

Don't Mess with My Design!

By Norberto Chaves

The interprofessional critique taboo: insecurity, paranoia and corporatism refuge.

In some professional publicity and graphic design sectors, a kind of deontological rule circulates, forcing opinions of our colleagues' work to be kept silent. This rule is part of the supposed obligatory solidarity between colleagues. Who is professional must be loyal above all to his colleagues and must never criticize their labor, without considering its quality.

But, who is more authorized to detect strengths and weaknesses in the colleagues' services than those who are good professionals? Bringing that rule into action, for example, a publicity campaign, the only ones who would be authorized to criticize it would be the doctors, lawyers and engineers, because they don't have this kind of compromise to someone who is not their colleague.

This belief and the resulting behavior set out, this way, a serious problem to the society: a key area of its development (communication) is deprived from the transforming and optimizing role of quality evaluation and the consequent pointing out of “bad *praxis*.”

Critique, on the other hand, is not an external, unconnected nor optional practice: it is an intrinsic part of the design process. What is to design if not a critique and correction sequence to every previous project, made by the author himself or his assessors to reach the maximum adjustment to the program?

This critique, ineludible in the project development, isn't limited to the design itself, it should be committed to the work of others as well. Such is the case of the brand interventions when one is already existing. A key part of this intervention is the previous diagnostic of this brand. And most of time, the previous brand came out as a designer's work. What does the professional do then? Does he avoid commenting on the work just to be loyal to his colleague? No: He will have to point out what's wrong with the existing brand as an unavoidable technical condition to get on with the new design. And, in most of cases, deficiencies come from mistakes made by the previous designer. Meaning: The silence covenant is technically dysfunctional and deontologically disloyal to the client.

Furthermore, the professional who exercises the critique to others' work in a responsible way, doesn't do anything but to conceptualize and socialize what he has learned from self-critique, being successful in transmitting a serious evaluation of the analyzed piece. All professionals should be trained in this task. To manage to verbalize the correct evaluation parameters accelerates the design processes and increases the final product quality.

The paradoxical character of that rule comes into sight when an absolutely legal and essential institution of the free competition society comes to take place: the contest. Every professional services contest – if it's well organized – gathers a jury of experts on the subject, and among them, the professionals with the highest authority. And it is precisely the argument of a bad-chosen jury which often leads to complaining of expert absence among its members.

This is the case, for example, of a design contest. There will be high-level designers in the jury that will judge their colleagues in an objective way. They will write a document pointing out the virtues of the winning project and in contrast, the limitations or mistakes made from those who lost will be evidenced. And it is very likely that this document will be made public because of simply being transparent in the management process.

If rejection to interprofessional critique was coherent, all of the designers should inhibit themselves to be part of a jury in which a colleague is actually judged; but also this colleague would be able to choose not to participate in the contest if the jury is not conformed by experts. So, the rule generates a paradox. It proves its falsehood.

What will it be then, the origin of this flagrant contradiction that states the “critique taboo”? It is not difficult to spot it. It is about an ideology's survival, which is established by the medieval guilds: The corporativism, an active concept to these days. The silence covenant, close to the “*omertá*” quarrel, prescribes: “don't tell on me and I won't tell on you; with my silence I buy yours.”

In a society that considers itself as democratic, where the free opinion and critique exercise are one of its pillars, such a covenant doesn't just represent an anachronism, but an absolutely antidemocratic practice that happens to be harmful for the community.

The professional has the right to critique and the obligation of practicing it. His loyalty is not to be bowed to the guilt – as in the medieval times – but to the society that he serves and in which he lives. A professional that serves the guild is a traitor to his society.

Just as the one who produces exposes himself to other people's critique, the one who criticizes exposes himself to be rebated. In that exposition, the value systems are at stake and at the same time are improved. The silence, the “*omertá*” is a lethal virus that leaves the society as an orphan of parameters and thrown to the “everything is fair” chaos.

By making a supported critique, the professional leaves behind his personal inclinations and assumes responsibility of developing growing objectivity levels, polishing in this exercise, parameters of general validity. FOROALFA was born and has grown up precisely with this vocation, opening a space in which we learn from all.

Truth be told, behind the supposed loyalty to the guild, a shameless aspiration to impunity operates, to make mistakes is riskless of judgement; “I don't criticize you, you don't criticize me; and screw the clients.”

Years ago, I published in a professional organization, a critique to 3 institutional ads which held serious deflections in its social ethics; specially serious because in them, the speech of a government institution was being disrespectful to the citizens.

The three ads were the creation of the same leading agency, fact that I ignored because public organization publicity is not generally signed by agencies. Its president, an amiable colleague of mine in some group works, invited me to a dinner in which he expressed his concern. This man, who lost perspective due to corporativism, couldn't even think about my critique being honest. And asked me if I had something against his agency. He supposed that I was so mediocre to use my word to disqualify a colleague in favor of others.

Whoever doubts of a critic's honesty *a priori*, despite what's been sustained about his arguments, evidences his/her own dishonesty. A mature, cultivated and loyal answer from him would have been to invite me to a work meeting with his creative team to exchange ideas about a valid rhetoric of the institutional communication.

The history of culture has had the critique as one of its auto-regulation pillars, at least from the times of Socrates. Musicians, writers, painters, philosophers, scientists, have exerted publicly their critical responsibility for centuries.

But, as it has been said, middle age has not ended for all of us. Our times back up premeditatedly the uncritical acceptance of everything that is being done: "Just do it." In that same way advances its irreversible decadence... With the corporativists as unconditional allies.

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