TASTE:  
History, Theory and Ideology of a Concept

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, and American traditions. Theoretical readings addressing connoisseurship, class, gendered tastes, dandyism, minimalism, details and femininity, among other topics.

Class meets Wednesdays 2-4:30. Office hours Thursdays 2-4:00 and by appointment any time.

II. OBJECTIVES, REQUIREMENTS, GRADING

Course objective: learn to think and write in a clear and sophisticated way about taste.

How class will work: Each class session will open with a quiz (short and straightforward) on the assigned readings. After the quiz and a brief introductory lecture, all sessions will be discussion-based. Attendance is mandatory. If you’re not comfortable speaking in class (as I myself never was when I was a student, fyi), let me know and we can come up with other ways for you to participate.

Written assignments: two papers, each 8-10 pp., each constituting 1/3 of your grade. A list of possible topics will be distributed for both assignments, but you may also elect to develop your own topics if you consult with me well in advance. For the first paper, you will turn in a rough draft and then meet with me individually for feedback, allowing you to revise before turning in the final version for a grade. For the second paper drafts and consultations are optional.

The breakdown of your final grade will be: first paper 1/3; second paper 1/3; attendance, quizzes, and participation together 1/3 (so each of these is 16.5%).

Rules to note: No electronics in class. If you have reason to need a device, come talk to me. But never phones. 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.

Academic accommodations are available for students with disabilities. Please contact the Moses Center for Students with Disabilities (212-998-4980 or mosescsd@nyu.edu) and see www.nyu.edu/csd. Students who are requesting academic accommodations are advised to reach out to the Moses Center as early as possible in the semester for assistance.

III. TEXTS

All texts except the two books listed below will be made available in a coursepack at Unique Copies (252 Greene Street between Waverly and 8th St.). Please buy these books at the NYU Bookstore:

Flaubert, Madame Bovary (Norton Critical Edition)
IV. SCHEDULE OF READINGS (all in coursepack except books listed above)

Jan. 29: Introduction through Manifestos
To be distributed and discussed in class:
- Mayakovsky et al., “A Slap in the Face of Public Taste” (1912)
- Excerpts from:
  - Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature* (written 1940s, collected 1981)
  - Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp’” (1964)
- Ungraded practice quiz on above texts (to show you what expect on weekly quizzes)

Feb. 5: Comparison and Distinction (90 pp.)
- Simmel, “The Metropolis and Mental Life” (1903) and “Fashion” (1904)
- Loos, “Ornament and Crime” (1910)
- Excerpt from Bourdieu, *Distinction* (1979)
- Chayka, “How Silicon Valley helps spread the same sterile aesthetic across the world” (2016)
- Quiz on readings

Feb. 12: The Classic (100 pp.)
- 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)
- Assignment: bring in a text, image or object that you would describe as “classic” and be prepared to justify this choice
- Quiz on readings
- * topics for paper #1 will be distributed *

Feb. 19: Taste and Social Mobility in 18th-c. Britain (75 pp.)
- Podcast with Vickery, Mullan, and Black on taste and social change in 18th-c. Britain [https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b0082dzm](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)
- Excerpt from Trentmann, *Empire of things: how we became a world of consumers, from the fifteenth century to the twenty-first* (2016)
- Images in installments #1-11 of McMansion Hell [https://mcmansionhell.com/101](https://mcmansionhell.com/101)
- Quiz on readings
- * discuss topics for paper #1 *

Feb. 26: *Pride and Prejudice*, I: Taste and Character on the Country Estate (166 pp.)
- Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), through end of Vol. II (p. 166)
- Quiz on reading
- * turn in one-paragraph progress reports on paper #1 + brief oral presentations *

March 4: *Pride and Prejudice*, II (180 pp.)
- Conclude *Pride and Prejudice*
- Look at paintings by Romney and Zoffany and etchings by Cosway (links will be emailed)
- Quiz on readings
- * sign up for individual paper conferences (required) *

Thursday March 5: hard-copy first draft of paper #1 due by 8 pm to instructor’s office
To be scheduled between March 5-10: guided tour of Metropolitan Museum of Art’s collection of 18th-c. French furniture and painting with art historian Dr. Margaret Samu

March 9-11: paper drafts returned with comments in individual paper conferences

March 11: Taste, Luxury, and Power in 18th-c. France (65 pp.)
Voltaire, “Le Mondain” / “The Worldling” (1736)
Voltaire, “The Man of the World” (1736)
Voltaire, “Taste” entry in vol. 7 of the Encyclopédie (1757)
Voltaire, “Luxury” entry in his Philosophical Dictionary (1764)
Quiz on readings

Friday March 13: final draft of PAPER #1 DUE by 5 pm (hard copy to professor’s office)

March 18: no class (Spring Break)

March 25: Taste in Balzac’s Metropolis (90 pp.)
Balzac, The Girl with the Golden Eyes (1835)
Paper #1 to be returned in class
Quiz on readings

April 1: Madame Bovary, I: “Live like a bourgeois, think like a demi-god” (120 pp.)
Flaubert, Madame Bovary (1856) through part II, ch. 8 (p. 107)
Flaubert, Dictionary of Received Ideas (compiled 1911-13 from Flaubert’s notes of 1870s)
Quiz on readings

April 8: Madame Bovary, II (160 pp.)
Conclude Madame Bovary
Quiz on readings
* topics for paper #2 to be distributed and discussed in class *

April 15: Dandyism and The Art of Living (115 pp.)
Balzac, Treatise on Elegant Living and “The Physiology of Attire” (both 1830)
Excerpt from Barbey d’Aurevilly, “On Dandyism and George Brummell” (1845)
Gautier, “On Fashion” (1858)
Baudelaire, “The Dandy” (1863)
Barthes, “Dandyism and Fashion” (1962)
Excerpt from Garelick, Rising Star: Dandyism, Gender, and Performance in the Fin de Siecle (1998)
Quiz on readings

April 22: Kitsch, Camp, Simulacrum (90 pp.)
Greenberg, “Avant-garde and Kitsch” (1939)
Adorno and Horkheimer, “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception” (1944)
Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp’” (1964)
Baudrillard on Disneyland (excerpt from Simulacra and simulation, 1994)
Garelick, “Melania Trump and the Chilling Artifice of Fashion” (2017)
Sasha Velour, “Met Gala 2019: Sasha Velour's Critical Camp Eye | WWD”
(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tu3CFyB3osY&app=desktop)
Quiz on readings
Assignment: bring an object, text or image to discuss in relation to one of today’s readings
* deadline for turning in rough draft of paper #2 if you want feedback *
Week of April 2: rough drafts to be returned in individual conferences

April 29: **Taste and Slavery in the American South** (130 pp.)

- “Virginia Luxuries” [https://www.virginiahumanities.org/2016/05/flip-side/](https://www.virginiahumanities.org/2016/05/flip-side/) (1820s)
  - Vlach, “Perpetuating the Past: Plantation Landscape Paintings Then and Now”
  - Sokolitz, “Picturing the Plantation”
  - McInnis, “The Most Famous Plantation of All: The Politics of Painting Mount Vernon”

Quiz on readings

**May 6: The Bad Taste of Others** (2-hour film)


Course evaluations in lieu of quiz

**Friday May 15:** Final drafts of paper #2 due by email