

Decontaminating Taste: Minimizing Nona esthetic Biases in Aesthetic Appraisal

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Abstract

Following work by scholars across academic disciplines and wide-ranging time periods, such as Hume, Kant, Burt, and Eysenck, this paper represents a review of theory and research on the nature of aesthetic appraisal, and ultimately theorizes about the tendencies that need to be avoided in order to become a better expert who can make defensible judgments of aesthetic works. Evidence exists that many biases commonly operate in aesthetic judgment, especially among laypersons, and these biases end up contaminating potentially valid appraisals of artworks, and ultimately the acclaim and success of artists in a society. In total, by identifying complementary concepts within social and cognitive psychology, philosophy, and sociology, eleven such biases are documented and discussed. There also appear to be parallels between the perceptual and cognitive heuristic processes that occur in more general human decision making and judgment, and those that can occur in biased art perception and evaluation. Especially notable are stereotyping and prejudiced tendencies that commonly exist in aesthetic judgments.

Keywords: rating artworks, aesthetic impact, aesthetic merit or value or quality, aesthetic consensus, critics' judgments, pattern perception, attitude measurement

The majority of people, when asked to judge the beauty of an object, seldom really think of its beauty at all. They offer not aesthetic judgments but personal judgments. All kinds of irrelevant factors seem to affect them.

Sir Cyril Burt

People will sometimes disagree about works of art, but this is not to say that all opinions are equally valid. For instance, if someone were to suggest that soap operas represented the highest form of art, aesthetes would agree to ignore this person as a serious and impartial judge of aesthetic quality. For David Hume (1757), a minority of critics will be the most qualified to give opinions about aesthetics. To use Levinson's words, some judges will be better 'Geiger counters' of the beautiful, or 'reliable detectors', and are one's best guides to artistic satisfaction (Levinson, 2002; 2010). However, personal taste preferences obviously exist, creating a tension between the idea of superior works and idiosyncratic preferences (Levinson, 2010). As Eysenck (1988) put it: "Judgments of aesthetic objects...are likely to be contaminated by many other determinants" (p. 117). What I have termed "non aesthetic biases" end up poisoning the waters of aesthetic value estimations.

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The key issue is how much of the personal and idiosyncratic aspects of preferences could be removed in order to judge artworks solely on relevant sub dimensions of aesthetic quality. The less that such biases exist in a society the less that aesthetic quality will be merely a “social construction” (Bourdieu, 1984). Many scholars from different academic areas seem to agree with the core elements of these ideas of bias, and there are parallels between many peoples’ “aesthetic” judgments and more general stereotyping and prejudiced tendencies.

1. Disinterested Aesthetic Value versus Non aesthetic Values

The following definition of aesthetics is used: “The study of the feelings, concepts, and judgements arising from our appreciation of the arts or of the wider class of objects considered moving, or beautiful, or sublime” (Blackburn, 1996, p. 8). A key step toward less subjectivity in aesthetic appraisal was Kant’s (1790) focus on the importance of disinterestedness and universality in judging artistic works. According to Kant, when you are appraising artworks you must be disinterested in that you are not focused on the functional purpose of an object, but on its ability to create aesthetic appreciation. This implies that agreement about aesthetic pleasure will only happen when each judge puts aside any idiosyncratic, personal agendas, such as one’s interests, goals, worries, or prejudices. Similarly, for Beardsley (1981), true aesthetic experience requires a freedom from past and present concerns.

This line of thinking was touched on by Hume (1757): “Particular incidents and situations occur, which either throw a false light on the objects, or hinder the true form from conveying to the imagination the proper sentiment and perception” (p. 10). Biases might include being a friend of the artist, harbouring racial prejudices, or following manners and opinions of a particular age. Many scholars of aesthetics have focused on reducing such sources of bias. Howes (1927) warns not to be deceived by “base motives”, Burt (1933) refers to the removal of “irrelevant associations”, Farnsworth (1950) describes cultural “conditioners of taste”, Finnäs (1989) speaks of “conditioned habits and fashions”, and Eysenck (1988) argues against “non aesthetic grounds” for one’s judgments that are ever-present in everyday life situations, such as fame, subject matter, or financial value. In discussing Hume, Shelley (1998) notes: “...the prejudiced critic allows pleasures and displeasures caused by extraneous factors to enter into consideration as if they were qualities of the object itself” (p. 33).

Similarly, Gracyk (1999) argues that: “...an individual’s social, practical, and personal concerns are not relevant to evaluating individual musical works” (p. 217). To be sure, in daily life art serves many functions for people, such as stress reduction or nostalgia (Winston, 1992; 1995), but these functions tend not to be relevant to the aesthetic value of a work. Budd (2014) similarly stresses the importance of distinguishing between artistically relevant responses and merely personal responses. Consistent with the uses and gratifications perspective of media effects (Rubin, 2002), it is likely that many people do not take the aesthetic value of film or music seriously, but watch or listen simply to fulfill personal needs. Among peoples’ reactions to literature, Van Peer (2008) distinguished between *context* (e.g., Catholic surroundings) vs. *text* (e.g., rebellious material) vs. *reader needs* (e.g., escapism). This does not necessarily mean, however, that people could not become less subjective appraisers of aesthetic value if they so desired. Young (2010) suggests that a relatively broad audience could become an “educated audience” who are disinterested, i.e., not prejudiced against artworks for “extraneous reasons”.

2. Aesthetic vs. Non aesthetic Domains: Violations of Disinterestedness

Hume (1767) and others were sceptical about an antidote to the relativity of musical taste. Farnsworth (1950), for instance, saw taste as a process of indoctrination, hopelessly culturally and temporally relative.

To be sure, judgments outside the realm of aesthetics are not intended to be encapsulated by aesthetic principles and can be expected to be unavoidably biased. Areas of purely subjective taste certainly exist, wherein one should not expect consensus, such as one's favourite sports teams, or whether one prefers green beans or peas. Such preferences are not defensible in the Kantian sense, but why a discerning critic highly evaluates a particular artwork, such as Beethoven's ninth symphony, is defensible, and one should *expect* discerning others to show consensus.

Social constructionist views such as Bourdieu (1984) suggest that judgments about artistic value are arbitrary, being affected by social and political structures. Such biased appraisal certainly occurs, but this is precisely the kind of bias that should be avoided by serious judges of art. For Bourdieu, art lasts only within particular societies; yet when there is independent consensus across time and place by diverse groups of evaluators this argument starts to break down.

In fact, data exist from numerous studies showing a tendency toward consensual ratings of aesthetic quality among experts in various domains, such as film, visual art, and music (e.g., Boor, 1990; Burt, 1933; Farnsworth, 1950; Lundy, 2010). Thus, there is a strong case that political or sociological factors do not *have to* control peoples' aesthetic perceptions. Related to what Hume (1757) called the "Test of Time", lasting through time tends to remove idiosyncratic elements, works that are durable, cross-culturally broad and deep in their artistic appeal (Levinson, 2010). Could we not achieve similar outcomes within much shorter time frames?

3. Becoming a Discerning Connoisseur by Doing One's Aesthetic Homework

A key issue is what work potential judges of aesthetic quality would need to do. However, Tocqueville (1835) argues persuasively that people in democracies tend to believe in equality of opinion, which extends to assuming everyone's opinion about the arts should carry equal weight (perceiving their own expertise without effort and modesty, nor a desire for self-improvement). Although it is a fair question to ask whose vote should count in a given aesthetic domain, we cannot go simply by consensus among the majority, otherwise the popular *Twilight* series might be considered among humanity's greatest aesthetic achievements. Tocqueville (1835) warned of the lowest common denominator problem within democracies, a danger arising from the tyranny or omnipotence of the majority. For instance, ordinary Americans (a majority), with a feeling of personal power and equality, tend not to defer to people having superior intellect or wider experiences (a minority), which often produces mediocrity. This could explain the relative obscurity of some critically acclaimed artists and the wide popularity of mediocre artists.

Not surprisingly, Martindale (1995, 2008) found "contemporary fame" in literature to be unrelated to any variables of eminence. For film preferences, laypersons were found to be affected by non aesthetic factors, such as the offensiveness of certain material, certain genres, accessibility and realism, and films catering to conventional values that were less challenging and complex (Holbrook, 1999). Carroll (1998) noted that mass art will "promise accessibility with minimum effort" (p. 196). One must always ask the question: Are there limitations in this artwork or is it simply revealing limitations in me, the perceiver? Many personal limitations, however, may be amenable to change. Indeed, a growing body of evidence exists that novices are more idiosyncratic than experts in their appraisal of artworks (Hekkert & van Wieringen, 1996; Silvia, 2013). Child (1962a), for instance, found that independent expert consensus about the *aesthetic merit* of visual art was greater than undergraduate consensus about *personal preferences* for visual art. This is consistent with Parsons' (1987) model of five levels of artwork processing, moving from his lowest stage of favoritism up to his highest stage of autonomy.

Eysenck (1957, 1988) suggested that factors irrelevant to aesthetic value get in the way of competent evaluations and we should not expect consensus to be high when these are not controlled. The average person likely shows impulsive aesthetic preferences, based on a very small subset of limited favorites resulting from low familiarity and simple heuristics like popularity. In contrast, aesthetic judgment in experienced and refined critics is done with high sensitivity to aesthetic value (Child, 1962a). Some works of art create experience more worth having, rather than works that please someone of a particular background, personal makeup, or personal history (Levinson, 2010). An aesthetic sensitivity capability has to be “earned” through diligent focus; expertise in any area takes a lot of “time on task” (Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Romer, 1993).

In short, as much as possible, the best judges of aesthetics will be able to see beyond their own limited perspective of time and place, as well as gender, race, politics, nationality, etc., and reach a wider, universal level. Shelley (1998) clearly sums up this stance: “If you and I have differing affective responses to a work of art, and those differences result from your superior perceptual acuity, our responses are not merely different: you have responded *better* than I have.” (p. 35). Humans are obviously full of biases that can affect the ability to be accurate and objective about anything, such as a teacher’s ability to fairly grade students’ essays. However, to be a better aesthetic judge (or teacher) one must be aware of biases that detract from the ability to rate aesthetic (or intellectual) products.

4. Non aesthetic Biases Tied to General Stereotyping and Prejudice

...a positive relation between preferences and aesthetic value tends to arise out of ability, creativity, and direct interaction with a complex object, more than out of insecurity, need to accept the dictates of authority, and habitual conformity.

Irvin Child

There are clear parallels between biased aesthetic judgments and more general stereotyping and prejudice. People often form attitudes, i.e. positive or negative favorability evaluations of objects (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993), based partly on stereotyping, which includes attitudes toward groups of people, such as artists. Ethnocentrism, or the belief that certain ethnic groups are superior to others (Brown, 1965), parallels the existence of taste cultures in aesthetic judgments, such as the strong feelings people have about genres of music (Denisoff & Levine, 1972). Farnsworth (1950) suggests that we are often trained to think of music in terms of stereotypes (cf. Stone, 1937; Tyler, 1946), and he found that students rated a piece of music as more enjoyable when they thought it was composed by Beethoven compared to a group made to think it was done by a relatively unknown composer (but actually composed by Bach). Another clear example of bias was demonstrated in an experiment in which a painting by a female visual artist was rated as better if she was portrayed as physically attractive (via false photographs; Murphy & Hellkamp, 1976). In short, the human brain often uses simple cues to perceive the world, whereas accurate perception of the subtleties in both individual people and aesthetic stimuli requires reflective and sophisticated contemplation in the Kantian sense.

5. Aesthetic Self-Help: Eleven Non aesthetic Biases to be minimized

The biases compiled in this paper represent at least a partial list of prerequisites that aesthetic experts could agree upon. In a recent investigation of non experts’ explanations for music and film ratings, non aesthetic biases were found to occur frequently (Lundy, Hinnners, Stephens, & Whitton, 2014).

These biases are consistent with Cupchik's (1992) research program suggesting that more naïve viewers of art use the cognitive habits of everyday life to do their aesthetic appraisal. Many of these biases should not be too controversial, yet some things that teachers would agree are obvious biases to avoid in grading students' work appear to be committed regularly in judgments of aesthetics.

5.1 1) The Familiarity Bias

"Blues songs all sound the same to me." OR "I can tell right away I don't like it."

This bias is defined as *appraisal of aesthetic works being affected by unequal levels of familiarity across various works*. This is the best starting point and is arguably the most obvious, common, and important biasing factor. Minimizing this bias could serve to reduce many other biases, and should be thought of as a first line of defense. It is a bias that surely exists in most people for most areas and genres of art. Budd (2014) argues that most people form their aesthetic views too quickly and casually, based on insufficient interactions with a work. Even some "art experts" are overly narrow in their area of expertise. People tend to be highly familiar with a small group of personal favourites, as well as artworks that have become commonplace in their society, but relatively unfamiliar with almost everything else. Thus, we should not be surprised if most people hold superficial, stereotyped views of most works. Avoidable error is created.

To quote Hume (1757): "When objects of any kind are first presented to the eye or imagination, the sentiment which attends them is obscure and confused; and the mind is ...incapable of pronouncing concerning their merits or defects" (p. 13). Tyler (1946) found that people have "...a strong tendency to form oversimplified concepts with regard to a composer's style" (p. 163), and von Lindern (2008) found that museum visitors tend to rate unfamiliar art objects lower than familiar art objects. This view is consistent with Cupchik's (1994) notion of reflective emotion: the interpretation of aesthetic stimuli is complex and multifaceted, and takes time to go beyond initial reactive emotions. Not surprisingly, level of familiarity with an artistic area correlates positively with *aesthetic judgment* (i.e., appraisal in line with independent expert consensus; Child, 1962b). One must thus make sure that neutral or negative reactions to artworks are not due to under familiarity.

Schuessler (1948) concluded that isolation from a style of music tends to create a negative reaction to it (akin to "musical segregation"). The problem of under familiarity fits with the *out group homogeneity effect*: the tendency to judge out group members as more similar to each other compared to in group members (Quattrone & Jones, 1980; Park & Rothbart, 1982). Equating familiarity should lead to less rough stereotyping and more refined comparisons. Repetition alone tends to enhance liking (Mull, 1957; Zajonc, 1968).

Such recognition *heuristic* must be effectively removed from the aesthetic equation, which is the tendency to rank the more familiar of two objects higher than the less familiar object (Goldstein & Gigerenzer, 2002). While under familiarity is surely the more common problem, over familiarity and the subsequent potential for outcomes such as *habituation* (Chance, 2014), can also bias ratings toward underestimation (Berlyne, 1971). In short, over exposure leads to decreased liking (Schellenberg, Peretz, & Vieillard, 2008; Szpunar, Schellenberg, & Pliner, 2004). The problem is more likely present when one has a limited artistic repertoire, simply experiencing the same few works over and over. Once again, lowering the *familiarity bias* should serve to make subsequent biases less likely, and should be the easiest to consciously control. *In the end, a better aesthetic judge is one who is highly familiar with all works to be judged, and does not become overly familiar with a small subset of works.*

5.2 2) *TheHistorical Bias*

“How dare Dylan go electric?” OR “Monet’s unfinished paintings are awful.”

This bias is defined as *being unduly influenced by one’s place in history, such as an inflexible aversion to artistic innovation*. Newness or oldness alone cannot be sufficient for a critical stance. Farnsworth (1950) cites evidence that the perceived eminence of composers follows predictable patterns, such as time-lags between years of a work’s release and inclusion in music encyclopedias. He suggests that this reflects the overcoming of initial aversions to “breaking of traditions”. The initial rejection of impressionism was clearly for invalid (i.e., nonaesthetic) reasons: “Paintings were expected to be refined and conservative, calling upon Classical traditions and vested with moral rectitude” (Cunningham, 2002, p. 6). Similarly, Crozier and Chapman (1984) noted that the works of Monet and Manet are now regarded as treasures, but the sentiment at the time was quite the opposite—indignation; they were seen as incomplete works. Most people, and even some critics, will apparently be behind in their appreciation of innovative art.

Teenagers in particular tend to be focused on current popular hits (Fox & Wince, 1975). Furthermore, peoples’ favorite songs tend to be from the time when they were adolescents or young adults (Holbrook & Schindler, 1989; Schulkind, Hennis, & Rubin, 1999). For example, Stipp (1990) found that a person’s age can be closely predicted by knowing the years of release of the person’s favorite “golden oldies”. Such a generation gap is supported by the existence of distinct musical tastes in which a framework is provided for peers to share states of awareness and meanings in order to form social connections within subcultures (Frith, 1983; Riesman, 1950; Savage, 1988; Zillman & Gan, 1997). It should become clear that such a social focus is closely linked to the next four biases, in that they are all strongly related to group affiliations. *In the end, a better aesthetic judge is one who is open to deviations from historical norms that are relevant to aesthetic quality.*

5.3 3) *TheConformity Bias*

“His music is so popular it must be good.” OR “Everyone is going to see it so it must be worth seeing.”

This bias is defined as *ultimately basing one’s judgment of an artwork on others’ reactions to the work, rather than one’s own intimate experience and independent appraisal*. This often takes the form of inferring quality simply by relying on group norms, or so-called herding effects wherein peoples’ evaluations of products are heavily influenced by the behavior of others (e.g., Huang & Chen, 2006).

Peoples’ responses to music, for instance, can be affected by non musical factors such as marketing or promotion of the performer’s image (Frith, 1983; Street, 1986), which can facilitate a tremendous inequality of success that tends to occur in modern “superstar” (Rosen, 1981) or “winner-take-all” markets (Frank & Cook, 1995).

Other examples of social influence include superficial snobbery (Kieren, 2010), a musician’s popularity, how much money a movie has made, or relying solely on critics’ opinions without experiencing the work for oneself. Salganik, Dodds and Watts (2006) have shown experimentally that social influence determines the popularity of songs on the internet, regardless of any potential differences in quality among the songs.

Conformity, defined as bringing one's behavior in line with a group, is known to explain a great deal of human behavior (Myers, 2013). Mere suggestion has been found to affect art appreciation (Farnsworth & Beaumont, 1929). Allison's (1980) accumulative advantage outcome can be tied to such social influence—fame once achieved makes it easier to achieve more fame, and a key determinant of how much attention a writer gets from critics is how much attention he has already received from other critics (Verdaasdonk, 1983). Conformity processes would then tend to create repeated experiences with certain artworks, thereby increasing liking for them via the mere exposure effect (Zajonc, 1968; Szpunar et al., 2004). It has been shown that uncertainty maximizes conformity influences (Sherif, 1935), so conformity could combine with the familiarity bias. In terms of conforming to authority, Radocy (1976) found that bogus information from ostensible authority figures can bias students to rate identical music performances as different in quality. Duerksen (1972) found that undergraduates rated two identical piano performances differently depending on how they were labelled: the "professional performance" was rated as better than the "student performance".

Farnsworth (1969) suggested that taste can be created by a government, wherein only certain works may be allowed, and good taste can be seen as works that promote propaganda value for "good" causes. Social institutions, such as the popular media, also help maintain the status quo, often going unnoticed and unquestioned. For instance, radio stations tend to push certain kinds of music, traditionally leaving a lot of music unknown to the masses (Barnes, 1988), and lack of radio play or commentary was associated with students' decreased liking for songs (Suchman, 1941; Wiebe, 1940). The DJ becomes an authority figure hyping certain music (Crozier, 1997; Russell, 1997). To be experienced, artworks must make it through various filters (Hirsch, 1969; 1972; Lopes, 1992), which can create a *massification* of taste (McQuail, 1994), at least within cultures (Russell, 1997). These factors can explain why many mediocre artists become stars. Adler (1985) argues that through social influence processes, stardom need not be related to talent at all.

The conformity bias also includes any tendency to overrate works that are unique but nothing else. Such *reactance* in the face of a perceived threat to one's sense of freedom (Brehm & Brehm, 1981) can be a strong bias, as in the person who says "I don't like anything commercial", as if all popular artworks are aesthetically weak. Such influences, however, need not be inevitable for every individual within a group. Farnsworth (1950) noted that "In any social group there will be those who respond to a particular social pressure with almost complete passivity and compliance. Others will be more resistant, and a few will be extremely unconventional" (p. 28). Ironically, greater consensus with expert aesthetic judgments among undergraduates has been linked to an "independence of judgment", i.e., not modifying one's judgments to conform to what one has heard others express (Child, 1965; Child & Schwartz, 1967). Many people seem to make decisions based on the perceived commonness or uniqueness of the choice (Yamagishi, Hashimoto, & Schug, 2008), whereas the aesthete is detached from this social dimension (Maslow, 1962). *In the end, a better aesthetic judge is one who bases aesthetic ratings on one's own reflective aesthetic experience with the work, not by following stereotypes, group norms or a reflexive need for rebelliousness.*

5.4 4) the Genre Bias

"I like all kinds of music except rap." OR "I don't like Westerns or foreign films."
 "Music divides us into tribes." Arcade Fire

This bias is defined as *summarily assuming that entire genres of artworks are practically all good or all bad*. This bias relates to oversimplification stereotyping tendencies, such as liking “70’s music”, which are not logical in a probabilistic sense. While the *average* quality of certain genres could be higher than others, among thousands of works within a genre some will surely exist at practically every level.

Falling victim to this kind of bias was identified by Hume (1757): “It is plainly an error in a critic, to confine his approbation to one species or style of writing, and condemn all the rest.” (p. 20). Similarly, Howes (1927) noted the possibility of making “...the mistake of condemning as bad art something in a style which the critic dislikes” (p. 239).

The *genre bias* is one outcome of “taste cultures” and “badge of honor” tendencies that people often espouse, akin to tribal or gang-like thinking (Austin, 1983; Denisoff & Levine, 1972; Dixon, 1982; Fox & Wince, 1975). It is a case of in group and out groups thinking applied to the world of art. Humans tend to have an ingroup bias—the tendency to favor one’s own group (“US” vs. “THEM”; Sumner, 1907; Sherif, 1958).

This could take the form of an out group homogeneity effect (Quattrone & Jones, 1980; Park & Rothbart, 1982) for music: instead of “they all look the same” (e.g., Asians or Blacks), it can become “it all sounds the same” (e.g., jazz or blues). Not surprisingly, Hall (2007) found that people possess stereotypes of others based on genre preferences for movies, TV and music, and some of these are negative. Farnsworth (1950) stated that “It is a truism that the people of each culture area are likely to regard their art forms as God-given and superior to those of their neighbors” (p. 23). He believed that this meant there are no absolute differences in aesthetic quality. However, these cultural biases would be minimized by equating familiarity with each culture’s works, allowing some people to decipher better and weaker works both within and between cultures. Holbrook (1999) found that laypersons are more likely than professionals to condemn an entire genre.

It can be a fruitless enterprise to argue that entire genres are better than others. Novitz (1992) denies that there are consistent aesthetic differences between groups of artworks (e.g., popular art vs. high art), but simply artificial distinctions and social conventions serving political functions. Levine (1988) suggests that these distinctions are a form of elitism to distinguish social classes, high art being more about defining a cultural group than about any intrinsic features of the artworks. There is clear evidence of culture-specific aesthetic preferences among different social classes (Snibbe & Markus, 2005).

In sum, no genre has a monopoly on quality. The level of aesthetic quality can be expected to vary widely within each area (just as individuals vary widely within so-called races). Yet if one espouses this somewhat egalitarian view of aesthetics, it is surprising that genre is exactly how TV channels, video stores, and radio stations define themselves—by genre, decade or subject matter (e.g., foreign films, action, westerns). *In the end, a better aesthetic judge is one who gives each genre and subgenre equal consideration and is able to decipher degrees of aesthetic quality within each category.*

5.5 5) *The Subject Matter Bias*

“I love movies with horses.” OR “I hate movies about football.”

This bias is defined as *basin aesthetic appraisal predominately on the topic of the artwork*. This is similar to the genre bias but represents a focus on the particular subject matter of the artwork rather than the aesthetic style of the work, which is a natural tendency of the untrained art viewer because it is easier to understand (Cupchik, 1992; Cupchik & Gebotys, 1988). Probabilistically, there are surely great, neutral, and horrible songs about many subjects. People appear to commonly have instrumental and content-oriented motivations when they consume media products (Rubin, 2002). Compared to artists and art-critics, Burt (1933) found that younger, untrained judges placed much more emphasis on the subject matter when judging visual art, and as a result consensus about aesthetic quality was lower compared to more experienced judges.

Winston (1995) cites evidence that according to those with more visual art experience, in better art there is more to it than just the subject matter, whereas to laypersons the subject matter is used to justify a positive (e.g., Christmas) or negative reaction (e.g., violence). Furthermore, popular art followers tend to idealize certain subject matter in terms of preferred moral qualities supporting the current social order (Winston, 1992). In a series of studies that had people of varying ages react to mass-produced artworks, Lindauer (1980) found that the most frequent reason given for liking a painting was the setting and subject.

This issue becomes a defining characteristic of aesthetics: the subject matter is not the key—any subject can be done aesthetically well, neutrally, or badly. The subject matter provides a context for aesthetic processes to ensue. One need not believe in ghosts to see artistic merit in Spielberg's *Poltergeist*. *Plan 9 from Outer Space* is not a bad movie because it is about aliens, and *The Martian Chronicles* is not a good book because it is about Martians. This subject matter bias has been summed up as sound advice about poetry appreciation: "Judge poems by their quality not by their subjects. You may not like cats, but there are good cat poems" (Dunning, Leuders & Smith, 1966, p. 14). *In the end, a better aesthetic judge is one who bases appraisal on the aesthetic elements of an artwork not mainly on the topic that happens to be covered.*

5.6 6) The Personal Prejudices Bias

"That's a chick flick isn't it?" OR "That's an awful book; the writer is gay!"

This bias is defined as *an unjustifiably negative attitude toward certain types of art merely associated with some out-group's distinguished from one's in group*. It includes personal feelings about political or religious views, morality, sexual orientation, nationality, ethnicity, gender, etc. An artwork may be tied to a subculture, lifestyle, or attitude one espouses. Rigg (1948) found that ratings of a piece of music could be manipulated by changing the mere association with the music (romance vs. Hitler vs. control group). Similarly, a respectable critic wouldn't rate an artwork lower just because it was about homosexuality (e.g., *Brokeback Mountain*). Quality is not necessarily related to the majority's view on morality either; seemingly immoral content can still be an impetus for good art. For example, the films *Pulp Fiction* and *Train spotting* were critically acclaimed despite the types of people involved (hit men and drug abusers). In contrast, Kant (1790) helped to reverse this kind of viewpoint by distinguishing aesthetic judgment from moral judgment, mentioning that great aesthetic works have often been created out of evil events.

These are examples of what Hume (1757) suggested about being "free from prejudice": "Where he lies under the influence of prejudice, all his natural sentiments are perverted" (p. 17). Other examples would include sexism, racism, or religious dogma. Narrow-minded fans of one style tend to abusively disparage other styles (Frith, 1983), regardless of their quality.

Related to the *genre bias*, music becomes a badge of honor in taste publics and taste cultures (Gans, 1974), social groups of devotees to particular types of music or musicians and the values they share (e.g., the Grateful Dead). It is a way of choosing friends and rejecting others (Zillman & Gan, 1997), often based along socioeconomic (Gans, 1974; Schuessler, 1948), education (DiMaggio & Useem, 1978), and ethnic dimensions (Denisoff & Levine, 1972; Dixon, 1982). Subcultures, lifestyles, and values also predict taste (Lewis, 1992; Lull, 1992), and differences in taste between groups likely amplify distinctions between social groups (Russell, 1997). Non aesthetic factors related to stereotyping and prejudice can bias judgments, and both often relate to simplicity in thinking and the need for quick answers (cf. Allport's (1954) "need for closure"). On the positive side, increased exposure and appreciation of another culture's music could reduce stereotyping and prejudice about both the music and the people who listen to it. *In the end, a better aesthetic judge is one who is open to giving equal consideration to works by any type of artist dealing with any aspect of the human condition.*

5.7.7) The Personal Idiosyncrasies Bias

"That music depresses me." OR "I don't like movies with subtitles."

This bias is defined as *idiosyncratic characteristics of the self that are not relevant to aesthetic quality judgment*. There may be factors related to a particular person that do not allow for objective judgment; one's personal problems should not become the artwork's problem. This bias is distinct from other biases in its individualized, less group-based nature. Fisher and Fisher (1951) found that individuals highest in insecurity and anxiety had more extremely positive or negative reactions to unfamiliar music compared to others. People who pay attention to the qualities of the music and not to what it is associated with have been called "intrinsic listeners" by Schoen (1928) as opposed to "extrinsic listeners" (or "associative"; Myers, 1922).

A common non aesthetic reason for reacting to an artwork, especially music, is an association with a positive memory (e.g., nostalgia) or negative memory, such as a former romantic partner (Eysenck, 1957).

Heinrichs and Cupchik (1985) found that parental memories predicted subjective pleasing ratings of paintings. Winston (1995) notes that followers of popular (vs. high) art prefer works that provide sentimental feelings of warmth and nostalgia, such as locations that evoke personal memories. This was described by Bullough (1907) in his four types of judging art as the "associative type", wherein one's appraisal of artwork comes more from the associations or memories aroused by the work rather than by the artwork itself. Lindauer (1980) found that all types of viewers' preferences for particular pieces of visual art were often based on associations, such as "...reminds me of a place I've been to" (p. 103). Cupchik (1992) has found evidence that more naïve visual art viewers seek out familiar objects and themes in artworks, thereby responding subjectively through personal associations.

This bias could also include an inability or unwillingness to experience certain emotions. Winston (1992) found that popular paintings are more likely to provide sentimental themes and soothing emotions that help the viewer avoid intense negative emotions, whereas high art paintings tend to explore a larger range of emotions. Terror management may make one avoid topics relating to one's mortality (Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, Rosenblatt, Burling, Lyon, et al., 1992), one may use art as an anesthetic to escape from a stressful life (Winston, 1992), and affective disposition may make a person like a film more if the protagonist wins (Zillman, 1996), but these are all non aesthetic biases. Child (1965) found that visual art judgment is negatively correlated with a preference for comfort and relaxation.

Occupation has been found to affect certain musical aesthetic preferences, such as tempo and rhythm (Foley, 1940; Schuessler, 1948), and so have age, socioeconomic status, region, education, and urban vs. rural setting (Fisher, 1951; Peatman, 1944). Farnsworth (1969) calls these kinds of factors “cultural conditioning”. In nonexperts’ explanations for their music and film ratings, the *personal idiosyncrasies bias* was found to be the most frequently occurring bias (Lundy et al., 2014). *In the end, a better aesthetic judge is one who is able to put personal idiosyncrasies aside and not make one’s own problems the artwork’s problem.*

5.8 8) *Impaired State Bias*

“You have to be high to relate to it.” OR “I’m in a bad mood so I’ll give it 2 out of 10.”

“A man in a fever would not insist on his palate as able to decide concerning flavours.”

David Hume

This bias is defined as *rating artworks when one is not in a personal state conducive to competent appraisal (e.g., intoxicated, fatigued, highly stressed)*. An artistic appraisal should not be based on the impaired state of a judge, just as a student’s grade should not be based on the impaired state of a teacher. Rubin-Rabson (1940) mentioned that “satiety”, “mood”, and “physical condition” could be expected to affect aesthetic responses. One study found that doing complex tasks while listening to music created preference for simpler melodies (Konečni, & Sargent-Pollock, 1976). In addition, preferences for complex versus simple melodies were found to be affected by manipulating anger (Konečni, Crozier, & Doob, 1976), and judgments of paintings were influenced by manipulating affect (Konečni & Sargent-Pollock, 1977).

Cantor and Zillman (1973) found that adolescents who were aroused prior to music evaluation showed greater music appreciation. Consequently, we must be wary of our state at the time of rating, and keep this roughly equal each time we rate an artwork (i.e., low stress, well-fed, not sick or sleep-deprived, and not taking drugs). This would fit with Hume’s (1757) recommendation of having “serenity of mind”. This bias also includes making sure one’s mood at the time does not conflict with the type of art being appraised. The key is to be aware of such extraneous states and avoid them while engaging in aesthetic appraisal, and this should be easy to control once one recognizes its relevance. *In the end, a better aesthetic judge is one who is in an aesthetically receptive state where reflective aesthetic appraisal is minimally inhibited or distorted.*

5.9 9) *Lacking in Good Sense Bias*

“That movie is too deep.” OR “Music just isn’t that important to me.”

This bias is defined as *basic prerequisite qualities lacking in a judge that are necessary for competent appraisal of artworks (such as intelligence, knowledge, aesthetic motivation, openness to experience, emotional stability, and logic)*. The relevant recommendation from David Hume (1757) to all aspiring critics was that one must be equal to the task, or mentally capable of comprehending the level of complexity of the art form (including delicacy of taste, recollection of thought, and being well-rounded). This bias includes markers of competence, which one might otherwise think were missing in the current list of biases, including relevant expert knowledge.

This must also include any obvious individual limitations, such as amusia, the inability to process melody (Ayotte, Peretz & Hyde, 2002). Reid (1764) noted that normal perceptual abilities are necessary to perceive beauty; however, these are not enough. Children, for instance, could not be valid critics because they are not ready cognitively, emotionally or experientially (Farnsworth, 1958; Gunthorp, 1940).

In short, one must rule out the possibility that there is a weakness within the audience—just as some one without a sense of humor could not be expected to judge stand-up comedians. A complex foreign film isn't bad because it is ambiguous and philosophical (or because of subtitles). Supporting these suggestions, Child (1965) found that for visual art, greater consensus with expert judgments among undergraduates was tied to a tolerance of complexity, verbal aptitude, and having an art background. Furthermore, both intelligence and age affect taste (Rubin-Rabson, 1940; Schuessler, 1948).

This bias would include *personality or motivational* variables such as openness to experience (vs. conservatism), which has consistently been found to predict aesthetic fluency and judgment (Child, 1965; Silvia, 2007), an opposing force to the narrow mindedness common in prejudiced thinking (cf. Rokeach, 1960). Not surprisingly, within *openness* on the Big Five personality scale is an aesthetics sub dimension (McCrae & Costa, 1997). Surely, one must also be aesthetically inclined (i.e., scoring high on the aesthetics subscale of *openness to experience* (McCrae & Costa, 1997) or the *Desire for Aesthetics Scale*; Lundy, 2010). Eysenck (1940/41; 1957) cites evidence of individuals with a knack for aesthetic abilities to know beauty, arguing for a biological basis in the form of a “T-factor” (good taste). Marković (2012) has found that certain dispositions are associated with understanding deeper symbolic meanings in aesthetic appraisal, including declarative knowledge, expertise, creative thinking, openness to experience, and imaginative thinking. There are works in all areas of art that one should be expected to appreciate as a competent aesthete, a kind of “aesthetic sanity test”. Along these lines, one might argue for an addition to Gardner's (1983) multiple intelligences: *aesthetic intelligence*. This might be the most difficult bias to overcome and not all individuals may be able to become competent aesthetic appraisers. However, many aspects of “good sense” could probably be cultivated if one was motivated. The amenable aspects of this bias are consistent with research on the potential development of expertise in aesthetic appraisal over time and the important role of wider knowledge (Marković, 2012; Parsons, 1987). *In the end, a better aesthetic judge is one who is able to possess abilities and motivations in the self that are prerequisites for refined aesthetic discernment.*

5.10 10) *The Unbalanced Judgment Bias*

“The lyrics are great, so I give it 10 out of 10.” OR “It's unique, therefore it's great.”

This bias is defined as *an overfocus on one aesthetic dimension of quality, while ignoring or underestimating the effect of other dimensions and not appraising the work as a unified whole*. Strong artworks represent unity in variety (Burt, 1933), a combination of harmony and complexity (Eysenck, 1957). Great works seem to strike the right balance between various elements, and critical appraisals may not take the whole artwork into account as a unified interactive force or Gestalt (cf. Arnheim, 1971). There is a possibility of ignoring a key element or overemphasizing one factor while seemingly ignoring most others (e.g., acting vs. screenplay). A singer may have a great voice but some people seem to ignore the mediocre song being sung. Another example would be rating music highly only because it was original, even if it was lacking in other areas, such as melody or vocals.

Artistic originality is an important aesthetic element, but it is not a sufficient condition for aesthetic greatness; great art must also be comprehensible (Martindale, 2009). Another lack of balance problem is nitpicking about one weak aesthetic sub dimension in a work (e.g., lyrics), and giving a low overall rating despite the presence of many other positive qualities. For instance, a judge who would rate an otherwise strong movie as below neutral only because of a flawed ending (see Gilbert, 2006) would be committing the unbalanced bias. *In the end, a better aesthetic judge is one who is able to base one's final appraisal of an artwork as a Gestalt experience among interacting artistic elements without unduly overemphasizing or underemphasizing any particular elements.*

5.11 11) Numerical Rating Biases

"I like it, so I'll give it 10 out of 10." OR "Every musician has a 5-star album."

This bias is defined as *quantitative rating weaknesses that undermine one's ability to give quantitatively proportional aesthetic appraisals*. These refer to a common suite of tendencies, which when taken together, spell *low quantitative refinement* or a lack of *proportionality*. One could argue that this is the bias that can affect even the most otherwise astute and sophisticated critics. This is a good last step check because a precise rating method cannot make up for more basic biases, such as lack of familiarity.

5.11.1 a) No standard quantification method.

"It is impossible to continue in the practice of contemplating any order of beauty, without being frequently obliged to form *comparisons* between the several species and degrees of excellence, and estimating their proportion to each other"

David Hume

When judging aesthetic works one should be able to rank and rate them compared to all other works; it is essential for numerical ratings to be proportional to each other within each judge. A key in putting numbers onto aesthetic works is knowing what a specific numerical rating (such as "85%") means, and it helps to have contrasting information along the entire rating scale. To facilitate this I developed the *Definitive Levels of Aesthetic Impact Rating Method* (DLAIRM; see Lundy, 2012), a comparative rating method designed to reduce this bias to its theoretical minimum. This relates to the next problem.

5.11.2 b) *Imprecise rating scale*. One cannot achieve Hume's proportionality without a wide-ranging familiarity of the best and worst works, and exemplars along the whole continuum of aesthetic impact (Lundy, 2012). Aesthetic quality is a matter of degree, so it makes sense to develop one's perceptual acuity to be as precise as possible. The worst example of imprecision would be the "thumbs up, thumbs down" scale used by Siskel and Ebert to rate movies, implying that quality comes at only two levels. This is worse than Dionysius who apparently distinguished between three levels-the elegant, the middle and the severely plain (Wimsatt & Brooks, 1957). Imagine measuring IQ or student grades in such a rough way. One could make the argument that inadequate precision is true of practically all current music and film critics, who either use no scales at all, or use between 5 and 11 rating levels (DLAIRM, in contrast, uses 41 levels with 2.5% precision; Lundy, 2012). Some areas of aesthetics are only narrative-focused and do not usually attempt quantitative ratings (especially literature). Such imprecision contributes to the next problem.

5.11.3 c) *Skewed rating distributions*. Even among otherwise sophisticated critics, some have a tendency to give too many 100 out of 100 ratings (Lundy, 2013). Works this extraordinarily good or bad must be rare. High familiarity will bring ratings closest to the approximate quality of the piece. If we aren't exposed to the full range of artwork quality we can't possibly know what best and worst means—a good song might sound like a great song if one has never heard a great song. Such problems show up as *rating distribution biases*. Similar to findings for IQ tests and many types of athletic performances (Chatterjee & Lehman, 1997; Murray, 2003; Wechsler, 1958), recent research suggests mound shaped distributions approaching normality among critics (Lundy, 2013; Lundy, Baker, & Crowe, 2016). In other words, extremely poor or great works are relatively rare while more modest achievements are much more common. In contrast, novice judges often show “less normal” distribution shapes (Lundy, Smith, & Binkley, 2013).

In the end, a better aesthetic judge is one who uses a standard quantitative rating method with high precision, which allows for maximally proportional rating distributions.

6. Aesthetic and Non aesthetic Conclusions

The focus of this paper seems especially important once one realizes that these non aesthetic biases occur across centuries, cultures, and aesthetic domains and they are often similar to general self-serving human tendencies, such as stereotyping and prejudice. Not surprisingly, various scholars across a wide span of time and academic areas have noticed elements of almost all of these biases. An area of debate is to what extent these biases can be attenuated and who is capable of becoming a relatively unbiased judge. Young (2010) suggests that a relatively broad audience could be competent to judge aesthetic quality, but just how broad such a group of judges can be is an unresolved issue. A related issue is to what extent people can minimize biases and still be human. Burt (1933) asked if “...we could brush aside these irrelevant associations—the fashions, the fancies, and the fads that so obscure our sense of beauty...would there be any solid ground of preference left?” (p. 289). He and many others have thought the answer to be yes, and appraisal data among experts suggests such independent consensus does exist (e.g., Boor, 1990; Burt, 1933; Farnsworth, 1950; Lundy, 2010).

If one is worried that following this idealized critical path will create a world of aesthetic clones, this issue has been diffused by Levinson (2010): we can all have our favorites within a given range of aesthetic quality. Plus, quality is a matter of degree; in fact, some net quality probably exists in almost half of all works (i.e., anything perceived above neutral).

To identify signs of bias in the self, one must consciously and critically reflect on the pattern of one's overall aesthetic reactions. Are there suspect patterns or blind spots in high or low ratings linked to particular genres, artists, ages or styles of the artworks? In short, the key to reducing bias appears to be openness to an equitable familiarization process, not unlike an unprejudiced world traveller open to a wide array of cultures. Disagreements are not expected to disappear, but they should decrease when the background noise is reduced and people are disagreeing about aesthetic factors only. When a person talks about a film, musician or book that he or she likes or dislikes, it is important to think about whether one is getting a disinterested aesthetic judgment or a non aesthetically biased opinion. The second option appears to be a common occurrence. In the end, a better aesthetic judge is one who has minimized biases within the self, and has come closer to achieving disinterested and authentic, potentially universal, aesthetic appraisal. Ultimately, the less biased that perceivers of aesthetic works are within a society, the more that true aesthetic quality will be recognized and rewarded.

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