TASTE:  
History, Theory and Ideology of a Concept  
(Draft Syllabus)

I. COURSE DESCRIPTION

When and how did it become possible to possess what we call taste? What theories have been advanced to explain, defend, and critique taste as a phenomenon? What can we learn from “bad” taste (kitsch, camp, vulgarity, Russian poshlost’)? Primary texts from the English, French, Russian and American traditions. Theoretical readings addressing connoisseurship, class, gendered tastes, dandyism, details and femininity, and Russian/post-Soviet sovok, among other topics.

Meets Wednesdays, 2:00 – 4:30 pm.

II. REQUIREMENTS

Attendance is mandatory; short weekly quizzes on the assigned readings will serve as a record of attendance. Attendance, quizzes, and participation together constitute 1/3 of your final course grade.

Written assignments: two papers, each 6-8 pp., each constituting 1/3 of your grade. A list of possible topics will be distributed for all assignments, but you may also elect to develop your own topic if you consult with me well in advance. I am happy to read drafts if you give me enough time.

No electronics in class unless you have an official accommodation.

If you plagiarize, you will receive an F in the class (yes, I do that).

Since I will communicate with you primarily by email, you will need to check your email daily!

III. TEXTS

In order to keep costs down most texts will be made available in a coursepack, but please purchase hard copies of these books (in these specific editions) at the NYU Bookstore:

Bulgakov, *Heart of a Dog* (Grove Press, trans. Ginsburg)  

IV. SCHEDULE OF READINGS (all in coursepack except books listed above)

Jan. 29: Introduction through Manifestos

Excerpts from the following will be distributed and discussed in class:

Tolstoy, *What is Art?* (1897)  
Mayakovskyy et al., “A Slap in the Face of Public Taste” (1912)  
Greenberg, “Avant-garde and Kitsch” (1939)  
Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature* (written 1940s, collected 1981)  
Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp’” (1964)
Feb. 5: Taste and Class

Wilson, Let’s Talk About Love: Why Other People Have Such Bad Taste (2014)
Each student will bring in a text, object, piece of music, or work of art to discuss in light of Wilson’s argument

Feb. 12: Taste and Social Mobility in 18th-c. Britain

Podcast with Vickery, Mullan, and Black on taste and social change in 18th-c. Britain
https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b0082dzm (BBC, 2007)
Lloyd, “The Cit’s Country Box” (1757)
Excerpt from Hume, “Of the Standard of Taste” (from A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful, 1759)
Donald, “Mr. Deputy Dumpling and Family”: Satirical Images of the City Merchant in 18th-c England” (1989)
Brewer, “The most polite age and the most vicious”: Attitudes toward culture as a commodity, 1600-1800” (in Bermingham and Brewer, eds., The Consumption of Culture, 1600-1800: Image, Object, Text, 1995, PDF)
Excerpt from Trentmann, Empire of things: how we became a world of consumers, from the fifteenth century to the twenty-first (2016)
Optional for those who want background on philosophical context: “18th Century British Aesthetics” and “The Concept of the Aesthetic” in Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy:

Feb. 19: Taste and Character on Austen’s Country Estate

Austen, Pride and Prejudice (1813)

Look at the following images:
Romney, Caroline, Viscountess Clifden and Lady Elizabeth Spencer (1786-91)
https://archive.com/artists/682~George_Romney/works/552749~Lady_Caroline_Spencer_later_Viscountess_Clfiden_and_her_sister_Lady_Elizabeth_Spencer#show ) OR HERE
https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details/collection_image_galler y.aspx?assetId=1142911001&objectId=3433890&partId=1
Etchings from Cosway, The Progress of Female Virtue and the Progress of Female Dissipation
https://www.princeton.edu/~graphicarts/assets_c/2010/11/progress4-7767.html and
https://artgallery.yale.edu/collections/objects/24416
Zoffany, Charles Towneley and Friends in the Park Street Gallery, Westminster (1781-3)
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Zoffani,_Johann_-_Charles_Towneley_in_his_Sculpture_Gallery_-_ 1782.jpg and The Tribuna of the Uffizi (1772-8)

Feb. 26: Taste, Luxury, and Power in France

To be scheduled: visit to Metropolitan Museum of Art to view 18th-c French furniture, painting and clothing, guided by art historian Prof. Margaret Samu

Voltaire, “Le Mondain” / “The Worldling” (1736)
Voltaire, “The Man of the World” (1736)
Voltaire section of “Taste” entry in vol. 7 of the Encyclopédie (1757)

Taste syllabus, p. 2
March 4: Taste and (Non-) Russianness


March 11: Taste in the Metropolis, I

Balzac, *The Girl with the Golden Eyes* (1835)

March 18: Spring Break

March 25: Taste in the Metropolis, II

Goncharov, *An Ordinary Story* (1846)
Excerpt from Elias, *The Civilizing Process* (1939)

April 1: “Vivre en bourgeois, penser en demi-dieu” (“Live like a bourgeois, think like a demi-god”)

Flaubert, *Madame Bovary* (1856)

April 8: Dandyism and The Art of Living

Balzac, *Treatise on Elegant Living* (1830)
d’Aurevilly, “On Dandyism and George Brummell” (1845)
Baudelaire, “The Dandy” (1863)
https://www.fulcrum.org/epubs/ks65hc79h?locale=en#/6/1576[xhtml00000788]!/4/1:0

April 15: Collecting and Connoisseurship

James, *The Spoils of Poynton* (1897)

April 22: The Classic

Winckelmann, “Reflections on the Painting and Sculpture of the Greeks, with Instructions for the Connoisseur, and an Essay on Grace in Works of Art” (1765)
Sainte-Beuve, “What is a Classic?” (1850)
T.S. Eliot “What is a Classic?” (1944)
Tertz, “On Socialist Realism” (1959)

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April 29: Scale, Aura, Mass Culture

Simmel, “The Metropolis and Mental Life” (1903) and “Fashion” (1904)
Adorno and Horkheimer, “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception” (1944)
Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936)
Each student will contribute a primary text, image, or object that can either be illuminated by or can challenge the assigned theoretical readings

April 29: Taste in and after the Soviet Union

Bulgakov, *Heart of a Dog* (written 1925, pub. 1987)
Tolstoya, “Fakir” (1987)
Mamin, dir., *Window to Paris* (1993)
Komar and Melamid, paintings, 1980s-2000s

May 6: The Bad Taste of Others