

Simon Stewart

Evaluative judgements: ethics, aesthetics and ‘bad taste’

(accepted for publication in *The Sociological Review*)

What is bad taste? Who is considered to have bad taste? Popular notions of taste maintain that some people have been born with a gift to understand beauty. Others, it is said, lack this gift and are thought to have bad taste, and moreover, this bad taste is sometimes linked to a lack of morals just as good taste is associated with virtue. Prominent sociological approaches to taste highlight its relational character. For example, in his famous study on taste in France, Pierre Bourdieu observed that ‘[i]n matters of taste, more than anywhere else, all determination is negation’ (1984: 56). With reference to debates about ‘bad taste’, this article theorizes new, post-Bourdieuian directions in research that consider the ethical and aesthetic dimensions of evaluative judgments omitted in Bourdieu’s research in order to complement (rather than replace) his focus on taste as relational. First, with reference to Max Weber’s (1968[1913]) notion of value-rational social action it considers the ethical dimension. Relatedly, it draws attention to debates concerning the limits of what can be artistically represented and what offends ethical sensibilities. As Weber (1946[1918]) observed, serving one ‘godhead’ or value sphere (such as artistic freedom) means offending another (such as ethics). This article provides examples of such clashes in value spheres. Second, in theorizing the aesthetic dimension of evaluation, attention is drawn to the interaction between individuals and cultural objects as people decide – individually and collectively – what they like and dislike. This attention to the interaction between individuals and objects, largely neglected in Bourdieu’s analysis, enables us to zoom in on the moment of evaluation to see that ‘bad taste’ is a changeable notion and that

objects can be recuperated and made ‘good’ by means of *evaluative reworking*.

Bourdieuian accounts of ‘bad taste’

Sociological perspectives maintain that there are no universal values that determine what is ‘good taste’ or ‘bad taste’. According to Pierre Bourdieu (2000[1997]), access to aesthetic pleasure is based on two key conditions: the historical emergence of an autonomous field of cultural production that adheres to its own internal laws (such as ‘art for art’s sake’), and the ability of some to access the resources and time necessary in order to learn how to perceive things aesthetically. According to this logic, the ‘bad taste’ of those who consider culture in terms of its functional rather than formal properties merely expresses a lack of education (at home and at school) as compared to the ‘good taste’ of the well trained. For those with good taste, the ‘bad’ is referred to by negation. When we classify something as ‘bad’, we classify ourselves and seek to hoist ourselves above the denigrated ‘other’ by means of our classification. In doing so, we align ourselves with certain social groupings just as we differentiate ourselves from others. Taste brings together ‘things and people that go together’: those with similar habitus, those who have experienced similar conditions of existence, just as it separates them from other people and other things (Bourdieu, 1984[1979]: 241). Tastes are thus asserted negatively, in opposition to other tastes. Definitions of the ‘legitimate’ are made in relation to the tastes of the dominated that serve as negative reference points for such judgements. Whereas the ‘pure taste’ associated with the ability to assume an aesthetic disposition ‘asserts the *absolute primacy of form over function*’, and allows the most everyday objects to be perceived aesthetically, ‘barbarous taste’ does the opposite: it subordinates form to function, thus reducing ‘things of art to the things of life’ and foregrounding their human content (Bourdieu, 1984: 30-32, 44). These two different ways of perceiving the world are rooted in differences of power.

‘Pure taste’ is a dominant aesthetic that is expressive of a habitus cultivated through many years of education, and thus an accumulation of cultural capital; a lengthy period of time freed from economic necessity; and an implicit or explicit awareness of the state of play in the cultural field (Bourdieu, 2000). In contrast, ‘barbarous taste’ is a dominated aesthetic expressing a habitus that has a memory of scarcity and has become accustomed to ‘making do’ because of a lack of time freed from economic necessity to pursue cultural interests or have regular opportunities for sustained aesthetic engagement (Bourdieu, 1984; Stewart, 2015).

Bourdieu’s model of taste as determined by negation has been applied in a number of contemporary studies. For example, Stephanie Lawler’s (2005) research finds that the public bourgeoisie in the UK, including, for example, academics, journalists and social commentators, produces a normative, desirable middle-class identity that is in great part defined by *what it is not*. As a consequence, in asserting its respectability, we hear very little about exactly what constitutes middle-class identity. In fact, we rarely hear the term ‘class’ used explicitly, despite the fact that we are living through an era of increasing economic inequality where class should be a key public issue (Lawler, 2005; Skeggs, 2004). Nevertheless, in the discourses of the dominant we hear more about ‘them’ than ‘us’, and *disgust* has become the dominant mode of the public middle-class’s appraisal of white working class culture. The *disgusting* thus becomes the ‘other’ in relation to which the middle-class derives its respectability. This ‘othering’ of working-class culture is not based on evidence but is instead created out of ‘a set of doxic constructions of “the working-class”’, which, when invoked in public media, serves to ‘produce working class people as abhorrent’ (Lawler, 2005: 431). As part of this process of ‘othering’, middle-class identity is presented as normal, desirable and, more importantly, ‘not disgusting’. Crucially, the disgust expressed is based on the notion that certain sections of the white working-

class have bad taste: they make the *wrong* aesthetic judgements. The notion of disgust is crucial here to an understanding of ‘bad taste’. In his illuminating excursus, *The Anatomy of Disgust*, William Ian Miller draws attention to the role played by disgust in hierarchizing, in marking out boundaries of self and culture. According to Miller (1997: 9), disgust ‘presents a nervous claim of the right to be free of the dangers imposed by the proximity of the inferior’. The ‘lower orders’ are perceived to be a threat, a pollutant to the social and political orders of the high, and Miller (1997: 18) observes that ‘[t]he socially low do not smell good to the high’. In fact, the higher a person’s status, the more space can be put between themselves and others and ‘the larger the space within which offences against the person can take place’ (Miller, 1997: 50). In contrast, the area of jurisdiction, for those at the bottom of the hierarchy, does not extend far beyond their skin, if indeed it extends beyond their skin at all.

The ‘bad taste’ of the lowly is perceived to be a matter of making the wrong aesthetic choices. Since the ‘cultural turn’ in class analysis, much attention has been drawn to the ways in which class is perceived in terms of ‘style’ and cultural capital (or lack thereof) as much as in relation to occupation or possession of economic capital (Bennett *et al.*, 2009; Bourdieu, 1984; Hayward and Yar, 2006; Savage *et al.*, 2013; Stewart, 2013b). As a consequence, dominated social groups are stigmatized less for their lack of ability to afford consumer goods and failure to participate in a consumer society than for what are perceived (by the dominant classes) to be poor consumption choices. Moreover, stigmatized sections of the white working-class are perceived to *over consume*. They are perceived to participate *excessively* in market-based consumption (Hayward and Yar, 2006; Tyler, 2013; Tyler and Bennett, 2010). There is, then, a new, reconfigured underclass that is denigrated on the basis of pathological consumption choices rather than an unwillingness to participate in the labour market (Hayward and Yar, 2006).

Branded, designer clothing, casual-wear, sportswear, tattoos and ‘chunky’ jewellery come to represent – in the eyes of the respectable middle classes – the height of ‘bad taste’. As Lawler (2005: 432) points out, there is nothing inherently vulgar about sportswear, tattoos or chunky jewellery, and, in fact, when these items adorn middle-class bodies they might even become ‘markers of individuality’. However, on working-class bodies, they become boundary markers ‘from which tasteful distance must be drawn’ (Skeggs, 2004: 169). Or, in more extreme examples, the aesthetic choices become so abhorrent that they can not be culturally recuperated: Beverley Skeggs (2004: 187) argues that whereas certain aspects of working-class culture, especially ‘the bits that are useful, such as the criminal associations, the sexuality, the immoral bits’ can be appropriated as cultural resources or exchange values for the middle classes, certain areas of working-class culture are *so bad* that they are beyond appropriation. It is worth noting that many of these taste judgements are gendered. For example, the working-class ‘hen do’ is perceived to be the height of bad taste, possessing no cultural value. It is an instance of femininity ‘done to excess’ that serves as the constitutive limit of taste; it is ‘the real from which tasteful distance must be drawn’ (Skeggs, 2004: 169). While, in Bourdieu’s (1984) research, those familiar with legitimate culture reserve scorn for ‘middle-brow’ tastes, all too often it is working-class women who are perceived to have the worst taste (Skeggs, 2004). In fact, working-class women often dis-identify from being classified as such ‘because they feel the *classification is a misrecognition of their value*, for when it is applied to them it is usually used to condemn or express contempt’ (Skeggs, 2015: 214).

On ‘bad taste’: the ethical dimension of evaluative judgments

In Bourdieusian accounts of taste, evaluative judgements are relational and ‘bad taste’ is understood in terms of distinction (or lack thereof). It is understood in terms of power. While

sympathetic to Bourdieusian cultural sociology, this article has a different thrust: in pursuing a post-Bourdieusian line of enquiry, it seeks to extend the reach of sociological analysis by considering the ethical and aesthetic dimensions of evaluative judgements. These dimensions, which involve normative judgements, are often overlooked in Bourdieu's work (Sayer, 1999). In order to give them full consideration, I distinguish them in 'conceptually pure form' because clearly demarcating them in reality is not always possible (Weber, 1968[1913]: 26). Let us start with the ethical dimension, with reference to Weber's (1968) notion of value-rational social action. Weber (1968) argued that value-rational social action, as an expression of substantive rationality, operates in contradistinction to the formally rational logic that dominates modern life with its quantitative, calculative, unambiguous mode of measuring things. It is 'determined by a conscious belief in the value for its own sake of some ethical, aesthetic, religious, or other form of behaviour, independently of its prospects of success' (Weber, 1968: 25). A value-rational stance can be motivated (for example) by a belief in a cause (eg environmentalism, socialism, nonhuman animal rights, feminism), a religious calling, an artistic outlook (eg a belief in art for art's sake or the pursuit of beauty), an ethical stance (eg anti-discriminatory, equal rights), or personal convictions (eg loyalty, duty or honour). Weber's concept is useful to apply in an era in which the value of culture, at an institutional level, is increasingly measured with reference to sales figures, profits and audience ratings (Bauman, 2011). As the classical sociologist Georg Simmel (1997[1896]: 249) observed, the levelling tendencies of the money economy have the same outcome as those associated with all levelling processes: they lead 'directly to the position of the lowest element'. Under such conditions, the economic dimension of evaluative judgement is dominant. In order to avoid this levelling down, and to avoid 'speeding past the specific value of things', it is important to provide alternative ways of researching value so that we do not

‘bracket out’ our values (Sayer, 1999: 426). How might this work? Mike Davis’s (2006: 53) scathing account of Dubai’s architecture and its ‘immense, psychotic assemblages of fantasy’, provides an example of a value-rational critique. In the formally rational terms of profit and economic growth, Dubai is a success story of the late modern world. Aesthetically, it stands out visually as big and bold, and it has been marketed so successfully that its fast-growing luxury image has been ‘branded into minds all over the world’ (Bodenschatz, 2009: 1). The United Arab Emirates (UAE) (where the city of Dubai is situated) is one of the six countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council that ploughed billions (or even trillions) of dollars into ambitious construction projects in the years leading up to the global financial downturn of 2008 (Kanna, 2011: 80). How did Dubai emerge as a visual spectacle? The vast amounts of money involved in the commissioning of new building projects and the virtually non-existent labour and environmental regulations have meant that architects employed by the UAE’s ruling families have been attracted by the possibility of a big pay day plus the benefits of a high degree of aesthetic autonomy: they have been able to design projects that would not be considered feasible in the global north (Kanna, 2011). The UAE has thus successfully drawn a number of so-called ‘starchitects’ to the region, including, for example, Tadao Ando, Norman Foster, Frank Gehry, Zaha Hadid, Rem Koolhaas, Jean Nouvel and Skidmore Owings Merrill (Kanna, 2011: 80). Gaining from the symbolic capital associated with these starchitects, the UAE’s ruling families have been able to present themselves as daring, aesthetically cutting-edge and innovative as they utilize the very best global creative talent. At the same time, they have been able to display their economic might and create a bombastic and imposing visual spectacle. As Ahmed Kanna (2011: 82) puts it, ‘[s]tarchitecture, which privileges the role of the architect as aesthete and genius of pure form and which elevates a few notable architects, investing them with almost super-human

powers of theoretical and aesthetic insight, is well suited to the demands of cities on the make'. It is also well suited to societies with little meaningful popular political participation or concern with labour or environmental issues (Kanna, 2011). However, when viewed through Davis's (2006) eyes, the *modus operandi* that underpins Dubai's architectural projects spoils any enjoyment that derives from their fantastical aesthetic proportions. Dubai is, according to Davis (2006: 51), 'a hallucinatory pastiche of the big, the bad and the ugly' and his evaluative appraisal is clearly informed by an ethical stance.

Davis expresses an ethical concern that the shadows of a particularly exploitative mode of production are cast over the contours and colours of an extraordinary – in terms of scope and scale – architectural and cultural landscape. Davis (2006: 68) argues that the Dubai aesthetic is characterized by a curious mixture of the grandiose ambitions of the Nazi architect Albert Speer and the cartoonish world of Walt Disney played out on the shores of Araby. Dubai is on the one hand, the very picture of modern capitalism. For the affluent global professional class, it is a tax haven and a site of the most conspicuous and extravagant forms of consumption. On the other hand, it is a feudal society, with every cubic metre of the land owned by the ruling al-Maktoum dynasty (2006: 61), and, below them, a native leisure class that makes up 15 per cent of the population. At the very bottom of the pile is a cheap, deportable and exploited labour force, predominantly recruited from South-East Asia, that has built (and is building) Dubai. This labour force has few labour rights, is controlled by totalitarian means and housed in appalling conditions. Construction workers perform twelve-hour shifts, six days per week, in dangerous conditions in the smouldering heat, and live up to 12 in a room often without air conditioning or adequate toilet facilities (Davis, 2006; Human Rights Watch, 2006). Davis's stance can be understood in value-rational terms: motivated by his ethical position, he foregrounds the human

costs of the way things are done to create Dubai's intoxicating visual spectacle which is made up of numerous mega-projects already completed or currently under construction, such as the artificial island world, the underwater luxury hotel, the shopping mall ski resort, the 7-star hotels and the tallest building in the world. Davis (2006: 49) argues that 'Dubai has already surpassed that other desert arcade of capitalist desire, Las Vegas, both in sheer scale of spectacle and the profligate consumption of water and power'. Davis's value-rational stance takes us onto a different register when understanding evaluative judgements. 'Bad taste', as we have understood it sociologically, is often considered a purely relational notion associated with class struggle. But now we can add to our understanding of evaluative judgement a value-rational dimension, highlighting ethical concerns. Davis's view, as an academic, could be interpreted as the typical stance of a dominated member of the dominant class castigating the class of paymasters, the (economically-politically) dominant-dominant; his position lends itself to an ascetic outlook that rejects extravagant and ostentatious expenditure as politically and culturally objectionable (Bourdieu, 1984; Broch (1969). However, even if there is some truth in this, it is clear that the ethical dimension of his evaluative judgement takes precedence. After all, would he complain so vehemently about the excessively flamboyant aspects of Dubai's architectural projects if they were created under equitable conditions?

We see in the above example that the ethical and aesthetic dimensions of evaluative judgements are not only difficult to disentangle, they are often at loggerheads. This is because, as Weber (1946) pointed out, value-rational judgements are many-headed: there is no external authority that can tell us that one value-sphere (such as science) is superior to another (such as art). Each value sphere stands in isolation and can only be understood in terms of its own internal logic. If we serve one 'godhead' or value sphere, Weber argued, we offend another, and 'so long

as life remains immanent and is interpreted in its own terms, it knows only of an unceasing struggle of these gods with one another ... their struggle can never be brought to a final conclusion' (Weber, 1946: 152). The following example exemplifies a conflict between two different 'godheads': an interview with the playwright Neil LaBute, demonstrates that in vehemently defending the value-rational principles of free speech and artistic freedom in his art, he offends the ethical and feminist sensibilities of others. Controversy has long been part of the artistic game. A brawl ensued at the opening performance of Victor Hugo's *Hernani* in Paris in 1830 due to the controversial use of romantic (rather than classical) dramatic conventions (Wilson, 2000: 25). Later in the late nineteenth century, the poet Arthur Rimbaud's attempts to disorder his senses became notorious in the Parisian literary scene; this disorder spilled into his life and culminated in him being shot by his lover Paul Verlaine. During the years of the Weimar Republic, the dancer Anita Berber 'performed on a knife-edge between insanity and experimental art' and caused a stir by creating an early piece of performance art in Berlin's best hotel: 'Calling loudly for three bottles of Veuve Clicquot, she removed her coat. A gasp went round the room, for she was stark naked' (Wilson, 2000: 200-201). With these examples and many more, from Marcel Duchamp's 'readymade' *Fountain* (a urinal) to Tracey Emin's *My Bed*, via punk's aesthetic 'which was about outrage, shock, violence, pornography, anarchy and self-destruction' (Wilson, 2000: 135), we can find examples of artists pushing the boundaries of free artistic expression and in doing so provoking outraged reaction. But is it still possible to shock? Zygmunt Bauman (2011: 15) argues that in our twenty-first century 'liquid modern world', the intensity of art has lessened; '[t]here is no coming to blows. No raising of barricades. No flashing of knives', because the durability of 'great art' has been replaced by art that is ephemeral and fleeting. The seriousness or weightiness of art has been replaced by 'embarrassment, lack of self-

confidence' given that art and culture are now in thrall to the interests of the consumer market. Just as in the world of reality television, artistic events are created that are calculated for maximal impact but which will soon fade from public memory (Bauman, 2011). But while Bauman makes some excellent points about the ways in which artistic endeavour is increasingly under the management of consumer markets (Bauman, 2005), art with an overtly professed political imperative is still produced and one of the ways that remains open to artists in order to get people's attention is to utilize shock value. The extent to which the use of 'shock' is utilized for commercial or political ends needs to be considered in each instance. In a 2015 interview, LaBute discusses his motivations behind *Exhibit A*, a short play that triggered controversy because it features a violent rape scene in which an aggressor has anal sex with a woman for the sake of art. *Exhibit A* was staged as part of the *Walking the Tightrope* production, which featured 11 five-minute political dramas, each exploring the issue of freedom of expression. LaBute (cited in Cripps, 2015) describes his play: 'In *Exhibit A*, a man physically assaults a woman in front of an invited audience. The man is an artist and the woman is his subject. Is it rape or is it art?' LaBute is no stranger to provocative work: earlier in 2015, in the wake of the shootings in Paris, when a number of journalists working for the Charlie Hebdo publication were killed in retaliation for their depictions of the Prophet Mohammed, LaBute withdrew, at the last minute, from staging a monologue with the provocative title: *Mohammed Gets a Boner*. However, in defence of artistic freedom, and in response to censorship and boycotts in the arts, he maintains his position that 'there is nothing that can't be said or seen on the stage' and nothing is 'sacred and out of bounds for the theatre' (LaBute, cited in Cripps, 2015).

Borrowing Weber's (1946) terms, we can see from these statements that LaBute serves the godhead of artistic freedom but in doing so, he offends the value sphere (or 'godhead') of

ethical sensibility. Moreover, his interview statements raise several questions that highlight the clashing of value spheres in artistic endeavours of this kind: Is it really the case that nothing is out of bounds? Is it not ‘bad taste’ in the extreme to graphically depict a rape on stage? Does the graphic depiction of a rape on stage make us complicit voyeurs of sexual violence? Are there any subject matters that even LaBute would find too distasteful to depict on stage? Are there some subjects that should not be shown in art? Certainly, for many of those serving a different ‘godhead’, giving primacy to ethical concerns or motivated by a feminist agenda in relation to the depiction of sexual violence against women, LaBute’s argument (and work) is highly distasteful. In contrast, for those who place the highest value on freedom of artistic expression, LaBute’s comments and his plays are likely to be judged favourably. This example tells us something about the notion of offence and its relation to power. Power enables distance and the capacity to put space between oneself and others. Distance from economic necessity is the prerequisite of an aesthetic disposition; distance in geographical space – when one’s home or neighbourhood is, in effect, a fortress – enables physical separation from others. It is harder to feel offence from a position of distance. It is easier to be blasé about a joke or a representation when any palpable threat to your person or kind is *very far away*. LaBute’s position in social space, as an affluent white man, makes him less likely to perceive the offence that his plays – such as *Mohammed Gets a Boner* and *Exhibit A* – might cause others because he is *distanced* from the subject positions that are occupied by those more likely to feel offended on the basis of their experiences.

On ‘bad taste’: the aesthetic dimension of evaluative judgments

The above examples highlight the importance of drawing attention to the ethical dimension of evaluative judgements. But if we are to research the ways in which individuals appraise cultural

objects, we need to better understand the aesthetic dimension by theorizing – with view to empirical research – the interaction between individuals and cultural objects. The proposed micro-level approach can be applied to the aesthetic and ethical (or even economic) dimensions of evaluative judgements though in this section, the emphasis is on the aesthetic. The approach proposed, while rooted in Bourdieusian analysis, seeks to increase its reach by considering the interaction between individuals and objects. It is notable that in various strains of sociological research, ranging from the ‘new sociology of culture’ to post-critical (and post-Bourdieusian) accounts of aesthetics, there has been a renewed attention to the cultural object itself (Harrington, 2004; Hennion, 2001, 2007; Wolff, 2006, 2008). This research is very instructive. For example, Janet Wolff’s post-critical account of beauty refers to extra-sociological criteria including, for example, the composition, colour and form of a painting, aware that these aesthetic discourses have their own histories (Wolff, 2008: 27). Bielby and Bielby (2004) draw attention to the ways in which value-judgements are made by fans in relation to soap operas depending on aesthetic properties such as the plausibility (or otherwise) of a plot line or character development. Austin Harrington (2004) argues that we need to be attentive to the qualities and merits (or otherwise) of objects belonging to a particular category of cultural production as compared to another that hails from the same category. Andrew Sayer (1999: 410) argues that struggles for distinction depend on the use value and intrinsic worth of cultural objects as much as on symbolic power. For example, ‘[i]f BMWs were unreliable and awful to drive they would not bring their owners any distinction’. Antoine Hennion (2001, 2007) argues that cultural objects respond to *amateurs*ⁱ who sensitize themselves to the properties of these objects. According to Hennion, aesthetic engagement is an active process through which we express our attachments to cultural objects, and is far less predictable than can be accounted for in critical sociological accounts that focus on

class background and social origin. Hennion attempts to formulate ‘a theory of passion’, as he observes how objects ‘give themselves up, they shy away, they impose themselves’ (2007: 97). Though critical insights in relation to the social determinants of taste are omitted from his account and there is a danger that we are left with mere descriptions of singular moments of aesthetic engagement (Prior, 2011; Schwarz, 2013), Hennion’s model has the virtue of bringing to the fore the cultural object and our co-productive engagement with it.

If we are to extend beyond singular accounts of aesthetic engagement with objects, we also need to examine how evaluative judgements are contested and how they play out in the context of inter-subjective dialogue. As Wolff (2008: 25) argues, the construction of hierarchies of works of art and the criteria identified with which to justify aesthetic value judgements ‘are, ideally, the product of reflexive deliberation in the context of communities of interpretation’. In practice, of course, such dialogue – whether in the realm of critical debate or in everyday conversation – is likely to be conflictual, especially as matters of taste can be so brutal. How we might research this dialogue is a thorny methodological question, but with more attention focusing on the situated aspect of aesthetic engagement, we will be in a better position to examine how inter-subjective judgments are formulated. We will be in a position to ask the following questions: how, at a micro-level, are evaluative judgments promulgated and contested? To what extent might consensus emerge out of the dialogue (Wolff, 2008)? How do individual and collectively formed judgements intersect with field-specific aesthetic hierarchies that ‘generate’ judgements over time (Bourdieu, 1993)? If we examine the aesthetic dimension of taste formation at a micro-level, we can explore the power dynamics between individuals as expressed by one class fraction over another, one generation over another, one friend or colleague over another, or one social group over another, as individuals fall under the sway of

others in deciding what is 'good' and 'bad'. Their authority will depend, to a great extent, on the volume and distribution of the capital they possess or their position in the hierarchy of a social group or field (Bourdieu, 1986). Moreover, in order to situate the aesthetic dimension of evaluative judgement in the everyday, a micro-approach is necessary in order to draw attention to a number of dynamic contextual factors (Stewart, 2012, 2013a). A key dynamic, as we have established, is the presence of other people but we can consider a number of other dynamics, each of which intensifies (or lessens) our degree of contact with the cultural object. However, in order to understand the aesthetic dimension of evaluative judgment, we also need to consider the level of engagement with the cultural object. For example, to what extent are we trained to be sensitive to the aesthetic properties of an object? An aesthetic disposition enables a greater appreciation of the formal properties of cultural objects but as has been pointed out by the likes of Hennion (2001, 2007), the ability to become transported by the aesthetic properties of objects is often quite simply the product of meticulous planning as individuals sensitize themselves towards objects. This involves not only the degree of preparation in advance but also the degree of engagement in the particular moment. There is, then, a temporal dimension to aesthetic engagement that needs to be considered (Stewart, 2015). To some extent, we can all find time for sustained aesthetic engagement, which refers to situations when our attention is all consuming and we become completely focused on our interaction with cultural objects. However, sustained engagement of this kind is more readily available for those higher up in the social class scale: those who are more likely to be in a position of control over the social timetables that structure their lives. Distracted aesthetic engagement is more common, especially for those of us who have less control over their free time, those (for example) juggling work and domestic tasks (Chatzitheochari and Arber 2012; Stewart, 2015). This kind of engagement involves a series of

micro-evaluations as we engage with cultural objects in a distracted manner: when, for instance, we flick through the pages of a magazine or from one television channel to another.

Nevertheless, whether we emerge from the deep contemplation associated with sustained aesthetic engagement, or from more fragmented, distracted modes of engagement, we are often compelled to share our evaluative judgements with others. Again, the task of research can be to explore this dialogue: where it takes place and under what conditions. Here, we can explore the carefully formulated (over a long period of time) opinion alongside the quick-fire (in the moment) judgements that we make.

As part of researching evaluative judgements situated in the everyday, we also need to consider the location in which they take place. Aesthetic engagement does not occur under laboratory conditions and we are not always presented with the austere conditions of near-silence that art galleries offer in order to engage, in a sustained manner, with cultural objects. Instead, our evaluations are formulated in a range of contexts, during work time and leisure time, in the domestic sphere, with others and alone. Moreover, while we might set aside time for specifically ‘cultural’ engagements, many of our aesthetic engagements are to a great extent involuntary. As a consequence, more research is needed on our reactions to aesthetic properties that are imposed on us. For example, when we are in public or commercial spaces, we might adopt what Simmel (1971[1903]) termed a blasé attitude, but we cannot totally guard against the onslaught of visual or aural stimuli. As we roam the urban environment in the course of our daily activities, cultural objects (eg garish advertisements, loud music) are forced upon us that we would never choose to engage with. Here, our appraisal of something being ‘awful’ or ‘annoying’, or, more generally, in ‘bad taste’ might be in great part triggered by its unwelcome intrusion on our personal space. Our irritation might be exacerbated and we might not be thinking with cool objectivity, but we

nevertheless, in the moment, whether in the shopping mall, the elevator or in the bustling street, might be compelled to make a series of evaluative micro-judgements.

Evaluative reworking

Let us now return to ‘bad taste’ and consider another aspect of the aesthetic dimension of evaluative judgements. How does something ‘bad’ become ‘good’? How does ‘bad taste’ become ‘good taste’? Here, we need to consider *evaluative reworking*. One of the curious aspects of things commonly held to be in ‘bad taste’ is that they are sometimes recuperated and made prestigious. How does this occur? *Evaluative reworking* operates in two ways: first it involves attempts (over time) to work or rework the existing interpretations and evaluations of objects; second, it involves interpretive work in relation to the object itself. However, in order for the judgement that emerges from the evaluative reworking to ‘stick’ or to become widely accepted, the individuals evaluating or interpreting the object need to be endowed with the requisite cultural competence and/or authority. This is because the ‘readings’ of cultural objects that have been established are resistant to change, and the properties of objects also resist, to some extent, the ways in which they are read, consumed or evaluated. Dominant or hegemonic value-judgements in relation to cultural objects, such as, for example, the notion that garden gnomes are in ‘bad taste’, take considerable aesthetic work, backed up with cultural and symbolic capital, to be reversed or disrupted. Furthermore, cultural objects have their own distinctive features and even though there are unlimited possibilities in the ways in which they can be read, some readings or evaluations are easier to make than others. For example, we can make conjectures in relation to the meaning of Nicolas Cage’s composition *4’33*, which is made up of silence, but there are limits to these interpretations. We might struggle to assert, for example, that this composition is *busier* than Rimsky-Korsakov’s *Flight of the Bumble Bee*, just as we might find it

difficult to argue that Patti Page's recording of the song *How Much is That Doggie in the Window* expresses as much pathos as Billie Holiday's *Strange Fruit*.

Let us explore evaluative reworking with reference to the example of 'kitsch', which is often considered to be the height of 'bad taste'. The origins of kitschⁱⁱ, it is argued, are threefold: First, it stems from mass culture (in both capitalist and totalitarian forms), enabled by 'the advent of the machine' and the increasing facility to reproduce and distribute cultural objects (Broch, 1969; Dorfles, 1969; Greenberg, 1939). 'Kitsch' objects are taken out of context so that we find, for example, Modigliani paintings reproduced in household ceramics and Beethoven's sonatas deployed in television adverts. Second, kitsch derives from Romanticism. According to Broch (1969: 61-62), kitsch operates as a closed system and inspired by Romanticism, makes beauty an end in itself. While art and science operate as open systems, and their protagonists drive endlessly onwards in search of new discoveries and for a glimpse of new expressions of reality, kitsch goes nowhere (Broch, 1969). Third, kitsch is rooted in a technique that is based on imitation and formulae. Hence it is the case that kitsch culture is standardised and (for example) the radio is 'a volcano vomiting a continuous spout of imitation music' (Broch, 1969: 65). However, Holliday and Potts (2012: 32) make the argument that there is no essence to kitsch (or bad taste): kitsch exists only when it is 'activated kitsch, kitsch pressed into particular service' (Holliday and Potts, 2012: 155). But even if we grant them the observation that there is no essence to kitsch, pressing questions for cultural sociologists in relation to kitsch include the following: is it more difficult for some objects to become kitsch than others? Are some cultural objects, as a consequence of their specific properties, more likely to offer themselves as 'kitsch' than others? When conveyors of 'cool' apply their evaluative reworking to 'kitsch' objects, what specific techniques are deployed? What institutional interventions or social interactions enable

the reappraisal of the object? What specific aesthetic properties are most suited to cultural reframing? How do ‘camp kitsch’, ‘cool kitsch’, ‘the good bad’, ‘the recuperated bad’ or an object deemed ‘so bad that it is good’, gain prestige in contrast to the irredeemably ‘bad bad’ cultural objects that stick to abject bodies, homes and communities (Holliday and Potts, 2012; Tyler, 2013)? Holliday and Potts (2011) identify two types of kitsch which involve an elevation of its lowly status: Camp kitsch is the ‘good taste of bad taste’ invoked by the tender feeling of camp (Sontag, 1964: 530); and ‘cool kitsch’ emerges as ‘a carefully choreographed, set of thermostatic operations’ that enables hitherto ‘out of bounds’ cultural objects or practices to be rehabilitated (Holliday and Potts, 2012: 155). For example, the garden gnome - widely considered to represent the apotheosis of bad taste and vulgarity – has been recuperated as ‘cool kitsch’: The gnome stools included in Phillippe Starck’s redesign of London’s St Martin’s Lane Hotel, have become ‘the sign of a gnome, a gnome-concept or idea and ... hence, at a remove from the gnome as decorative object or garden’ (Holliday and Potts, 2012: 179). These examples demonstrate the fluidity with which aesthetic codes switch sides and change meaning. They are examples of evaluative reworking. When evaluative reworking gains authority and credence, what was ‘kitsch’ becomes newly valued and what was ‘cool’ is now consigned to the cultural dustbin; what was the height of trendiness now becomes outmoded. At the same time, cultural omnivores, ‘cool’ and ‘camp’ aficionados of kitsch and inventive amateurs appropriate or reappropriate objects that were hitherto ‘out of bounds’, uncool or ‘bad’ and make it their own. This trend is arguably on the rise in an era during which high status groups are increasingly omnivorous and comfortable in engaging with popular cultural forms (Peterson and Kern, 1996).

In order to better understand evaluative reworking, we need to augment Bourdieusian analysis by examining, in greater detail, individual-object interaction. We need to consider the

varying degree of evaluative reworking that is required before the meaning or value of an object can be reversed. Do some cultural objects require more evaluative reworking to transform them than others? It would seem that they do. As Miller (1997: 107) wryly points out in relation to matters of disgust, '[n]o matter where and when, it is harder to make the squishy and slimy non-disgusting than the non-squishy and non-slimy'. We might say a similar thing, more broadly, about cultural objects in general. Sociological insight enables us to see the variability of ways in which a cultural object is used and interpreted, depending on contextual factors, from time to time and from place to place, but in order to get a fuller picture, we need to pay specific attention to the evaluative reworking that occurs in the interaction between individuals and the properties of the objects. The properties of cultural objects need to be understood in relation to the specific moment in the history of the field of cultural production when they were produced (Bourdieu, 1993). This brings us back to matters of habitus, class and power: our ability, or otherwise, to read cultural objects in a certain way will demonstrate the extent to which we are able to perceive the world aesthetically, by means of the regulated improvisations of our habitus (Bourdieu, 1990[1980]), and although we are all free to evaluate, it takes an aesthetic disposition and high levels of cultural capital to perform *prestigious* evaluative reworking. Evaluative reworking is imbued with authority when imbued with institutional cultural capital in the form of qualifications, titles or awards (Bourdieu, 1986); or with the authority that can be bought with money and the logic of profit - eg the legitimacy conferred by advertising, branding and public relations or by the notion that a best-seller sold well 'simply because it was selling well' (Boorstin, cited in Bauman, 2005: 60); or by means of the harnessing of public opinion whether through civil society, public or social media, through mediascapes that provide 'large and complex repertoires of images, narratives and "ethnoscapes" to views throughout the world'

(Appadurai, 1990: 299). Without such authority, evaluative judgements do not stick.

Conclusion

Bourdieuian research demonstrates that judgements about ‘bad taste’ are in great part determined by negation. In seeking to extend the reach of sociological research beyond this relational account, this article theorizes the ethical and aesthetic dimensions of evaluative judgements. First, with reference to Davis’s ethical critique of Dubai’s grand architectural projects, the article theorizes the value-rational aspect of evaluative judgements in order to highlight their ethical dimension. Furthermore, it argues that offence is inextricably linked to social distance: this distance enhances the ability to keep offence at arm’s length and makes it harder to see why others, in a different subject position, might be offended. Second, in considering the aesthetic dimension, the article theorizes an account of evaluative judgement situated in the everyday, one that zooms in on individual-object interaction. This attention to the interaction between individuals and objects enables us to see that ‘bad taste’ is a changeable notion and the ‘bad’ can become ‘good’ through evaluative reworking that challenges existing interpretations and evaluations. Exploring the ethical and aesthetic dimensions of evaluative judgement helps us guard against two troubling ‘default’ positions: letting the market determine the value of cultural objects and/or resigning ourselves to a state of cultural or moral relativism by ‘bracketing out’ our values (Sayer, 1999: 426). By performing the difficult task of identifying and distinguishing the ethical and aesthetic dimensions of evaluative judgement, we can gain a multi-layered understanding of what and how people value.

References

Appadurai A (1990) Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy. *Theory, Culture & Society* 7(2): 295-310.

Bauman Z (2005) *Liquid Life*. Cambridge: Polity.

Bauman, Z (2011) *Culture in a Liquid Modern World*. Cambridge: Polity.

Bennett T, Savage M, Silva E, Warde A, Gayo-Cal M, and Wright D (2009) *Culture, Class, Distinction*. London: Routledge.

Bielby D D, and Bielby WT (2004) Audience aesthetics and popular culture. In: Friedland R, Mohr J (eds) *Matters of Culture: Cultural Sociology in Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 295-317.

Bodenschatz H (2009) *Dubai: Wonder of the World in Crisis*. Available from: http://www.pro-urbe.net/sites/default/files/images/int/bw_2009_23_0016-0025-e.pdf

Bourdieu P (1984[1979]) *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. London: Routledge.

Bourdieu P (1986[1983]) The Forms of Capital. In: Richardson JG (ed) *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*. New York: Greenwood Press, 241-258.

Bourdieu P (1990[1980]) *The Logic of Practice*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Bourdieu P (1993[1983]) *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Bourdieu P (2000[1997]) *Pascalian Meditations*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Broch H (1969[1933,1950]) Notes on the problem of kitsch. In: Dorfles G (ed) *Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste*. London: Studio Vista, 49-76.

Chatzitheochari S and Arber S (2012) Class, Gender and time poverty: a time-use analysis of British workers' free time resources. *The British Journal of Sociology* 63(3): 451-471.

Cripps C (2015) Je suis ... un playwright: In the wake of Charlie Hebdo attack plays by Neil LaBute, Caryl Churchill and Mark Ravenhill explore censorship and freedom of speech. *The Independent*, 15 January. Available at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/features/je-suis-un-playwright-new-plays-by-neil-labute-caryl-churchill-and-mark-ravenhill-explore-censorship-and-freedom-of-speech-9978705.html>

Davis M (2006) Fear and Money in Dubai. *New Left Review* 41: 47-68.

Dorfles G (Ed.) (1969) *Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste*. London: Studio Vista.

Harrington A (2004) *Art and Social Theory*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Hayward K, and Yar M (2006) The 'chav' phenomenon: consumption, media and the construction of a new underclass. *Crime, Media, Culture* 2(1): 9-28.

Hennion A (2001) Music Lovers: Taste as Performance. *Theory, Culture and Society* 18(5): 1-22.

Hennion A (2007) Those Things That Hold Us Together: Taste and Sociology. *Cultural Sociology* 1(1): 97-114.

Holliday R, and Potts T (2012). *Kitsch! Cultural Politics and Taste*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Human Rights Watch (2006) *Building Towers, Cheating Workers: Exploitation of Migrant Construction Workers in the United Arab Emirates*. Available at:

<https://www.hrw.org/report/2006/11/11/building-towers-cheating-workers/exploitation-migrant-construction-workers-united>

Greenberg C (1969[1939]) The avant-garde and kitsch. In: Dorfles G (ed) *Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste*. London: Studio Vista, 116-126.

Kanna A (2011) *Dubai, the City as Corporation*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Lawler S (2005) Disgusted Subjects: The Making of Middle-Class Subjectivities. *The Sociological Review* 53(3): 429-446.

Miller WI (1997) *The Anatomy of Disgust*. London: Harvard University Press.

Peterson RA and Kern RM (1996) Changing Highbrow Taste: From Snob to Omnivore. *American Sociological Review* 61: 900-907.

Prior N (2011) Critique and Renewal in the Sociology of Music: Bourdieu and Beyond. *Cultural Sociology* 5(1): 121-138.

Savage M, Devine F, Cunningham N, Taylor M, Li Y, Hjellbrekke J, Le Roux B, Friedman S, and Miles A (2013) A New Model of Social Class: Findings from the BBC's Great British Class Survey Experiment. *Sociology*, 47(2): 219-250.

Sayer A (1999) Bourdieu, Smith and disinterested judgement. *The Sociological Review* 47(3): 403-431.

Schwarz O (2013) Bending Forward, One Step Backward: On the Sociology of Tasting Techniques. *Cultural Sociology* 7(4): 415-430.

Simmel G (1971[1903]) The Metropolis and Mental Life. In: Levine DN (ed) *Georg Simmel: On Individuality and Social Forms*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 324-339.

Simmel G (1997[1896]) Money in Modern Culture. In: Frisby D and Featherstone M (eds) *Simmel on Culture*. London: Sage, 243-255.

Skeggs B (2004) *Class, Self, Culture*. London: Routledge.

Skeggs B (2015) Introduction: stratification or exploitation, domination, dispossession and devaluation? *The Sociological Review* 63(2): 205-222.

Sontag S (1964). Notes on 'Camp'. *Partisan Review* 31(4): 515-530.

Stewart S (2012) Reflections on sociology and aesthetic value. *Distinktion: Scandinavian Journal of Social Theory* 13(2): 153-167.

Stewart S (2013a) Evaluating culture: sociology, aesthetics and policy. *Sociological Research Online* 18(1): 14.

Stewart S (2013b) *A Sociology of Culture, Taste and Value*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Stewart S (2015) Aesthetics and time: sustained and distracted modes of engagement. *Cultural Sociology* 9(2): 147-161.

Tyler I, and Bennett B (2010) Celebrity chav: fame, femininity and social class. *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 13(3): 375-393.

Tyler I (2013) *Revolting Subjects: Social Abjection and Resistance in Neoliberal Britain*. London: Zed Books.

Weber M (1946[1918]) Science as a Vocation. In: Gerth HH and Mills CW (eds) *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. London: Routledge, 129-156.

Weber M (1968[1913]) *Economy and Society*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Wilson E (2000) *Bohemians: The Glamorous Outcasts*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press.

Wolff J (2006) Groundless Beauty: Feminism and the Aesthetics of Uncertainty. *Feminist Theory* 7(2): 143-158.

Wolff J (2008) *The Aesthetics of Uncertainty*. New York: Columbia University Press.

ⁱ Hennion's (2007: 112) notion of the amateur is chosen 'because it is more appropriate and general than "enthusiast" or "fan", but is less about "expertise" than the word "connoisseur". It is used here in a wider sense than the negative English one, of amateur as "non-professional", and it designates any lay-person engaged in a systematic activity, which makes them develop, in various degrees, their sensitivities or abilities in that domain'.

ⁱⁱ The etymology of kitsch includes *verkitschen* (to make cheaply) and *kitschen* (to collect junk from the street) (Holliday and Potts, 2012: 46-47).