of images, creativity, motivation and other artistic aspects.

#### 5. Arrange critique by subject matter

You cannot critique different types of photography in the same manner. While good photographs share common characteristics, each genre has specific characteristics. For that reason it is important that

the reviewer has expertise in the type of photography being reviewed. For example it is best to have a portrait photographer review portraits, a landscape photographer review landscapes and so on. This is because you cannot review portraits, landscapes and other genres the same way.

#### **6. Good lighting is essential**

Physical conditions of the review are just as important as the qualifications and the approach used by the reviewer. Among those one of the most important is lighting. Having good lighting, consistent from review to review, is essential. Photographs depend on lighting to be seen properly. Overly dark or bright lighting conditions will affect the print viewing experience negatively, leading to commentaries about the print being too bright or too dark. Similarly, lighting should be calibrated for daylight if the review is done indoors. If the review is done outdoors, midday light in a shaded area is best.

#### **7. Print versus screen**

I prefer to review physical prints because this is what I exhibit and sell. However, I am not opposed to reviewing images on screen as long as the viewing device is calibrated. When doing a screen review I do mention that I cannot vouch on the print quality because there is nothing automatic in going from a screen image to a printed image. How the image prints out is fully dependent on the photographer's printing skills.

#### **8. Be factual, not opinionated**

The reviewer's behavior is just as important as the reviewers' knowledge. As the old adage says, no one cares about how much you know until they know how much you care.

Make your critique factual, not opinionated. An example of a fact-based critique is: 'This print is blurry because the camera was used handheld and the shutter speed was too slow.' Sharpness is a verifiable fact and if the photographer wanted to create a sharp image there is something wrong with the resulting photograph.

An example of an opinion-based critique is: 'I don't like blue so I suggest you change the color of the image to a warm tone.' Color choice is a matter of personal taste and if the photographer chose that color intentionally there is nothing wrong with this decision.

#### **9. Keep your opinions about art to yourself**

You don't have to like a specific photograph in order to make meaningful comments about it. You may not want to hang this photograph in your living room, however that doesn't mean it is devoid of qualities. Point to what works and what does not work in the photograph in regards to artistic and technical aspects and keep your personal taste in art private.

#### **10. Adjust your critique to the skill and achievement level of the photographer**

There is no point critiquing the work for having a lack of vision if the photographer does not know how to set his tripod correctly! For this to work you have to set a hierarchy of importance. This is the purpose



*Grand Canyon Monsoons.*



*Mono Lake Sunrise.*

of the skills evaluation pyramid (page 17). You can't evaluate and critique the work of a beginner the same way that you evaluate and critique the work of a photographer with 40 years of experience.

Therefore, you have to adjust your evaluation according to the skill, knowledge and experience level of each student. While the ultimate goal remains learning how to create world-class images, the goal of a print review is to assess where the student is and point to specific things this student can do in order to reach the next step.

### **11. Explain what you find to be the number one problem**

Do so in a clear and concise manner. It is not possible to fix everything at once. A photograph may have several

problems, but usually one stands out as the most important. That's the one that needs to be addressed first. For example, if a photograph is not very sharp and taken in poor light (at noon for example), the thing that needs fixing first is learning to take photographs in good light. Who cares if the photograph is not sharp if it is not interesting. Light quality is much more important than sharpness. Nobody cares for a sharp photograph of a boring subject.

### **12. Point to both the good and the not so good aspects of the work**

Don't just point to what is wrong with the work. Point also to what is good. Often the best way to get your point across is to dull the pain of the critique by offering kind words about what works in the image. In other words, don't just tear it apart! The 'boot camp' approach to criticism is rarely effective because while it is easy to tear apart a photograph, it is challenging to rebuild the self-esteem of the photographer afterwards. Often it is simply impossible and you run the risk of discouraging the artist altogether. The best approach is to start by pointing out what works in the photograph and its inherent qualities, and then continue by pointing out what does not work and explain how these issues can be corrected by doing specific things.

### **13. Critique constructively**

Offer constructive criticism. If you find something wrong, provided this is a fact and not an opinion, give suggestions about fixing the problem. Don't just say that something is 'bad.' Explain how it can be improved.

### **14. Teach the subjects you critique**

Offer tutorial sessions, either through workshops or group meetings, during which you teach the things you will be looking for during critique sessions. That way the critique sessions are closer to a 'test' that follows a lecture than to an exchange of personal opinions about what is 'good' or 'bad' photography. Teaching the foundations of good photography, then asking students to create photographs that use these foundations, gives you something on which to base your critique. Instead of being an opinion, this critique becomes an implementation of your teaching.

Another effective approach is to show work by well-known photographers as examples of what you consider to be good photography. This can be done either privately during the critique session or during a group presentation after the critique session.

### **15. Follow the work of each student over time**

You can't critique art in a vacuum. A first critique is only a starting point. Follow up critiques are necessary to evaluate progress and continue the process. For this reason, whenever possible it is more constructive to follow the work of specific students than to do one-time print reviews. Critiquing the work

of someone whose progress you are keeping track of is a lot more helpful because you can point out progress instead of just saying 'this works and this does not work.'

#### **16. Don't be rude but don't be patronizing**

Accolades and kudos are nice but not necessarily helpful. Similarly, harsh criticism alone leaves people emotionally shaken and unsure about what they should do next. We learn by fixing mistakes, but we gain confidence by building our self-esteem. To be helpful a critique must therefore feature both negative and positive aspects. Few photographs are perfect and few photographs are totally bad. Don't sway to one extreme or the other. Provide a balanced critique in which you address both the positive and the negative points of the image.

#### **17. Respond to criticism constructively**

It helps if the person being reviewed knows how to respond to criticism constructively. To this end teaching a class, or offering a tutorial on 'how to respond to criticism constructively' can be helpful. The purpose of the seminar would be to teach participants how to respond to criticism in a positive manner.

Personally, I cover this subject in series of essays titled How to respond to criticism. These essays will be published here in the coming months. In the meantime below is an overview of the nine points I consider most important when responding to criticism.

##### *Nine Tips for Responding to Criticism*

1. Do not accept criticism blindly
2. Do not argue unnecessarily
3. Do not be defensive
4. Do not be your own critic
5. Do not expect everyone to be pleased
6. You don't have to be rude
7. Seek an audience that likes your work
8. Don't disregard positive comments
9. Move on

#### **18. Use a measuring device**

I kept this for last because I consider it to be particularly important. To critique photographs without a measuring device of some kind is like grading a test without an answer sheet. How do you know what is correct and incorrect and how can you justify the grade you give to students?

This means having an evaluation tool that allows both teacher and student to see what steps are involved in going from beginner to master photographer. In my reviews I use a measuring device that I designed: *The Alain Briot Photographic Skills Pyramid*. This pyramid (page 17) provides a framework, a scale if you want, for the critique. I have used this evaluation tool successfully for many years in my teaching.

#### **19. Conclusion**

A print critique is not about you. It is about someone else's work. The goal is not to demonstrate your knowledge of photography. The goal is to help another photographer improve his or her work.

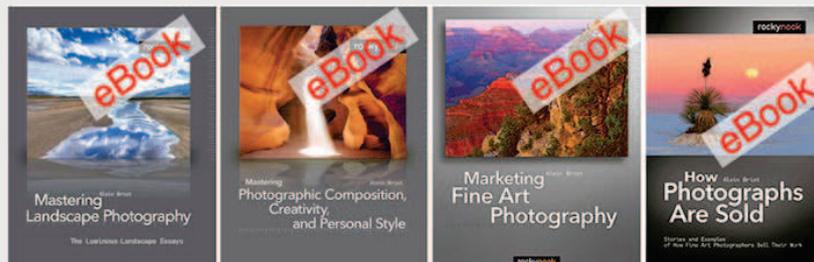
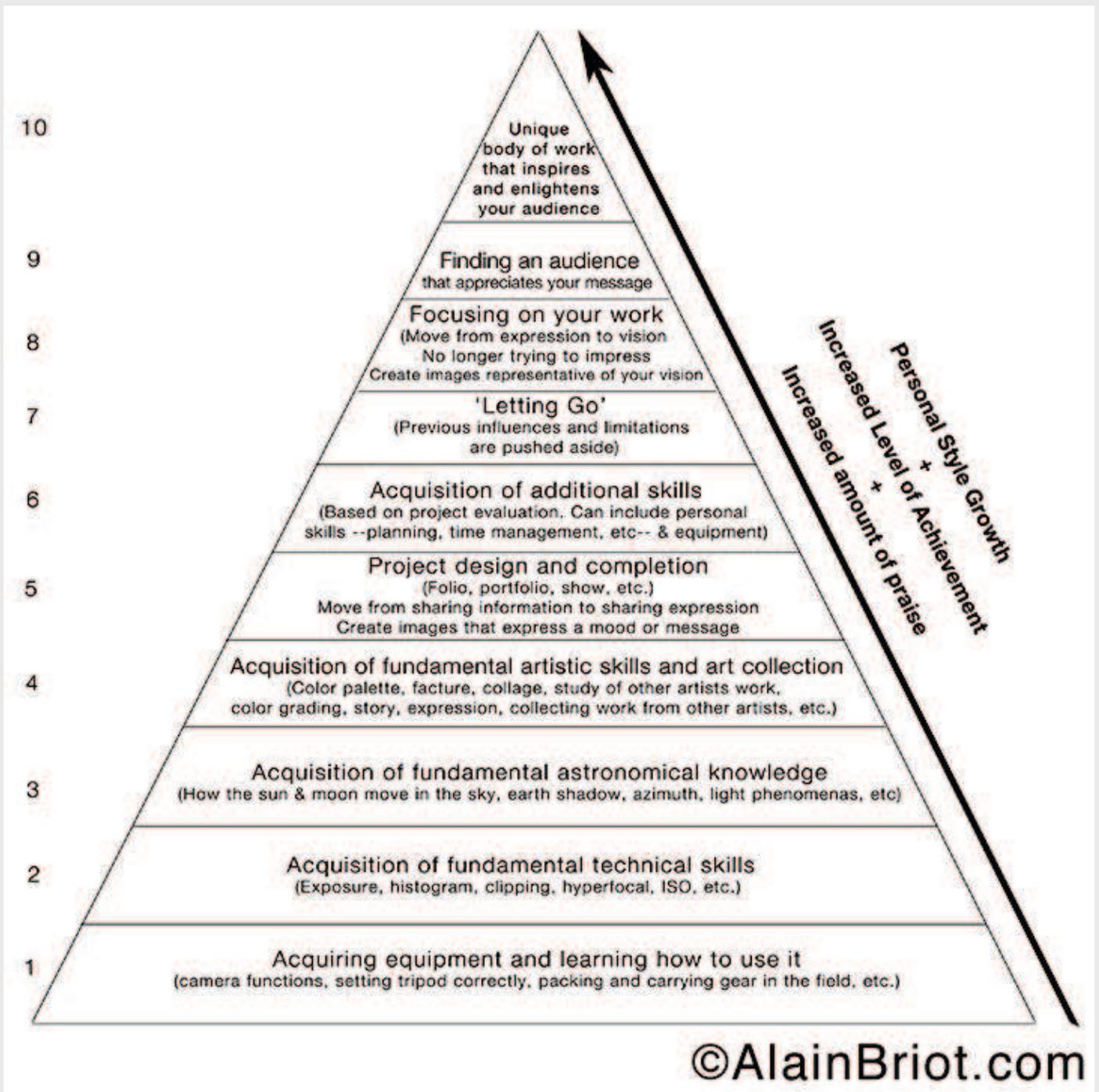
When reviewing photographs, take time to explain how the photographer can improve his or her work. Give solutions to the problems you point out and point out ways students can make their work better.

Make the print critique part of your teaching. When done that way a print review becomes an extension of your teaching. It also becomes a way to see how much of your teaching your students have retained and used in their own work.

#### 20 - Going further

How to find and develop your personal vision is the concept taught in the new *Personal Vision Mastery Workshop* on DVD. You can read a detailed description and download the table of contents at this link: <http://beautiful-landscape.com/MDVD-Vision-Mastery-SPO.html>

My next essay will focus on the subject of art competitions. *About Art Competitions* will expand on my views about photography critiques as they apply to the field of photographic and artistic competitions.



I create fine art photographs, teach workshops and offer Mastery DVD tutorials on composition, image conversion, optimization, printing and marketing. I am the author of Mastering Landscape Photography, Mastering Photographic Composition, Creativity and Personal Style, Marketing Fine Art Photography and How Photographs are Sold. All 4 books are available in eBook format on my website at this link: <http://beautiful-landscape.com/Ebooks-Books-1-2-3.html>