

# **Can Critics Create a Standard of Taste?**

## **Hume, Bourdieu, and Nehamas on the Role of Critics**

by

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis explores whether art critics can create a standard of taste by which artworks can be evaluated. The question is examined through the lens of three thinkers: David Hume, Pierre Bourdieu and Alexander Nehamas. Art criticism is generally associated with the cultural elite: criticism tends to be inaccessible to those outside of academic and artistic circles due to its specialized language, highly academic institutions with which it is associated, and due to its history, where people from privileged backgrounds shaped discourse in the art world. One might worry that a standard of taste that critics establish would only be a reiteration of the norms and values of the elite. I argue that instead of creating a standard, art critics can open the dialogue about art to wider audience by emphasizing the importance of personal engagement with artworks and how these experiences connect us to other people. To do so, this thesis introduces David Hume's work *Of the Standard of Taste* and critically evaluates the role of critics it presents through the lens of Pierre Bourdieu's work *Distinction*. To show that elitism and social power is not all there is to art criticism, I introduce Alexander Nehamas's ideas from his book *Only a Promise of Happiness*. Finally, I argue that Alexander Nehamas's theory of art critics exemplifies an approach to art criticism where critics do not have to create a standard of taste. Instead, art critics can promote diverse interpretations and evaluations, allowing for a more democratized understanding of taste where no standard prevails.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Throughout the history of the Philosophy of Art, there has been a general interest in what constitutes a beautiful artwork. This inquiry invariably led to the question of whether certain people are better endowed with the capacity to discern real beauty,<sup>1</sup> the question of critics. Art critics can help us navigate our artistic experience, deepen our understanding, and point us in directions we otherwise would not have looked. To do so, critics can give interpretative guidance by helping us uncover the layers of possible meanings in a given artwork, and foster a meaningful connection between art and human experience. Art critics also bear social significance: critics can reflect on the broader cultural, political, and social issues by reflecting on the way artworks mirror prevailing values in society.

However, those interested in art, consequently, might be interested in whose reviews are trustworthy enough to be given credit and whether critics can create a standard of taste that can be followed so that we can arrive at beauty. The latter inquiry will be the focal point of this thesis. The reason for my interest in this question is that I perceive art criticism to be associated with cultural elite. Criticism tends to be inaccessible to those outside of academic and artistic circles due to its specialized language, the highly academic institutions with which it is associated, and its history, where people from highly academic backgrounds shaped discourse in the art world. One might worry that critics can establish a standard of taste, but this standard of taste only reflects the norms and values of the elite (Bourdieu 1987, 204). However, I am interested in whether elitism and social power are all there is to art criticism. In this thesis, I will argue that instead of creating a standard, art critics can open a dialogue about art to a wider audience by emphasizing the importance of our direct engagement with artworks and how these

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<sup>1</sup> In the course of this thesis, the term “beauty” will be used in relation to artworks. Moreover, the term “beautiful art” and “good art” will be used interchangeably throughout this thesis.

experiences connect us to others. Nehamas's understanding of art criticism, especially his views about the role of critics, is an example of such an approach. It fosters diverse interpretations and evaluations, allowing for a more democratized understanding of art criticism not bound by a prevailing dominant taste that sets the standard.

To answer this question, I will discuss David Hume's argument for such a standard in his work *Of the Standard of Taste*. For Hume, matters of taste are never objective as the aesthetic value does not exist independently of the perceiver but is not merely subjective either, for he thinks some tastes are better than others. Good critics who possess certain qualities, such as the delicacy of taste, have practice in a particular art, can form comparisons between works, are free from prejudice, and have good sense can, through unanimous agreement, *create* the standard of taste. Therefore, for Hume, although there exists no objective aesthetic property out there in the world, there is still good and bad taste, and the true judges will be the ones with good taste (Hume 1875, 187).

Pierre Bourdieu's work *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* can be interpreted to reflect on the socio-cultural aspects of Hume's conditions of a good critic and standard of taste. While Bourdieu is not explicitly concerned with aesthetics, his sociological work on what it takes to make taste judgments in the broader social context allows us to critically evaluate the whole debate, most importantly, on whether there exist certain critics who "get it right". Here, Bourdieu theorizes that taste is only a reflection of social realities, associated with social acceptance, and class distinctions. According to Bourdieu, our cultural capital, which encompasses knowledge, tastes, and preferences acquired through socialization and upbringing, coupled with our habitus,<sup>2</sup> comprised of habits and predispositions shaped by

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<sup>2</sup> the concept of cultural capital and habitus will be explained in detail in Chapter III

cultural capital, manifest in various fields of social life, reinforcing a person's social status. This theory allows him to regard taste as a function of this cultural capital and habitus, playing a fundamental role in socialization that brings about social distinctions (Bourdieu 2002). On this account, there cannot exist general principles by which we judge artworks as what we find beautiful strictly depends on our social upbringing. For the same reason, there cannot be critics who have a better sense of what is considered good or bad art, as each critic would have a different taste judgment, and this variance can be attributed solely to their diverse cultural capital and habitus. Nevertheless, as I will elaborate in this thesis later, dominant groups in society can impose their aesthetic norms and values on the rest of society, falsely establishing a standard of taste.

Hume and Bourdieu can be put into conversation with each other because their views are, at specific points in their theories, similar. As I will explain in later chapters of this thesis, they both endorse aesthetic non-realism<sup>3</sup> and emphasize the role of cultural influences on taste. Most importantly, however, contrasting them reveals how they take these initial starting points in different directions when considering whether critics can create a standard. The reasons mentioned above lead Hume to argue for a standard of taste dependent on critics, whereas it leads Bourdieu to see the existence of such a standard merely in the light of social power. For Bourdieu, critics who bring about such a standard of taste only perpetuate the existing inequalities in society by imposing their aesthetic preferences, values, and norms. However, the question arises whether social power is all that is at work behind aesthetic judgments.

To argue that this is not the case, I will introduce Alexander Nehamas's ideas on criticism as presented in his work *Only a Promise of Happiness: The Place of Beauty in a World of Art*. For Nehamas, there is no single universal community of critics who unanimously judge

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<sup>3</sup> According to aesthetic non-realism, aesthetic value is not an objective property of artworks. The concept will be explained in more detail in relation to Hume in Chapter II.



works of art as good or bad. Instead, there exist sub-groups and communities that are fluid enough to allow for movement between them. These communities are vaguer than Bourdieu imagined, as one can switch between them and develop a different appreciation for different works of art, and this appreciation does not necessarily have to be rooted in one's social capital. The multiplicity of these different aesthetic communities reflects a more democratic understanding of taste that is not inherently grounded in social inequalities, as Bourdieu would argue. Moreover, for Nehamas, criticism does not aspire to establish a standard that all critics should follow to be considered as good, one that Hume imagined. Art critics do not have to agree on aesthetic value to create a standard jointly. Instead, they can all create their "own standard" in the sense of a standard of artworks worth engaging with, in their opinion. Most importantly, however, art critics cannot predict what that experience will be like for different people but can promise the reader that a potential engagement with a specific work of art is worthwhile. Nehamas emphasizes that one should get into direct contact with the artwork, focusing on the dynamic process between the work and the perceiver (Nehamas 2007).

The reason for my bringing these three authors together is that they all reject aesthetic realism but on different grounds. For Hume, there is no objective aesthetic value that can be discovered, but still, true judges are more fit to judge good art from bad art. For Bourdieu, aesthetic realism cannot exist as aesthetic value is just a mere symptom of the power relations that exist in society. For Nehamas, since there is no single universal aesthetic community but multiple, the aesthetic value assigned to a specific work of art will depend on the aesthetic community in question. Therefore, for him, aesthetic value, instead of being an objective property of an artwork, is different for each community.

Despite the differences in their theories, my observation is that they can fruitfully be put in conversation with one another. This dialogue allows for a more critical understanding of

whether art critics can create a standard, whether such a standard exists at all, and, most importantly, whether such a standard is indeed essential.

In this thesis, I will not explore what is the meaning of an artwork or what is beautiful. Instead, I will explore whether art critics can create a standard, and how this question was approached throughout the history of philosophy. To do so, Chapter II will focus on Hume's theory of the standard of taste. To critically evaluate his theory, in Chapter III, I will consider possible criticism from Pierre Bourdieu on whether such a standard exists and, if yes, whether it should be followed. In the last chapter, with the help of Alexander Nehamas, I will argue that there exists an account of art critics that does not necessitate the existence of a standard, as Hume proposed, and can also transcend the idea of aesthetic judgements being merely grounded in social relations, as Bourdieu argued.

## II. DAVID HUME – OF THE STANDARD OF TASTE

### A. Introducing Hume's aesthetics

Hume's *Of the Standard of Taste* explores the nature of aesthetic judgment and the criteria by which we evaluate beauty and artistic merit. At the time of writing *Of the Standard of Taste*, aesthetic theory was developing to establish a standard for subjective judgments of beauty (C. Korsmeyer 1998, 135). Hume thought that aesthetic and moral value judgments can never be objective. He denied aesthetic realism, the belief that beauty is a quality that exists independently or inherent in objects, objectively accessible to human perception. However, this did not lead him to endorse an aesthetic subjectivist position, i.e. dismissing taste as a merely subjective matter: for Hume, some tastes are better than others (Gracyk 2021). This latter idea takes center stage in his work *Of the Standard of Taste*. However, to understand how these different ideas merge in his complex theory, it is essential to first look at some key definitions he is using.

Hume saw taste as a natural capacity allowing us to make aesthetic evaluations. Taste produces sentiments, by which he meant impressions and emotions, signaling approval and disapproval of a particular object. Beauty is such a sentiment, an impression that expresses approval. Without taste that expresses such sentiments, thinking about beauty would not be possible, as the idea of beauty is grounded in the sentiment itself and is not derivable from other ideas (Gracyk 2021).

However, since for Hume aesthetic judgments are based on sentiments instead of rational principles (Graham 2005, 3), all sentiments will be right in the sense that they do not refer to anything beyond themselves and, therefore, cannot be evaluated according to a standard (Hume 1875, 260). The issue Hume detects here is that if one equates perception of beauty with

the experience of the sentiment, i.e. a feeling, then judging an object as beautiful is a mere report of the person's feeling, and this makes it difficult to argue that a critic's taste judgment can ever be a recommendation of an object of art. If a verdict is just an expression of pleasure, it just means it is pleasurable for that person (Gracyk 2021). To respond to this worry, Hume argued that a critic's judgment, although based on sentiment, is subject to standard. This does not mean that a critic's verdict can be evaluated as either true or false. Instead, their taste can be refined through practices contributing to a more refined and accurate judgement of a work of art (Hume 1875, 264). In this reading, not every sentiment leads to proper judgment (Hume 1875, 264–265). However, it is important to note, that through this argument, Hume is not leaning toward aesthetic realism: he does not endorse that aesthetic value is an objective property in artworks and that those with refined sentiment can discover it. He simply argues, that although sentiments can never be true or false, there still exist a standard of taste critics with a more refined taste can establish (Gracyk 2021).

## **B. True judges of taste – Humean critics and their five qualities**

Since those with finer sentiments can better judge what is beautiful or not, they can discover those works of art that are “naturally fitted to please”. By such works, Hume means those that have been appreciated throughout history, for they continuously evoke a sentiment of beauty. These works are of higher value as they have endured different cultures' sentiments and historical periods, i.e. they stood the test of time (Hume 1875, 263–64).<sup>4,5</sup> However, even

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<sup>4</sup> Korsmeyer (C. W. Korsmeyer 1976, 205) explains that the “test of time” is a useful tool in filtering out defects of taste. History depicts which works of art have kept being appreciated over time, among wide audiences.

<sup>5</sup> The argument for the “test of time” has been criticized for leading to a circular assessment of aesthetic value. According to this argument, such artworks are better because they are judged to be so by good critics. However, identifying the true critics requires knowledge about which artworks are better. The issue of circularity has been raised by Levinson (Levinson 2002). According to Kivy (Kivy 1967), however, three qualities (delicacy, lack of prejudice, and good sense) are free from this criticism, because these are qualities that can be explained without the critic's approval of a work of art. Thus, they do not have to be defined in terms of what is good art. For Kivy,

though some objects are naturally fit to please, we might not be able to perceive them as equally pleasurable due to defects in our internal organs or situations/incidents that might prevent us from discovering these works. Hume identifies five qualities that make for good critics: delicacy of imagination, practice with artworks, forming comparisons, being free from prejudice, and having good sense. In the following passages, I will briefly explain how Hume sees each quality as essential for a critic to form accurate judgments of taste.

Firstly, the delicacy of imagination in an individual ensures that the finer emotions are attuned to perceive beautiful objects and their peculiarities (e.g. nuances, composition). Therefore, critics should aspire to have a delicacy of taste that allows us to perceive the finest details of beautiful objects that please us (Hume 1875, 265–268).

Secondly, practice in particular art and in contemplating beautiful objects also help us make better aesthetic judgments. Practice is essential when we encounter beautiful objects for the first time, as our sentiments cannot immediately appreciate each element in the work. However, with practice, our sentiments are more refined and better able to find beauty: when we revisit an object multiple times, in different contexts, it is less likely that the details of the beautiful object escape our attention or that we will find an object beautiful at first sight that would be deemed to be of lower value at closer inspection (Hume 1875, 269–70).

Thirdly, to make sound aesthetic judgments, it is also essential to form comparisons between beautiful objects throughout different cultural contexts and historical ages and to measure their excellence to each other (Hume 1875, 269–270).

Fourthly, critics should also be free from prejudice when judging beautiful objects. When assessing such objects, critics must not make judgments based on individual

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however, there is an infinite regress problem, as each time we want to evaluate an aesthetic judgement we always fall into a subjective criterion for assessing them.

circumstances. If one is influenced by personal interests and dispositions, their taste can be discredited as biased (Hume 1875, 270–271).

Lastly, possessing good sense is essential for keeping track of the destructive influence of prejudice on aesthetic judgments and intellectual faculties. Although aesthetic judgments are based on sentiment, good sense allows for the insertion of reason into our decisions concerning beauty. Good sense encompasses all the other four qualities and ensures that we have a reasoned, consistent approach to evaluating artworks that is impartial in evaluating their merits (Hume 1875, 272–273).

These principles of taste, according to Hume, although universal, are cultivated only in a few. Those who lack delicacy are unable to perceive the fine and nuanced qualities of objects. Without practice, one's judgment might be confused. The inability to compare beautiful objects prevents critics from distinguishing works of real value. Prejudice corrupts the natural sentiments, and lack of good sense prevents one from finding the beauties of design and reasoning, i.e. making one unable to see the relation between the parts of the work and its overall purpose (Hume 1875, 273).

A good critic, therefore, for Hume possesses a strong sense of delicate sentiment, has practiced engaging with artworks, and can compare them to one another without the influence of prejudice (Hume 1875, 273–274) guided by good sense.<sup>6</sup> Critics, therefore, allow Hume to bridge his rejection of aesthetic realism with his project of establishing a standard by which taste judgments can still be evaluated (Gracyk 2021).

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<sup>6</sup> To the five qualities Hume argues critics should possess, Ross (Ross 2008, 24) proposes two additional qualities: imaginative fluency and emotional responsiveness. According to Ross, these qualities reflect the contributions of imagination and emotions to our aesthetic judgements.

### C. The uniformity of the verdict of the true judges

True judges of taste will be able to follow these general principles, and their shared judgment will constitute the Standard of Taste (Hume 1875, 274). However, even the best critics might diverge in their evaluations, and they will have preferences for some art over others due to their different humors, the manners or opinions of their historical period or geographical location (Hume 1875, 279). For this reason, Hume argues, we can account for variance in the taste judgments of even among the most qualified critics. Hume warns the reader that these preferences should not be confused with prejudice as these can simply be attributed to basic dispositions of character and moral differences due to cultural differences (Hume 1875, 276). Although Hume does not specify how exactly such differences are different from mere prejudices, I will not focus on this element in his theory.<sup>7</sup> What is important for this present thesis is that true judges of taste will overcome these biases and, eventually, arrive at the standard of taste (Hume 1875, 276–78). However, the question of which cultural dispositions count as blameless arises and whether they can ever or should be overcome.

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<sup>7</sup> Michelle Mason (Mason 2001) expands on the difference between “blameless” sources of variation and mere prejudices, by explaining the former in terms of internal variations and external variations. For Mason, internal variations are harmless differences, however, external variations influence the pleasure experienced through beauty. For Mason, neither of these differences lead to error in aesthetic judgements. Moreover, James Shelley (Shelley 1994) raises the question of how we determine which difference is blameless and which results from prejudice. For Hume, the joint verdict of true judges can determine the difference between the two. Nevertheless, the question of how many true judges are needed for a joint verdict to discern the difference remains unanswered. Jonathan Friday (Friday 1998) problematizes that the joint verdict of true judges is enough to detect the difference between these variations. For Friday, where judges are different in character and background, it is possible that they will not be able to agree and hence, arrive at a joint verdict that sets the standard. Stephanie Ross (Ross 2012) argues that the fact that Hume accounts for these “blameless” variations allows him to accommodate the complexity of the varying tastes of true judges.

### III. PIERRE BOURDIEU – DISTINCTION

#### A. Cultural capital and habitus – Can and should cultural dispositions be overcome?

Like Hume, Bourdieu, in his work *Distinction* discusses how cultural differences influence taste in art. However, while for Hume such differences do not give strong enough ground to reject the standard of taste, for Bourdieu, these cultural differences lead him to reject the existence of the universal standard of taste Hume is proposing altogether. Social class and background inevitably influence our preferences, judgments, and enjoyment of art. What kinds we find ourselves encountering is *simply* a function of our education and our class (Bourdieu 2002, 1–2). Consequently, those who have a taste for what is praised as fine or high art have been given a cognitive code to understand high culture, whereas working-class people are more inclined towards works that seem to mirror life or display more practical values (C. Korsmeyer 1998, 135–36; Bourdieu 2002, 2).

For Bourdieu, this phenomenon is best explained by his concept of cultural capital, i.e. cultural knowledge or tastes and practices that individuals acquire through socialization and education (Grenfell 2008, 11). This capital is unequally distributed in society and reinforces social distinctions. Consequently, those with more cultural capital are better equipped to navigate the cultural field of high art. Based on these resources that are acquired through education and socialization, individuals develop the habitus, through which Bourdieu refers to a set of dispositions and preferences that individuals internalize without being aware of it (Bourdieu 2002, 6). These dispositions guide people's choices, and preferences, in other words, they define their taste, which, through engagement in the social fields (e.g. cultural, educational, artistic, or economic), reflects their cultural capital and their ability to acquire further capital.



Therefore, taste is a tool through which people distinguish themselves and assert their social identity and position in society (Bourdieu 2002, 6).

Those individuals who perform better in these social fields make up the dominant group, who impose their cultural norms, values, and beliefs on groups that perform worse (Bourdieu 2002, 7). These dominant norms and values shape individual preferences, and subordinate groups internalize them without questioning their legitimacy. The result is that subordinate groups reproduce the cultural codes that dominant groups impose on them. In this sense, dominant groups exert control over cultural capital and by reproducing it to their liking, maintain their position within society, while making it difficult for subordinate groups to earn recognition, i.e. have their social capital recognized (Grenfell 2008, 184). This could result in, for instance, the marginalization of alternative perspectives (excluding alternative forms of cultural expression), cultural practices, or cultural biases, and in general in a hierarchy of cultural preferences that label some as the legitimate standard, while others as “lower” or more popular (Grenfell 2008, 184–85).

According to Bourdieu, to conceal the fact that dominant groups project their cultural capital and taste onto society, shaping what is good and bad based on their preferences, dominant groups declare these preferences and practices as belonging to the pure aesthetic. By the term, Bourdieu means a form of cultural appreciation that is illusionary in that it tries to hide the fact that aesthetic judgments are rooted in social factors like education and upbringing (Bourdieu 2002, 5). For Bourdieu, therefore, pure aesthetic only serves to uphold the idea that there is an autonomous and universal aesthetic judgment that is divorced from these social factors when in fact, it is impossible (Bourdieu 2002, 493).

The idea of the pure aesthetic gives us reasons to be skeptical about Hume’s standard of taste. Just as the pure aesthetic, Hume’s standard also seems to be detached from social considerations such as background and cultural capital. Although Hume does not entirely put

social considerations aside, by arguing that cultural differences, even among the true judges, lead to disagreement, he still holds that even such disagreements could be overcome. Hume therefore is not deeply concerned with the social inequalities underlying such a standard, an idea that Bourdieu adequately accounts for.

Similarly, the pure aesthetic, according to Bourdieu, also serves to uphold the dominant ideology of there being a standard against which all other tastes and preferences can be measured. For this reason, Bourdieu could object that the people Hume thinks are the true judges coming up with the standard are, in fact, the dominant groups whose values and norms constitute the pure aesthetic. Moreover, those who possess the five qualities that Hume argues critics must have are very likely to be coming from a privileged background or social position that ensures that they have the chance to acquire and cultivate these qualities. For instance, those from wealthier backgrounds could have had more exposure to different works of art so that they could better compare and judge them without the influence of any prejudice. These considerations from Bourdieu object to Hume's theory of the standard as it points to its possible elitist nature.

For Hume, however, it is not necessarily evident that these people with high levels of social power will be the true critics. There could be a gap between those with high social prestige, i.e. belonging to the dominant group and the true critics. It is possible that true critics possess more cultural capital, and Hume does not deny that. However, it is not a necessary condition for being able to judge the standard. Hume, therefore, could avoid Bourdieu's objection by saying that being a true critic is not necessarily only an entrenchment of social position, it is not just those who are socially advantaged who can then create the standard of taste. Hume's concern is purely aesthetic, and Bourdieu is right to point out that aesthetics cannot be completely detached from the social. However, considering Hume's possible response to Bourdieu's criticism of the true judges, the question of how far this observation

about social power takes us and whether there is more to criticism arises. Hume could argue that power relations are not all there is behind aesthetic judgements, and we can in fact think of critics and the Standard of Taste they create as not necessarily aligning with the norms and values of the elite.

Bourdieu's theory does not provide answers to this last question, and this might be because Bourdieu's theory does not strictly concern the aesthetic but instead treats it as a sphere to which the symptoms of these social power relations spread. Therefore, for navigating around this question, Hume's purely aesthetic theory could be useful. However, if it is not just the power relations in place that influence our aesthetic judgments, then Hume is still facing the problem of explaining what it is behind aesthetic judgments if not an aesthetic value that is out there in the world, i.e. aesthetic realism – an idea that he sets out to deny at the beginning of *Of the Standard of Taste*.

## **IV. ALEXANDER NEHAMAS – ONLY A PROMISE OF HAPPINESS**

### **A. Introducing Nehamas's aesthetics**

Alexander Nehamas's work approaches the question of whether critics can create a standard from a different angle than Hume and Bourdieu. Nehamas does not appeal to a standard of taste, like Hume did. For him, there is no such standard that critics should follow to distinguish between good art from bad art. Instead, he emphasizes that critics, through their reviews, should invite the reader to engage with the work directly, form their own evaluations and interpretations and explore the desire that draws them to beauty and to other people. Moreover, Nehamas's theory accounts for the social aspect of taste but does not treat it as a mere marker of social class, as a function of social power, as Bourdieu saw it. However, to see how Nehamas fits with Hume and Bourdieu, it is important to introduce the key elements in his theory briefly.

Nehamas is interested in why we choose to engage with certain artworks over others, and he looks for his answers in the processes of interpretation and evaluation. For him, paying attention to a specific work of art, deciding that there is a point in interpreting it, marks the first crucial step in the formation of aesthetic judgements: choosing what we interpret sets out what is significant and valuable for us (Nehamas 2007, 41). Although it is a commonly held view that this process of interpretation precedes evaluation, on Nehamas's account, the two are closely interlinked and are never really isolated from one another. According to Nehamas, to have an evaluation is to have an interpretation, for when we bother to interpret a specific work of art, it also implies that there was an evaluation involved in the first place (when we decided to interpret a specific work of art). However, even though interpretation aims to reach an evaluative judgement, such judgement does not mark the end of the engagement with it. When

we read an art critic's verdict, their evaluation opens up for further interpretations and evaluations to be made by the reader. For Nehamas, therefore, these intertwined processes of interpretation and evaluation are never finite, and art critics, through their reviews, can point to infinite possibilities to rethink the artwork. Reaching a verdict, for Nehamas, is never the purpose of criticism (Nehamas 2007, 42–47).

There is also another layer of evaluation going on, which is evaluating which critics are trustworthy. When we decide to read an art critic, we judge that their verdicts on a specific work of art will point us in a direction that might be worthwhile. For the very same reason, we do not read criticism to tell us whether a work of art is good or bad. These evaluations only invite us to see what the work in question can offer to us, and in order to understand that, we first need to interpret on our own. No matter how strongly we trust a critic's judgement, they cannot prescribe an evaluation nor the meaning of a work of art nor tell us how it will affect us when we get in contact with it. Beautiful objects carry a promise that engaging with them might be worthwhile and might add to our lives, but no critic can tell us whether this will be the case. Only by being in direct contact with them can we see what beautiful works have to offer to us (Nehamas 2007, 101).

The question arises, how do we perceive the critics we find to be trustworthy, whose recommendations we give credit to? For instance, Hume sees critics as higher authorities, teachers who guide us in what they believe is the “right” direction towards beauty. For Nehamas, however, such a direction does not exist. He sees critics as analogous to friends who introduce us to people they think might add value to our lives. Friends describe their friends to us, and based on this description, we can decide to meet them. This invitation from our friends to meet someone new, however, cannot predict how we will feel about this specific person when we are in their company. Similarly, critics can describe a work of art, i.e. evaluate it in a way

that intrigues me, but this description will never be enough for me to find out what this artwork holds for me, what place it will have in my life, if I decide to continue to have it in my life at all (Nehamas 2007, 101).

The worry with thinking of critics as teachers, like Hume does, is that it might discourage independent engagement with the work of art in question and, instead, lead people to accept the point of view of the critic only because of their perceived higher authority. Furthermore, this might perpetuate hierarchies in the artworld by deepening the gap between those who are “qualified” enough to engage in criticism and those who only get to follow the critic’s opinion. This is not to say that we cannot agree with a critic; what is important is that these critics are not of higher authority. They are more like friends, as Nehamas suggests, only inviting us through their reviews to engage with the work in question because they think it might be worthwhile. If we happen to agree with them, they introduced us to a work that we all find important to engage with. However, what matters is not the agreement itself, but that they induced us to explore the work on our own, without imposing their own views.

The critic’s verdict, therefore, does not mark the end of engaging with a work of art but rather points to the future life of the work in question. Likewise, criticism does not aspire to reach objectivity regarding aesthetic judgements (Nehamas 2007, 42–44). According to Nehamas, the opposite is the case: evaluation only expresses our commitment to the future and our desire to keep the work as part of our lives (Nehamas 2007, 53).

## **B. Nehamas and the standard of taste**

For Nehamas, critics, therefore, do not provide general principles of aesthetic evaluation, and hence, there are no standards of taste like the one Hume aimed to establish (Nehamas 2007, 47). Although Hume and Nehamas agree that there is no independently

existing standard by which we can discern good art from bad art, Hume goes on to argue that critics can bring about what he calls the standard of taste, whereas for Nehamas, the role of critics will not consist in bringing about such a standard. Taste, for Hume, is a faculty that can be cultivated through the five qualities.<sup>8</sup> These five qualities distinguish the good critics from those who cannot discern important subtleties of specific works of art. On the other hand, for Nehamas, taste is not a faculty that has to be refined, for instance, by the qualities Hume defines. Instead, it is an ability that everyone possesses (Nehamas 2007, 52). In this light, the differing verdicts of critics is not necessarily due to a defect,<sup>9</sup> as Hume suggested. The explanation to our differing aesthetic judgements is simply due to a difference in taste, a taste in what is worthy of interpretation, but no taste is worse than another (Nehamas 2007, 52). Likewise, critics cannot be ranked against one another, nor can their verdicts (Nehamas 2007, 137).

For Hume, critics with the five qualities can create the Standard of Taste, and based on this standard, we can distinguish between good and bad taste. For Nehamas, such a distinction does not exist. Nevertheless, he distinguishes between those who lack taste and those who possess it. For him, critics who follow standards set by others are the ones who lack taste (Nehamas 2007, 89), and should not be followed. On the other hand, he sees the originality of taste<sup>10</sup> as an essential feature that critics should possess to be regarded as good critics (Nehamas 2007, 89).<sup>11</sup> In this sense, Nehamas marks certain characteristics that distinguish between good and bad critics, similar to Hume. Nevertheless, the important difference here is that Hume,

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<sup>8</sup> The discussion of the five qualities critics should possess can be read in Chapter II., subchapter b.

<sup>9</sup> Although Nehamas does not use the word 'defect', he mentions that uniformity and conformity of taste are signs of "bad taste" (87).

<sup>10</sup> For Nehamas, the originality of taste also demands the distinctiveness of taste, i.e. being different from the rest.

<sup>11</sup> It is important to note here that Nehamas does not explicitly say that critics should possess originality and distinctiveness of taste, he argues only that works of art (and people) come to our attention when they stand out from those surrounding it. In my interpretation, this thought can be extended to critics as well, as we tend to prefer critics whose tastes stand out from the rest, revealing new insights about a work of art.

through the *Standard of Taste*, offers a structural feature that serves as a criterion for something to count as taste, whereas Nehamas does not give a substantive characterization of what marks good or bad taste, just suggests that a critic with an original taste has more to offer to us. Nehamas's account positively contributes to a more inclusive art-appreciating community. If the most important value that critics should possess is their distinct tastes, it inevitably makes for a more diverse artworld, where critics and readers alike are encouraged to critically engage with works of art. In such a situation, deviation from the standard is not something to be discouraged because the only "standard" to follow, according to Nehamas, is the originality of taste (Nehamas 2007, 89).

However, the originality and distinctiveness of taste also comes with the possibility that others might disagree with us on the aesthetic value of a certain work of art. For Nehamas, it is essential that we take into consideration the dissent of others, yet this should not prevent us from sticking with our judgement. Interaction with others does not force us to give up our aesthetic judgements. Instead, it ensures that taste never remains a merely subjective or private enterprise, as we have to consider the understanding of others when shaping our judgement (Nehamas 2007, 77).

### **C. The social dimension of taste**

For Nehamas, our desire for beauty has a fundamental social aspect, for when we encounter a beautiful object, we can only make sense of this experience by asking, for instance, what others think of this work of art or what their experience with it was like. To understand our experience of beauty, we have to turn to others, and only through engaging with them can we recognize the direction in which beauty is directing us. In this sense, the desire for beauty is



not only social in the sense that my circumstances reflect on my interaction with an artwork, but that the very interaction with beauty itself is shared with others (Nehamas 2007, 77).

It is possible to interpret this argument from Nehamas in the context of art critics. Whenever a critic encounters a beautiful object, their experience invites others to engage with it and make it part of their life by getting into direct contact with it based on this recommendation and, ideally, choose to interpret and evaluate it (Nehamas 2007, 79). In this sense, critics can create a community of auditors that centers around this shared experience of beauty and the desire to make a particular work of art part of their lives (Nehamas 2007, 79).<sup>12</sup>

Nehamas's theory of these communities of beauty improves Bourdieu's account of the influence of social power on taste, specifically social class and education. Although Nehamas does not explicitly discuss the influence of social power on taste, he would not necessarily disagree with Bourdieu on whether this is the case. However, it is essential that for Nehamas, the groups that Bourdieu refers to as dominant do not necessarily impose their values and norms on other groups. For Nehamas, those sharing similar tastes create a community (for Bourdieu, a class), and instead of imposing their own tastes on other communities, they acknowledge the different communities' existence and together, create a new society. The different communities in society are still connected by a shared desire to find beauty in the world, the only difference is that they look for and find them in different places. This understanding of critics on Nehamas's account allows us to not necessarily associate critics with what Bourdieu called the dominant group. Instead, critics can come from each of these smaller communities, and no single community's taste would be forced on the rest of society. Interpreting Nehamas this way,

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<sup>12</sup> This idea also plays a central role in Ted Cohen's work *High and Low Thinking about High and Low Art* (Cohen 1993, 155), where he expands on how sharing a certain feeling about an artwork can create bonds between people which eventually lead to the existence of a community. However, for Cohen, this idea serves the argument that these communities break with distinction between high and low art, whereas for Nehamas, it is part of his argument that there is no standard that prevails in society.

critics, through their reviews, can create smaller, more inclusive communities that eventually make up for a diverse society. Critics will only invite people to join the community of beauty they are part of, but they will never be forced to accept the aesthetic judgements that prevail in that community (Nehamas 2007, 81–82).

Moreover, Bourdieu's observation that aesthetic judgements are bound by a hierarchical structure, within which there exists a dominant, authoritative taste that confines individuals from different social classes to their respective social positions can be improved by Nehamas. He suggests, that the boundaries of such communities are not strictly defined, as Bourdieu would imagine, but constantly shifting, allowing for mobility between them. Consequently, the boundaries of such communities are not pivotal since no community of beauty is ever universal. Nehamas's perspective presents a way out from the oppression that Bourdieu sees is imposed by dominant groups within the realm of aesthetics.

In this chapter, I pointed out how Nehamas's theory of critics can be contrasted with Hume's concept of the standard of taste and Bourdieu's arguments against such a standard in *Distinction*. Nehamas's ideas on aesthetic judgements, taste, and criticism share similarities with these thinkers; however, his approach to questions related to these topics is a novel one. For Nehamas, critics, instead of bringing about a standard, should encourage us to engage with artworks on a personal level, inducing a diversity of interpretations and evaluations. Moreover, Nehamas avoids Bourdieu's objection against Hume by presenting a view of critics according to which they do not necessarily perpetuate existing aesthetic hierarchies but emphasize the social dimension of taste, allowing for a more democratized understanding of aesthetic judgements according to which different communities of beauty can coexist, without deeming the other as inferior.

## V. FINAL THOUGHTS

In this thesis, I explored the question of whether critics can create a standard of taste by which artworks can be evaluated. The reason for my interest in this question originates from a common objection against art criticism as an elitist field. This raises the worry that since mostly those coming from privileged backgrounds have access to criticism, they are the ones shaping the discourse in the artworld as well. In this reading, critics can create a standard of taste, but this standard will only reflect the aesthetic norms and values that prevail among elitist circles. However, I was curious about whether it is possible to imagine art critics who, instead of setting a standard for discerning good art from bad art, can emphasize the importance of personal experience with artworks.

To explore this question, I focused on three thinkers: David Hume, Pierre Bourdieu and Alexander Nehamas. I critically reformulated their arguments to engage them in a dialogue about whether art critics can create a standard of taste. In Chapter I, I briefly explained which of their arguments will be of central importance and outlined my argument.

In Chapter II, I gave a brief introduction to Hume's aesthetic theory, his aesthetic non-realism, his denial of aesthetic subjectivism and the key concepts he uses, such as taste and sentiment, to give a background for understanding his work *Of the Standard of Taste*. Moreover, I briefly reformulated the five qualities of Humean critics and how their uniform judgement gives the Standard of Taste. Lastly, I mentioned that cultural differences can arise even among the judges possessing the five qualities.

In Chapter III, I introduced Pierre Bourdieu's ideas presented in the Introduction of his book *Distinction*. To give the basis for my arguments, I defined his key concepts of cultural capital, habitus, dominant groups, and the notion of the pure aesthetic. This last concept I compared to Hume's Standard of Taste to point to the possible negative socio-cultural

implications such a standard might have. Moreover, I argued that the critics who possess the five qualities that Hume sets out are likely to be associated with the dominant groups in society, as Bourdieu explains, pointing to the elitist implications of Hume's standard of taste. Nevertheless, I also raised the question whether Bourdieu's explanation of taste as a mere social marker and result of social power is all there is to art criticism.

Chapter IV, firstly, introduced the key concepts in Alexander Nehamas's aesthetics: the interconnectedness of interpretation and evaluation, the role of critics, considering them as friends, and the importance of first-person experience with the work of art. I firstly argued that Nehamas's idea of critics as friends is essential for encouraging independent engagement with artworks, while Hume's more authoritative theorization of critics as teachers only further perpetuate the already existing hierarchies in the artworld. Secondly, I pointed out that Nehamas also marks certain qualities that good critics should have, nevertheless, these qualities only promote a more inclusive understanding of taste, whereas Hume's standard is more restrictive. Lastly, I emphasize that Nehamas's theory of communities also accounts for the social dimension of taste Bourdieu brings into the discussion. For Nehamas, however, these communities do not impose their norms and values on others, like Bourdieu would imagine dominant groups do. Rather, the boundaries of these groups are fluid and are not tied to social class.

While Hume argues that critics can create a standard, Bourdieu's possible objections point to the elitist implications of such a standard. However, in this thesis, I argued that Nehamas's theory of critics responds to possible objections against criticism as an elitist approach while also acknowledging the social aspects of taste Bourdieu emphasizes without reducing it to merely a marker of social class or a function of social power. Critics, therefore, do not have to establish a standard; instead, they can promote diverse personal evaluations and interpretations, allowing for a more democratized understanding of taste.

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