THE MIDWAY REBORN

Against Taste

BY MINAL HAJRATWALA
their very existence that we did not spring from the womb fully formed, but that we instead developed. In changing, we might have to admit to having been wrong.

Still, I can’t say taste has anything to do with the passion that art inspires in me. So long as it strikes me as true, I am as likely to be stirred by an artwork that is a bit confused and crudely presented as by one that is polished, beautiful, lofty. Taste can’t account for those powerful moments of intimacy and connection we get when we touch one another across a darkened auditorium, as surely as lovers reach for each other in the dark.

But it has taken me a while to confess this, and longer still to understand it. One clue came last year when I attended a documentary theater piece in New York, “Undesirable Elements/Secret History,” by the performance artist Ping Chong. It was a traveling show, redone entirely in each city where it was performed, using local subjects. The artist interviews six city residents, then directs them in a performance of their own stories. They walk in a circle, they tell their tales, sometimes they miss their cues—and that’s all they do. They are not actors, dancers, clowns, violinists or virtuosos, only fellow humans who have endured war and loss and hate. And I was moved.

To be honest, no live performance had ever moved me so. As I sat in the front row, tears rolled down my cheeks, and I could barely breathe. Afterward, I even recommended it to my circle of people of taste.

And immediately I was filled with regret. These were not, understand, mere friends. They were people among whom my masquerade had succeeded. For as long as I can remember, I have rolled my eyes at my parents’ suburban immigrant decor (a needlepoint square that says “Welcome to the Hajratwalas,” a plush carpet in pink and green). My own surroundings exhibit a subtlety that errs, if at all, on the side of blandness (creamy painted walls, natural wood). I am pleased when I find that I like what other people of taste like and attribute the rest of my preferences to a certain atavism, a lack of “culture” in early life.

When confronted with tackiness, I am reassured by my embarrassment—a sensation that may date from adolescence, when our parents remind us by

"In place of hermeneutics, we need an erotics of art."
Susan Sontag, “Against Interpretation"

"And if I try to make my way
To the ordinary world
I will learn to survive. . ."
Duran Duran, “Ordinary World”

I have no sense of taste. I do not mean this literally, for I have taste buds as prickly and swollen with passion as any. I can recount my favorite foods, from my mother’s mango pickle to a Persian pomegranate sauce served over grilled chicken in a San Diego restaurant whose name I will always regret not writing down the night I was in love there. No, I mean “taste” in the figurative sense; when it comes to art and culture, I have none of what commonly passes for good taste.

Of course I’ve tried to acquire it, envying those who because of their class and color in America seem born with it. For as long as I can remember, I have rolled my eyes at my parents’ suburban immigrant decor (a needlepoint square that says “Welcome to the Hajratwalas,” a plush carpet in pink and green). My own surroundings exhibit a subtlety that errs, if at all, on the side of blandness (creamy painted walls, natural wood). I am pleased when I find that I like what other people of taste like and attribute the rest of my preferences to a certain atavism, a lack of “culture” in early life.

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ourselves in our purchases. Our tastes—more than our emotions, thoughts, or even deeds—are essential to the outward version of who we are.

This is why artistic tastes reflect far more than cultural value. They are an arbiter of class, which we in America like to pretend does not exist. Paul Fussell’s book “Class: A Guide Through the American Status System” is filled with sentences that are upturned-nose versions of the ones in my character exercise: a certain class of person (sniff!) puts pennies in his loafers, or drinks sparkling wine, or goes to ice-skating shows rather than the theater. Seen in this light, personal preferences carry high stakes.

I realize now that I’d intended the uniting of my own taste with good taste to be my ticket in. As much as—and maybe more than—my Ivy League education, it would grant me admission to the cultural elite. Taste was the lesson I was meant to learn, and yet could not.

Post-Ping Chong, I decided I needed a code that would alert me not to what I thought was good or bad, but to what they would think. I believed there must be some hidden standard that people of taste applied. I, being an outsider, had no access to these rules, but now that I had joined the fraternity, maybe I could learn them.

Around this time, a person who seemed to have just such a natural and confident sense of taste introduced me to Matthew Arnold’s “Culture and Anarchy.” Rather than invoking standards, Arnold favored what he called “touchstones”; he believed that by identifying certain “master” works—those by Shakespeare, for example—and the sensation they arouse in us, one can arrive at a consistent basis for judging art.

I was encouraged by this idea, its allowance for individuality, its sane approach to canonization. Within my circle of taste, we began to discuss it; I tried to identify my own touchstones. And again, I was embarrassed.

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That’s because in order to find the work of art that moved me most, I had to return to suburban Michigan, grade 7. The year was 1983, and the artists were Duran Duran.

Today, who could defend the synthesized strains of the songs “Girls on
Film” and “Is There Something I Should Know?” as standard-bearers for any-
thing? But at the time, we grade 7 girls felt for Nick, Andy, John, Roger and
Simon what our mothers’ generation had felt for the Beatles. Taste didn’t have
anything to do with it; “coolness” did. But perhaps this distinction is only
semantic.

Should I pretend my fascination with these boys in hair spray was only a
fleeting schoolgirl phase? Part of me wishes to, but it was not—as I proved just
last year by screaming my lungs out at a “Duran Duran Up Close” concert in
New York’s Beacon Theater. I stood throughout most of the event, singing
every word along with thousands of other Gen-Xers reliving their youth. And
I finally understood what being a fan, being in love with a group, being at a
“normal” concert, was all about.

After that concert, I cared a lot less about good taste. Still, I found I was
slightly embarrassed to tell people about it. I’d mention, as if justifying myself,
that “80s music” was back now, that it was a bonafide trend. I’d try to inject
that touch of irony that gives anything a cool gloss. I’d marvel aloud about the
fact that the band, once so hugely popular, so thoroughly “low culture,” had
such a hold on me.

Why? Duran Duran seemed to speak directly to my adolescent angst
(along with Kierkegaard and Camus, the other two legs of my existentialist
triad). Today, I see that the band was talking over my head. I had no idea, for
example, that “Girls on Film” was about modeling and pornography, though I
may have had a vague sense that it referred to alienated women.

Beyond their angst, I had been attracted to the band members’ androgyny.
Today, I see how their makeup and their confessions of bisexuality appealed
to my inner queer aesthetic. In the conformist Reagan ’80s, it was a relief to
see people doing something, well, freakish. And I’ve always been attracted to
femme boys such as Boy George and Prince—an attraction that is more purely
sexual than musical. Perhaps, as Audre Lorde almost said, the erotic is an
early source of the aesthetic.

Actually, Lorde said, “The erotic is power.”
This link between personal taste and the erotic may explain why being seen as having bad taste felt, for a long time, so profoundly shameful. It was not like the fear of using the wrong fork when dining with the queen. It felt more akin to having a menstrual stain on my skirt in front of television cameras.

For my conflict was about the longing of the brown girl to belong to a white world, of the queer girl to belong to the straight world, of the outsider to come inside. And its resolution lies in ... notions of taste. There is no need to internalize good taste. On the contrary, we ought to cease accounting for it at all.

Need I say that we are not talking about doing the nasty here? The erotic is not merely sexual in Lorde’s formulation, or in Sontag’s (quoted at the top of this essay), or certainly in mine.

Lorde, again: “The erotic is a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire.”

Ah, satisfaction. Lorde’s measure is not Arnold’s intellectual standard, but instead one of pleasure—the deepest, most satisfying kind of pleasure we can know. And the beginnings of our sense of self—what else could this mean, but adolescence? Perhaps it is in one’s adolescence, amid the turmoil of the forming self, that clues to one’s aesthetic can be found after all.

Surely as the self grows up, what satisfies it also shifts and evolves. In the early days of an affair, after a first night together, or a second, or a third, my body may feel twinges the next day—thrills moving up and down my torso, like a second spine, assimilating a new memory of touch. Later in the affair, the lovemaking deepens, becomes more and more satisfying, yet the twinges grow rare, happening only every few months. The threshold of the erotic rises.

In the same way, what I demand from art now is more layered, deeper, than the music that satisfied my preteen soul. What leaves me open-mouthed, almost gasping, with surprise and pleasure in a theater these days is not likely to be a pop band geared toward teenagers.

But the foundation of my aesthetic still resembles that which thrilled me at age 12. Duran Duran’s lyrics—“And if I try to make my way/To the ordinary world/I will learn to survive”—offer an outsider’s point of view, something queer and lonely at the core.

This outsider-ness is, for me, the stuff of good art. The greatest artists have created despite and against the citizens of good taste, who spat at their paintings and hissed at their poems. For art is about the erotic, if the erotic is defined as the most interior expression of truth, and the erotic is always at risk of being hidden, collapsed or crushed. It must be excavated and protected against all “opinions,” “standards” or “values.”