The Stone is a forum for contemporary philosophers and other thinkers on issues both timely and timeless.

Our democratic society is uneasy with the idea that traditional “high culture” (symphonies, Shakespeare, Picasso) is superior to popular culture (rap music, TV dramas, Norman Rockwell). Our media often make a point of blurring the distinction: newspapers and magazines review rock concerts alongside the Met’s operas and “Batman” sequels next to Chekhov plays. Sophisticated academic critics apply the same methods of analysis and appreciation to Proust and to comic books. And at all levels, claims of objective artistic superiority are likely to be met with smug assertions that all such claims are merely relative to subjective individual preferences.

Our democratic unease is understandable, since the alleged superiority of high culture has often supported the pretensions of an aristocratic class claiming to have privileged access to it. For example, Virginia Woolf’s classic essay — arch, snobbish, and very funny — reserved the appreciation of great art to “highbrows”: those “thoroughbreds of the mind” who combine innate taste with sufficient inherited wealth to sustain a life entirely dedicated to art. Lowbrows were working-class people who had neither the taste nor the time for the artistic life. Woolf claimed to admire lowbrows, who did the work highbrows like herself could not and accepted their cultural inferiority. But she expresses only disdain for a third class — the “middlebrows”— who have earned (probably through trade) enough money to purchase the marks of a high culture that they could never properly appreciate. Middlebrows pursue “no single object, neither art itself nor life itself, but both mixed indistinguishably, and rather nastily, with money, fame, power, or prestige.”

There is, however, no need to tie a defense of high art to Woolf’s “snobocracy.” We
can define the high/popular distinction directly in terms of aesthetic quality, without
tendentious connections to social status or wealth. Moreover, we can appropriate
Woolf’s term “middlebrow,” using it to refer to those, not “to the manner born,” who,
admirably, employ the opportunities of a democratic society to reach a level of
culture they were not born into.

At this point, however, we can no longer avoid the hovering relativist objection:
How do we know that there are any objective criteria that authorize claims that one
kind of art is better than another?

Centuries of unresolved philosophical debate show that there is, in fact, little
hope of refuting someone who insists on a thoroughly relativist view of art. We
should not expect, for example, to provide a definition of beauty (or some other
criterion of artistic excellence) that we can use to prove to all doubters that, say,
Mozart’s 40th Symphony is objectively superior as art to “I Want to Hold Your
Hand.” But in practice there is no need for such a proof, since hardly anyone really
holds the relativist view. We may say, “You can’t argue about taste,” but when it
comes to art we care about, we almost always do.

For example, fans of popular music may respond to the elitist claims of classical
music with a facile relativism. But they abandon this relativism when arguing, say,
the comparative merits of the early Beatles and the Rolling Stones. You may, for
example, maintain that the Stones were superior to the Beatles (or vice versa)
because their music is more complex, less derivative, and has greater emotional
range and deeper intellectual content. Here you are putting forward objective
standards from which you argue for a band’s superiority. Arguing from such criteria
implicitly rejects the view that artistic evaluations are simply matters of personal
taste. You are giving reasons for your view that you think others ought to accept.

Further, given the standards fans use to show that their favorites are superior,
we can typically show by those same standards that works of high art are overall
superior to works of popular art. If the Beatles are better than the Stones in
complexity, originality, emotional impact, and intellectual content, then Mozart’s
operas are, by those standards, superior to the Beatles’ songs. Similarly, a case for
the superiority of one blockbuster movie over another would most likely invoke
standards of dramatic power, penetration into character, and quality of dialogue by which almost all blockbuster movies would pale in comparison to Sophocles or Shakespeare.

On reflection, it’s not hard to see why — keeping to the example of music — classical works are in general capable of much higher levels of aesthetic value than popular ones. Compared to a classical composer, someone writing a popular song can utilize only a very small range of musical possibilities: a shorter time span, fewer kinds of instruments, a lower level of virtuosity and a greatly restricted range of compositional techniques. Correspondingly, classical performers are able to supply whatever the composers need for a given piece; popular performers seriously restrict what composers can ask for. Of course, there are sublime works that make minimal performance demands. But constant restriction of resources reduces the opportunities for greater achievement.

Looked at this way, the superiority of high art is almost a truism. But, as I write, there come back to me Alex Ross’s words in his 2004 essay, “Listen to This”:

Music is too personal a medium to support an absolute hierarchy of values. The best music is music that persuades us that there is no other music in the world. This morning, for me, it was Sibelius’s Fifth; late last night, Dylan’s “Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands”; tomorrow, it may be something entirely new. I can’t rank my favorite music any more than I can rank my memories. Yet some discerning souls . . . say, in effect, “The music you love is trash. Listen instead to our great, arty music” . . . . They are making little headway with the unconverted because they have forgotten to define the music as something worth loving. If it is worth loving, it must be great; no more need be said.

But I am not disagreeing with Ross. We love many works of art for many reasons. The Beatles, for example, attracted people for their catchy melodies, teasing lyrics, cool attitudes, sense of musical adventure, political views, and by now even the memories they evoke. More generally, the popular movies, TV shows, and hit songs of the day will attract simply because they connect to what currently seems
most vivid and fascinating; they speak to the “way we live now.” Many of these reasons have little to do with the purely aesthetic qualities of the work. The same can be true of works of high art, which may attract us more as expressions of the artist’s personality or as evocations of a fascinating age than for their aesthetic merit.

But another reason to love a work of art is that it has the stunning intellectual and emotional complexity and depth of Homer’s “Iliad,” the Chartres cathedral, or Bach’s Mass in B minor. My argument is that this distinctively aesthetic value is of great importance in our lives and that works of high art achieve it much more fully than do works of popular art.

What follows from this superiority of high art? Not that all such art is of high quality. An ill-conceived and ill-executed symphony, cathedral, or poetic drama may be as decisively bad as the most inane sitcom or trashy popular song (perhaps worse, precisely because of its pretensions). Nor that popular works cannot achieve high levels of artistic excellence. Nor, finally, that any hour spent on art of lesser aesthetic value is never well spent. There are times when art considerably less than “the best” may better suit our needs.

But the danger for many of us is that love of popular art is so easy, so comfortable, so insisted on by our commercialized environment that the less accessible world of high art is ignored. To some extent, as Ross points out, this is the fault of the way high art currently presents itself (a topic I hope to take up later). But it is also due to the blindness of the lover to any merits the beloved lacks. My argument has tried to show lovers of popular art how much more there is to love.

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