

Bad Taste: Marginalities, Ambiguities, Paradoxes

From baroque to kitsch, from mannerism to the obscene, from camp to trash, from the vulgar to the tacky, from popular art to pop art, the notion of “bad taste” has known many different incarnations over time. However, despite the slings and arrows regularly cast in its direction, bad taste has nevertheless managed to innovate and regenerate ceaselessly, rising ultimately to the ranks of an esthetic paradigm. As such, in *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche proclaimed that “bad taste has its rights no less than good taste”. Bad taste takes on multiple forms, to the point of even outlasting the endlessly shifting values of a given society and acquiring a seemingly positive quality.

This Graduate Workshop, which will focus on the XIXth, XXth, and XXIst centuries, intends to restore the notion of “bad taste” to its rightful place by deconstructing the mechanisms intended to be the instruments of its marginalization, and by analyzing the creative, expressive, and affirmative potentials of the proverbial black sheep of esthetics. The frequency of criticisms intended to denounce the notion of bad taste allow us as well to determine a certain number of categorical notions crucial to this concept:

- The fundament *expressiveness* of bad taste, which can be communicated by immoderateness, flashiness, sentimentality (an immoderate use of color, dependance on “easy” emotions, visual ostentation)
- An esthetic dimension which can appear outdated or overdone. Retro-ness, tackiness, or obsolescence, which would appear automatically to be in bad taste, because they do not conform to the tastes of their day.
- A *esthetic conservatism*, prompted by an unflagging adherence to the standards of the “academy” or “conformism”.
- The *absence of respect* for the rules, and as such, a facet of bad taste which may appear *provocative, politically incorrect, or even revolutionary*.
- The “popular” (which is to say “vulgar”) dimension, by which we mean the measure to which, according to the works of Pierre Bourdieu, the search for good taste amounts effectively to a striving to distinguish oneself, and in doing so to affirm one’s belonging to a certain, culturally dominant, social stratum.
- The *mercantile* dimension, through the critic of kitsch, of a consumption-based society, and the notion of a cultural industry, such as they have been theorized by Adorno and Horkheimer.

Using these different notions as a starting point, we will attempt to interrogate the societal and social mechanisms through the example of institutions which would impose and diffuse the ‘canons’ of a generation. These include, but are not limited to: the academies, the reviews, appreciation societies, universities, literary critics, the press, or more generally the medias, all of whom assist in the exclusion of certain cultural productions and practices in the name of a moral or esthetic norm. In this perspective, the participation of the doctoral students will expose a more or less explicit and enduring system of hierarchization of genres within the fields of literature, visual arts (from painting to comic books), architecture, performance arts (including theater and cinema, as well as others), music, media (television, radio, press, etc), graphic arts (video games),

as well as the notion of sub-genres, all of which have been ignored or under-appreciated because they have been deemed less noble or not belonging to any institution. Who is it that decides what is in bad taste? Is bad taste not all too frequently associated with a certain bourgeoisie esthetic? Is it not possible that there exists, as posited Baudelaire, an “aristocracy of bad taste”? If this is the case, it seems it would then be necessary as well to consider the instances where bad taste is considered to be a good thing, where it becomes *good taste* to have *bad taste*. In effect, certain practices attempt to re-appropriate this quality in order to better subvert it.

It becomes necessary, therefore, to determine the motivations (ethical, esthetic, political) that drive a certain part of society to place bad taste on such a high pedestal, and to ask oneself if these people are not part of the provocation, of the transgression, when they do not declare themselves through the means of an avant-garde manifesto (for example the terms “jazz” or “impressionism” which were initially terms of derision). Through the question of *kitsch* (or even neo-kitsch) as well as *camp*, we will consider the ways that bad taste can become the object of a game of humorous referencing which, through the means of an intermediary effect, allows the notion of bad taste to assume a certain ironic distance. Finally, we will not fail neither to draw attention towards the entirely relative dimension of bad taste such as it is subject to change based on notions of geography (travel-logs, notions of nationalism) and temporality (changing fashion trends, reevaluations of artists or of forgotten forms of art). As such, the different case studies will each shine a light upon different cultural productions traditionally considered to be in bad taste, denigrated, forgotten, or unable to fit into overly-narrow cultural parameters imposed by a historical, sociological, philosophical, literary, musicological, or psychological perspective. Nevertheless, they will also show that these productions can be revamped and reconsidered in accordance with contemporary tastes, after a certain time.

Potential avenues of inquiry include :

I The Multiple Faces of Bad Taste : Kitsch, Tackiness, Vulgarly ...

What does multiplicity of notions of “bad taste” reveal to us? It is possible to offer a definition of bad taste or is it only understandable in a kaleidoscopic dimension? Is it not, by its very essence, an elusive notion, can it not be considered the “counterpoint” of taste?

II Bad Taste and Society: Mechanisms of Distinction and Prescription

Who decides what is “bad taste” in the 19th, the 20th, and 21st century? Do the growing affirmations of subjectivity starting in the 19th century not render any denunciation of bad taste all the more void? What have been the ideological clashes surrounding the notion of bad taste? Can bad taste be assigned to a certain social station?

III The Culture of Bad Taste: When Having Bad Taste is a Good Thing

What mechanisms allow for the rehabilitation of bad taste? What do they reveal about esthetic modernity? Are we still living in the “era that dreams of bad taste” that Walter Benjamin evoked when writing about the 19th century? What are the motivations that incite a person to adopt bad taste as the order of the day? Is it an attempt to provoke, to amuse, to deceive, or simply to set oneself apart?

IV The Politics of Bad Taste: the Ethics of Provocation

In what capacity is bad taste allowed to coexist with politics and morality? Does being in bad taste imply a certain sort of immorality? Is the humor of bad taste always and necessarily politically incorrect? Against what political and moral values might one establish an ethical system of “bad taste”?

V The Bad Tastes of the Other

Does bad taste necessarily belong to somebody else, to “the Other”? What can travelogues tell us about the relativism of this idea? Are geographic or temporal distance ever safe from the label of bad taste? Does the rejection of “bad taste” not result from the willful imposition of a certain distance between that which is different and, beyond that, from a refusal of otherness (human, but also cultural and temporal)?

Calendar

Deadline for submissions: February 26th, 2018

Responses: March 26th, 2018

Date of workshop: Wednesday, May 23, 2018 (at the Université de Versailles Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines)

Eligibility

This call for papers is open to all doctoral candidates, as well as doctors who have defended in the past few years, in France, or abroad. Abstract proposals may be submitted in French or English. Abstracts should be approximately 500 words in length, and should be submitted accompanied by a short presentation of their author (including the title, field of doctoral research, year of defense if possible, as well as the university where enrolled) by February 26th, 2018 at the latest. Please send abstract proposals to the following address: doctorants.chcsc@gmail.com