

Taste and Democracy  
Malcolm Quinn

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## Introduction

*by Philip Schofield, Professor of the History of Legal and Political Thought, Head of Department, The Bentham Project, UCL Faculty of Laws*

It is an immense pleasure and great honour for me to introduce Professor Malcolm Quinn. I have known Professor Quinn for nearly 10 years, ever since he had the temerity to attend one of the Bentham Seminars that we organize annually at UCL. He explained that he was working on utilitarianism and art, which to some people may sound like a contradiction in terms, and he subsequently invited me to speak on ‘Bentham and taste’ at a symposium which he organized on ‘The Idea of the Art School in Early Nineteenth-Century Britain’ at Tate Britain in 2010. Professor Quinn had come to realize that there was an important conversation to be had concerning Benthamite utilitarianism and aesthetics that was not only of historical interest but of contemporary significance. I then invited Professor Quinn to give a Bentham Seminar, having become aware that he was opening up what was, for scholars of Bentham and of the history of utilitarianism more generally, a whole new area of study.

Professor Quinn soon afterwards published his monograph *Utilitarianism and the Art School in Nineteenth-century Britain* (2013), which combines his cross-disciplinary expertise in fine art, intellectual history, and art education. It consists of a highly original study of the influence of utilitarian thought, and of Bentham in particular, on the introduction of publicly funded art education in nineteenth-century Britain. The key events in his account are first, the establishment of the House of Commons Select Committee on Arts and Manufactures of 1835–6, which was dominated by followers of Bentham, in particular John Bowring and William Ewart, and which led to the establishment of the government-funded School of Design; and second, the reforms introduced by Henry Cole after the

School came under his control in 1852. Professor Quinn points out that Bentham regarded the notion of ‘good taste’ as a device used by the aristocracy or ruling elite in order to support their power and privileges. Aristocratic good taste found its institutional embodiment in the Royal Academy of Arts. The School of Design, therefore, given its Benthamite origins, might have been expected to provide a clear, utilitarian alternative to the Royal Academy. Professor Quinn argues, however, that, influenced by the *laissez-faire* principles associated with Adam Smith and, therefore, excluding any role for the legislator, Bowring and Ewart accepted the standards provided by custom and convention in matters of taste. It was only when Cole came to control the School, that a more radical agenda was adopted. Questions of taste were subordinated to questions of utility, legislative involvement encouraged, and some distance placed between the publicly funded institution and the Royal Academy. Professor Quinn goes on to argue that Bentham’s radical utilitarian agenda for the art school remains relevant today as a model for the publicly funded art school. In short, the book is not only a highly original contribution to Bentham studies, nineteenth-century intellectual history, and the history of art education, but also announces a rationale for a programme of reform.

Professor Quinn has since worked on a comparison of the standards of taste found in David Hume and Bentham, and further developed his ideas about the nature of taste in a democratic society. As well as the explicit comparison of Hume and Bentham, Professor Quinn has shed considerable light on their respective underlying philosophies, and the vexed question as to whether Hume was or was not a utilitarian, and whether, or rather to what extent, Bentham was a follower of Hume. By relating his considerable knowledge and understanding of aesthetics to themes in the history of moral and political theory,

Professor Quinn is making a contribution to the subject that is being recognized internationally—at least by Bentham scholars—to be of outstanding importance and originality.

As an example of the way in which Professor Quinn is playing a critical role in developing and expanding the range of Bentham studies, I would like to refer to the current seminar series on ‘Bentham and the Arts’ that, together with Professor Anthony Julius (UCL Laws), Professor Quinn and I have organized and which will hopefully lead to a co-edited publication. Speakers have been asked to consider Bentham’s challenge to aesthetics with a particular focus on Bentham’s writings on sexual morality, in which he demolishes the traditional Christian conflation of marriage, sex, and procreation. I am grateful to Professor Quinn for his support, advice, encouragement, and especially his ideas, which are making this series so successful. I mention this to show that Professor Quinn is not only a top-rate scholar, but that he is an excellent colleague, who is passionate about his subject and who communicates that passion to others. The present lecture, which develops some of the themes that characterize his recent work and relates them to a contemporary setting, will constitute the evidence that will prove the claims that I have made about the quality of Professor Quinn’s research and scholarship.

**Philip Schofield**

Bentham Project, University College London



Figure 1

The first public Art School, 1837 Government School of Design, Somerset House, Illustrated London News 27th May 1843



## Professor of Political and Cultural History University of the Arts London

I was delighted and honoured when University of the Arts London gave me the title of Professor of Cultural and Political History, not least because this offers the opportunity to do research at the intersection of culture and politics within the historical framework of state-funded art education on which this University was founded and within which I was educated. My current research is about how Jeremy Bentham's thought can change our view of the familiar story of British aesthetics since the eighteenth century.<sup>i</sup> This research sustains a focus on aesthetics, ethics and politics that I've maintained since the publication of my first book in 1994.<sup>ii</sup> In the book *Utilitarianism and the Art School in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Routledge 2013), I showed how followers of Jeremy Bentham in the UK Parliament in the early nineteenth century, who included Bentham's editor John Bowring, sought to change attitudes to arts institutions when they challenged the public value of the Royal Academy of Arts and secured a grant for the first state-funded art school in England, The Government School of Design, which was established in 1837 at the very beginning of the Victorian era (Figure 1) Securing a government grant for art education, which was only the second British government grant given for education of any kind, was a political act that was part of a general argument about the transparency and accountability of public institutions. We have seen an echo of this debate in 2018, with complaints that works of art borrowed from the Royal Collection, which are currently on show in an exhibition of the art collection of Charles I at the Royal Academy of Arts,<sup>iii</sup> should be "free to be seen by the people, its true owners."<sup>iv</sup> It is also worth noting that although the utilitarians secured the grant for state-funded art education in 1836, the management of the School of Design was not in the hands of anyone who shared their approach until 1852, when Henry Cole set out on a mission to bring about 'the art education of the whole people'. In this lecture, in line with the focus of my current research, I'm going

to place the particular historical narrative of state-funded art education in Britain within a larger narrative of the bourgeois revolution in taste leading from Joseph Addison to David Hume, as well as indicating how Jeremy Bentham staged his own counter-revolution against Hume and Addison in the name of democracy. In placing taste outside democracy, I will argue, Bentham provided us with an insight into the strange ‘apolitical’ politics of taste, which seeks to bring about a situation in which the route to a certainty of judgement and common understanding is only available through the apolitical agency of impartiality. This position of impartiality, however, is used to enforce a social distinction that separates the ‘good’ and impartial pleasures of taste from the ‘bad’ and indiscriminate pleasures of the world at large. Jeremy Bentham was a thinker of the bourgeois era who saw that if the bourgeoisie sought to solve their ethical problems by aesthetic means, specifically through the employment of distinctions between good and bad taste, new ethical problems would be created as a result. For Bentham, questions of taste and the social role of art should be considered within the framework of the social organization of pleasure. Since the origins of the state funded art school form part of the story of the bourgeois revolution in taste, Bentham’s counter-revolution against Addison and Hume is also part of that history, and may offer some lessons to those of us working in art and design education in 2018 who are seeking new ways of talking about taste or good ways to stop talking about it. The first part of this lecture draws attention to the manner in which impartial distinctions of taste construct a defile or narrow path for judgment that can survive the collapse in the cultural value of these distinctions. A recent example of this was the award of the Nobel Prize in Literature to Bob Dylan in 2017, which challenged cultural distinctions of the kind that would separate Bob Dylan from John Keats, but thereby affirmed the status of the impartial spectator within judgments of cultural value, over and

above the sectarian interests of literary cliques. The second part of this lecture suggests that the way out of taste lies through the rejection of the impartiality through which distinctions of taste are enforced.

In locating the particular historical narrative of state-funded art education in Britain within a larger narrative of the bourgeois revolution in taste, the first thing to say is that state-funded art education is linked to social distinctions of taste by the manner in which distinctions of taste emerge in the context of the transition to modern, market-led societies. In an article published in *Studio International* in 1970, Norbert Lynton, who at that time was Head of the Department of Art History at Chelsea School of Art, declared that that “the existence of any sort of state-funded art education is a very remarkable thing .. it proves the survival of a superstition that came in with industrialization, a desire for some sort of insurance policy against the end of civilization.”<sup>v</sup> There are a couple of interesting things to note about this statement. The first is that it makes for good history, because Lynton locates the origins of the state-funded art school with industrialization and capital rather than within a general history of art or a simple narrative of art education stretching from the academies of the Renaissance to 1970. The Government School of Design that opened in rooms in Somerset House London on 1 June 1837, was distinguished not by the special qualities of art, but rather by the way that the term ‘design’ was used to frame an aesthetic response to the logic of commerce and capital. This set The School of Design apart from both academies of art and traditional universities. In The School of Design, ‘design’ became the name for an attempt to institute government regulation of the existing social regulatory force of taste, in the form of a public pedagogy linking the artisan, the manufacturer and the customer. Before the establishment of the School of Design, what the aesthetico-social

regulatory force of distinctions between good and bad taste had already brought about was, a new challenge to the social status of the connoisseur who trains himself to recognize the particular qualities of an object of art, by the person of taste who uses objects of art to train his own perception. As Giorgio Agamben has pointed out, the increasing social importance of the person of taste in commercial society “does not correspond, as we might have expected, to the spirit’s more receptive attitude towards art or even to an increased interest in art.”<sup>vi</sup> In Britain, perhaps more than any other country, distinctions of taste developed to provide aesthetic solutions to the moral problems of commercial society. Eventually, in 1837, a School of Design whose mission is the government regulation of public taste, becomes a radically different institution from an Academy of Art and a university.

At the same time, however, it is also possible to describe another kind of marginal history of art that developed as a response to the non-concurrence of art and taste. In this lecture, I’m going to discuss two artists who have engaged with taste as a subject for their art. The first artist, William Hogarth, gives us an insight into how to approach ‘the history of taste’ which is the historical framework for what I have called the ‘requirement’ for state-sponsored art school pedagogy in England. Hogarth, who sets out a thesis on public taste in his print ‘The Bad Taste of the Town’ of 1723/4 (Figure 2), gained personal advantages from a new emphasis on aesthetic solutions to moral problems in commercial society in a way that, later in his career, put him at odds with Joshua Reynolds’ allegiance to an ideal history of art that is enshrined in the mission of the Royal Academy of Arts. The second artist, Grayson Perry, who is the Chancellor of UAL, gives us an insight into the problems and opportunities for an analysis of taste from within the legacy of state-funded art education. Grayson



Figure 2

William Hogarth, 'Masquerades and Operas or The Bad Taste of the Town' 1723

Perry is a contemporary artist who, I would say, deliberately chooses to work with the fact that social distinctions of taste, expressed as a set of responses to his objects that are inscribed on those objects, do not concur with the history of art which he also uses as a resource. I will focus on his pot 'Taste and Democracy' from 2005, which displays soundbite reactions to Perry's Turner Prize win in 2003.

When Grayson Perry delivered the first of four Reith Lectures for the BBC in 2013 with the title 'Democracy Has Bad Taste', arts practitioners were given a new kind of forum in debates on taste. More recently, staff at UAL have hosted the conference 'Taste After Bourdieu'<sup>vii</sup> at Chelsea College of Arts in 2014 and initiated the exhibition 'The Vulgar: Fashion Redefined' at the Barbican in 2017.<sup>viii</sup> The 'Taste After Bourdieu' conference was the starting point for the forthcoming book *The Persistence of Taste: Art, Museums and Everyday Life After Bourdieu*, which I have edited with Dave Beech, Carol Tulloch, Michael Lehnert and Stephen Wilson (Routledge 2018). The aim of our book is to offer an interdisciplinary analysis of taste in the wake of Pierre Bourdieu's sociology of taste. Our book unites artists and art educators with curators, sociologists, art theorists, art historians, design historians and cultural historians. Hosting an interdisciplinary conference on Bourdieu in a University of the Arts raised an important question regarding the analysis of taste, namely, how do twentieth-century models for the analysis of taste, which were built on debates in sociology, anthropology and aesthetic philosophy, hold up in the twenty-first century, at a point when questions of taste are both widely dismissed as irrelevant and anachronistic and yet are proving hard to eradicate from public discourse. At present, taste is in the odd position of being consigned to history by the leaders of cultural institutions while being acknowledged as an unwelcome but persistent spectre of social value. To give one example, in an interview in 2017, Deyan Sudjic, co-Director of the Design

Museum in London, advocated the separation of the activity of design from judgments of taste as a matter of curatorial policy:

There was an exhibition in the early days of the museum at the Boiler House [sic], which was called Taste, and Stephen Bailey [sic], the then-director, thought it would be a good idea to put things he approved of on easels, and things he didn't like on dustbins. You can't run a museum containing only things you like. Design is not an object or a thing. Design is not taste.<sup>ix</sup>

Sudjic hopes, I think, that if he can focus our attention on design as a social activity rather than design as an object or a thing, then the practice of taste, which is based on the evaluation of our responses to objects, will disappear from the museum. Nonetheless, the displays in the Design Museum in 2017 have included one devoted to 'Choice and Taste' which has guided visitors to think about the difference between choices that, on the one hand, "are heavily influenced by practical considerations, such as how well a product performs a specific function, or its value for money" and on the other, choices that are "a matter of personal taste, with users opting for a favoured colour, material or style." It seems to me that this display is making a valiant effort to re-describe taste as a personal matter, in which everyone makes a simple preference for an object because we 'like' the colour or the style. The ghostly figure behind these simple preferences is the person of taste, the so-called 'cultured' or discriminating person who doesn't simply prefer one object to another, but instead shows a stubborn preference for their own ability to evaluate their responses to objects. If we are looking for the exit from taste, I think what we have to do is look to why this preference for the ability to evaluate our responses to objects is so stubborn. As David Hume put it in his essay 'Of the Delicacy of Taste and Passion' of 1742, a person of discrimination and delicate

sentiment “is more happy by what pleases his taste, than by what gratifies his appetites, and receives more enjoyment from a poem, or a piece of reasoning, than the most expensive luxury can afford.”<sup>x</sup> Here Hume also draws our attention to the importance of a basic aesthetic distinction between ‘what pleases our taste’ and ‘what gratifies our appetites’, in other words a distinction between the pleasures of taste and the pleasures of the world. Hume tells us that the the practice of taste is what can give us power over our preferences, and that without it we will very quickly start making bad choices in life. This is the real ‘bourgeois revolution’ in taste, the point at which the fixed social hierarchies occupied by the aristocracy and the poor are replaced by an aestheticized form of social mobility in which the evaluation of our responses to objects is accorded higher status than the ownership of them. To my mind, this bourgeois revolution in taste is what is left out of Pierre Bourdieu’s sociological analysis of taste. For Bourdieu, taste is a set of cultural hierarchies that delimit the characteristics and possibilities of consumption. In Bourdieu’s view, distinctions of taste appear because the ‘grand bourgeois’ consumes differently from the university teacher, who consumes differently from the nurse and the executive. For Hume, on the other hand, taste, which is the business of those in the middle-station of life, offers the possibility of a social power which is enacted through ordinary consumption, but in which social status accrues to a cultural and aesthetic distinction between the pleasures of taste and the pleasures of the world. Hume argues that as we wander through the world of goods, we can’t pretend that our happiness does not depend in some way on the objects that surround us. We are not monks in a monastery or gurus on a mountain in Tibet. On the other hand, we don’t want our happiness to depend on these objects. So how do we walk this tightrope? Hume’s answer is that we signal that we are not dependent on these objects by making our choice of some objects rather than others say something good about us. In this way, taste and discrimination makes us the guarantors of our own happiness.



Hume's view that the pleasures of taste provide us with personal autonomy and social orientation gives us some insight into why we might still want to exhibit a stubborn preference for the pleasures of taste over and above the pleasures of the world. However, I think we have to look elsewhere in Hume for the narrow defile of taste that nonetheless guarantees an ethical movement across social space. In his *A Treatise on Human Nature*, Hume offers the observation that if I hate my enemy but nonetheless take pleasure in the fine qualities of his voice, this impartial reflection on the relationship between my satisfaction in his voice and my dissatisfaction with him as a person ought to make me more certain about everyone else's agreement on the qualities of a good voice. This method of evaluation, Hume argues, is quite different from the careless use of 'the language of taste,' which is stuffed with grand but empty terms such as 'elegance' and 'simplicity' that are supposed to compel the agreement of others. If I can make the transition from the careless use of a language of taste to the careful use of a practice of taste, then the pleasure I take in my enemy's singing voice becomes information that I can use to produce a social orientation for myself, as the kind of person who is capable of testing out a range of pleasant and unpleasant sensations in order to arrive at a discriminating judgment.

This question of an impartial judgment brings us closer to where distinctions of taste begin to take on meaning in the social field. This is also where the question of 'taste and democracy' arises, a question that, as we have seen, also concerns Grayson Perry. By enforcing a social practice of impartiality, distinctions of taste don't so much provide an aesthetic of politics as aestheticise a social ideal of the *apolitical*, in which the route to certainty and a community of understanding is only available through impartiality. But as we have seen, impartiality also enforces a social distinction that separates the pleasures of taste from the pleasures of the

world. In the second part of this lecture, I'm going to focus on this question of impartiality and the apolitical in a discussion of Joseph Addison and Richard Steele's role in laying the tracks for the bourgeois revolution in *The Spectator* between 1711 and 1714. Addison's wish to develop of the arts in conformity with what he called "the general Sense and Taste of mankind" is also a means to institute a social hierarchy in which the 'apolitical' pleasures of taste, as an idealized vision of social agency, are valued over and above both political factionalism and the sectarian character of the arts. Following this discussion, I will show how William Hogarth, who has been described as an 'Addisonian' artist, constructed a first sketch of the bourgeois revolution in taste and how Grayson Perry has worked with the legacy of that revolution in his piece 'Taste And Democracy'. I will then briefly introduce Jeremy Bentham's criticism of Addison and his contrasting regard for Hogarth. If Hogarth's reading of Addison gives us a relationship between art and taste that enforces a distinction between the disciplined pleasures of taste and the undisciplined pleasures of the world, the manner in which Bentham understands the ethics of Hogarth and Addison in completely distinct ways, suggests that a moral order of art could achieve independence from the moral order of taste. Bentham shows us where an exit from taste might be located, in a way that can help us distinguish a collapse in the cultural value of distinctions of taste from the impartiality through which these distinctions are enforced.

## **Addison and Co.**

It is important to note that we can locate the historical origins of distinctions between good and bad taste; as Penny Sparke has noted, 'taste' is only joined by the epithets 'good' or 'bad' during the bourgeois revolution<sup>xi</sup>. This is also the period, from the early eighteenth century onwards, when this issue of the non-concurrence of the history of taste with the history of art comes to the fore. This is

characterised by a wish to develop of the arts in conformity with what Joseph Addison, in essays for *The Spectator* between 1711 and 1714, called “the general Sense and Taste of mankind”. What is distinctive about Addison’s position is that, on the one hand, it unites all mankind on the ground of ordinary perception and, on the other hand, it divides mankind into those who can learn to rely on the pleasures of taste and those who are content with the pleasures of the world. It also gives a very specific social role to the arts. For Addison, his new conception of taste ‘in general’ could be used to oppose sectarian rules of art; in his words:

Musick, Architecture, and Painting, as well as Poetry, and Oratory, are to deduce their Laws and Rules from the general Sense and Taste of Mankind, and not from the Principles of those Arts themselves; or, in other Words, the Taste is not to conform to the Art, but the Art to the Taste.<sup>xii</sup>

In the seventeenth century, writers like Jean de La Bruyère gave some latitude to the spectator to decide (rightly or wrongly) at what point an object of art has attained perfection. In *The Spectator* in the early eighteenth century, Joseph Addison and his collaborator Richard Steele took another leap forward and used the eidolon of ‘Mr Spectator’ as the personification of “the general Sense and Taste of mankind”. The “general Sense and Taste of mankind”, rather than employing the violence of party political difference, employed violence in a different way, by seeking to enforce neutrality and impartiality of vision as a founding principle of cultural agency. Addison even provided a manifesto for this apolitical party of the “general Sense and Taste of mankind”:

We whose Names are hereunto subscribed do solemnly declare, That we do in our Consciences believe two and two make four; and that we shall adjudge

any Man whatsoever to be our Enemy who endeavours to persuade us to the contrary. We are likewise ready to maintain, with the Hazard of all that is near and dear to us, That six is less than seven in all Times and all Places, and that ten will not be more three Years hence than it is at present. We do also firmly declare, That it is our Resolution as long as we live to call Black black, and White white. And we shall upon all Occasions oppose such Persons that upon any Day of the Year shall call Black white, or White black, with the utmost Peril of our Lives and Fortunes.<sup>xiii</sup>

Good taste would triumph, Addison thought, if public taste stopped bowing to the arbitrary rules of art, and art started accommodating itself to the rationale that enables everyone to call “Black black, and White white.” This sets up an opposition between a ‘true’ perception of things as they really are and a false perception brought about by a fixation on the rules of art. It also means that true perception becomes a new means to establish social standards of taste. Despite Addison’s seemingly populist emphasis on ordinary perception, what he advocated was the replacement of an older social distinction between those who knew the rules of art and those who did not, with a new distinction. This new social distinction was between the cultural choices of those who were actively sharpening their ordinary perception and learning how to evaluate their responses to the arts, and those who were passively content with all that was ‘childish and absurd’ in the performing arts. Distinctions between Good Taste and Bad Taste set their own aesthetic rules, which therefore give a specific social role to the arts, as the vehicles of a refined sensibility. Jean-Jacques Rousseau has left an account of how taste literally ‘crowds out’ art, when he described the reaction of the spectators at a play by Molière: “I never attend a presentation of a Comedy of Molière without admiring the delicacy of the spectators. A word

that is a little loose, an expression that is coarse rather than obscene, everything wounds their chaste ears”<sup>xiv</sup>. Here the spectators run the show, because the ‘coarseness’ of Molière is defined not by the playwright himself but by the judgment of his audience that he has failed to make his work agreeable to them.

A different and contemporary perspective on the relationship of taste and art is provided in an excellent analysis of two museum visitors in front of a painting by the sociologist Dirk Vom Lehn, in our forthcoming book *The Persistence of Taste: Art, Museums and Everyday Life After Bourdieu*. Vom Lehn’s chapter on these two museum visitors appears in a section of the book on taste and the museum edited by Michael Lehnert. Vom Lehn offers a close analysis of the dialogue of two people in front of Rembrandt’s painting of Hendrickje Stoffels. What is noticeable about his analysis, is how the assessments of the painting that these two people are standing in front of are being used by them to establish a social relationship with each other. On the one hand the museum offers a safe space in which the pleasures of taste, which are based on the evaluation of our responses to objects, can be separated from the less discriminating pleasures of the outside world. On the other hand, what is evident in Vom Lehn’s account is that the evaluation of responses to the Rembrandt portrait, which at one point veers off into a discussion of *The Girl With the Pearl Earring*, a film about Vermeer, can take place in the space of “the general Sense and Taste of mankind” without having to be concerned with any work of art in particular.

The status of the museum as a place where the pleasures of taste are pursued, does not diminish the potential for those outside the museum to enforce distinctions between the pleasures of taste and the pleasures of the world. For an example of this, I’d like to refer you to the following question: “How much

can we really rely on someone who loved The Doors?” This question appeared in a review by Patricia Lockwood, published in January 2018, of a documentary film about the writer Joan Didion, directed by her nephew Griffin Dunne<sup>xv</sup>. It is a question which takes us straight to the heart of distinctions between good taste and bad taste, which parse the quality and social status of our responses to objects. With this question, Lockwood raises an issue concerning Joan Didion’s ability to evaluate her own responses, which it seems may have been impaired by her indiscriminate love of The Doors. The question then is “can we really rely” on someone who is blinded by their passions and can’t tell the difference between loving something and evaluating it? If Joan Didion can’t organize her own preferences, what does that say about us if we express a preference for the work of Joan Didion? In Patricia Lockwood’s review, this spiral of cultural doubt and suspicion, what she calls the three-in-the-morning question, is laid to rest – Lockwood decides at the end of her review that Joan Didion’s writing “can be leaned against like John Wayne.” On the basis of what we have already read, we have to assume that this certainty about Didion’s quality does not issue from Lockwood’s *love* of Joan Didion but rather from her critical evaluation of her work. Discovering reasons why Didion might not be relied upon, where she might have been led astray, is what demonstrates the crucial social distinction between evaluating something and loving it. Addison’s eidolon ‘Mr Spectator’ is still at work here, because impartiality is what you ought to strive for and the seductive qualities of the object are what you should resist. This means that after all this pan-American and cross-cultural shenanigans with Joan Didion, Jim Morrison and John Wayne we can nonetheless say that we have been offered a judgment of taste, which could be phrased as ‘Reading Joan Didion is for those who can learn to prioritise the pleasures of taste, while listening to The Doors is for those who are content with the simple pleasures of the world.’ A judgment

that advises us to choose Joan Didion and avoid Jim Morrison is of course perfectly useless; but it has nonetheless shown us how to find aesthetic support for the social and ethical value of an impartial judgment, which can protect us from bad choices. It is important to note the gulf that separates this essentially bourgeois judgment of taste, which draws on the valorisation of an ethically safeguarded motion across social space, from an aristocratic take on personal choice. For an example of the latter, look to the famous and acerbic comment about Michael Heseltine, attributed to Sir Michael Jopling, that the trouble with Heseltine was that he had to buy his own furniture. This is a joke made by a Peer of the Realm at the expense of the socially mobile.

### **William Hogarth and Grayson Perry**

“It seems beyond argument that Hogarth’s enterprise was Addisonian, in that his moral series implicitly advocate a middle way between vice and excessive virtue.”<sup>xvi</sup> So says David Bindman in his book *Hogarth and His Times: Serious Comedy*. Other Hogarth scholars such as Ronald Paulson and David Solkin have given support to this idea of Hogarth as an Addisonian artist. Mr Spectator actually makes an appearance in one of Hogarth’s paintings, ‘The Edwards Hamilton Family’ of 1834 (Figure 3 and Figure 4). At the request of his patron Mary Edwards, Hogarth painted her holding *The Spectator* number 580 of August 1, 1714 in which Addison discusses the omnipresence of the deity. *The Spectator* no.22 of March 26 1711, which condemns ‘the false Taste the Town’ may have been one of the sources for Hogarth’s early print ‘The Bad Taste of the Town’ of 1723. This print features an imaginary ‘Accademy of Art’ [sic] which is modelled on Burlington House Piccadilly, the home of Richard Boyle, third earl of Burlington. This fantasy academy, whose doors are firmly shut, is shown to be failing to stem the general decay of public taste that is illustrated in the

foreground, in the form of crowds being led towards the facile and shallow amusements of masquerades and Italian operas. In the middle of the image, plays written by English dramatists such as Shakespeare, Congreve, Dryden and – who else – Addison, are being carted off in a wheelbarrow to be sold as wastepaper. Here Hogarth stays true to Addison’s injunction that “Taste is not to conform to the Art, but the Art to the Taste” and the viewpoint of ‘Mr Spectator’ that separates the true pleasures of impartial vision from the false pleasures of the world.

Grayson Perry, I think, does not show us how to find aesthetic support for the social and ethical value of an impartial judgment, but rather shows how such impartial judgments split the social field and divide the artist from his audience, rather than establishing an Addisonian community of common sense that artists are happy to conform to. ‘Taste and Democracy’, a glazed ceramic pot made by Grayson Perry in 2004 (Figure 5), depicts characters with speech bubbles who offer soundbite reactions to Perry’s Turner Prize win in 2003, including, for example, one bubble with the words ‘He’s a serious artist and a lovable character’ spoken by a woman pushing a pram. The source of this statement was actually a question put to Perry from a journalist following the Turner Prize win. In this case, public discourse has been trapped like a genie in a glazed ceramic pot. Any response to Perry’s pot would inevitably include a response to these stylized responses and so would make you wonder how stylized your own response is going to be, as if you would always find a version of your daring critical challenge already inscribed on its surface.

These two artworks on the subject of taste show that it is also possible to describe what happens when artists respond to ‘Mr Spectator’s’ intentions for art, or in the case of Grayson Perry, to the legacy of that response. However, as I will





Figure 3  
The Edwards Hamilton Family on a Terrace, 1734,  
William Hogarth, Oil on canvas, 68.5 x 86 cm.  
Private Collection Photograph by Patrick Goetelen



Figure 4  
Detail

now discuss, Jeremy Bentham's paradoxical embrace of Hogarth on anti-Addisonian principles accomplishes another kind of work by indicating the exit from distinctions of taste.

## Jeremy Bentham

Jeremy Bentham loathed Joseph Addison and liked William Hogarth. He displayed Hogarth's illustrations to Samuel Butler's *Hudibras* on the walls of his house. We can account for this anomaly if we observe that in Bentham's discussion of Hogarth's engravings depicting the benefits of 'Beer Street' and the evils of 'Gin Lane' (Figure 6), he identifies Hogarth as someone who had "reflected more upon morals than many who give themselves out as professors of this science."<sup>xvii</sup> Reflecting on morals in a way that puts you on a par with professors of moral philosophy is not the same thing as solving your ethical problems by aesthetic means, through the employment of distinctions between good and bad taste. Bentham's view of Hogarth does not assume that the moral order of art, which can present an ethical choice between the good option of 'Beer Street' and the bad option of 'Gin Lane', is necessarily subsumed within the impartial moral order established by the pleasures of taste. It is important to note that Bentham's attack on Addison takes place on the terms set by an Addisonian worldview, in which the arts have been co-opted to a project of refinement; but his comments on Hogarth shows how a counter-revolution is possible from within the terms of this Addisonian universe. To adapt terms that I used earlier, if Patricia Lockwood's problem is "How much can we really rely on someone who loved *The Doors*?" the problem that Bentham poses is, to use his own words, how can we choose "A pure and simple amusement?" when "to be hard to please .. shall be found to be advantageous?"<sup>xviii</sup> Lockwood's question, as I have said, is about how to find aesthetic and ethical justifications

to support the social value of an impartial judgment, which can protect us from bad choices in music and many other things as well. Bentham's question, in contrast, is about why we tend to assume that certain choices are generally inferior, when we gain a particular social advantage by avoiding them. Jeremy Bentham has to find his way out of the world built by distinctions of good taste and bad taste by reversing the logic through which this world has been built. The logic of Addisonian taste is that impartiality is the guarantee of a good choice. From Bentham's point of view, impartiality, which separates the pleasures of taste from the pleasures of the world, is a way of turning what had previously been a source of pleasure and amusement for oneself or for someone else into an object of ridicule and contempt. He reasoned that good taste, rather than guaranteeing virtue or constructing an insurance policy against the end of civilization, was a source of social harm. By working against the grain of the logic of what I have called the strange 'apolitical' politics of taste, Bentham came to the conclusion that taste and democracy were at odds with each other. His thought suggests that we can reject the aristocratic violence involved in pointing out that someone has bought their own furniture, without having to then embrace the bourgeois violence of asking whether we can rely on someone who loved The Doors.

## Conclusion

In the first part of this lecture, I drew attention to the manner in which judgments of taste can be completely useless a guide to what to choose and what to reject within the cultural field, while still convincing us that impartiality will protect us from bad choices. The second part of this lecture suggested that the way out of taste lies through the rejection of the impartial evaluation of our responses to objects through which distinctions of taste are enforced. Impartiality itself may be a bad choice – that stubborn preference for our ability to evaluate our responses to objects, may itself be the thing that is leading us astray. In conclusion, I want to tell a story about an art school (not UAL) that illustrates how good taste can be a bad choice. In the designer Victor Papanek’s polemic *Design For the Real World*, he discusses a low-tech radio receiver that used a recycled tin can, transistor, earplug, wire paraffin wax and wick, designed by Papanek and George Seeger to be used in parts of the world without a good power supply and using locally sourced materials. Papanek observed that when he discussed the design for the radio in a lecture at the Hochschule für Gestaltung in Ulm Germany in 1966, the Professors of the School strongly objected and suggested that he should paint his can light grey on the grounds of taste. Papanek replied:

painting it would have been wrong. For one thing, it would have raised the price of each unit by maybe one twentieth of a penny each, which is a great deal of money when millions of radios are built. Secondly, and much more importantly, I feel that I have no right to make aesthetic or “good taste” decisions that will affect millions of people in Indonesia, who are members of a different culture.<sup>xix</sup>

What could be more ‘impartial’ than a coat of light grey paint? What could

exemplify the dangers of bad choices, shallow amusement and kitsch more than a gaudily decorated can? Yet Papanek, shows, firstly, how impartiality is enforced as a way of preventing bad choices and, secondly, why impartiality itself is exactly the wrong choice in this situation. This story also asks us to reflect in what ways people who work in art schools become conscious of how decisions that are apparently made in the name of good art and good design, are actually being made in the name of apolitical socio-cultural forces and insurance policies against the end of civilization. The conditions that created a requirement for the state-supported art school of the 1830s no longer exist, yet, writers such as Michael Bhaskar have argued that “We now have so much – whether it’s books, songs, films or artworks (let alone data) – that we can’t manage it all alone. We need an “algorithmic culture”. Yet we also need something more than ever: human taste.”<sup>xx</sup> Bhaskar assumes that ‘Mr Spectator’, the person of taste, is still the privileged agent of culture, the still point around which everything else revolves. But this is not necessarily the case. In the Addisonian universe, good cultural choices are the prophylactic against bad cultural choices. In the current universe of consumption, products can design themselves and refine their operability from user data. A pathological user who exhibits social regressive tendencies may well be preferred, as the economic value of their data could be greater. Rather than Bhaskar’s idea of a mutually beneficial trade-off between the tastemaker and the algorithm, in future we are likely to see an increasing asymmetry between human decisions and corporate control of the design object, which in turn will generate the need for new design interventions in the field of human decision making to plug the gaps. In this way, a relationship between good human choices and bad human choices that is controlled by distinctions of taste will become less and less relevant. In a reversal of Joseph Addison’s appeal to “the general Sense and Taste of Mankind”, the general management of



Figure 6  
William Hogarth, 'Beer Street' and 'Gin Lane' 1751

pathology may become the cultural norm and self-management through taste the cultural exception. As a harbinger of this, at the end of my introduction to *The Persistence of Taste*, I make the following observation ‘In 2013, at a meeting of a UK Parliamentary Group on Culture and Wellbeing, someone raised the possibility that membership of the National Trust might be a better solution for depression than antidepressants. If culture is prescribed, it cannot be chosen. If it cannot be chosen, there can be no taste.’ What this also means, of course, is that there can be no social distinction between the pleasures of taste and the pleasures of the world. Then you can listen to The Doors without someone else losing their trust in you.

## Notes

- <sup>i</sup> This research forms part of my work as Honorary Senior Research Associate, UCL Faculty of Laws, Bentham Project 2017-2020.
- <sup>ii</sup> Malcolm Quinn, *The Swastika*, Constructing the Symbol, London: Routledge (1994).
- <sup>iii</sup> ‘Charles I: King and Collector’, Royal Academy of Arts, 27 January -15 April 2018.
- <sup>iv</sup> “The Royal Collection is a marvel. But it should belong to the people.” Leader comment in *The Guardian* 27 January 2018, 2.
- <sup>v</sup> Norbert Lynton, ‘Coldstream 1970’, *Studio International*, 180:927 (November 1970), 167-8, 167.
- <sup>vi</sup> Giorgio Agamben, ‘The Man of Taste and the Dialectic of the Split’, in *The Man Without Content*, Stanford: Stanford University Press (1999), 13-27, 14.
- <sup>vii</sup> ‘Taste After Bourdieu’, Chelsea College of Arts, 15 -16 May 2014.
- <sup>viii</sup> ‘The Vulgar: Fashion Redefined’, Barbican London, 13 Oct 2016 – 5 February 2017.
- <sup>ix</sup> Deyan Sudjic, quoted in Stefanie Marsh, ‘Objects reveal a lot about the way we live, who we are, what we value’ *The Guardian*, 18 February 2017, 31-2.
- <sup>x</sup> David Hume, [1742] ‘Of the Delicacy of Taste and Passion’ in *David Hume Selected Essays*, edited by Stephen Copley and Andrew Edgar, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2008), 10-13, 11.
- <sup>xi</sup> Penny Sparke, ‘Taste and the Interior Designer’ in *After Taste*, edited by Kent Klienmann, Joanna Merwood-Salisbury and Lois Weinthal, New York: Princeton Architectural Press (2012), 14-27, 15.
- <sup>xii</sup> Joseph Addison, *The Spectator*, No. 29, April 3 1711.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Joseph Addison, *The Spectator*, No. 126, July 25 1711.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 1752, ‘Final Reply’ to Charles Bordes’, in Masters, Roger D. and Kelly C. *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*, Vol. 2. “*Discourse on the Sciences and Arts’ and Polemics*”, Hanover and London: University Press of New England (1992), 110-129, 122n.
- <sup>xv</sup> Patricia Lockwood, ‘It was gold’ *London Review of Books*, Vol. 40 no.1, 4 January 2008, 19-20, 19.
- <sup>xvi</sup> David Bindman, Hogarth and *His Times: Serious Comedy*, London: British Museum Press (1997), 33.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Jeremy Bentham, *The Works of Jeremy Bentham*, ed. John Bowring, 11 Vols. , Edinburgh: William Tait (1838–1843), Vol. 1, 540.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Jeremy Bentham, *The Rationale of Reward*, London: John and H.L Hunt, (1825), 210.
- <sup>xix</sup> Victor Papanek, *Design for the Real World: Human Ecology and Social Change*, London: Thames and Hudson (1972), 164-165.
- <sup>xx</sup> Michel Bhaskar, ‘In the age of the algorithm, the human gatekeeper is back’, *The Guardian* [Online] September 30 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/sep/30/age-of-algorithm-human-gatekeeper>, [accessed 3 Oct 2016].



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University of the Arts London is Europe's largest specialist art and design university and a vibrant world centre for innovation drawing together six distinctive and distinguished Colleges with international reputations in art, design, fashion, communications and performing arts: Camberwell College of Arts, Central Saint Martins, Chelsea College of Arts, London College of Communication, London College of Fashion, and Wimbledon College of Arts. Proudly associated with some of the most original thinkers and practitioners in the arts, the University continues to innovate, challenge convention, and nurture exceptional talents. One of our goals is to sustain and develop a world-class research culture that supports and informs the university's academic profile. As a leader in the arts and design sector, we aim to clearly articulate the practice-based nature of much of our research, and in doing so to demonstrate the importance of the creative arts to scholarly research. The Professorial Platforms series is an opportunity for University colleagues and associates, as well as invited members of the public to learn more about the research undertaken in the University. The Platforms enable Professors to highlight their field of interest and the University, in turn, to recognise and commemorate their successes to date.

