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## Let's Talk About Taste

So far I've been re-examining global pop, schmaltz, big-voiced singing and other aspects of Céline's career from unaccustomed angles, finding thirteen ways of looking at a songbird, circling to try to find a more objective standpoint. But is there any objectivity to be found in artistic taste? The debate over whether beauty lies solely in the eye of the beholder runs through cultural history. It arises every time a critic makes a top ten list: Am I just naming the movies or books or albums I liked most in the preceding year, or am I asserting these ten works somehow were *in fact* the best or most significant? Do I dare to say the two claims are related?

Less trivially, "objectivity" is in play whenever there is a court case of censorship that results in art experts being summoned to testify to the "merit" of the transgressing work. These opinions are treated as *evidence*, as if they came from a forensic report – except that the prosecutors also bring out their own professors, curators or critics to argue that the accused creation is in fact devoid of redeeming aesthetic or social value. The verdict often turns on which experts have more prestige, making their tastes more *believable*: If one set comes from small Christian schools and

the other from Harvard and Oxford, you can guess the outcome. A string of such spectacles took place in the late 80s and early 90s when neoconservatives took aim at record companies for putting out heavy metal and rap albums that offended "family values" and at the National Endowment for the Arts for granting public funding to "obscene" art. These "culture wars" preoccupied arts advocates for nearly a decade. They could as easily have been called taste wars.

One of the most trenchant responses came from a duo of immigrant artists, Russian expatriates Vitaly Komar and Alexandir Melamid: If the problem is what standards of taste ought to prevail in a diverse and democratic society, they asked, why not decide by democracy's best approximation of "objectivity," a popular vote? Since a taste election is difficult to imagine, Komar and Melamid (previously known for their satires on official Soviet socialist-realist art) settled for other thermometers of the public temperature: opinion polls and focus groups. They commissioned an \$80,000 "People's Choice" poll asking Americans what they liked and didn't like in art – sizes, styles, subjects, colors – and proceeded to make two paintings: "America's Most Wanted" and "America's Most Unwanted."

The poll spoke loud and clear: America liked the color blue, and images of natural landscapes, historical figures, women and children and/or large mammals on mid-sized canvases. So Komar and Melamid produced a "dishwashersized" picture of rolling hills, blue skies and blue water beside which a family is picnicking while George Washington, a deer and a hippopotamus stand idly by. The "Most Unwanted" painting is a small, sharp-angled geometric abstract in

gold and orange. They conducted smaller polls around the world: every country wanted a blue landscape.

The laughs here aren't just at the expense of popular taste. As Melamid said in an interview in the book *Painting by Numbers: Komar and Melamid's Scientific Guide to Art* (1997):

There's a crisis of ideas in art, which is felt by many, many people. ... Artists now – I cannot speak for all, but I have talked to many artists who feel this way – we have lost even our belief that we are the minority that *knows*. We believed ten years ago, twenty years ago, that we knew the secret. Now we have lost this belief. We are a minority with no power and no belief, no faith. I feel myself, as an artist and as a citizen, just totally obsolete. ... Okay, it can be done this way or that way or this way, or in splashes or smoothly, but why? What the hell is it about? That's why we wanted to ask people. For us – from our point of view – it's a sincere thing to understand something, to change the course. Because the way we live we cannot live anymore. I have never seen artists so desperate as they are now, in this society.

Added Komar, in his accented English:

Also, art world is not democratic society, but totalitarian one. It does not have checks and balances. Individuals who create its laws and criteria are also its main decision-makers. This conflation of executive, legislative and judiciary is hallmark of totalitarian society.

In collaboration with New York composer and neuroscientist Dave Soldier, they also conducted a smaller-scale, Internet survey to produce the People's Choice Music. The uproarious "Most Unwanted Song" turned out to be, as dictated by the poll, more than twenty-five

minutes long, included accordions, bagpipes, a children's choir, banjo, flute, tuba and synthesizer (the only instrument in both the most wanted and most unwanted tunes) and mashed up opera, rap, Muzak, atonal music, advertising jingles and holiday songs. The "Most Wanted Song," the song that would be "unavoidably and uncontrollably 'liked' by seventy-two percent, plus or minus twelve percent, of listeners," was a five-minute R&B slow jam, a male-female duet with guitar, sax, drums, synths and strings. Critics often described it as sounding like ... Céline Dion. And they all claimed to like the "Most Unwanted" much better.

Is Céline Dion's music a dishwasher-sized blue landscape? And if a statistically solid majority of the Earth's people, plus or minus twelve percent, wanted to fill the world with sappy love songs, what would be wrong with that? Who gets to say? Komar and Melamid were addressing a widespread collapse of faith in all regimes of taste that previously guided not only the reception but the making of art. As refugees from a totalitarian state, they were earnest about democracy; as artists, they understood (as their project inevitably demonstrates) that the mechanisms of democracy are hopeless for art. No individual person would actually want the "Most Wanted Painting," a ridiculous jumble of incongruent elements. It was a sincerely painful joke about art and democracy – as is the history of taste, for anyone who takes both democracy and art seriously.

Komar and Melamid's pseudoscientific project is a reminder that science so far has little to say about taste. Evolutionary theorists propose the blue-landscape ideal may derive from an embedded longing for the primeval savannah, and that admiration for musical virtuosity has to do with its function as sexual-status display, like a bird's bright plumage. Anthropology finds social music (for dancing,

religious rites, parties, relating stories) in all human cultures; music for “pure” listening is an anomaly. And brain science has shown how musical pleasure is structured by expectation and familiarity, in a particular song (when will the pattern resolve, and how?), between songs (is this music like other music we know and like?) and between genres (do you know the rules of this kind of music?). Balancing repetition and novelty is crucial: some songs feel too complicated to enjoy (like the “Most Unwanted” song) and others too clichéd to hold interest (as critics found the “Most Wanted”). There’s little explanation, though, of why people gravitate toward different ratios of surprise to familiarity. Going by the patrons of experimental music concerts, people who like formally unpredictable art are not especially prone to drive fast cars, bungee jump or even talk to strangers. But they do seem more likely also to be reading obscure novels or looking at weird paintings. Is there a “risk gene” for artistic adventurousness?

The new discipline of musical neurobiology, well outlined in Montreal researcher (and ex-record producer) Daniel Levitin’s *This Is Your Brain on Music* (2006), hints that the brain might be built to prefer consonance to dissonance, steady rhythms over chaotic ones and so forth. However, these penchants seem to be malleable, as science journalist Jonah Lehrer says in *Proust Was a Neuroscientist* (2007). There’s a network of neurons in the brain stem specifically geared to sort unfamiliar sounds into patterns. When they succeed, the brain releases a dose of pleasuregiving dopamine; when they fail, when a sound is *too* new, excess dopamine squirts out, disorienting and upsetting us. Lehrer suggests this explains events such as the 1913 riots at the Paris premiere of Igor Stravinsky’s dissonant *The Rite of Spring*. But these neurons also *learn*. With repeated exposure, they can tame the unknown, turn “noise” back into “music.” Thus, a year

later, another Parisian audience cheered for *The Rite of Spring* and in 1940, Walt Disney put it in a children's cartoon, *Fantasia* (appropriately enough, the dinosaurs-and-evolution sequence).

The problem with this parable is that it isn't really about repeated exposure. Maybe the brains of children in *Fantasia's* audience were readied by having heard music influenced by Stravinsky. But what about the 1914 audience? It seems implausible it was mainly the rioters returning to give him a second chance. No, it would have been the hipsters of 1914, lured by the *succès de scandale* and eager to be shocked, to take the dopamine overdose. Their neurons were prepared without ever hearing the sounds. The picture is fuzzy unless we can measure the effect of received concepts and social identifications on "private" neuro-auditory processes.

Still, the field is young. I wouldn't be surprised if variances in individual brain chemistry help explain taste predilections: if Céline fans and I disagree on whether her music is fresh, maybe my brain is a bigger dopamine junkie. Likewise, that the ranks of *outré*-music aficionados are so full of the socially awkward suggests their nonconformism may not be entirely by choice. (*Artistic, autistic* – watch your pronunciation.)

But the bias that "conformity" is a pejorative has led, I think, to underestimating the part mimesis – imitation – plays in taste. It's always other people following crowds, whereas my own taste reflects my specialness. A striking demonstration of the mimetic effect comes from a group of Columbia University sociologists, who took advantage of the Internet as a zone in which you can conduct large-scale simulations of mass-culture behavior, isolated from advertising and other distorting factors. They set up a website (as researcher Duncan J. Watts explains in a 2007 *New York Times Magazine* article)

called Music Lab, where 14,000 registered participants were asked to “listen to, rate and, if they chose, download songs by bands they had never heard of.” One group could see only song titles and band names; the rest were divided into eight “worlds,” and could see which songs in their “world” were most downloaded. In these “social-influence worlds,” as soon as a song generated a few downloads, more people began downloading it. Higher-rated songs did do somewhat better, but each world had different “hits,” depending which songs “caught on” there first. They called the effect “cumulative advantage,” a rule that popularity tends to amplify exponentially. (In the control group, quality ratings and popularity usually matched.) Does this mean people are lemmings? No, just that we’re social: we are curious what everybody else is hearing, want to belong, want to have things in common to talk about. We are also insecure about our own judgments and want to check them against others. So songs might in part be famous simply for being famous. Intriguingly, as Watts notes, “Introducing social influence into human decision making ... didn’t just make the hits bigger; it also made them more unpredictable.”

Perhaps cumulative advantage’s semirandomized conformity helps explain why the history of art is not all blue landscapes. When “early adopters” help make a Picasso famous, his reputation becomes self-inflating; the mutation becomes the mainstream, even though few people immediately like his paintings. Taste’s insecurity turns out to be the prerequisite for artistic growth.

Aesthetics is the discipline created to contend with this insecurity, but considering that philosophy of art has been underway for at least three centuries (since the Enlightenment, and much longer if you include Aristotle), it comes up quite short on accounting for

taste. It has analyzed elegantly the myriad ways the elements of art function, but when it confronts conflicts of taste, it engages in more retroactive rationalization than convincing illumination – and its verdicts on “good taste” often conveniently align with the taste the writer happens to hold.

In one landmark essay, “Of the Standard of Taste” (1757), David Hume describes the tasteful person in terms that seem intuitively right: “Strong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison and cleared of all prejudice, can alone entitle critics to this valuable character; and the joint verdict of such, wherever they are to be found, is the true standard of taste and beauty.” But that’s a job description for critics, not a standard of taste. For that, Hume can only appeal to authority: the tasteful person will give approbation to works that stand the test of time – the works still approved by tasteful people later. It’s a tautological, survival-of-the-fittest view that’s no help in resolving quarrels of taste in our own lifetimes. His stipulation that the critic be credentialed with wide knowledge and experience could itself be described as a prejudice – a bias in favor of tradition, which may punish deviation from the “highest” standards and obstruct the creation of new ones. Exactly this kind of prejudice kept most high-culture Brahmins from accepting pop music or film as art at all until the 1960s. Hume acknowledges the need for artistic change, but he underestimates how determinedly his elite of taste aristocrats would resist it: the demand to be at once expert and unbiased is enough of a paradox that you could say Hume’s ideal critic by definition cannot exist.

Aesthetic philosophy’s other great-granddaddy is Immanuel Kant. His Third Critique, *The Critique of Judgment* (1790), like Hume’s essay, begins from the dilemma that people can disagree on what is beautiful.

But the parts of the Third Critique that dazzle are its limnings of the nature of beauty and of the sublime, and its subtly kinetic account of how reason, imagination and perception interact in “free play” to produce aesthetic judgment: Kant seems almost to intuit, two centuries in advance, how disparate chambers of the brain light up simultaneously when we listen to music, as recounted in Levitin’s book. When he tries to account for how these processes produce opposing judgments, however, Kant falls back on a fantasy that there’s a *sensus communis*, a “common sense” of beauty that *would* generate a consensus if only there were “ideal” conditions – including ample education, leisure, etcetera. Aesthetic agreement only eludes us because circumstances distort some people’s perceptions. A modern reader can’t help noticing that Kant’s ideal conditions suspiciously resemble being an educated eighteenth-century gentleman in cultured Koenigsburg. This “common sense” is not only unconvincing from a contemporary, diversity-oriented viewpoint – it doesn’t even sound *desirable*.

But some of his insights still seem crucial. Kant was the first to say that aesthetic judgments are by nature unprovable – they can’t be reduced to logic. Nevertheless, he pointed out, they always feel necessary and universal: when we think something’s great, we want everyone else to think it’s great too.

Not long after Kant and Hume, whose contributions were only the weightiest in a more widespread dispute, the veracity of taste was largely put on the philosophical shelf. The “man of taste” tended to become a caricature – a figure out of Molière or Oscar Wilde, the dandy who lavishes more care on niceties of form and style than on deeper values. (In fact the clinching portrait of such a character was drawn even in the thick of the Enlightenment, in Denis Diderot’s extraordinary *Rameau’s Nephew*.) Many writers (Nietzsche among

them) have lambasted Kant, in particular, for saying the appreciator of beauty must be "disinterested," adopting a personal distance from the origins, content and implications – the meaning, if you will – of the work of art.

The great American art critic Clement Greenberg, one of the rare later thinkers to take up the question, suggested that Romantic ideology raised art to such a sacred status in the nineteenth century that it seemed gauche to call attention to the process of evaluating it. Following Kant, Greenberg offered brilliant descriptions of the mental "switch" that is flipped when we regard something aesthetically – as we can do with anything, he argued, not just art, by contemplating an object or scene or person as "an end in itself," apart from any other role or use – echoing Kant's definition of beauty as "purposiveness without purpose." Greenberg was also lucid on Kant's insinuation that to enjoy art is also to judge it – you like it because it gives pleasure, but it can't give you pleasure if you don't like it.

Greenberg's answer to taste conflict, however, was the same as Hume's: we know there is objective taste because, over time, a consensus is reached on the great works of the past. (Never mind that anything ruled out by previous generations' consensus is probably lost and unlikely to come messing with the current consensus.) The most objective taste in the present, he said, belongs to those who know that canon deeply but are also open to novelty. Which (surprise, surprise) sounds a lot like Clement Greenberg, although his openness seemed to ebb by the mid-1960s, when he began trashing new art movements as a decline from the modernism on which he'd made his critical reputation – a vivid case of the contradiction between mandarinism and flexibility. And that's not even to mention his dismissal of mass

culture as, first, "kitsch" and, later, "middlebrow" – either way, the enemy of "genuine" culture.

Rather than by science or philosophy, the story of how aesthetic judgment reached the crisis felt by Komar and Melamid is best understood as a product of western art itself. To oversimplify wantonly, the disenchantment begins with the severing of visual art and music in particular from their religious role, in which the Church (and, rhetorically, God) is the ultimate art critic. After the Enlightenment, art gradually moves from an aristocratic status to a bourgeois one. The Romantics, in reaction, celebrate artistic genius as an autonomous agent of revelation, proudly outside society. Modernism gives that outsider status a harder edge: Art's mission becomes not just to reveal higher truth but also to attack social falsehood. The very idea of "beauty" becomes a second-rate capitulation to bourgeois values – now ugliness, obscenity, formlessness and randomness all can be in the best of taste. Innovation becomes the yardstick, as artists continually attempt to outpace taste, to violate its terms or render it irrelevant. The belief is that to bring about a higher consciousness, it's necessary not just to delight with newness but also to mount a shock attack on the old, bourgeois, decadent consciousness. As critic Boris Groys puts it, "Now it is not the observer who judges the artwork, but the artwork that judges – and often condemns – its public." The motivations are varied – for some, it's a psychoanalysis-inspired faith in the irrational; for others, it is revolutionary politics or plain misanthropy; for most, it's just what bohemians do. And improbably, they succeed. Not that taste comes to an end, but the expectation of consensus withers.

This is possible because attacks on conventional taste have been mounted from several directions. It's an outcome of the disillusioning

course of the twentieth century, as sounded in Theodor Adorno's question of how to write poetry after Auschwitz. But mainly it's a more upbeat, good-humored attack from the paradoxical partnership of capitalism – which seeks to remove any barriers to reaching all possible marketplaces – and democracy, which fosters the view that elite opinion is no better than anyone else's. (Today they've been supplemented by their advanced outgrowths, globalization and identity politics.) The most powerful vehicle for that alliance is mass culture. Pop songs and movies and genre fiction and magazines are so appealing, achieve so much aesthetically for so many people, that snobbery cannot hold the line against them. With Pop Art, camp aesthetics and rock 'n' roll, the notions of highbrow, middlebrow and lowbrow – which from nearly the dawn of mass culture dominated discussions of taste (see historian Michael Kammen's *American Culture, American Tastes*) – start to fall apart. By the early twenty-first century, almost no one believes in them.

Among artists themselves, the continual process of violating limits seems to reach an endpoint or at least exhaustion, and anything-goes eclecticism takes its place (critic and philosopher Arthur Danto calls this “the end of art history” or “post-art”). Among audiences, a growing fragmentation and subculturization accomplishes similar ends: though indie-rock and classical listeners, science-fiction fans and architecture buffs, rockabilies and swing kids, hip-hop heads and salsa dancers may believe strongly in their own tastes, in aggregate they are acclimatized to the notion that separate “taste worlds” can coexist peacefully, without need for external, official inspection and verification.

Early on, this shift brought pop-culture criticism into its own. While there had been a few serious commentators on movies and

jazz, the treatment of pop and mass culture in North America was mainly confined to light journalism until the advent of writers such as Pauline Kael and Andrew Sarris on film (as well as their equivalents in France) and the “counterculture” press that created rock criticism, with writers such as Robert Christgau, Greil Marcus, Lester Bangs and Ellen Willis. While film critics usually made the case that film deserved appreciation on a par with high art, rock criticism began with a more radical stance against elite taste, arguing *no* work was too humble for aesthetic contemplation – that a form’s most “low” or “impure” qualities could be its strengths. As the field grew, that attitude was watered down: some writers reintroduced traditional hierarchies in updated forms; a rough idea of a pop/rock canon began to coalesce in books like the *Rolling Stone Record Guides*; other fans and critics, especially after punk, adopted a harsh line on “selling out” to an entertainment industry that, like Greenberg or Adorno before them, they considered a capitalist scheme to foist brainless product on a beclouded public; and so on. The debates over “rockism” and “popism” are symptoms of present unease about standards and subjectivism, as is, of course, this book. But the mandate to dethrone taste orthodoxies remains part of pop criticism’s legacy, so much so that it may help bring its own extinction: Within what more than one writer has called “No-Brow” culture, who needs professional critics? What do they offer, if not objectivity?

The one bothersome matter in this anarchic taste universe (a utopia or dystopia, depending on your ideology, but one that cannot be wished away) is the persistence of a mainstream – what Greenberg or his contemporary Dwight Macdonald would have called “middlebrow” culture, the politely domineering realm where Céline Dion is queen, unattached to any validating subculture.

Middlebrow is the new lowbrow – mainstream taste the only taste for which you still have to say you're sorry. And there, taste seems less an aesthetic question than, again, a social one: among the thousands of varieties of aesthetes and geeks and hobbyists, each with their special-ordered cultural diet, the abiding mystery of mainstream culture is, "Who the hell *are* those people?" Perhaps Komar and Melamid are right: the way to the heart of taste today may be through a poll.