

B E T T E R

L I V I N G

Through

Criticism

How to Think About Art,  
Pleasure, Beauty, and Truth

A. O. SCOTT

# Better Living Through Criticism

How to Think About Art,  
Pleasure, Beauty, and Truth

A. O. Scott

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*for Justine*

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ERNEST: You have told me many strange things to-night, Gilbert. You have told me that it is more difficult to talk about a thing than do it, and that to do nothing at all is the most difficult thing in the world; you have told me that all Art is immoral, and all thought dangerous; that criticism is more creative than creation, and that the highest criticism is that which reveals in the work of Art what the artist had not put there; that it is exactly because a man cannot do a thing that he is the proper judge of it; and that the true critic is unfair, insincere, and not rational. My friend, you are a dreamer.

GILBERT: Yes: I am a dreamer. For a dreamer is one who can only find his way by moonlight, and his punishment is that he sees the dawn before the rest of the world.

ERNEST: His punishment?

GILBERT: And his reward.

—OSCAR WILDE, "The Critic as Artist"

From now to the end of consciousness, we are stuck with the task of defending art. We can only quarrel with one or another means of defense.

—SUSAN SONTAG, "Against Interpretation"

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## Introduction

# What Is Criticism? (A Preliminary Dialogue)

Q: What's the point of criticism? What are critics good for?

A: Those are the big questions! The obvious questions, anyway. But they're not exactly the same question.

Q: But isn't criticism just whatever critics do?

A: Sure. And everybody who criticizes is a critic. You see the problem. We've barely gotten started and already we're running in circles. When we talk about criticism, are we talking about a job—kind of writing, a species of journalism or scholarship, an intellectual discipline of some sort—and therefore the people who make their livings at it? Or are we talking about a less specialized undertaking, something like playing cards or cooking or riding a bicycle, something anyone can learn to do? Or maybe even a more elementary, more reflexive activity, like dreaming or breathing or crying?

Q: I thought the arrangement was that I would be asking the questions here.

A: Sorry.

Q: So let's start again, and start with you. You are a professional critic, and also someone who thinks a lot about what criticism is and what it's for.

A: Though not necessarily in that order. And not exclusively, of course.

Q: Okay. But what I'm asking is—

A: What good am I? What's the point of what I do?

Q: If you want to put it that way. I might not have been quite so hostile.

A: No worries. Opposition is true friendship, as William Blake said. Every critic grows accustomed to dealing with skepticism and suspicion and, sometimes, outright contempt. *How dare you! What gives you the right? Why should anyone listen to you?* We get this all the time. Provoking people to question our competence, our intelligence, our very right to exist—that seems to be a big part of what it is to be a critic.

Q: And now you've decided to fight back. You're feeling defensive. Would it be accurate to say that you wrote this whole book to settle a score with Samuel L. Jackson?

A: Not exactly. But I'm glad you brought that up. A bit of background: In May 2012, on the day *The Avengers*—you saw it, right? Everyone did—was released on 3,500 screens across North America, I published a review in which I praised some aspects of the movie—the cleverness of its dialogue, the sharpness of the performances—while complaining about others, in particular its sacrifice of originality on the altar of blockbuster conformity. If you'll allow me to quote myself: “The secret of ‘The Avengers’ is that it is a snappy little dialogue comedy dressed up as something else, that something else being a giant A.T.M. for Marvel and its new studio overlords, the Walt Disney Company.” That assessment stands up pretty well, if I say so myself. By the time *Avengers: Age of Ultron* came along a few years later everyone else seemed to be saying more or less the same thing: that its charms and thrills were overwhelmed by soulless corporate spectacle. There is some satisfaction in having been in the vanguard of pointing out the obvious.

At the time, though, I was part of a premature backlash. Not long after my review was posted on the *New York Times* Web site, Jackson, who plays Nick Fury in the movie and in other Marvel Universe franchise installments, posted a Twitter message exhorting “#Avengers fans” that “AC Scott needs a new job! Let's help him find one! One he can ACTUALLY do!” Scores of his followers heeded his call, not by demanding that my editors fire me but, in the best Twitter tradition, by retweeting Jackson's outburst and adding their own vivid suggestions about what I was qualified to do with myself. The more coherent tweets expressed familiar, you might even say canonical, anticritical sentiments: that I had no capacity for joy; that I wanted to ruin everyone else's fun; that I was a hater, a square, and a snob; even—and this was kind of a new one—that the nerdy kid in middle school who everybody picked on because he didn't like comic books had grown up to be me. (In my day, some of the nerdy kids everybody picked on were the ones who did like comic books, but I guess things have changed now that the superheroes and their fanboy followers have taken over everything. I was picked on for reasons that had nothing to do with comic books.)

The *Avengers* incident blew up into one of those absurd and hyperactive Internet squalls that are now a fixture of our cultural life. Mace Windu had called me out! I had summoned the righteous wrath of Jules Winnfield! Jackson and I were Photoshopped into action-movie combat poses on entertainment Web sites. Miniature think pieces sprouted like mushrooms after a rainstorm. Our Twitter beef made the news in Brazil, Germany, and Japan. A few of my colleagues embraced the cause of standing up not only for my own beleaguered self, but also for the integrity and importance of the job I was in Jackson's view unqualified to do.

Q: Were you scared?

A: On the contrary. I was grateful. Neither my person nor my livelihood was in any danger, and *The Avengers* went on to become the second-fastest film to date to reach \$1 billion at the global box office. I gained a few hundred followers on Twitter and became, for a few minutes, both a hissable villain and a make-believe martyr for a noble and much-maligned cause. It was win-win all around, and then everyone moved on.

But even a tempest in a teapot can have meteorological significance, and I think Jackson raised a valid and vital question. Putting aside the merits or limitations of what I wrote about *The*



*Avengers* or any other movie, it's always worth asking just what the job of the critic is, and how it might ACTUALLY be done.

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Q: So you've set out here to defend that job against the attacks—the criticism—of sensitive movie stars and their fans? Isn't that a little bit hypocritical? It seems like you can dish it out, but you can't take it.

A: Well, no, actually. I mean, yes, we all get a little sensitive when the people whose work we write about—or for that matter our readers—find fault with what we do. That's only human. What I'm more interested in here is the general tendency—I would really say the universal capacity of our species—to find fault. And also to bestow praise. To judge. That's the bedrock of criticism. How do we know, or think we know, what's good or bad, what's worth attacking or defending or telling our friends about? How do we assess the success or failure of *The Avengers* or anything else? Because whether or not it's our job, we *do* judge. We can't help it.

Q: And how do we judge? Or maybe the question is “Why do we judge?”

A: Honestly, when I set out to write this book I thought the answers would come much more easily than they did. That there would in fact be answers of a kind I could state clearly and emphatically. Maybe I'd discover that we know what's beautiful or meaningful or even just fun because of neural switches or hormonal responses that evolved at the dawn of human time in order to help us avoid predators and produce more offspring. Or maybe I'd conclude that we are able to make determinations and discriminations of value because we have access to innate and eternal standards that, though they mutate over the centuries and express themselves differently from place to place, nonetheless keep us on the path of truth and beauty.

You can look at the history of human creativity and find patterns—shapes, sounds, stories—that suggest deep continuity. You can also survey the wild diversity of human making and conclude that no single category or set of criteria could possibly contain it all. Every culture, every class and tribe and coterie, every period in history has developed its own canons of craft and invention. Our modern, cosmopolitan sensibilities graze among the objects they have left behind, sampling and comparing and carrying out the pleasant work of sorting and assimilating what we find. Meanwhile, we are inundated with new stuff, which is also pleasant even if the glut can leave us feeling paralyzed and empty. We marvel at the abundance or worry about the too-muchness of it all. There are so many demands on our attention, so many offers of diversion and enlightenment on the table, that choosing among them can feel like serious work.

Q: And that work—the winnowing and contrasting, the measuring and interpreting—is what you call criticism.

A: Yes. But it's also something more basic and more urgent. It's complicated. Let me go back to Samuel L. Jackson. Six months after the *Avengers* episode, he revisited our Twitter quarrel in an interview with the *Huffington Post* and gave voice to a widespread complaint about criticism in general, and about the criticism of popular culture in particular. “Ninety-nine percent of the people in the world look at that movie as what it is,” he said. “It's not an intellectual exposition that you have to intellectualize in any way.” This is an old and powerful—in some ways an unanswerable—argument against criticism, rooted in the ideas that creative work should be taken

on its own terms and that thought is the enemy of experience. And it is indeed precisely the job of the critic to disagree, to refuse to look at anything simply as what it is, to insist on subjecting it to intellectual scrutiny.

“Intellectualize” is a deliberately ugly word, the use of which is an accusation in its own right. But really it’s just a synonym for “think,” and it’s worth asking why it should be necessary to deny so strenuously that *The Avengers* might be both the product and a potential object of thought. The movie is very much an “intellectual exposition” in the general sense of having arisen from the conscious intentions and active intelligence of its creators, including Jackson himself. It also, like many other comic-book entertainments, sets out to explore what fans of the genre and veterans of high school English would be sure to recognize as Big Themes, among them honor, friendship, revenge, and the problem of evil in a lawful universe. And finally (and, from my own perspective, most vexingly), *The Avengers* shows what can happen when a playful storytelling instinct collides with the imperative of global profit that drives so much twenty-first century Hollywood production.

All of which is to say that *The Avengers* is an extremely interesting and complex artifact, and that its successes and limitations are worth puzzling over. And yet even to contemplate the work of teasing out the good from the bad, finding the context and staking a claim, might be to miss the point. Or, as Jackson put it: “. . . if you say something that’s fucked-up about a piece of bullshit pop culture that really is good—‘The Avengers’ is a fucking great movie; Joss [Whedon] did an awesome job—if you don’t get it, then just say, ‘I don’t get it.’”

But I get it. In particular, I appreciate the double standard that Jackson invokes as he places *The Avengers* simultaneously beneath criticism (“a piece of bullshit pop culture”) and beyond it (“a fucking great movie”). He is echoing the reflexive disdain for movies and other low- and middlebrow amusements that came so easily to intellectuals of an earlier era, and at the same time invoking the ancient, superhighbrow idea that a work of art is inviolate and sufficient unto itself. In these circumstances, a critic will be guilty of foolishly taking seriously what was only ever meant as harmless, easy fun, or else of dragging something sublime down to his own ridiculous level. But guilty either way.

Here’s the important thing, though: in doing this, a critic will be no different from anyone else who stops to think about the experience of watching *The Avengers* (or reading a novel or beholding a painting or listening to a piece of music). Because that thinking is where criticism begins. We’re all guilty of it. Or at least we should be.

Q: So you’ve written a book in defense of thinking? Where’s the argument? Nobody is really against thinking.

A: Are you serious? Anti-intellectualism is virtually our civic religion. “Critical thinking” may be a ubiquitous educational slogan—a vaguely defined skill we hope our children pick up on the way to adulthood—but the rewards for not using your intelligence are immediate and abundant.

As consumers of culture, we are lulled into passivity or, at best, prodded toward a state of pseudo-semi-self-awareness, encouraged toward either the defensive group identity of fanhood or a shallow, half-ironic eclecticism. Meanwhile, as citizens of the political commonwealth, we are conscripted into a polarized climate of ideological belligerence in which bluster too often substitutes for argument.

There is no room for doubt and little time for reflection as we find ourselves buffeted by a

barrage of sensations and a flood of opinion. We can fantasize about slowing down or opting out but ultimately we must learn to live in the world as we find it and to see it as clearly as we can. This is no simple task. It is easier to seek out the comforts of groupthink, prejudice, and ignorance. Resisting those temptations requires vigilance, discipline, and curiosity.

Q: So then what you've written is a manifesto against laziness and stupidity?

A: You could put it that way. But why cast it in such a negative light? This book is also, I hope, a celebration of art and imagination, an examination of our inborn drive to cultivate delight and of the various ways we refine that impulse.

Q: And all that is the critic's job?

A: It's everyone's job, and I believe it's a job we can actually do. I suggest that the effort might begin with the way we address the works that answer our bottomless hunger for meaning and pleasure, and also, simultaneously, with the way we understand our responses to those beautiful baffling things.

We are far too inclined to regard art as an ornament and to perceive taste as a fixed, narrow track along which each one of us travels, alone or in select, like-minded company. Alternatively we seek to subordinate the creative, pleasurable aspects of our lives to supposedly more consequential matters, pushing the aesthetic dimensions of existence into the boxes that hold our religious beliefs, political dogmas, or moral assumptions. We trivialize art. We venerate nonsense. We can't see past our own bullshit.

Enough of that! It's the job of art to free our minds, and the task of criticism to figure out what to do with that freedom. That everyone is a critic means, or should mean, that we are each of us capable of thinking against our own prejudices, of balancing skepticism with open-mindedness, of sharpening our dulled and glutted senses and battling the intellectual inertia that surrounds us. We need to put our remarkable minds to use and to pay our own experience the honor of taking it seriously.

Q: Okay, fine. But how?

A: Good question!

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## Chapter One

# The Critic as Artist and Vice Versa

What is a critic? If you ask around—or read some of my mail—you will learn that a critic is, above all, a failed artist, unloading long-simmering, envious resentments on those who had the luck, talent, or discipline to succeed. This assumption is so widespread as to amount to an article of public faith. Every working critic could easily assemble, from discarded letters and deleted e-mails, a suite of variations on the themes of “You’re just jealous” and “I’d like to see *you* do better.”

In response, it can always be noted (immodestly, and therefore not always persuasively) that history provides empirical, biographical evidence to the contrary: an extensive roster of important critics who were also masters of various arts. In the mid-nineteenth century, Charles Baudelaire wrote brilliantly about modern painting without harming either his skills or his standing as a poet; in the second half of the twentieth, John Ashbery and Frank O’Hara did the same. Philip Larkin, another poet, wrote ardently and insightfully, albeit with a touch of his habitual grumpiness, about jazz. Hector Berlioz was a preeminent music critic as well as a great composer. George Bernard Shaw was both one of the greatest English-language drama critics and one of the greatest English-language dramatists of his time. Le Corbusier’s writings about architecture have been at least as influential as his buildings, and are perhaps more accommodating. The key directors of the French New Wave—Jean-Luc Godard, Eric Rohmer, Claude Chabrol, François Truffaut—started out as film critics, associated with the journal *Cahiers du Cinéma*. Most of the significant critics of poetry since at least the romantic era have also been poets, and a few (Samuel Taylor Coleridge, T. S. Eliot) have attained canonical stature in both forms. So there!

But the defensive critic may be compelled to admit that such figures are outliers, exceptions that prove a deeply embedded rule. The rule is upheld by the obvious and apparently immutable hierarchical distinction between what critics and artists do. One person may do both, but there is little doubt about where the real value—the real work—resides. *The novels are okay, but it’s the book reviews that really stand out.* Is it possible to imagine fainter, more damning praise? The writers and poets of whom this can be said belong mostly to the ranks of the minor and the almost-memorable, providing thesis fodder for intrepid graduate students and waiting in the shadows with gray, stoical patience for a moment of reassessment and rediscovery. The number of critics who have managed to last—to claim, on the basis of their critical writing alone, a foothold on Parnassus or a spot in the canon—is vanishingly small.

This is no doubt because criticism is understood to be a time-bound, reactive, secondary activity, stealing whatever temporary prestige, importance, or shock value it has from the durable labor of real artists. As their art persists beyond the difficult moment of its birth, it leaves behind not only the original responses it provoked, but also the world that spawned those responses. Moving toward its

future—from the church altar to the museum; from the bookseller’s stall to the classroom; from the concert hall to the recording studio; from the run-down Times Square grind house to the Criterion Collection DVD box; from the ragged domain of physical artifacts to the seamless digital archive—the work acquires new admirers, fresh skeptics, and calls forth interpretations that discern previously unsuspected meanings and pleasures within its familiar contours. Art, in other words, is durable and also mutable, whereas criticism is fixed and therefore perishable. The job of criticism is to be about art; the job of art is just to be.

Criticism, in this view, is, at best, helpful and disposable, an inessential, changeable prop, like the temporary partition in the gallery on which a painting is hung or the cover slapped on a paperback edition of a classic book. Useful, perhaps, but basically superfluous. And it is always a small step from recognizing that we can live without criticism to deciding that we should. In the opening pages of *Real Presences*, his study of the unacknowledged intimations of divinity in secular culture, George Steiner envisions a Utopia—a “counter-Platonic republic”—in which “all talk *about* the arts, music and literature is prohibited” and “from which the reviewer and the critic have been banished.” That Steiner is himself a critic of considerable renown is not a sign of bad faith, but rather of idealism, of determination at least to imagine a cultural situation unburdened by “the dominance of the secondary and the parasitic” that defines our unhappy present condition.

Steiner’s attack on criticism is a defense of art. This is not a matter of taking up arms against individual critics who spitefully or callously wound the feelings of particular artists, but of a more profound antagonism, the response to a more systemic threat of harm. In Steiner’s view, and in the view of many others who share his prejudices even if they lack his learning, criticism is a pernicious, parasitic growth on the mighty trunk of human creativity. At least in the fantasies of anticritical ideologues (who are often professional critics themselves), the glories of creation can only be apprehended if those distorting excrescences are cleared away. It is a mortal, existential struggle: if art is to live, criticism must die.

But exactly the opposite is true. It is my contention here that criticism, far from sapping the vitality of art, is instead what supplies its lifeblood; that criticism, properly understood, is not an enemy from which art must be defended, but rather another name—the proper name—for the defense of art itself.

Let me go further. Criticism is art’s late-born twin. They draw strength and identity from a single source, even if, like most siblings, their mutual dependency is frequently cloaked in rivalry and suspicion. Will it sound defensive or pretentious if I say that criticism is an art in its own right? Not in the narrow, quotidian sense in which “art” is more or less synonymous with skill, but in the grand, fully exalted, romantic meaning of the word. That the critic is a craftsman of sorts is obvious enough. I want to insist that the critic is also a creator. And if my own workmanlike efforts are inadequate to support the assertion—because, look, I was on deadline and the editor cut the best parts and nobody understands me, anyway—let me fall back, temporarily, on an argument from authority.

H. L. Mencken, the sage of Baltimore and the scourge of all that was phony and flabby in American culture in the first half of the twentieth century, declared that any good critic was acting not from “the motive of the pedagogue, but the motive of the artist.” Rebutting the popular misconception that the critic “writes because he is possessed by a passion to advance enlightenment, to put down error and wrong, to disseminate some specific doctrine”—in short, to make arguments—he proposed a much more basic impulse. What motivates the critic “is no more and no less than the simple desire to function freely and beautifully, to give outward and objective form to ideas that bubble inwardly and have a fascinating lure in them, to get rid of them dramatically and make an articulate noise in the

world.” Exactly!

This blithe assertion of intellectual and creative autonomy—supported by the bravura and insight of which Mencken at his best was capable, and by the permanent spot he managed to claim in the American literary pantheon—is complicated by the nature of the particular art form Mencken’s notional critic pursues. The contradictory heart of the matter is that criticism is an art produced in reference to, and therefore in conflict with, other arts. T. S. Eliot, who did not hesitate to associate criticism with “the other fine arts,” also noted its exceptional status, its essential difference from its siblings. He liked to describe art (in particular poetry, which he favored not only for vocational reasons, but also in deference to its traditional position of supremacy in Western aesthetics) as “autotelic,” meaning self-completing or self-sufficient. A poem, a statue, or a piece of music is essentially (supposedly) independent, freestanding, whereas any specimen of the art of criticism, however dazzling in itself, must always lean upon and make reference to something else.

This makes criticism an anomaly. It may be true that art is born of a struggle with the hard facts of life and the obduracy of the materials at hand, but this struggle does not really involve personal, mutual hostility. The sculptor is not the enemy of stone. The painter is not in competition with the human form. The key of G will not take umbrage at a composer’s use of it. Words do not hate poets. But criticism, as Mencken notes, is different. In part because it is, or seems, *personal*.

When [the critic] sits down to compose his criticism, his artist ceases to be a friend, and becomes mere raw material for his work of art. It is my experience that artists invariably resent this cavalier use of them. They are pleased so long as the critic confines himself to the modest business of interpreting them—preferably in terms of their own estimate of themselves—but the moment he proceeds to adorn their theme with variations of his own, the moment he brings new ideas to the enterprise and begins contrasting them with their ideas, that moment they grow restive. It is precisely at this point, of course, that criticism becomes genuine criticism; before that it was mere reviewing. When a critic passes it he loses his friends. By becoming an artist, he becomes the foe of all other artists.

Mencken’s conclusion is that this state of hostilities is ultimately beneficial to all concerned: “Literature always thrives best, in fact, in an atmosphere of hearty strife.”

Agreed! And so do all the other arts. Criticism is the art that contends against them for their own benefit, and also to further its own aesthetic ends, to make its articulate noise in the world. This means that criticism, far from being a minor, petty, secondary art, is in fact larger than the others. There is more of it, its scope is wider, its methods more eclectic than any of its rivals. It encompasses all of them, and compels them all to serve its needs. It is not parasitic, but primary.

I know what this sounds like: sophistry, vain hyperbole, sheer arrogant nonsense. In the sense that Mencken understood and practiced it, criticism is a relatively new and limited pursuit, and throughout human history a great many artistic traditions have flourished entirely untouched by what we or Mencken would identify as criticism. No cartouche has been unearthed suggesting the existence of an Egyptian sage urging the public not to miss the Pyramids. They were even harder to miss then than they are now. Scribes and calligraphers in the ages before newspapers and magazines did not have the time or inclination to jot down and copy responses to the latest madrigal or altarpiece. Wandering

through museum galleries, we can be moved and delighted by African masks, Greek vases, and Chinese scrolls without knowing—in some cases without even being able to guess—what contemporary local savants might have made of them.

But we can also be sure that these objects and experiences did not make their way to us without passing through a process of judgmental scrutiny that began at the moment of their conception and that informed every stage of their gestation. Every made thing answers to—which is also to say that it struggles against, and sometimes transcends—aesthetic norms and cultural purposes that are implicit within it even as they may be inscrutable to late-arriving or alien eyes. A work of art is itself a piece of criticism.

The purpose of George Steiner's thought experiment—his peremptory sweeping away of the fog of commentary that he sees shrouding the finest products of the human imagination—is to clarify exactly this point. "All serious art, music and literature," he writes, "is a *critical* act," by which he means not only that art in general constitutes "a criticism of life" (in Matthew Arnold's phrase), but also that the arts "embody an expository reflection on, a value judgement of, the inheritance and context to which they pertain."

This is a starchy, pseudo-Germanic way of noting that, far from existing in a state of serene, autotelic isolation, works of art reach beyond themselves, engaging other works that exist alongside and before them and the historical circumstances in which they arise. On one level, the point is so obvious that it hardly needs arguing. Libraries, course syllabi, museums, and the iTunes Store are all organized around a belief in the organic existence of genres, traditions, periods, and other forms of artistic affiliation. We are routinely taught to attend to "context," an agreeably vague term for the stuff we might want to know about the thing we are looking at, and also, more precisely, for the stuff that thing seems to know.

We may still cling to the myth of the solitary creator, toiling in a garret awaiting a visit from the muse, but the reality of creation has always been much more interactive. Not simply because an individual painter or writer is likely, however cantankerously or reluctantly, to be part of a scene or a school, or even because of the essentially collaborative, collective nature of pursuits like theater, film, architecture, and music. All art that is recognizable as such is in some degree about other art. Every writer is a reader, every musician a listener, driven by a desire to imitate, to correct, to improve, or to answer the models before them. It would be too much to say that every artist is a failed critic, unable to appreciate what already exists without adding to it, but it does not seem to me inaccurate to say that all art is successful criticism.

This is a simple, practical observation, but I also want to gesture toward what I take to be a vast and more fundamental truth. We are accustomed, in the post-everything present, to an aesthetic of the sample, the mash-up, and the pastiche. For several decades now—an era marked by hip-hop appropriation, self-ironizing television shows, literary parody, and cinematic homage—culture has thrived on various styles of borrowing, quotation, and metacommentary, much of it bracingly original. At worst, we have been subjected to tiresome and cynical bouts of remaking and recycling, but what is more striking is the sheer novelty that so often emerges from the contemplation and reinvention of the old. Hip-hop is perhaps the supreme example of this apparent paradox: an authentically and at times radically new musical idiom built from the stolen beats and blended sounds of antecedent forms. Similar practices—of nodding and winking, spoofing and honoring, remixing and repurposing—have a way of popping up wherever our gazes happen to land. Filmmakers like Quentin Tarantino and Joel and Ethan Coen (to cite only two of the better-known cases) mine the movie past to make films that are saturated in history without quite resembling anything that has come before. Visual art since the

1980s, when Andy Warhol replaced Jackson Pollock as the supreme influence on the young, has aggressively recombined both the iconography and the literal images of earlier times. A hundred hothouse flowers have bloomed: paintings based on paintings, photographs of photographs, photographs of paintings, and hard-to-classify, hard-to-miss artifacts that count as works of art because no other category exists for them.

Not everyone is happy about this, of course. There is by now a bursting archive of complaint about the derivative, secondary, unserious aspects not just of particular works or artists, but of entire art forms and of the hectically self-conscious, air-quoting zeitgeist itself. The situation that Steiner calls “our current *misère*” (which to a sensibility less saturnine might look like a whole world of fun) is often faulted for the ascendancy of hybrids, simulacra, and imitations, secondhand stuff that has crowded out the authentic, heroic, self-authorized masterpieces of yesteryear. But whatever you think about specific trends and tendencies within late twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century culture—what used to be called postmodernism and is now just called “now”—they represent the latest iteration of something as old as art itself.

Imitation is not the erosion of originality; it is the condition of originality. History proves as much. The popular culture of the past half century has been a self-propelling machine for the production of novelty that turns almost instantly into nostalgia. An old song is one that was on the radio two summers ago, a classic is the one you danced to at your prom, and the movies and television programs of your childhood are marked with the tints and timbres of antiquarianism. But the thread that connects the generations is a relentless dialectic of copying and reinvention. Every explosion of transformative newness turns out, on closer inspection, to be the recovery and recasting of what was already there, aided by new technology and the eager devotion of fans striving to pay tribute to their idols by mimicking and surpassing them. The story of rock ’n’ roll is a chronicle of successive generations of teenagers teaching themselves Chuck Berry riffs and going from there. As soon as the style grows too big or baroque—as soon as the raw essence of the music is obscured by commercial scale or artistic ambition—someone will come along to give the wheel another turn by reinventing it.

The iconoclasts of the French New Wave were in thrall to the artistry of Hollywood studio hacks—auteurs, in other words—and bewitched by the power of American commercial genres. Jean-Luc Godard’s *Breathless* is a movie without precedent, full of freshness, youthful vigor, and the air of Parisian postwar reality, and yet it is also almost entirely a commentary on American crime cinema going back to the 1930s. And, in turn, quite a lot of the most interesting subsequent cinema—from *Bonnie and Clyde* to Wong Kar-Wai—is a commentary on and elaboration of the themes and styles of *Breathless*.

Godard is an exceptional figure, of course, but also, for just that reason, an exemplary one. There has perhaps never been a filmmaker so completely and compulsively obsessed with cinema—as a record of history, a tool for thought, a playpen, and a field of battle. Godard is also a director for whom filmmaking and film criticism are finally indistinguishable. To say that the polemical and appreciative essays he wrote in *Cahiers* as a young man—in which he embraced, with militant fervor, the movies of Howard Hawks, Fritz Lang, Nicholas Ray, and other misunderstood geniuses of the studio system—were a prelude to the investigations of cinematic form carried out in *Breathless* and beyond is also to say that those films carried out, by other means, the investigations begun in print. In his late work (above all, the eight-part, four-and-a-half-hour-long *Histoire(s) du cinéma*), this continuity becomes explicit, as the sequence of moving images becomes the ideal medium for thinking about the legacy and the future of motion pictures.

Godard’s *Histoires* is a grand anomaly and also the apotheosis of a familiar genre, the movie



about movies. Cinema is a language with built-in reflexive capabilities that other art forms may seem to lack. Music criticism is unlikely to be scored, or art criticism conducted by means of brush and pigment. But it is precisely in those art forms that Godard's epic collage—a counterpoint of borrowed images and meditative narration—finds its strongest precedents.

The canon of high literature, fine art, and classical music consists of a long conversation between eras, styles, and nations that is at times covert rather than explicit, but that is always there. Some of the principal monuments of literary modernism—James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Ezra Pound's *Cantos*, Eliot's "The Waste Land"—are brand-new tapestries woven out of ancient thread, and some of the most radical innovations of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century avant-garde are acts of recovery and reinterpretation. Pound's exhortation to "Make it new"—an enduring and perennially refreshable modernist slogan—presumes the existence of that all-important "it," which is to say everything that the frigate of human civilization has left in its wake.

The new does not occur in a vacuum; it requires materials. And the revolutionary impulse that swept, in successive waves, across the arts from the middle of the nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth involved the compulsive excavation of such materials, for rescue, correction, and adaptation. Manet, the first great modern painter, may have been responding to the social tumult of Paris in the 1860s and '70s, but he was also conducting a passionate argument with Titian and Velázquez and the tradition of European painting, attempting to recover the sources of its vitality and give them currency in his own changed milieu. Picasso, coming a little more than a generation after Manet, began his career with an intensive inquiry into his native tradition, evoking Goya, Velázquez, El Greco, and other Spanish masters in his early paintings. As his ambition grew, he radically expanded his field of influences to include, most decisively, the African masks and figures that inspired *Les Femmes d'Alger* and the Greek vase decorations that informed his mischievously erotic late drawings and etchings. His intent was not to quote or to appropriate—or to flatter the cleverness of beholders who might "get" the references—but rather to find a vocabulary of images and techniques able to infuse his own work with the primal, authentic power he desired.

The itineraries of modernism pass through the old—the archaic, the ancient, the atavistic—en route to the new. Similarly, European and American modernisms trafficked in the exotic—the primitive, the alien, the strange—in their search for the immediate and the essential, for that elusive quality that would shake painting, poetry, and music out of their inherited patterns and complacent assumptions. To some degree, this was all a response to the feeling of belatedness that shadows the experience of modernity. The world as found by its restless modern spirits is already crowded, its most fertile areas already carefully farmed or wildly overgrown. The only way forward seems to be *back and through*.

But it may be that by "modern" in this instance we really mean something closer to "human." The felt imperative to "make it new" is itself not so new; making it new is pretty much the way it's always been done. Lateness—that sinking feeling that originality has been exhausted and that only repetition remains—has weighed on the souls of artists since the beginning. The Great Originator of English letters, Shakespeare himself, ransacked the cupboards of high and low literature, history, and folklore in search of viable scenarios, cobbling scraps of Ovid, Holinshed, Latin comedy, commedia dell'arte sketches, and medieval fairy tales into an imposing, profligate edifice that nearly every subsequent writer of English—American, Irish, African, Caribbean, Indian—would feel free to pillage.

There are different ways of imagining this continual process of ransacking and remaking, which determines the specific course of each art form over time. Apprentices school themselves in the work of the masters, breaking down the mysteries of earlier achievements into techniques that can be

imitated and adapted. The fundamental critical process—the hinge that conjoins the twin activities of creation and analysis—may reside in this basic activity of loving demystification. To revert to an earlier example, you hear Chuck Berry on the radio and your pleasure at the sound is redoubled by an impulse that is compounded of envy, admiration, and desire. *I want to do that. How did he do that? Maybe I could do it better!* The budding cineaste—Jean-Luc Godard at the Paris Cinémathèque, craning forward in the first row to catch the image as soon as it bounces off the screen; Martin Scorsese raptly taking in a double feature in the Manhattan of his youth—dreams of casting a spell like the one he finds himself under. The bookworm longing for a deeper connection to her literary idols—for their company—mimics their voices until she finds her own.

The discipline that turns a fan into an adept—the breaking down of the sound into its constituent notes, the film into its shots, the prose into its defining tonalities—can be acquired at school or in solitude, by direct tutelage or dreamy osmosis. In every case, it involves the transformation of awe into understanding, and the claiming of a share of imaginative power. Each of our make-believe fledglings (the rocker, the director, the poet) is also therefore a critic. The stronger they grow, the more autonomous and confident in their mastery of the art in question, the more decisively critical their efforts become, until they succeed in reversing the direction of influence and altering the work of their predecessors. Chuck Berry sounds different after the Beach Boys, Bruce Springsteen, and the Sex Pistols. They all take it upon themselves to finish what he started, even if—exactly because—it had seemed self-sufficiently *done* to begin with. Godard, the disciple of Hitchcock and Hawks, is also the interpreter, as Tarantino will be his. “The past,” according to T. S. Eliot, is “altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past.”

Eliot’s word for this looping temporal relationship between the old and the new is “tradition,” a term that was, in his time as in ours, somewhat suspect. It can mean a slavish, timid reliance on preexisting models, or else a way of doing things hemmed in by conservative, ethnocentric assumptions. But his understanding of tradition is less restrictive, and more dynamic, than his subsequent reputation as an imperious conservative might suggest. The idea of tradition is what allows us to perceive patterns and affinities over time, and to acknowledge that “no poet, no artist of any art has his complete meaning alone. His significance . . . is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists.” Morbid as this may sound, it identifies two crucial components of artistic ambition: the desire to last, to have at least a chance at immortality; and the anxious wish to measure up, to elbow one’s way into a company that does not require your presence. “The existing order is complete,” Eliot declares, “before the new work arrives,” which is both discouraging and realistic. There is never, at any moment, a need for more—Chuck Berry does not require Bruce Springsteen; Velázquez can do without Picasso or Manet—but there is always, at the same time, the imperative to continue, to correct, to improve, to repeat. And, thereby, to change the character of everything that has come before: “[F]or order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered.”

Whether, in the end, such an order really exists—and whether its existence undermines the autotelic completeness that Eliot elsewhere projects onto any successful individual work—has already been a matter of intense historical and ideological debate. Eliot is talking about European high culture in a prescriptive, defensive tone that presses all kinds of hot buttons, and making a big deal about the necessary “impersonality” of literary creation. It is therefore easy to miss that his real interest—in the essay I have been quoting, published shortly after the end of World War I, when its author, still in his early thirties, was far from the literary Grand Pooh-Bah he would become—is in what it feels like to be an eager young artist looking for a place to stand in a field crowded with the monuments and

muddy footprints of the great.

How to make room for yourself? How to make it appear—to yourself first of all, but then to everyone else—as if you belong? These are the kinds of questions that underlie Harold Bloom’s idea of influence, a version of tradition that replaces Eliot’s ideal order with the passion and tumult of contending personalities and errant meanings.

“Poetic influence,” according to Bloom, “always proceeds by a misreading of the prior poet, an act of creative correction that is actually and necessarily a misinterpretation. The history of fruitful poetic influence, which is to say the main tradition of Western poetry since the Renaissance, is a history of anxiety and self-saving caricature, of distortion, of perverse, wilful revisionism without which modern poetry as such could not exist.” Anyone who has not encountered Bloom’s own marvelously willful and perverse readings in this tradition—in a series of books, the shortest and grandest of which is *The Anxiety of Influence*—should be sure to seek them out. Literary criticism has rarely been practiced with such a combination of learning and drama, as the designated “strong poets” grapple with each other in a struggle that seems primal rather than modern in its intensity.

Part of what is at stake in that struggle is the assertion of primacy—not just one poet outdoing another but, more radically, shaking off the stigma of coming afterward and laying claim to originality, to independence, to an authority that makes the rest of the tradition irrelevant. Not all art explicitly proceeds from such a grandiose motive, but very little of it is produced without reference to some idea of greatness, usually one that involves the transcendence of precedent. (It goes without saying that the sorry fate of most art is to fall into imitative mediocrity, failing even to live up to the available models.)

It may seem as if I am enclosing art (along with criticism) in a familiar corral of self-reference, an airless theoretical space in which poets write to, about, and through other poets, movies make obsessive allusion to other movies, and every song is the echo of another song. But what I am really trying to do is zero in on the existential paradox of art itself, which springs out of an urge to master and add something to reality and finds itself immediately confronted with obstacles that are also its available tools. This urge is very old—there is no record of its first occurrence—and also apparently inexhaustible. To understand it requires the resources of science and the inventions of myth.

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In Plato’s *Symposium*, the supposed transcript of a philosophical Athenian drinking party that prophetically parodies the panel discussions and think-tank roundtables of later times, the comic playwright Aristophanes offers a fable about the origin of love. (In our own day, the fable has been retold in song by Stephen Trask in the musical *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*.) It is a preposterous and touching story about the destruction of a primordial protohuman race of roly-poly, four-legged, Janus-faced creatures, each one endowed with two sets of genitals. Instead of two sexes, there used to be three—all male, all female, and androgynous—but there was not really any sexuality as we know it, since each body was complete unto itself. One day Zeus, in a fit of Olympian jealousy, split our ancestors in two with lightning bolts, and ever since then each member of our broken species has been tormented by the desire to recover his or her missing half. Our coupling is the clumsy, desperate, occasionally successful attempt to put back together what divine violence broke apart.

In addition to regaling his friends with a fanciful and metaphorically persuasive account of the human libido, Aristophanes touches, in them and in subsequent readers of the *Symposium*, a deeply resonant imaginative chord, one that sounds across cultures and historical eras. So much of our

striving—in love, religion, art, and work—seems to be undertaken out of a longing, overtly expressed or not, to restore a sense of lost wholeness. Once, just beyond the boundary of living memory or recorded history, we were complete. Now we are damaged, fallen, deformed.

Often, as in the book of Genesis and its later elaborations, what brought us down was our own arrogance or ambition. According to Aristophanes, Zeus was impelled to dissect us because, as whole self-sufficient quadrupeds, we threatened the supremacy he and the other immortals had enjoyed since they overthrew the Titans. A more famous myth—chronicled long before Plato’s time by the poet Hesiod—similarly situates human origins in a scene of conflict with the gods. The Titan Prometheus, who possessed an “intricate and twisting mind” and who enjoyed punking the haughty and humorless Zeus, concealed fire in a fennel stalk and delivered it to mankind. For this transgression, Prometheus was chained to a rock, to be preyed upon forever by an eagle. For our part, as punishment for accepting his gift, we received a box of woes, delivered to us by a kind of robot-woman, fashioned by the collective artifice of all the gods, named Pandora. “Since before this time,” Hesiod recounts in the *Works and Days*, “the races of men had been living on earth / free from all evils, free from laborious work, and free from all wearing sicknesses.” So the possession of fire brought about a fall into the world of suffering and vexation we now inhabit, a world leavened by fleeting intimations of hope, the one thing that remained inside Pandora’s box.

In later antiquity (in the plays of Aeschylus, for example), during the Renaissance, and even more so in the romantic period, Prometheus was often regarded as a heroic, revolutionary figure. To Percy Bysshe Shelley he represents “the type of the highest perfection of moral and intellectual nature, impelled by the purest and truest motives to the best and noblest ends”—both the progenitor of human genius and its incarnate ideal. In Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound*, he is the “Champion” of mankind, while Zeus is the “Oppressor,” and Zeus’s punishment of Prometheus is both a terrible, tragic injustice and a prelude to redemption. For Hesiod, though, Prometheus is a thief and a liar who got what he deserved, leaving his human protégés an unhappy legacy of limited power and pervasive suffering. The moral Shelley extracts from his story is that anything is possible, that the sacred fire freedom is within our grasp. Hesiod reaches the opposite conclusion: “So there is no way to avoid what Zeus has intended.”

To illustrate this fatalistic point he unspools a longer, even more pessimistic outline of human history, the narrative not of a precipitous fall but rather of a slow, implacable decline brightened by a few glimmers of hope. There was, at the dawn of human life, a Golden Age, followed by the Ages of Silver and Bronze and then by an Age of Heroes (during which the Trojan War was fought)—all of them leading to the present Age of Iron, where Hesiod and his listeners find ourselves. It is not a happy place. “Never by daytime will there be an end to work and pain, nor in the night to weariness, when the gods will send anxieties to trouble us.”

Apart from the polytheistic superstition, this sounds curiously modern, and much of the *Works and Days* resembles that most modern of genres, the self-help book, albeit in a key of melancholy resignation rather than peppy optimism. It is a guide to coping with the stresses and challenges of daily life that combines practical advice with spiritual insight, a compendium of folk wisdom colored by a weary pessimism that is both touching and disconcerting. A twenty-first-century reader, accustomed to living with feelings of belatedness and perhaps susceptible to nostalgic visions of Golden Ages past, might be startled to discover that same malaise settling over a work that is one of the earliest monuments of Western literature, a heroic poem roughly contemporary with the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad*. Before anything had really gotten started, everything already sucked.

Which is exactly Hesiod’s point. We labor under a divine curse. The serial myths of origin and

history he relates (in the *Works and Days* and also in its companion, *Theogony*) comprise an anthology of exile and punishment, hubris and calamity. We retell these stories in order to be humbled and chastened, but also as inspiration to try again, to recover the loss and repair the damage, or at least, following in the plodding footsteps of the *Works and Days*, to keep going. But every attempt to overcome our condition, whether through momentary consolations or Utopian projects, serves inevitably to remind us of it. To the extent that we are inclined to seek perfection, we are bound to fail, and out of a combination of morbid discontent and stubborn idealism we are compelled to calibrate, as precisely as possible, the nature and extent of the failure. Our creativity originates in anguish and longing, and our creations, when we contemplate them, seem alien and mysterious. We become morbidly aware of their flaws and infelicities, and almost reflexively note the ways they fall short of the ideal. We doubt their value and question their meaning, and find ourselves by turns enthralled and puzzled by their power.

This is an essentially tragic account of the origin of art, and also, implicitly, of criticism, since criticism finds its home in the shadow that falls between intention and act, between the inspiration and the inevitably disappointing work that emerges from it. Our drive to create originates in—and compensates for—a primal feeling of alienation, of lostness in the universe and confusion about our identity. Frequently aligned with that sense of our original inadequacy is, somewhat paradoxically, a perception of our subsequent decline. The more we do, the further we stray from our sad beginnings, the less heroic we appear to ourselves. It is always the Age of Iron, and the Golden Age is always behind us, giving off a luster that illuminates the terminal shabbiness of our present condition.

But, of course, there is a contrary view, according to which the creative impulse originates in a moment of miraculous discovery and develops progressively, toward a horizon of perfection. For Shelley—and, before him, for Aeschylus—Prometheus was a hero, not a knave, and the emphasis falls not on his theft from the gods but on his gift to mankind. Art may still appropriate the divine prerogative of making, but it flatters by imitation rather than blaspheming by hubris.

In an example of the happy synthesis of pagan and monotheistic traditions that enlivened the thought of the Renaissance, Giorgio Vasari begins his *Lives of the Artists*—an epochal compendium of gossip, art history, and celebrity worship—with a theological solution to the riddle of historical beginnings. Where did it all start? Did the Greeks invent art, or the Egyptians, or some other ancient people? There is evidence in the archeological record to support various theories, but these are ultimately of little more than passing interest to Vasari, who prefers to situate the genesis of art in the first verses of Genesis. The first artist was God, who, “in the act of creating man . . . fashioned the first forms of painting and sculpture in the sublime grace of created things. It is undeniable that from man, as from a perfect model, statues and pieces of sculpture and the challenges of pose and contour were first derived; and for the first paintings, whatever they may have been, the ideas of softness and of unity and the clashing harmony made by light and shadow were derived from the same source.”

Part of the charm of this passage is its elegant solution to a vexing chicken-and-egg problem. Is art primarily the imitation of nature, driven by the desire to replicate what the eye sees in the world? Or does it always consist of the imitation of some other, prior art? Vasari’s answer is “both,” since nature itself is, quite literally and specifically, a work of art, fashioned of the same substances that later artists will use to capture it. The first creator worked in clay, stone, light, and color, and his followers will not only render what he made, but also reproduce it, on an appropriately modest scale, in similar media. The great painters are like demigods, exerting an influence almost equal to the divine original: “In my opinion,” Vasari writes, “painters owe to Giotto, the Florentine painter, exactly the same debt they owe to nature, which constantly serves them as a model and whose finest

and most beautiful aspects they are always striving to imitate and reproduce.” Giotto himself, though he was discovered and tutored by the older painter Cimabue, learned directly from the source.— According to legend, Giotto was a peasant’s son whose first works (the ones that caught his mentor’s eye) were pictures of grazing sheep scratched with one stone on another.

It is hard to imagine a less alienated account of the origin of art, and Vasari’s book, a compendium of chronologically ordered biographical sketches of Italian artists (from Cimabue to Michelangelo) that sometimes read like mash notes from the world’s biggest painting fan, is one of the happiest, most unabashedly positive works of criticism ever written. It helped that Vasari, himself a well-connected painter and architect, had an abundance of good material to work with, and was able to survey, without straining, a Golden Age of incomparable richness. The roughly three hundred years of history he covers—from the 1200s to the mid-1500s—invite a progressive, evolutionary narrative of continual refinement and improvement. Art, for Vasari, is always tending toward perfection, and the art of the Italian peninsula, moving out of the Middle Ages, discovers new technical resources as it develops. Vasari notes the elements of this progress—advances in the accurate representation of human anatomy and skin tone, the deepening of perspective, the growing dynamism of composition—and concludes that they combine to make “modern art even more glorious than that of the ancient world.”

You can argue that our own modern art is far less glorious than his, but my point about Vasari here is that he presents a nontragic, antideclivist story of the origin and growth of art. Not that it’s a matter of choosing between the happy and sad versions of the story: there is always plenty of evidence to support both optimism and pessimism, which coexist in counterpoint at every moment of history and within the conflicted sensibilities of every generation.

In our own time, we prefer to look for clues about our origins in science, rather than myth or religion. How did a peculiarly human propensity for making—for distilling harmony from noise, pictures from marks, stories from words, emotions from make-believe—come about? What function did it serve for our ancestors as they tried to survive and reproduce? Is there a hidden utility in the pleasure and beauty—or even the confusion and terror—we discern in the arts? “Rich and seemingly boundless as the creative arts seem to be,” the biologist E. O. Wilson writes, “each is filtered through the narrow biological channels of human cognition.” Moreover, “the creative arts became possible as an evolutionary advance when humans developed the capacity for abstract thought.” This was, we might say, the Promethean moment—the moment, lost to all recollection and possibly to empirical recovery, when we became conscious of our enormous power and also of our limitations. We found ourselves able to make things and also, as a consequence, to judge them. Not unlike the original critic in Genesis, who cast his eye over what he had made and decided it was good.

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How did he know?

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## Chapter Two

# The Eye of the Beholder

If you know anything, surely you know what you like. How could you *not* know? Who else could know for you? Nothing is more personal than the feelings—of being moved or bored to tears, of being tickled or provoked, of swooning or fuming—that fall under the general headings of taste or, if we want to be philosophical about it, aesthetic experience.

There is, axiomatically, no disputing taste, and also no accounting for it. And yet the conventional wisdom applied to this fundamental human attribute—the neurosensory switch that flips to bliss when we encounter beauty, sublimity, or charm, to boredom or disgust when those qualities fail to materialize—amounts to a heap of contradictions. There is no argument, but then again there is *only* argument. *How could you not like that? Wait, you mean you actually liked that?* Taste, we assume, is innate, reflexive, immediate, involuntary, but we also speak of it as something to be acquired. It is a private, subjective matter, a badge of individual sovereignty, but at the same time a collectively held property, bundling us into clubs, cults, communities, and sociological stereotypes.

Aesthetic experience takes place in a crowd or in ecstatic isolation. It is, in either case, a series of discrete moments of contemplation and surrender. You stand in front of a painting, sit in a theater seat, look at a screen or a dancer or the page of a book and you are moved, tickled, transported, shocked. Or else you aren't. But over time, those moments aggregate into a pattern—unless, that is, they express a preexisting tendency. You may know what you like—of course you do—but do you know why? Do you know, somehow, in advance? Do you like what you like because of who you are? Or is it the sum of your likes and dislikes that *makes* you who you are?

All this talk of liking may resemble a Facebook wall rather than an attempt at intellectual inquiry, and it's true that social networks and marketing algorithms have displaced, or even rendered moot, some of the more traditional forms of aesthetic discourse. Each of us, inhabiting a private universe of taste, is also invited to link, to share, and to declare as a favorite. *Customers who bought War and Peace also purchased Straight Outta Compton (deluxe Anniversary Edition) also purchased The Office Season 3 on Blu-ray also purchased The Very Hungry Caterpillar. You might also like Euripides: Complete Greek Tragedies, The Naked Gun 2½, Their Eyes Were Watching God, and Born to Run. Your friends recommend Blood Feast, I Am . . . Sasha Fierce, Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions, Halo II.*

You are, in other words, the kind of person who likes—or could like, or might be persuaded to try—those things. But is that really a kind of person at all? Do those actual and inferred preferences form a coherent picture of a discerning sensibility, or do they just represent a concatenation of consumer choices? A digital, collagist portrait of an individual's appetites, or merely a record of credit card purchases? And what about all the stuff you hate, or don't care about, or never got around to trying?

The movies stranded in the Netflix Queue, the unread novels piled on the nightstand, the show you somehow kept missing—what do *those* things say about you?

To complicate matters further, your taste, however defined and dogmatic it might be, is never static. It is something that can be refined, corrected, outgrown, or lost. The album that never left your turntable the summer you were sixteen might sound tinny and overwrought to your forty-year-old ears when you impulsively repurchase it in a specially remastered deluxe digital edition. The book that split you open as a sensitive undergraduate might embarrass you in middle age. And the slow, talky film that bored you stiff back then might make you weep when you stumble across it in the course of a night of sadder, wiser, insomniac cable surfing. You can learn to like something that baffled you at first sight, and, equally, you can be convinced of the unredeemable flaws in something that thrilled you at the time of your initial encounter.

And much as you might, in deference to the social norms of the age, couch your opinions in modest, subjective language, really, who are you kidding? The careful, nonjudgmental terminology of personal preference is like soft carpeting on the hard floor of objectivity, the ground of certainty on which we secretly, shame-facedly desire to stand. What we mean to say, what we want to say—what we from time to time allow ourselves to say—is not *I like it* but *That's great!* Not *I wasn't really into it* but *That was terrible!*

We set off for the movies or the museum or the iTunes Store and find ourselves suddenly wandering in thickets of philosophical uncertainty, groping through an epistemological fog in search of stable principles. How do we know what we know? Why do we feel what we feel? What are we talking about? These questions, rather than any set of rules or criteria, form the foundations of criticism, an activity that is split at the root between the antithetical answers each question implies.

Its most basic and intractable confusion is about whether, when we begin the work of critical argument, we should be talking about feelings or about things. *Is it just me, or is that a beautiful painting?* It's just you—unless it's just me. That has to be the theoretical starting point. Or at any rate it has been since at least the late eighteenth century, when Immanuel Kant, having nothing better to do in the Prussian city of Königsberg, set about investigating the fundamental nature of taste.

The result of his inquiry—*The Critique of Judgment*, known among philosophers as Kant's Third Critique, after the earlier critiques of Pure and Practical Reason—is notorious for its dense argument and vaulting abstractions. Its difficulty may arise not only from the character of Kant's mind, an instrument delicately attuned, as few others have been, to conceptual nuances and logical distinctions, but also from the nature of what, in this instance, he is thinking about. Compared to the other areas of philosophical inquiry Kant staked out and reformulated in the course of his unparalleled career, the question of aesthetic judgment may be especially thorny. The literary critic Terry Eagleton calls it "the joker in the pack of [Kant's] theoretical system." And this is because it seems, even at the most basic stage of definition, to be riven with contradictions and inconsistencies. Though we rarely agree in practice, about how to distinguish between right and wrong or truth and error—the problems that guided Kant's contributions to ethics and scientific method—there is some consensus about what those concepts mean and thus at least the possibility that some common ground about their application might be discovered.

The tricky thing about Kant's philosophy—and also the source of its liberating power and its constraining rigor, both of which continue to be felt more than two centuries after his death—is that it conducts itself as much as possible independently of external, preexisting authorities. That is, the good and the true must establish themselves without leaning on religious dogma, political power, or any other tempting logical shortcut. Might does not make right; the categorical imperative does.



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