

# Pretentiousness: Why It Matters by Dan Fox

written by John Yohe | May 23, 2016



*Pretentiousness: Why It Matters* by Dan Fox

Coffee House Press, 2016

144 pages – Coffee House / [Amazon](#)

Some might take a book about pretentiousness as a bit, well, pretentious—especially if the subtitle is *Why It Matters*, with a sub-subtitle informing us that we're about to read "An Essay." To be clear, *Pretentiousness* is not one of those slick non-fiction books by *New Yorker* (or *New Yorker* wanna-be) writers for capitalists who want to feel good about participating in Big Business: Writer and art critic Dan Fox justifying your Wall Street income. But Fox *is* making a case for the value of pretentiousness, as a way to try out ways of living, to test different lifestyles.

In order to 'take back' the term pretentiousness, Fox first delves back into the latin roots of the word: *praetendere*—'to hold before oneself,' like one would a mask, as in to do something others might find pretentious is you wearing a mask, trying on a personae. The key being that those others can tell you're wearing a mask, and that they think you're not being 'real,' that you're pretending. Except that Fox argues we all do this, all the time:

....the assumption about a pretentious person is that their pretension is bookended by a time before, when they were truly themselves, and a time after, when they will give up their silly act of pretending, or rather, performing, is part of what we all do each day.

Fox later adds another layer to what he think pretentiousness is, or does: it's what is "unfamiliar," to ourselves, and to others, who see it as false, or not normal. Pretentious people are stepping outside the bounds of what is normal in their culture, clique, or (most especially important for Fox and his fellow Brits) class.

*Pretentiousness* is short, 135 pages, more of a novella-length essay, and

probably could have been condensed down to a long essay, though I like the potential of this kind of longer exploration, where the essayist has time to explore many facets of the subject, rather than being super-direct.

Having given some historical background on the use and development of the word, Fox explores the act of pretentiousness through different subjects like food, fashion, music and, most interestingly, acting, to give us alternate ways of looking at it. I'm not sure the whole chapter about the history of different acting styles serves as a great 'point' in his argument, though it's interesting, and Fox is obviously interested in the subject, and so, like with Montaigne's tangents, I'm mostly willing to go along, because part of the pleasure of writing like this is to read Fox, read the person.

The flip side of tangents though, is that sometimes points are not made. Or, I'm left wondering what they are. Fox jumps from subject to subject within the first few chapters, and though the format of the book is ostensibly a linear book building to a main argument, the first half really reads almost like a collage, à la David Shields, and I half-wonder if Fox actually originally wanted his text that way.

What's missing here are some good solid contemporary examples of pretentiousness: all of Fox's examples are from decades ago, at the earliest. It's as if he didn't want to offend anybody by calling something they like pretentious, even though, again, he's supposedly making an argument for the value of it. I think, though, what's really going on is that pretentiousness can be in the eye of the beholder. I can judge all the young hipsters down on Alberta Street in Portland, Oregon to be (very) pretentious, but I'm sure they would not call themselves that, or if so, only ironically. And, really, I don't think they'd think, like Fox argues, that they're 'pretending,' or even experimenting with some kind of social role.

I'm more interested when Fox argues that pretentiousness comes from a transgressing of class boundaries. It seems more acute in England, where even different accents can 'place' someone in (or outside of) a certain social circle, though it of course happens in America. My own minor example: the wine snob, which term comes from the idea that a middle-class person (don't even think about a working- or lower-class person!) 'pretends' to be an expert on wine, when everyone *knows* that that's a taste cultivated by the rich. That is, a middle-class wine snob is pretending (experimenting?) to be rich, so us fellow middle-class crabs in the bucket have to take that wine snob down a notch or two, back down in the bucket of normalcy.

Although Fox does at one point mention in passing that the idea of pretentiousness is something that happens among white people, that's as far as he goes in addressing race, or other cultures, but surely the concept, and practice, exists in China or Botswana. One example in America might be the concept of black people accusing other black people of 'talking white,' though surely this is the best example of what Fox is arguing, in that those 'talking white' aren't doing so in the same sense as being a wine snob, neither pretending nor performing, but in fact actually experimenting in different ways of thinking (if we take the use of language as how we think, or a way we think) and being, or at least trying on a different cultural mask

and the idea all american black people must speak a certain way.

Later chapters on pop music and visual art (Fox's speciality) read as almost separate square-peg essays trying to be placed in the round hole of the book. It's not that they're not interesting, but, for example, Fox's argument about pop music is more about how it's way more innovative than people give it credit for. Which I don't disagree with, but this is where the definition of pretentiousness slips away from Fox. That, and/or despite the going back to latin roots, the definition is never clearly formulated. Rather, Fox uses many other words and terms, like 'innovative,' but also 'pushing creative boundaries' and 'taking risks' as synonyms for pretentiousness, leading to the claim that someone like David Bowie (or the 70s/80s Bowie) is/was pretentious. Which, I don't think you'd find *anyone* (other than Fox) who would think of Bowie as pretentious.

And if I'm misinterpreting Fox's intention, and his point is, I think, that he's trying to 'take back' the word from its derogatory feel, then he hasn't convinced me. Instead, he want me as a reader to just take his word for it. Which is hard to do when, especially in the chapter on pop music, he makes some doozy claims, like that *Sgt. Pepper* and *Dark Side Of The Moon* are concept albums (note: others claim this too, though not everyone, and not me) and, of course, that those albums are pretentious. They're not, though Roger Waters (decades later) claiming *Dark Side* is a concept album might be (*The Wall* is a concept album though, of course). As a musician and writer, Fox's regurgitated opinions about music I've known and loved my whole life just offends me and makes me start to think that he's the pretentious one here.

So I'm left thinking I understand what Fox wants to do with pretentiousness: turn it into a synonym for a type of 'play' (he never uses this term), or creativity. That's fine, I don't disagree that pretending, or experimenting, or playing, are important. I just don't see—he hasn't convinced me—we need to use the word 'pretentiousness' in place of any of these other words or terms. Even he, at the end, concedes that "It can never be appropriated as a positive word." So why try? I start to wonder if there's a bit of defensiveness going on here. Like when he says we are all pretentious every day that he might actually mean himself?

And Fox still leaves me without any real explanation, or empathy, for the handlebar-moustached hipsters of Portland. But *that* type of pretentiousness doesn't hardly seem on Fox's rader. But he's from New York. Fucking New Yorkers are all pretentious assholes...