**Malcolm Quinn**

**‘Pop Goes Taste’**

**Talk delivered at RIBA event ‘Late Tuesday – Good Taste/Bad Taste’ 27 October 2015**

<http://ow.ly/U62Hn>

Since the eighteenth century, we’ve all been in thrall to an idea about taste.  We have wanted to believe that a sense of taste and discrimination will allow us to live within commercial society while trusting ourselves before we trust the brands, products and services that surround us. We have assumed that taste can make a virtue out of the necessity of living within the world of goods. This view of taste as our personal ‘vantage point’ in the world, has been supported by mass media, liberal governments, art schools and universities as long as the narrow gap between the museum and the gift shop, between the editorial and the advertorial, could be kept open.  However, that gap is shrinking and as it shrinks, the social skeleton or infrastructure that has supported taste is more clearly revealed.  Tonight, I’m going to talk about how, in the fifties and sixties, Playboy and Pop Art became part of the supporting infrastructure of taste and how Playboy’s recent decision to stop publishing nude photographs in its magazine, signals its withdrawal from the shared domain defined by arguments about taste. I will end with some comments on post-Pop art, to show how a sense of taste can vanish without us even noticing it has gone. I will begin with some remarks on how taste creates a virtue out of necessity.

I’m sure that none of us thinks that we were born with a sense of taste and discrimination, but we do believe that we have acquired a ‘sense of taste’ by learning how to negotiate the world of commerce and capitalism on our own terms, rather than on the terms dictated to us by Ikea, Apple or Farrow and Ball. Not only is taste a virtue, it is perhaps the main way that virtue is articulated in commercial society – we say no to Nike, we say yes to a wind turbine, and this says something good about us to ourselves and to others. It solves a particular dilemma that we all encounter as we make our way through the world of goods and down the aisles of the supermarket. The dilemma is this. As we wander through the supermarket, we can't pretend that our happiness does not depend in some way on the products 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? The 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. In his essay ‘Of the Delicacy of Taste and Passion’ written in the middle of the eighteenth century, the philosopher David Hume saw a sense of taste and fine discrimination as providing us with autonomy and an individual vantage point in the world of commerce. Hume said:

Philosophers have endeavoured to render happiness entirely independent of every thing external. This degree of perfection is impossible to be *attained*; but every wise man will endeavour to place his happiness on such objects chiefly as depend on himself; and *that* is not be *attained* so much by any other means as by this delicacy of sentiment. When a man is possessed of that talent, he is more happy by what pleases his taste, than what gratifies his appetites, and receives more enjoyment from a poem, or a piece of reasoning, than the most expensive luxury can afford.[[1]](#endnote-1)

In another essay ‘Of the Standard of Taste’ written in 1757, Hume describes a person of ‘valuable character’ who would perfect their sense of taste to the point where they gained ‘strong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice’.[[2]](#endnote-2)From the middle of the eighteenth century to the present day, taste is what has allowed us to walk through the seven circles of capitalist Hell unscathed, like Dante and Virgil in the inferno. So far, I’ve described a sense of taste as a tightrope or narrow way that allows us tread virtuously through the world of commerce. In the mid-twentieth century, *Playboy* Magazine and Pop Art showed us how to tread this narrow path of taste while going deeper into the inferno. In 1953, when it was first published, *Playboy* was one of the first mainstream magazines to display nude women. Recently, Playboy Enterprises has announced that, beginning in March 2016, Playboy Magazine will no longer feature nude photographs. The received wisdom on this decision is that it is a no-brainer. At first sight, it looks like a tasteful, even an ethical, move to make. Petur Workman of the Phoenix Media Group has said ‘I think it’s genius .. This is going to allow them [Playboy Enterprises] to attract a much more upscale group of brands.’[[3]](#endnote-3) However, I don’t think that this decision is about Playboy becoming more tasteful, more ethical, or coming to consciousness about the representation of women in the mass media. It is actually about how Playboy *used* to find it important to promote the idea that we could live in the world of commerce and capital on our own terms, and now it no longer does. In his essay ‘Playmates for Justice’, the art critic Dave Hickey argues that when it began, Playboy magazine was an example of the American mass media functioning *in loco parentis*, ‘doing the jobs that mom and dad would have done if they weren’t back in Kansas and so relentlessly old fashioned.’[[4]](#endnote-4) In the case, of *Playboy*, Hickey thinks that the parenting was done by an imaginary projection of Hugh Hefner who he calls ‘Uncle Reggie’:

Uncle Reggie does something vague in the city, but he drops by from time to time to sit in the living room with his legs crossed, in his designer duds, smoking a long cigarette, and surveying the furniture with mild disdain. Uncle Reggie tells you about the grand restaurants and chic nightclubs in New York, Chicago and LA. He chats about fast cars, hi-fi, fashion models, cool black musicians, and the great artists he’s met, dishevelled in their tuxedos. He shows you a world that is naughty and sleek but still pretty nice, still quintessentially American and nothing like the decadent world of those Euro-trash *bon vivants* for whom the term *playboy* was invented.[[5]](#endnote-5)

Hickey says that Hefner ‘brought his sensibility into the neighbourhood’ by

granting you permission to gawk at the boobs you had been gawking at anyway, but not like an animal, not like a redneck, like a cosmopolitan man of the world.[[6]](#endnote-6)

We can find this statement offensive while missing a more important point that Dave Hickey also forgets to mention. On the narrow precipice of taste, even the miserable post-adolescent fantasy of gawking at boobs like a cosmopolitan man of the world, depends on deriving happiness from the autonomy this brings us within the world of commerce. As I said in my introduction, taste is what allows us to trust ourselves before we trust the goods, the services and the brands. This means that for Uncle Reggie to be able to bring his sensibility to our neighbourhood, we would have to assume that he was not working as the paid agent of the fashion chains, or in the employ of the restaurants, the nightclubs and the vehicle manufacturers. If Uncle Reggie is no longer there to encourage us to ogle naked women in a tasteful way, then his job is simply to promote the perfumes, body sprays and watch straps that are marketed under the Playboy brand. So in the space between the Playboy brand and the sea of internet pornography, now there is nothing at all. Playboy have decided that there is no profit in placing discreetly revealed nipples alongside interviews with politicians and intellectuals; they have disinvested in the cultivation of taste.

During the period when Uncle Reggie held sway, Pop Art was also in the ascendant. Like Reggie, Pop brought its sensibility to the neighbourhood; it was an art of the present tense that was self-conscious about the difference between the ancients and the moderns. It also taught us how to gawk at boobs like a cosmopolitan man of the world. The artist Richard Hamilton, commenting on the difference between the woman in his painting ‘$he’ of 1958 and the women in the paintings that had immediately preceded it, said:

Art’s Woman in the fifties was anachronistic – as close to us as a smell in the drain; bloated, pink-crutched, pin-headed and lecherous; remote from the cool woman image outside fine art. There she is truly sensual but she acts her sexuality and her performance is full of wit.[[7]](#endnote-7)

Richard Hamilton is usually seen as offering a cool, detached and analytical approach to the pin-up in contrast to the unselfconscious love of the mass media image of women in the work of an artist such as Peter Blake. If we see them both as facing the ‘Supermarket Dilemma’ I mentioned earlier, the art of Peter Blake seems to teeter on the edge of telling us that his happiness actually does depend on the commercial object of the pin-up, while Richard Hamilton is almost at the other extreme of the guru on the mountain perched high above the world of goods. However, both Blake and Hamilton show us how to tread the path of taste because they have followed David Hume’s advice – their happiness is placed on objects that depend on themselves and their artistic sensibility. Individual pin-ups, such as a life-size Brigitte Bardot spread piecemeal through the pages of Reveille in 1957[[8]](#endnote-8) became key motifs for certain artists at that time, because they suggested possibilities for a rearrangement of what Richard Hamilton called the ‘component parts’ of the pin-up. True to the distinction between himself and Hamilton, Peter Blake is shown dreaming about Bardot, rather than analysing her image, in the film *Pop Goes the Easel*, made by Ken Russell for the BBC in 1962.[[9]](#endnote-9) The film also featured the artists Derek Boshier, Pauline Boty and Peter Philips. In *Pop Goes the Easel*, Ken Russell takes us on a tour of Peter Blake’s bedroom, with Blake announcing in a voice over ‘this is like living in Girl’s Town.’ Russell wants us to believe that Girl’s Town is also our town, and that these four Pop artists, like ourselves, are learning make their way in the world of goods by creating art. We join Blake, Boshier, Boty and Philips in a giddy dance through a world of fast cars, the space race, the twist, pin ups, fun fairs, parties and rock and roll. The film ends with harpsichord music that takes us back to cool contemplation in the studio. *Pop Goes the Easel* is introduced by Huw Weldon, acting not like Uncle Reggie but more in the style of the commanding officer of a tank regiment. Speaking directly to camera, Weldon allows for the possibility that we might dismiss the work of these four artists as ‘tawdry and second rate’ while reminding us that they are depicting a world that we all live in ‘whether we like it or not’. Weldon’s introduction reminds us of the path of virtue at the heart of a Pop sensibility, the delirious possibility of walking through the seven circles of capitalist Hell while living in one’s own personal Eden. The fact that Weldon appears to be a kind of God of the Old Testament only adds to the impression that Blake, Boshier, Boty and Philips can ‘be as little children’ in the world of goods.

So what has happened to the ideal, once enshrined in Pop Art and *Playboy* magazine, of making a virtue out of the necessity of living within commerce and capitalism? The crucial difference between ‘Pop Goes the Easel’ and the Post-Pop art of Damien Hirst, Jeff Koons and Takashi Murakami is that now, we are not encouraged to believe that the artists and ourselves are treading the same path through the world of goods. Instead, these artists do exactly what Playboy Enterprises have now done; they have stopped bringing their sensibility to the neighbourhood and they have disinvested in the cultivation of taste. This disinvestment might be difficult to spot, because artists can appear in your neighbourhood without bringing their sensibility to it. If you haven’t already done so, I recommend a trip to Damien Hirst’s Newport Street Gallery in Vauxhall to see how taste disappears without us even noticing it is gone. At first sight, Hirst’s gallery seems to employ the same arrangements as a museum like Tate – there is a series of exhibition spaces, currently showing paintings by John Hoyland, and a gallery shop selling works by Hirst. But Hirst is not behaving like Nick Serota and he is not behaving like Uncle Reggie – he is not concerned with enabling you to negotiate your own way through the world of commerce. To understand what has changed, let's return to the Supermarket Dilemma for a moment. Hirst’s gallery in Newport Street isn’t like the all-you-can-eat cultural buffet of Pop but it isn’t like an old-fashioned museum either. The key relationship that is being constructed is the one between Damien Hirst and John Hoyland. Hoyland is in the Gallery and Hirst is in the shop. If we follow the terms of my ‘Supermarket Dilemma’, we cannot say that we *are* dependent on any happiness we might obtain from this centripetal locked motion in which Hoyland circulates around Hirst, but neither can we signal that we are *not* dependent on this Hirst-Hoyland thing by making our choices say something good about us, because there are no choices to make. In this situation, there is no space in which taste could be constructed, no room for us to become the guarantors of our own happiness. What is happening in Vauxhall now is also happening elsewhere. The UK Government is not interested in investing in the infrastructure of taste either – its definition of happiness is something that it would like to measure through a national index and not a happiness that taste allows you to measure out for yourself within commercial society, on your own terms. In 2013, at a meeting of an all Party Group on Culture and Wellbeing[[10]](#endnote-10) 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. If there is no taste, there is no virtue to be found in the necessities of commerce and the fragile ideal of walking through the seven circles of capitalist Hell while living in one’s own private Eden is over. So pop goes taste.

Malcolm Quinn 2015

ENDNOTES

1. David Hume, ‘Of the Delicacy of Taste and Passion’ [1741-2, 1777] in *David Hume Selected Essays*, (Oxford, OUP 2008), 11. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Hume, ‘Of the Standard of Taste’ [1757], 147. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Petur Wurkman, quoted in Emma Bazilian, ‘Will Playboy’s Brand Survive Without Nudity?’ *Adweek,* October 8 2015, <http://www.adweek.com/news/press/will-playboy-s-brand-survive-without-nudity-167636> [accessed 1 Nov 2015]. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Dave Hickey, ‘Playmates for Justice’ in *Pirates and Farmers: Essays on Taste* (London, Ridinghouse 2013), 160. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Hickey, ‘Playmates for Justice’, 160. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Hickey, ‘Playmates for Justice’, 161. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Richard Hamilton, ‘an exposition of $he’ in Russell and Gablik (eds.), *Pop Art Redefined*, (London, Thames and Hudson 1969), 73. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Hamilton, ‘an exposition of $he’, 74: ‘The only pin-up I can remember making a greater impact in art circles was Brigitte Bardot spread piecemeal through *Reveille* (October 1957)’. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. See BFI information on ‘Pop Goes the Easel’ (Ken Russell 1962) at <http://www.screenonline.org.uk/tv/id/1275788/> [accessed 1 Nov 2015]. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. ‘ ‘All Party Group: Culture and Wellbeing 11th December 2013’ available from: <http://parliamentarywellbeinggroup.org.uk/2013/12/19/meeting-1-culture-and-wellbeing/> [↑](#endnote-ref-10)