

The Making of Classics

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I

Classics do not drop from heaven. A finished work in the studio is not a classic yet. There may be a classic air about it, but its looks will not tell whether it will eventually rise to classic status. The career of a classic depends on more than the work itself - to begin with, on the attention it receives. Such a career will have various stages. The work must be born to the public world, must be reviewed by experts. Next, it must become generally known, assert itself among its specific audience. If it becomes a common concept for everyone, its career as possible future classic continues. The last stage in this career is reached when the candidate work survives a phase of inflationary reproduction: something known by everyone up to the point of surfeit, and yet not repulsive, is a classic.

Classic objects are living proof that artistic quality cannot be reduced to either novelty or rarity. Classics evolve via growth, consumption, and then, progressive decay of novelty value. The stage of inflationary reproduction, however, is critical for the selection of quality – a quality enabling something aged to retain its exemplary power. Rarity, therefore, does not define the classic, either. The question how classics arise is thus equivalent to looking for a quality that surpasses both the lure of novelty and the value of rarity.

The sociologically objective outcome of the selection process determining classical quality is a catalogue of recognised classical works. We find such a catalogue in

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every artistic discipline. In the course of elaborating their specific catalogues of classical works the various disciplines also define their own identities. The catalogues are not static, however; they are open-ended and constantly being rewritten. Yet, at any particular point in time any particular version of a canon is binding and exemplary. The existence of such catalogues means there is something objective about quality which resists reduction to novelty or rarity.

II

That there is an objective quality beyond novelty or rarity is a controversial assumption. Quality addresses the senses. Sensuous judgement is called taste. Taste is judgement not based on stringent reasons. It can only refer to perceptions, feelings, vague ideas, habits. Even the clearest preference or the sharpest distinction based on taste will always remain subjective. Judgement that remains subjective lacks binding power.

It is very tempting to conceive aesthetic quality as a substance. Beauty would then be a kind of innate idea. To assume that some innate idea exists might perhaps be correct with respect to the human sense of symmetry or harmony involved in the perception of organic shapes. It would, however, be completely unfounded to assert that a canon of recognised works can be subsumed under an idea of higher symmetry or harmony. Beauty, although ideal, is not endowed with the ideality of Platonic ideas. At any rate, beauty is not reducible to pre-established criteria. If there is some ideal involved it is that of motivation. The ideal of motivation is another expression of our unbounded desire for making sense. We cannot but crave for coherence and meaningfulness because we, ourselves, are bundles of drives whose satisfaction lies in coherence. All perceiving, feeling, striving and concluding is interconnected and serving each other. Together, these acts form a grandiose chord, merge into one comprehensive intelligence.

But again, openness to sensorial motivation is something individual. What we perceive are our own sensations, what we feel are nothing but our own feelings. We are monads without windows into other minds. Also the fact that all our sensing, perceiving and feeling is interrelated is part of subjectivity. So, having dealt with individual taste, the objective status of artistic quality would seem to be rooted in social convention. Convention, however, is not the basis of substantive objectivity, either. It is the rule transforming arbitrariness into social norm.

No wonder, therefore, that aesthetic validity is supposed to escape objectification. And yet, is there anything more stable in culture than the corpus of recognised works? Are catalogues of canonical works not even more stable than the epitome of objectivity, i.e. the corpus of scientific theory? Theories will come and go, but a work of art once recognised as canonical will most probably remain so. This stability is the more remarkable, as each catalogue of canonical works – just like the corpus of theories – is subject to constant debate. Since there is no pre-established system of aesthetic order, one is led to suspect that something else comes into play when individual taste and social convention interact; something surpassing the transformation of arbitrariness into convention.

III

There is a way of establishing objectivity that does not contradict the reign of subjectivity; this is the transformation of subjective taste into economic value. The most typical and most common example of transformation of subjective preferences into socially binding values is market price formation. If aesthetic value were determined in an analogous way, taste and convention would not resist becoming objective.

Aesthetic value has something to do with economic price. After all, art markets exist. But everybody claiming to cherish art will insist that a distinction must be

made between prices in art trade and aesthetic rank. It is also important to note that the case of the art market does not apply to architecture. What is traded in architecture is not art, but physical structure. The price of buildings is only marginally related to architectural quality, or, if there are conservation codes for historical buildings, the inverse relationship holds. Not even architectural services are priced according to quality. Pricing follows standard price lists calculated on the basis of building category and total building cost only.

Art trade is not the only market where artistic value is negotiated. Another market of this type is the one for published opinion on creative rank. In such a market architectural value or worthlessness is established; and, of course, it is here that things must be traded if they are to become classics. Price formation in this market is the first stage of such a career. When a work of art appears on this market, this is equivalent to its being born.

Opinions are traded in information markets. Yet, the measure of artistic value or worthlessness is not the price of the information itself. Aesthetic rank is determined by a quite different kind of price formation, i.e. the allocation of votes. Crucial for the ranking of a work of art or of an author is the attention paid to their publicised appearance. What counts is the number of reviews, the journalistic resonance, the number of citations, in short, documented attention.

The market for expert public opinion is called discourse. This term is somewhat misleading since it suggests that arguments are exchanged in order to achieve consensus. However, establishment of consensus through rational debate is not what the review system is all about. What is being allocated are not arguments; what prevails is not compelling logic. Rather, the debate constitutes an immaterial market where information is exchanged for attention. What counts is the amount of attention obtained; the trophy goes to whatever has caused the greatest stir. Ranking is a price system measuring people's preparedness to spend their attention on something. The rank achieved depends on the accumulated number of citations or reviews. What perhaps also influences the result is the attention

income of those presenting some work or writing a review. (The standard example for this kind of market is scientific communication, where individual productiveness and reputation are measured via personal citation accounts listed in a citation index).

Today, the market for published opinion has taken over the function formerly performed by tacit convention. The opinions traded here are not exclusively concerned with current production. Where such markets exist, tradition is at stake, too. The catalogues of canonical works are constantly being enlarged and revised. Striking is how much opinions about recent works vary and how rapidly and clearly consensus grows with increasing temporal distance. One is free, for example, to deny that Richard Meier or Richard Rogers are important architects, but someone not impressed by Adolf Loos or Ludwig Mies van der Rohe will be considered to lack architectural judgement. The bare fact of continuing presence in public discourse gives rise to unquestionable recognition. Ranking tends to produce a catalogue of works which are undeniably important in the sense that doubt automatically disqualifies itself.

IV

Self-disqualifying doubt is equivalent to unquestioned recognition. There is no higher measure of social objectivity. We should, however, wonder how this objectivity comes about. Does subjective taste become objective, or are we dealing with successful manipulation? Is constant attention a safe measure of aesthetic value? Or is it an indication that public opinion makers have imposed something on us?

To answer those questions it will not be enough to examine the market. What happens in the market of published opinion is not always straightforward. Fraud and manipulation are not unheard of. Artists are built up and importance is

exaggerated. The crucial question is how far the long arm of fraud and manipulation will reach. Publicity and publication power may get anything across for a short while, but the question remains whether wheeling and dealing, and exertion of pressure, can lastingly impose any random thing. This brings us back to the works themselves. Is there a characteristic quality that each canonical work possesses, a quality common to all of them?

It is futile to look for this quality among physical or even measurable characteristics. Remembering the endless number of failed attempts to explain architectural quality by some doctrine on proportions should be warning enough. Nevertheless, the proportions of all shapes and forms that have become classic share a special feature: they give the impression of being exceptionally *motivated*. To use the metaphor introduced earlier once more, they are motivated like a deeply moving chord. They invariably touch more than one, primary, sense; they bring our different senses and capacities of experiencing into resonance. The facade of a building has a certain sound because optical stimuli do not only affect vision: they also address our musicality; a flight of stairs is looking elegant, not only because of its elegant sweep, but because it evokes a feeling animated walking in us; a surface captures the eye, not only because the eye itself is groping, but also because it takes over for the sense of touch on distance.

Human perception understands more than reason grasps. Classic works are those which explain this to us – or rather, which make us feel this. Canonical works seem to be motivated to a degree that invariably surpasses our ability of explanation. Classic works remain surprising, because we do not fully understand the conspiracy of our senses producing the impression of overwhelming quality. There is something surprising about classic works, and yet they are incarnations of conclusiveness down to their most minute details. Even the traditional heritage embodied in the succession of canonical works seems to be logical in the sense that each work reacts to its predecessor in a surprising, but also surprisingly logical, manner. Those works are so evidently convincing that this must have something to do with our own sensuousness and intelligence. When we sense those works' motivation their form, expression and symbolism mingle and enrich each other,

thus making us aware how far our capacity of experiencing may reach. Sensorial motivation, expressed differently, means that a classic work is exceptionally precise in addressing both the synaesthetic potential of our sensuousness and the subtle needs of our attention.¹

V

Works that rise to the status of classics have something in common: they tell us something about our sensuous intelligence. Classic works are not (or not only) just satisfying one or another predilection. They enlighten us about a general capacity behind individual preferences. This capacity, although thoroughly subjective, goes beyond being individual. It reveals what it means to be a subject. This capacity is not just present or absent: it is a potential longing to be developed further, towards full self-realisation.

Might it not be that the objectivity of this potential is the basis for the objectivity of artistic rank? Could artistic creation not be the collective laboratory where the synthetic effect of differentiated modalities and ways of experiencing is being explored? Without this social experiment, would we know what subjectivity means? Without the evolution of different artistic disciplines, would we know of the subtleties of our senses or the conspiratorial interaction of different modalities? And would we not be oblivious to the potentials of our senses, emotions and intellect if we were not able to gaze into the mirror of canonical works?

Looks into this mirror show us a dimension of common depth behind the play of diversity. This depth reaches further than arbitrariness. It is here where we must

¹ For a discussion of the concept of sensorial motivation, cf. Dorothea Franck and Georg Franck, "Qualität. Von der poetischen Kraft der Architektur" (Quality. On the Poetics of Architecture), in *Merkur*, no. 626 (June 2001). English translation available at: <http://www.iemar.tuwien.ac.at/publications>

locate the basis of the stability exhibited by the catalogue of canonical works. This stability is not predetermined. On the contrary, it happens quite often that there is a change in ranking and there is even something like business cycles in evaluations of the traditional heritage. Those revisions, however, are typically minor compared with what remains canonical. Revisions in the choice of works admitted to the catalogue of classics are an exception. If revisions resemble business cycles this is simply because the ongoing debate about artistic value is not only concerned with current production, but with the heritage as well.

And yet, could it not be that the impression of motivatedness has somehow been imposed on us in the course of time? Is attention not usually first aroused by something confusing and disturbing which, in retrospect, will seem to have been motivated? We experience something we originally did not expect at all as quite conclusive later. This tendency is so general and constant that it should make us wary. Are we not seduced into putting things right in retrospect?

VI

There are good reasons for thinking that a work's flair of motivation has been produced by its rise to classical status in retrospect. One general reason is that human beings tend to consider those things important which are being described as such. More specific are reasons having to do with market-type selection processes. The debate about creative quality constitutes a market in which published opinion is exchanged for an interested audience's attention. This market, like any other, will give rise to a certain kind of wealth; but not the reviewers – at least not only those – will become rich. Wealth in attention will be acquired by the reviewed artists and works. Their ranking established this way will reflect the uneven distribution of their incomes. As usual, the accumulation of attention income will show a tendency for self-reinforcement. Authors and works receiving a lot of attention are not so much noticed for the reasons that made them prominent originally, but rather for attracting so much attention.

Through accumulation of attention works gradually assume classic status. It is not only plausible but in agreement with economic laws that works having reached the top are being favoured retroactively for having done so. It cannot even be excluded that, looking back, some random choice may appear to have been motivated because some initial windfall profit was subsequently transformed into true reputation capital. All of us are familiar with the experience of aesthetic conversion: we find something revolting at first; gradually, we begin to take it seriously because of all the commotion around it, and at last we propagate the same thing as fantastic ourselves. In retrospect we think we were blind. It is, of course, also possible that we were victims of autosuggestion, that we were manipulated in the attention market.

Today, when mass procurement and channelling of attention have become an advanced technology of attraction operating in state-of-the-art industries, one cannot exclude that exemplary aesthetic status may be the result of marketing techniques. So, are there more far-reaching effective ways of probing the motivation of creative works?

VII

Yes, there are. We can discover them by observing the relationship between prestige and attractiveness. No prestige without power of attraction. Power of attraction can be artificially produced, but only attraction itself can be manipulated through marketing. If it is possible to produce exemplary aesthetic status by technical means, then enduring quality is reducible to power of attraction. The classical carthorses of attraction are novelty and rarity. Novelty and rarity value fuel publicity campaigns and unleash mechanisms of self-reinforcement. However, although being generally known reinforces attractiveness, it also induces the inflationary reproduction of the attracting agent. Something everybody knows is

also known to be seen and talked about by everybody. On the one hand, this inflation produces massive public presence and thus social objectivity, but, on the other hand, it liberates forces which aggressively erode the value of novelty and rarity.

Even massive amounts of staged prominence will not withstand the acid test of inflationary reproduction. This test reveals the durability of quality which surpasses manipulated market value. This different kind of value emerges when the eminence of some work recovers after an inflationary phase. Novelty and rarity value have then dissolved. Those aroused by the hype have lost interest. At this point it means something if a certain audience remains. Inflation has become ineffective, or rather, has proved useful in detecting a different value.

Enduring quality, which remains after the values of novelty and rarity have been consumed, is what canonical works have in common. This quality was not visible in the works from the beginning, but recognising it, sensuous intelligence also recognises itself. Increasing ability to sense motivation and the refinement of sensuous intelligence are themselves part of the processes through which enduring works are selected. Refinement of intuition and social organisation of the needs of perceptive attention are one and the same.

This process of growth and refinement is inseparable from the evolution of markets that eventually manifest themselves as self-organising cultural business. Markets often occur together with shadow markets. And, as usual when needs are met in markets, the need for attention and its satisfaction is self-reinforcing. Therefore, marketing plays a certain role, but needs are not bound to be manipulated. Needs invite seduction, but by allowing to be seduced, those needs may outgrow their original impulse. Any process of refinement means that an original impulse is transcended. This capacity for self-transformation does not imply that needs can be reversed without effort, only that they may develop through contact with exceptional motivation. Expressed differently, a window of

motivated development may open when attention needs are taken so seriously that even their plasticity is accounted for.

Aesthetic quality evolves together with the sense recognising it. The formation of classical quality and the refinement of sensuous intelligence are one and the same. It follows that classical works are those showing us that we are more sensitive and more sensuously intelligent than we would have thought. This conclusion does not yield any criteria for production but it is a basis for an ethic of creativity.