

The Conscious Practitioner

Week 8 - Taste, Class and Cultural Value

It always starts with definitions

- Taste (in the sense of culture):
 - A person's **tendency** to **like or be interested** in something.
 - The ability to discern what is of **good quality** or of a **high aesthetic standard**.
- Class (in the sense of culture):
 - a set of category of things having some property or attribute in common and differentiate from others by kind, type, or **quality**.
 - a system of ordering society whereby people are divided into sets based on **perceived** social or economic status.

Taste and class

- How does tastes link to classes? There is a very classic example mentioned in Kate Fox's popular book, *Watching the English: The Hidden Rules of English Behaviour*.
- Do you add sugar into your tea?

Taste and class

- How does tastes link to classes? There is a very classic example mentioned in Kate Fox's popular book, *Watching the English: The Hidden Rules of English Behaviour*.
- Do you add sugar into your tea?
- “[Working class people drink] industrial quantities of strong, brick-coloured, sweet, milky tea. Lower-middles and middle-middles drink a paler, ‘posher’ version, Twining’s English Breakfast, say, rather than PG Tips. The upper-middle and upper classes drink weak, dishwater- coloured, unsweetened Earl Grey. Taking sugar in your tea is regarded by many as an infallible lower-class indicator: even one spoonful is a bit suspect (unless you were born before about 1955); more than one and you are lower-middle at best; more than two and you are definitely working class... Some pretentious middles and upper-middles make an ostentatious point of drinking Lapsang Souchong, without milk or sugar, as this is about as far removed from working-class tea as they can get. More honest (or less class-anxious) upper-middles and uppers often admit to a secret liking for the strong, rust-coloured ‘builders’ tea’. How snooty you are about ‘builders’ tea’, and how careful you are to avoid it, is quite a good class-anxiety test.”

Cultural Hierarchy

High and low culture

- In a group:
 - Brainstorm a list of culture forms, culture genres, and media. Try to come up with example of both high and low culture.
 - Rank items on your list from high to low.
- After you finish the list, share it with the whole class.

Cultural Hierarchy

High and low culture

- Now, based on your list and the others list, try to summarise
 - What're the characteristics of high culture?
 - What're the characteristics of low culture?

Art

What is art

- We are in the University for Creative Arts, so what is art?

Art

What is art

- We are in the University for Creative Arts, so what is art?
- Art: the expression or application of human creative skill and imagination, ..., producing works to be appreciate primarily for their beauty or emotional power.
- What is the different between “culture”, “art”, “media”?
- What is not art? What does it mean when we say, “this is a work of art”?
- Who decide whether something is art or not?

What is art

Matthew Arnold, 1869, Culture and Anarchy

- Art, in the literacy context, is “the best that has been thought and said”.

What is art

Matthew Arnold, 1869, Culture and Anarchy

- Historical context of 1860s, a time of major social shifts, political transformations, and technological advancements
- The civil war breakout in North America; in the South America including Mexico, people are experiencing one of the most blood conflicts in human history, the Paraguayan War; steel warship and machine gun were invented; in Asia, Japan started the Meiji Restoration, and China just got defeated in the Second Opium War; the first underground opened in London; Alfred Nobel invented dynamite; Maxwell equation was published; Dmitri Mendeleev developed the modern periodic table...

What is art

Matthew Arnold, 1869, Culture and Anarchy

- Culture, or civilisation, is improving.
- Art is an antidote to commercialisation, industrialisation, self-interest, and 'barbaric' tastes.
- Art is the best that has been painted/photographed/filmed/recorded/designed.

What is art

Gilbert Seldes, 1924, Seven Lively Arts

- popular culture
- jazz
- Broadway musical
- vaudeville
- Hollywood cinema
- comic strips

Art and mass culture

The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, 1935, Walter Benjamin

- Mechanical reproduction devalues the aura of art. "Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: Its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be [located]." So, the "sphere of authenticity is outside the technical".
- "Works of art are received and valued on different planes...with one, the accent is on the cult value; with the other, on the exhibition value of the work. Artistic production begins with ceremonial objects destined to serve in a cult. One may assume that what mattered was their existence, not their being on view." In the era of mass production, the value of art transit from cult value to exhibition value. The mechanical reproduction of a work of art destroys its cult value, by removing it from a fixed, private space (a temple) and placing it in a mobile, public space (a museum) for exhibiting the work of art to many spectators.

Art and mass culture

The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, 1935, Walter Benjamin

- Changes in the cultural tastes of the public follow "the manner in which human sense-perception is organized [and] the [artistic] medium in which it is accomplished [are] determined not only by Nature, but by historical circumstances, as well."
- The production of art will inherently base on the engagement of politics.

Taste

Pierre Bourdieu, 1984, *Distinction: a Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*

- People with more cultural capital — education and intellect, style of speech and style of dress, etc. — determine what distinct aesthetic values constitute good taste within their society. People with less cultural capital accept them as natural and legitimate that ruling-class definition of taste, the consequent distinctions between high culture and low culture.
- In such a system, a assumption of “working-class people expect objects to fulfil a function” as entertainment or mental diversion, whilst upper-class people passively enjoy an objet d'art as a work of art, by the gaze of aesthetic appreciation.
- Similar to the Marxist view on culture values, the dominant forms of taste is a type of symbolic violence between social classes, made in the power differential that allows the ruling class to define, impose, and endorse norms of good taste upon all of society.

Taste

Pierre Bourdieu, 1984, *Distinction: a Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*

- 'Barbaric' taste codes: art as functional, facilitates escapism, linked to working class.
- The gaze: objet d'art; aesthetic appreciation.
- Cultural capital: taste codes and aesthetic codes (e.g. a predisposition towards a certain cuisine, certain types of music, and a certain taste in art). It's taught to children. The distinctions of taste that then guide children to their places in their social class and within the hierarchy of social classes. The child's internalisation of preferences for objects and behaviours particular to a social class, and the internalisation of a cultural aversion towards the other social classes, make them "select" their class by themselves.
- Habitus: habits, capital, perspective – shared with those of similar class.

Taste

Pierre Bourdieu, 1984, Distinction: a Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste

- In this system, taste covers every part of one's life, from food, furniture to music and decoration. With taste there is also a "distaste", by which it disgusts things that consumers don't like.
- You gain symbolic capital in tastes, by making "correct" distinction. -> think about why people buy painting from famous artists and hang them in their living room.
- Spreading middle class knowledge, superiority, and snobbery.

Discussion

- We talked about 'quality television' and the high aesthetic value of MLP last week, how does those concepts draw upon aspects of established art and culture?
- How do those new popular culture and entertainment, like games, fit with Gilbert Seldes' idea of The Lively Arts?
- Do you think games, comics, manga, or anime is art? Why?
- We talked about fan and fandom last week, to what extent fan communities reflect Pierre Bourdieu's idea of 'habitus'?

Paratexts

Jonathan Gray, 2010, *Show Sold Separately*

- Paratexts: materials that surround a published work, and that provide context and can influence how the work is interpreted. e.g. interviews, reviews, bonus materials, comments,...
- “paratextual frames can... prove remarkably important for how they assign value to a text, situating it as a product and/or as a work of art”

Paratexts

Jonathan Gray, 2010, *Show Sold Separately*

- **Entryway paratexts:** those we encounter before we see the work, like trailer, advertisement, review, etc.. Entryway paratexts encourage (or discourage) audience to see the work, and for those who choose not to, entryway paratexts become their only experience with the work, and the impressions left by the paratexts will be how they perceive the work, too.
- **In media res paratexts:** those we encounter during or after our experience of the work, like DVD bonus features. In media res paratexts have considerable influence on how the audience who do become viewers end up understanding and interpreting the work. It's especially important in series (TV series or franchise series) for filling the gaps from one episode to the next.

Paratexts

Jonathan Gray, 2010, *Show Sold Separately*

- Paratexts often:
 - actively promote artistry, creativity, 'aura' of text
 - emphasise uniqueness, value, and authenticity
 - work in opposition to 'low culture' of comparative texts
- Examples: Art Cinema: festivals, film awards, posters, pre-screening director talk, reviews with high profile premier, celebrity gossip etc.

Popular TV

Jason Jacobs, 2001, Issues of judgement and value in television studies

- TV usually considered a medium of communication rather than artistic expression. There is a distinction between television as medium and television as programme or text.
- “When we find ourselves wanting to make judgements about ‘television’... the variety and diversity of its instances as programmes... threatens to undermine sensible debate.”
- TV as a medium and works on TV, have those characteristics:
 - unclear relation to ‘traditional aesthetic criteria’
 - “hybridity and promiscuity” of genres
 - “quality” is defined so differently across too many kinds of programmes
 - the “dispersed and messy” textuality
 - viewing is distracted, interrupted, low concentration, different from to close concentrated reading/watching

Prestige Game

Felan Parker, 2017, Canonizing Bioshock: Cultural Value and the Prestige Game

- “Bioshock is an archetypal prestige game: a special class of AAA game that is expected to excel commercially but has distinction from other popular favourites and best sellers by grace of its supposed artistic quality and canonical status.”
- Aesthetic: steampunk; Art Deco; reference to pop culture between 1930s and 1950s; restrained, psychological sophisticated horror.
- Philosophical Depth: critique of neo-liberalism, free-market, unrestrained capitalism; Ryandian objectivism; different moral pathways available and players are asked to consider actions; engages with history and politics; discussion of utopia and dystopia links with famous works like Animal Farm, 1984, Logan's Run.

Comics Verse Art

Bart Beaty, 2012

- 5 “symbolic handicaps” excluded comics from art
- 1. “bastard genre” – ‘scandalous’ combination text and image, mixed medium, confronts Enlightenment opposition between painting and poetry
- 2. young audience, “minor art destined for minors” (21)
 - roots in 19th century publications for adults
 - by 20th century predominantly orientated towards child readers
 - considered dangerous by academics and commentators
- 3. associations with caricature, humour, excluded from humanities
- 4. not integrated into visual arts courses
- 5. images too multiple, mass reproduction, and small to be considered in own right

Readers, audiences, and fans

Benjamin Woo, 2020

- “There are no naive readings, whether in academia or the comic shop. Our aesthetic standards, expectations, and tastes come from somewhere. I think there is good reason to believe many of them are learned through our interactions with other readers, much as Bourdieu suggests of cinema buffs and other pop culture connoisseurs: ‘in identifying what is worthy of being seen and the right ways to see it, they are aided by their whole social group (which guides and reminds them with its ‘Have you seen...?’ And ‘You must see...’) and by the whole corporation of critics mandated by the group to produce legitimate classifications and discourse is necessarily accompanying any artistic enjoyment worthy of the name.’ Conversations like these focus our attention, training us to perceive objects differently. At the very least, we learn to express our taste in terms that are intelligible to significant others: Which preferences will earn knowing nods of approval? Which ones must be repressed or admitted only under the guise of ‘ironic appreciation’ or the ‘guilty pleasure’”.

Popular entertainment

- This week you were tasked to choose an example of popular entertainment (film, TV show, game, music, book...) in your group complete the following exercises using your example:
 - Introduce or show your example to your group mates.
 - Discuss: does the audience need to have a certain knowledge to enjoy your example? (E.g, you need to be able to read to enjoy a book) If so, what kinds and levels of knowledge is required?

Popular entertainment

- Now further discuss the following in your group using your example:
 - Who is the target audience of your example? (Think about the knowledge required to enjoy the work) Does the work assume that its audience are from specific groups (gender, class, race, ethnicity,...)? Does the work approach to specific tastes?
 - How does your example target those audience and tastes you recognised in last step? Think about the textual, visual and oral languages in your example.
 - Does your example challenge or reinforce normative attitudes and behaviours? If so, how? Use instance in your example to support your ideas.