Bending Forward, One Step Backward: 
On the Sociology of Tasting Techniques

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Abstract

The 'new' sociology of culture has provided us with valuable insights regarding the performative, corporeal, and unpredictable dimensions of art tasting, which the 'old', critical sociology of art failed to recognise. But how can we profit from these insights without committing the sin of the denial of the social (and social structures in particular)? This article suggests that these insights may be incorporated into the critical sociology of art once we are ready to substitute reified tasting techniques for reified tastes as our main objects of study. Relying on work in anthropology, philosophy, history and neuroscience, I urge us to put tasting techniques at the heart of our research agenda in cultural sociology. This will enable us to simultaneously give full account of the subjective, unique art-tasting experiences which are informed by specific tasting techniques, as well as of the role the same techniques play in social reproduction and social closure.

Keywords
Bourdieu, sociology of art, taste, tasting, techniques

Introduction

In the conversation reported above, and documented in the film Waste Land (Walker et al., 2010), the international artist Vik Muniz is teaching his collaborators, Brazilian garbage pickers, how to take pleasure of the pictures they have created together. As Muniz knew well, the pickers didn't need him in order to enjoy the pictures: they were already thrilled by the pieces of rubbish turning into discernible objects, and by the fact that these objects were portraits of themselves and their co-workers. They still needed Muniz, however, to learn how the pictures would be experienced by their intended audience, those knowing how art should be consumed. The poor pickers were highly unlikely to be familiar with either this kind of aestheticising attitude towards art, nor with the choreography demonstrated by Muniz.

Muniz attempts here to be a cultural translator and teach the garbage pickers something about how art should be experienced. This 'something' may more accurately be called a 'technique'. It is a way of operating both the body (swaying forward and backward) and the mind (paying attention alternately to different aspects of the artwork) in order to produce a certain mental effect, a beautiful moment of an elevating art experience. Some people, including readers of this article, may have practiced it for years without ever paying attention to using it, not to mention describing it verbally.

In this article I suggest that the concept of 'techniques' may proffer a solution for the main
controversy within the contemporary sociology of culture and the arts, offering a common ground for synthesising the 'critical' (or 'classicist') sociology of taste (from Bourdieu, 1984 onward) and the 'new' ('romanticist') sociology of tasting (as represented by Antoine Hennion and others), a schism which has been discussed at length over the pages of this journal and elsewhere (e.g. Acord & DeNora, 2008; Born, 2010; de la Fuente, 2007, 2010; Hennion, 2007; Prior, 2011; Tanner, 2010). Applying the concept of 'techniques' may help us bridge between the macro and the micro level of art consumption, as well as between its socially (pre-)determined dimension and its conjunctural/contingent one.

A technique is a modus agendi, a sequence of actions conducted by a corporeal subject in order to achieve a certain goal (often serving as a basis for improvisation). In particular, a technique of art tasting is a sequence of actions conducted by the art-taster, which directs the operation of her body, mind and sensuous attention while interacting with the artwork in order to achieve a certain experience, feeling or understanding. Techniques of art tasting are highly material/embodied: they direct bodies towards artworks in ways that produce embodied mental reactions in the taster (taking a short glimpse of the same picture while walking by and chatting would yield quite different an experience than Muniz's). Neuroscientific research shows that different 'styles of attending' to cultural objects, such as listening to music with eyes closed rather than open, change both the perceived emotional intensity of the cultural experience and the related brain activity as represented in neuroimaging (Lerner et al., 2009). However, just as they are corporeal, these techniques are also highly social: their mastery is acquired in socialisation and education; hence they are unevenly distributed across society. Mastery of such techniques is thus a main difference between those initiated into the consumption of high art (or subcultural genres like punk) and those uninitiated, and more generally, between the art consumption ('tasting') patterns of members of different social groups. This difference has both external impacts (seeing someone swaying in front of a picture tells something about her) and internal ones (avoidance of swaying would change the art-experience of the art-taster).

Two Sociologies of Culture

In front of a masterpiece, the art lover may encounter a spiritual experience. This achievement is not a matter of certainty, it depends on too many variables to guarantee predictability, but sometimes it happens: while adoring the artwork, the art lover (possibly bending forward and backward) experiences transcendental elevation. What account should the sociologist give of this moment? This question is the gist of the schism that splits cultural sociology into rival camps.

One strategy is that of the iconoclast. Just as the sociology of religion explained religion (and religious effervescence) without god, so did the sociology of art endeavoured to explain art without aesthetics. This tendency is in line not only with left-wing critical scholarship, but also with sociology's traditional 'scientific' mission of disenchantment. The demystification of art consumption and taste judgement has been Bourdieu's explicit goal. His sociology of art project (above all, Bourdieu, 1984, but already in Bourdieu & Darbel, 1991[1969]) is openly anti-Kantian, explicitly formulated in opposition to the Kantian anti-utilitarian notion of the aesthetic as disinterested pleasure; and against the discipline of traditional art history and its exclusive focus on the intrinsic characteristics of artworks. For Bourdieu, the seemingly disinterested love of art is a sophisticated social investment that pays off, disguised as disinterested pleasure-taking. Both aesthetic preferences (familiarity with and taste for highbrow artworks rather than popular pieces) and aestheticising attitude (experiencing and judging artworks according to their form, by application of pure aesthetic judgement, rather than according to their content or possible uses) are unevenly distributed. For Bourdieu, these preferences and dispositions of the elite, inculcated at home and at school, are actually heirlooms, forms of cultural capital: they serve to reproduce class structure and class boundaries, and to legitimise and naturalise the privileged status of their owners. Art consumption is socially structured and socially structuring, consequential for one's social positioning. The art sociologist's role is to expose the uneven distribution of cultural tastes; the exogenous, quasi-economic mechanisms shaping tastes (such as 'investments' and 'withdrawal from devalued objects'); and the role of taste in social reproduction. This 'distinction' model of art consumption is still highly popular and prolific (e.g., Bennett, 2006; Bennett et al., 2009). Bourdieu's theory of art consumption may easily explain the reaction of the garbage pickers to Muniz's explanations, a mixture of misapprehension and sacrilegious joking, typical of lower-class people confronted with matters of taste and aesthetics so alien to them (Heikkilä, 2011).
This critical, anti-aesthetic sociology of art has been for the last decade under a strong attack—not only by empirical works demonstrating that the logic of cultural distinction is not universal, but culturally- and historically-specific (Bryson, 1996; Coulangeon & Lemel, 2007; Lamont, 1992; Peterson and Kern, 1996), but also by theoretical critique that sophisticatedly challenges the very foundation of critical sociology, epitomised in the seminal writing of Antoine Hennion (Gommart & Hennion, 1999; Hennion, 2003, 2007, 2008). Whereas empirical evidence for elite omnivorousness may well be incorporated into the Bourdieusian structural framework (Lizardo & Skiles, 2008), the insights of this new, post-critical sociology seem at first glance incommensurate with it.

Whereas Bourdieu has been criticised for his alleged determinism and his Marxist and structuralist residues (e.g. Alexander, 1995; cf. Lizardo, 2011), the criticism of the new sociology of art also applies to more pragmatist/voluntaristic critical sociologies. Hence, for the purpose of this discussion, it is more important to identify the strengths and weaknesses shared by all sociologists working in the critical tradition (in order to retain the strengths and overcomes the weaknesses), rather than discuss their contradicting presuppositions. By 'critical sociology' I thus refer to all accounts that focus on cultural taste as both socially-constituted (through socialisation) and socially constituting (playing—consciously or unconsciously—a strategic role in closure/group formation, constituting self-value, and 'boundary work' strategies such as distinction and assimilation).

The new sociology of art (for reviews see Born, 2010; Hennion, 2003, 2007; Prior, 2011) defines itself not in opposition to aesthetics and the humanities (which are being rehabilitated: Born, 2010; Wolff, 2008; Zolberg, 1990), but rather in opposition to critical sociology, from which it differs in several respects:

a) Interest in aesthetics and artistic contents: instead of rejecting the aesthetic experience as an illusion, a social weapon, or at best an epiphenomenon, the new sociology of art takes seriously the aesthetic experiences and judgements of art-tasters, the aesthetic contents of art, and the pleasures it evokes;

b) Interest in the material and corporeal dimension of art tasting: inspired by Actor-Network Theory and the growing recognition in the power of the material within anthropology, the material agency of artworks and its operation on the taster/user's corporeality gains ever-growing recognition (Acord & DeNora, 2008; Gomart & Hennion, 1999). The artwork's materiality is no longer considered a mere screen for non-material, symbolic 'contents': its affordances inform consumption, and may pose resistance to some uses, appropriations and interpretations;

c) Interest in the act of tasting: the act of art consumption is no longer viewed as a mere non-problematic realisation of pre-existing dispositions, but rather as a performative act, which entails a certain degree of uncertainty (Hennion, 2007; Hennion and Grennier, 2001). This stance rejects the reification of taste (see also Woodward & Emmison, 2001): the singular tasting-event cannot be reduced to any objectified taste which has existed prior to it and predetermined its effect. Research on 'taste', it is claimed, actually studies the discursive practice of 'talking about one's taste', not the actual mechanisms directing consumption experiences (Hennion, 2007; Ranciere, 2004).

Whereas scholars in both the distinction and the omnivorousness traditions focused on associating categories of people with categories of artworks (replying the question 'who likes what'), the new sociology of art is rather interested at the 'how' question: how people use art and how art effects people (DeNora puts more stress on the first, Hennion on the second). The new sociology of art doesn't completely reject questions of taste, however, while recognising the fact that people have preferences, it claims that these preferences are far more conjunctural, reflexive and context-dependent than Bourdieu would have allowed.

In an article published lately in Cultural Sociology, Nick Prior (2011) discusses the significance of this shift away from Bourdieu's critical paradigm, which as Prior meticulously demonstrates, has been the hegemonic paradigm within the sociology of culture (and music in particular). Prior praises this new sociology for enabling sociologists to produce more round and realistic, less mechanistic portrayals of art
consumption. He also praises the new sociology of art for revealing 'deep lacunae' by posing new questions that lay beyond the reach of critical sociology, generative as it might be. However, Prior also urges sociologists not to go too far. He warns us that going too farther away from Bourdieu may result in adopting the wrong language and the wrong model of agency. On the lexical level, a retreat from the existing sociological language may result in reverting to the romantic terminology along with its full ideological baggage. On the level of agency lies the risk of substituting for structural determinism 'a form of aesthetic individualism' that denies any influence from power structures beyond the encounter-level, thus replacing orthodox sociology with a kind of micro-aestheticism that ascribes culture too much autonomy.

Whereas Prior's paper offers an excellent picture of the promises and risks of these new trends, he stops short of offering a clear future path for the sociology of art. Prior urges sociologists to redraw disciplinary boundaries between themselves and art/humanity scholars, rather than take an interdisciplinary 'weak, murky and anodyne middle ground' of 'third way' politics. Bourdieu may then be strategically deployed as ammunition in this interdisciplinary conflict. But how can Bourdieu be deployed without giving up the valuable insights of the new sociology of art? And yet, without turning to a 'third way' compromise between the critical and the new sociologies which will lack rigour and consistency?

**Synthesis, Not a Compromise**

There are two main possible answers to this question, both only hinted by Prior. The first answer (the 'territorial compromise model') is implied by Prior's rhetorical question: 'Is it never the case that taste is a social weapon?' This may imply that art consumption is sometimes a social weapon, yet in other times a pure autotelic activity. However, in this case we still lack the criteria to help us allocate the boundary between the Bourdieusian and Hennionic worlds: when should art consumption be explained by determining exogenous sociological factors, and when shall we rather interpret it as an unpredictable result of the aesthetic encounter, a performative act of tasting?

The second answer, which I further develop below, offers a way around these theoretical hurdles: embedding the aesthetic dimension within the framework of critical sociology. Here, art consumption is not divided neither into its 'aesthetic dimension' and 'sociological dimension' (a practice criticised by Eyerman, 2006), nor into cases demanding critical analysis and those refusing it. Instead, this strategy gives close attention to the performative dimension of *all* the encounters between persons and art-objects (as suggested by the new sociology of culture), only in order to re-introduce the critical framework and employ it while interpreting the data. As Prior hints, there is 'much to be gained by a critical engagement with aesthetics'.

This can be done by choosing techniques as our primary objects of study. Instead of objectifying taste, as done by Bourdieu, we may escape the theoretical dead-end by objectifying tasting techniques and study their history and sociology. The tasting subject herself and the tasting techniques accessible to her are both social products, shaped by the tasting subject's life path and socialisation (multi-sited and eclectic as it may be: see Lahire, 2003). Mastery of some tasting techniques rather than others influences people's subjective/inner experiences while encountering artworks and their (both enduring and conjunctural) taste preferences. At the same time, however, consuming art 'correctly' may be read as a status/identity cue, an embodied cultural capital in Bourdieu's terms.

This synthesis enables us to acknowledge that people's encounters with art-objects (like their encounters with people) are performative, nondeterministic and partly-unpredictable, but simultaneously to further sociologise these encounters by studying the socially-acquired and socially-consequential techniques employed within them. By neglecting these encounters, the sociology of taste could not portray exhaustively the rich interrelations between art consumption and the social. Instead of giving up the sociology’s critical mission altogether as suggested by Hennion, or restrict it to a defined territory, we may thus adopt these new insights and sensitivities to revise and extend our critical framework.

The interest of sociologists in aesthetic attention started as early as Weber’s comments on the aesthetic sphere governed by desire to non-religious salvation. Berger & Luckmann (1966) considered art 'a finite province of meaning', characterised by a mode of attention different from practical attention. For Blumer, 'a tree is not the same object to a lumberman, a botanist, or a poet', since each of them is prepared to act toward it differently (1969:69). However, there is more than one mode of aesthetic attention. Different people act on art-objects differently, and the practical turn has increased our sensitivity to the
embodied dimension of their different modes of engagement. By reifying consumption techniques and making them into main objects of study sociology may account for differences in behaviour and experience among art tasters and for their extra-artistic implications. Doing this surely requires sociologisation of embodied practices and their embedding in structural accounts (Howson & Inglis 2001, even if the plurality and eclecticism of late-modern habitus excludes one-to-one assignation of practices to groups: Lahire, 2003). However, if we accept that social structures consist in routinisation, and often in routinised embodied practices (Reckwitz, 2002), we cannot be confined to analysis of mere correlations between people and objects, while skipping the plurality of practical, experiential ways in which people engage with these objects, the very fabric of which structures are made.

**Tasting Wine**

The theoretical move of embedding phenomenological sensibilities within re-sociologised framework may be demonstrated by dwelling on the tasting of wine. Hennion, who studied wine tasting, is not only an emphatic representative of the new sociology of art, but also a master of attentive (even if de-sociologised) description. Let's read his depiction of drinking wine during a social conversation:

*The man takes his glass, he begins to drink. At this point, he stops an instant, takes two small sniffs, drinks again, makes a ‘moment’ with his lips while replacing his glass and before taking up and continuing where he was in the broken thread of conversation* (Hennion, 2007:104)

*Even so, reduced to such a nuance, a pause marked by a movement of the lips, this small gesture introduces an important difference. Barely perceptible, it signals another arrangement of the self, a degree attained in the tasting. Less of an intention than an attention, and a stronger presence of the tasted object, each reinforces the other without a primary cause. He has not simply drunk, he has drunk a wine. There is no taste without this minimal ordering of experience that makes the experience appear, this light shifting of self with self, which opens a parenthesis in the course of what is happening, modifies it, orients it, makes it enter into a frame, even if all these small events are adumbrated, occurring without effort or calculation. I drink and ‘I drink’, I feel effects and I stop and reflect for an instant on what ‘it’ does to me. There is also no taste in the other direction without this intensification of the object, which itself responds or provokes.* (Hennion, 2007:105)

Hennion is not interested at the automatic tasting, conducted with little attention only to ratify our prior self-knowledge (I'm fond of New World's Chardonnay). Instead, he focuses on the ordering of experience through corporeal techniques: intensifying the attentiveness to the object by breaking the thread of the conversation, concentrating, and making a small movement of the lips. These gestures are similar in function and order to those mentioned by Muniz (bending forward and backward, alternately focusing attention on different aspects of the artwork). They help the wine taster shift into a ‘perplexed mode’ (Gomart and Hennion, 1999) in which uncertainty prevails as to the experience resulted from the singular, contingent encounter of the tasting subject and the tasted object. Obviously, by taking these gestures (and the experience of art-tasters in general) seriously—rather than as a mystification to be demystified, a thin veil hiding the exertion, justification and accumulation of crude power—Hennion is able to offer much finer a picture of the micro-level tasting act.

However, whereas Hennion's strategy uncovers some hitherto ignored dimensions of tasting, it also hides some others. I wish to briefly address three of them: (a) durable tastes which are strong enough to persist across situations, independently of the tasting techniques applied; (b) the class/group characteristics of tasting techniques; and (c) the use of tasting techniques as basis for discrimination and social closure. Whereas the first dimension is Bourdieusian, the last two emerge from the integration of new insights on the performativity of tast-ing into the critical framework.

Wine is sometimes drunk inattentively, even among wine-afficionados. For Hennion, in this case 'there is no taste'. However, someone who listens to the radio at the background while writing an article—or drinks Grand Vin while engrossed in a conversation—exercises personal taste even without consciously concentrating on the qualities of the tasted object, as would become evident if she suddenly felt urged to turn off the radio as the song changes. This usually happens in two scenarios: in the first, the new song is
incompatible with the desired or current practical register, emotional register, or energy level (all being important factors in choice of music: DeNora, 2000; Knobloch, 2003). A good example would be a couple having a heart-to-heart conversation in bed, late at night, when suddenly the radio turns on slow, romantic songs into upbeat dancing music. The couple could find this music desirable at other times, but now it would make it hard for them to continue the conversation and retain intimacy and reflexivity. In the second scenario, the radio switches into music which is simply not one's taste, regardless of context. As demonstrated by Tony Bennett and her collaborators, strong liking for certain genres correlates positively with strong dislike for others. This is especially right for genres highly identified with a particular class and age group, such as classical music or heavy metal (Bennett et al., 2009, ch.5.3). A hypothetical whimsical radio music editor who suddenly switched from operettas to death metal or vice versa, would probably lose most of her listeners within seconds. Similarly, even while drinking casually, without breaking the conversation to intensify attentiveness by applying ritual tasting techniques, wine drinkers may be compelled to pay attention to the wine just sipped if its taste surprised them, either in quality (the cheap table wine appears to be an exquisite Burgundy, or vice versa) or qualities (e.g. too watery, heavy, fruity or astringent for one's taste). Here relatively stable and durable preferences inform the results of the encounter between tasters and tasted objects. Hennion's de-sociologised model applies smoothly only to hedonistic cultural 'gated communities', where no heavy metal or table wine may ever infiltrate.

However, even in cases where taste is contingent upon the performance of tasting rather than on objectified tastes, the dimension of culture (class cultures, but often also ethnic cultures, life styles, etc.) cannot be dismissed. This is evident both in Hennion's portrayal of wine-tasting and in the Waste Land scene. In both cases, the techniques applied to intensify the objects are accessible only once acquired, usually through mimesis (in primary or secondary socialisation), but sometimes through explicit training (such as in wine tasting courses, or intercultural encounters like the one documented in Waste Land). Since access to repertoires of tasting techniques depends on socialisation, their distribution within the general population is far from being blind to sociodemographic categories such as class, ethnicity, age, education level etc. This macro-structural restraint of uneven access to repertoires may be implicit in pragmatic sociology (Silber, 2003) but is seldom made explicit.

This means people from different backgrounds often taste objects differently. Hennion's 'amateurs', who typically create the ideal circumstances for delving into the music by shaping the situation to the finest details, turn the music on, and then become passive and let the music exert its effect on themselves (Gomart & Hennion, 1999)—are not merely 'people': they have strong class characteristics. The differences between their listening techniques and those of shift workers who listen to music while performing monotonous work are remarkable enough.

Whereas the experiential encounter between a taster and a bottle of wine (or a painting) is a singular, somewhat unpredictable event, it is socially shaped through historically-specific, unevenly disseminated tasting techniques.

However, even those who cannot drink wine (or view pictures) the 'right' way—who are familiar with neither the legitimate external gestures, nor with the legitimate ways of directing sensuous and mental attentiveness—are still able to make taste judgements (such as saying 'this wine is tasty' or 'I don't like this picture', or simply turning the radio off). By reducing taste to legitimate techniques prevailing among the dominant classes, Hennion naturalises the dominant status of these techniques, while veiling their social efficacy in power dynamics.

This brings us to the third dimension that goes unnoticed by Hennion: that mastery of tasting techniques often serves as a basis for exclusion just as the mastery of good taste does. In certain contexts, people who know how to drink wine and are able to judge and discuss wine may gain different privileges. Thus, Hartmann (2000) shows that familiarity with wine drinking techniques plays a decisive role in hiring senior executives in Germany (together with the candidates' taste in apparel, their hexis, and their skills in discussing literature). Life style, tastes and tasting techniques are interpreted as either indicating candidates' professional skills or their social compatibility. In other words, not only are modes of attentiveness to cultural objects (tasting) shaped by social stratification, they also contribute to its shaping. This stratifying impact is not restricted to the job market: the same applies to social ties and mate selection (Kalmijn, 1998).a

Sociologists have repeatedly shown how tastes are semiotically read (as judgements that judge the judges) and used to shape and justify power relations (this applies equally to the high-brow/low-brow stratification logic of Bourdieu; the omnivore/univore logic of Peterson & Kern, 1996; and their mixture: Coullangeon & Lemel, 2007). However, people also read the ways in which others consume cultural
objects. Practices such as the 'moment' of the lips while drinking wine, or closing one's eyes while listening to Beethoven (Johnson, 1995) not only shape the taster's experience (Lerner et al., 2009), but also profess her social identity. These are performances of group membership that represent and reproduce power through selection and exclusion.

Impression, like mental experience, is thus performative: it's not enough to love the right wine if one drinks it quickly as if it were tequila. The same techniques that enable the direction of attention to create a specific internal experience also produce a specific external impression. Just as there is a certain degree of alignment between the value of people and the value of the music they like (Roy & Dowd, 2010), there is also homology or alignment between high- or low-status people and high or low-status tasting techniques, respectively (due to bidirectional emanation of status between people and practices).

A sociology centred around tasting techniques and modes of attentiveness as culturally and historically specific practices (that have their own histories: crystallisation, solidification, standardisation and reproduction) would enable us to avoid both the problematic Bourdieusian hypothesis that people retain durable taste dispositions across contexts (criticized by Lahire, 2006 and Santoro, 2011); and the opposite, extreme pragmatist position that modes of attention to objects may be understood while 'forgetting about history' (Dodier, 2003), without referring to durable competences and dispositions. It enables us to acknowledge that even when taste preferences are situation-dependent, the encounter of a tasting subject and a tasted object is not informed by the situation alone, but also by the modes of attentiveness and techniques of tasting which are accessible to (and employed by) the particular taster. These techniques represent practical knowledge corporated within the taster's body, and although their employment is context-dependent and partly-voluntarily (people may choose which techniques to employ from those available to them: Carter, 2003; Swidler, 1986), they play a decisive role in social reproduction (hence, there is no contradiction between active, choosing actors and critical sociology of the plural habitus and its roles in shaping both innovation and reproduction: Frère, 2011).

Studies conducted since the 1990s in various disciplines have demonstrated the active nature of our perception and judgement of our surrounding world, including artworks (e.g. Csordas, 1993; Hirschkind, 2001; Nead, 1992). Our sensuous experience of objects is culturally specific, since it is always mediated by particular manners of paying attention to them, i.e. tasting techniques. These patterns of 'action towards objects' are acquired cultural skills and sensibilities. People are socialised to apply certain modes of attention under certain circumstances, and they hone these skills and sensibilities throughout their biographies of interactions with particular objects, which thus shape their subjectivity. Philosopher Robin George Collingwood suggested that music listeners hear its sounds, colours, movements, and emotions only insofar as they have an ear—and a body—trained in the sensibilities the composers bring to bear on their work. 'One does not hear "the raw sound" and then elaborate upon it an imaginary experience of motion and colour. One simply "hears" the emotion and colour'. These skills are not 'purely cognitive', but 'rooted in the experience of the body in its entirety, as a complex of culturally and historically honed sensory modalities' (Collingwood, 1966, paraphrased by Hirschkind, 2001:638).

If sensuous experiences and judgements of objects are indeed activities, in which tasters employ culturally and historically honed techniques, then it remains for us sociologists to turn these techniques into a main object of study: to identify how they are acquired, applied, reproduced, and changed, and trace their cultural genealogies. This will enable us to understand better sympathies and antipathies both between people and objects and among people (including 'class-relations', which are often mediated by people's relations to objects).

A good example for an attentive analysis of tasting techniques and their social trajectories is offered by historian James Johnson (1995), who demonstrated how historically-specific was the attentive, absorbed (preferably with eyes closed), silent, and emotionally-involved listening that emerged in Beethoven's time (and has remained hegemonic among classical music aficionados). An 18th century Parisian noblemen would consider some of the components of this technique quite inappropriate for their kind: whereas shopkeepers, petit-bourgeois and pupils were viewed as paying too much attention to the music, nobles left the opera before the end of the concert, and spent their time there in social conversation. The emergence of absorbed listening and its social climbing to the status of a 'noble' practice relied on changes in fields as different as emotional styles (the rise of 'sensibility', and later romanticism); musical styles (a new taste for particular kinds of instrumental music); and the physical design of concert halls (the location of doors and chairs; the new practice of turning lights off during concerts). Here artistic forms, social and cultural formations and consumption techniques are inextricably intertwined.
Recognising Quality

Paying attention to attention and tasting techniques may also help us solve one of the most disturbing questions in the psychology of taste: the fact that non-sensory, discursive knowledge influences our sensuous experience, perception, and enjoyment of tasted objects (Bloom, 2010), as indicated in both tasters' reports and fMRI representations (e.g. neuronal reactions to the taste of wine are influenced by knowing its price: Plassmann et al., 2008). Paul Bloom dedicated his last book to solving this riddle. His hypothesis is that knowledge helps taster estimate the skills and efforts invested in the production of cultural objects. The rarer these skills are and the greater the investment is, the greater is our pleasure (Bloom, 2010). But can appreciation be equated with pleasure? We often admire the virtuosic skills entailed in art performances or artworks we don't love, enjoy, or relate to. A techniques-centred model of art tasting may solve the puzzle: it seems more likely that people choose their degree and mode of attention—the tasting techniques they choose to employ from their personal, culturally-specific toolkit—depending on their prior knowledge of the tasted object. This explains (to give only one example cited by Bloom) why people can't appreciate a world-renowned violinist playing at an underground station. Discursive knowledge doesn't shape experience directly: it tells listeners that a performance is worth investment in increased attention (e.g. closing one's eyes: Lerner et al., 2009), putting oneself (as a listener) in a perplexed mode through the necessary series of actions in order to enable the music act on one's body. Whereas some passengers were unfamiliar with the relevant criteria of appreciation, others simply would not practice within this context techniques they do master. This is an important lesson for critical art sociology: the dispositions of subjects and qualities of objects don't produce experiences and judgments mechanically (as in Bourdieu, 1996): dispositions must first be activated through engagement in attentive consumption.

Could the Love of Art be Taught?

Before concluding, I'd like to point to one unsolved set of questions, which should occupy a central place within any techniques-centred research agenda. In the dialogue that opened this article, Muniz seems to believe that he may teach the garbage pickers to view the artworks in the production of which they collaborated in the same manner as their intended purchasers at Sotheby's would. Bourdieu warns us against this illusion, which he dubs 'cultural communism'. He contends that legitimate artworks 'yield profit in distinction, proportionate to the rarity of the means required to appropriate them' (1984:228), as 'the symbolic profit arising from material or symbolic appropriation of a work of art is measured by the distinctive value which the work derives from the rarity of disposition and competence which it demands and which determines its class distribution' (1984:229). In other words: enjoying an artwork has social value only as much as it relies on rare dispositions and competences, usually monopolised by the dominant classes. These dispositions are inculcated in young age, and are hard to acquire later in life. This is why investment in culture pays. Culture that can be enjoyed by the masses cannot by definition be considered 'high culture', since then it can no longer perform its social function of veiling, euphemising and legitimising privileges and social reproduction. For Bourdieu, this mechanism is only effective while remaining secret, hence critical sociology threatens it.

Hennion rejects Bourdieu's account twice: first, by maintaining that social reproduction of taste is not a well-kept secret but rather a fact obvious to social actors; and second, by suggesting that people are not only reflexive about their own taste (and about its being the product of social reproduction) but also actively shape and transform their own tastes. This seems like the French take off on the 'Reflexivity Thesis' (e.g. Beck, Giddens, and Lash, 1994), which drew sharp criticism in the UK. Critical scholars contended that a disposition to reflexivity is part of one's habitus, a mental pattern distributed unevenly in the population (even if becoming more widespread than before), depending on social position and socialisation (Adams, 2006; Mouzelis, 2007:2.8; Sweetman, 2003): creativity, choice and innovation are intrinsic components of the habitus and social structure (Frère, 2011).
But even for those who contend that all people are somewhat reflexive about their tastes and are likely to choose to 'learn to love' any musical or artistic genre, it remains much harder to hold that people may reflexively shape their own techniques of tasting. Whereas trying to 'like' an object refers to the mental effort to find what is good about it, enjoy it and talk about its positive value, trying to consume an object in a particular manner cannot be obtained by one's reflexivity, will or choice alone. It requires pedagogy or mimesis.

Muniz partakes in such pedagogy. His implicit techniques-centred model of cultural tasting leaves space for learning which does not exist in Bourdieu's cognitive model of strenuous decoding (Lizardo, 2011). Unlike Bourdieu, Muniz assumes that enjoying art 'correctly' depends not on the automatic application of merely-cognitive schemes and disposition that one may either have or not have (as they are inculcated in early age, and guide actor's improvisation in future situations they have never experienced before). Instead, he implicitly relies on model of cultural techniques, patterned ways of using the body (swaying forward, taking a step backward) and mind (attention focused at the changing of image into material and vice versa) that enable certain interactions between subjects and art-objects and produce certain kinds of experiences and pleasures. These context-dependent, corporeal techniques may thus be transmitted to others by pedagogy.

We may cautiously say that the garbage pickers who listened to Muniz have surely learnt something about how highly-educated, initiated art-lovers experience art. But did it make their experience identical with initiated art-lovers? Probably not. One may contend that techniques cannot be accounted for in isolation, but rather as they interact with one another and with a whole set of dispositions. On the other hand, monolithic habitus has become rare in a world where socialisation paths are multiple and unpredictably eclectic, dispositions are acquired later in life, and intra-habitus tensions develop (Frère, 2011; Lahire, 2003). Even members of the cultural elites master eclectic sets of techniques, each acquired in different site and way. Empirical studies of the ways in which people acquire these techniques should be high on the agenda of cultural sociology. Are some tasting techniques (possibly associated with rarer cultural genres) intrinsically harder to acquire, and may only be taught in specific ways or in early age? and if so, what makes them such? How mimesis and cultural transfer transform tasting techniques? A whole battery of questions about cultural initiation, mimesis and socialisation may be posed and directed not at reified tastes for specific cultural objects, but rather at specific cultural techniques.

**Conclusion**

The new sociology of art is right to suggest that each taster/art-object encounter is a singular interaction, which—like interpersonal interactions—is not fully predictable. However, this singular event is shaped by the repertoire of tasting techniques (acquired through socialisation) mastered by the taster. This structural shaping of the performative tast-ing event could only be recognised once the new sociology of art drew attention to this performative encounter. Accounting for it demands expanding the Bourdieusian framework: even in his most phenomenologically-oriented paragraphs on art consumption as interaction with objects (1995:320), Bourdieu believed that the encounter is mechanically determined by the identity of the parties involved (the habitus and the art-object), while neglecting the interaction process and the techniques applied. If—as demonstrated above—cultural experiences and judgments are not produced mechanically by art-objects, but rather mediated through consumption techniques, then these techniques must become a central focus of sociological research. This is especially true since although techniques are unequally distributed, late-modern people often master wide repertoires of consumption techniques and must choose which one to employ when.

The new sociology of art invites us to go beyond Bourdieu's conceptualisation of taste as a predictable interaction between self-enclosed artworks (objects of a given social value) and (given set of qualities and pre-existing dispositions of) subjects (Hennion, 2003). Alongside the dispositional and positional there also exist the interactive (Mouzelis, 2007) and performative (Hennion and Grennier, 2001) dimensions of tasting as an event unfolding in time, which critical sociology of taste left undertheorised.
That these dimensions are now better recognised represents a large step forward in our sociological understanding of art consumption. This entails recognition of the multiple activities conducted by art tasters, far beyond encoding and decoding statements regarding their social positions: the employment of sensuous skills in order to use the affordances of the art-object for action on the self and others (DeNora, 2000; Tanner, 2010). However, while giving recognition to these dimensions, the new sociology of culture dangerously verges on the expulsion of the social—that is, denying social structure and de-sociologising culture altogether.

Paying close attention to the social dimension of consumption techniques may help us avoid this path. It demonstrates that performativity and pre-existing identities are not diametrically opposed: performativity is shaped by the competences of actors and by the techniques they master. Biographies, socialisation paths and group (e.g. class) identities are thus indispensable while explaining tasting events. Although these events are not fully predictable, taste judgements and experiences (and the tasting techniques that inform them) still retain a degree of structuredness and predictability. This is the first time the social strikes back against its expulsion by the new sociology of art. The second strike of the social is the use of these structured tasting patterns as a basis for discrimination and exclusion in the job market, the marriage market etc. The authentic intrasubjective experience achieved by attending to a unique art object in a particular way does not erase the power of this performance to create external impressions, mark group membership, and be used as capital.

In order to address this cultural and historical complexity, cultural sociology is urged to substitute reified techniques for reified tastes as its core objects of study. This research agenda, heavily indebted to both Bourdieu and Hennion would (a.) tell the stories of modes of attention and art consumption techniques: their histories, crystallisation and evolution processes; (b.) study their uneven prevalence across sociodemographic categories, their social semiotics (identification with social groups), their uses in exclusion and inclusion, and their social trajectories across history; and (c.) investigate their corporeality, and the degree to which they relate to other dispositions (i.e., whether different techniques and modes of attention often go together as they represent a similar orientation of the self to art objects—a question which should be left for local, empirical research).

Obviously, strategies-centred agenda is no panacea: it cannot teach us much about the discursive level, that is, about the socially significant practices of talking about cultural preferences. However, it may immensely enrich our understanding of the social nature of art-tasting itself. Taking this path would enable us to profit from increased sensitivity to the aesthetic, corporeal, material and performative aspects of art consumption (and acknowledge their motivational force, thus avoiding functionalist reasoning from effects to motivational causes :Alexander 1995:155), without risking the denial of the social. On the contrary: this close attention to tasting shall contribute to further sociologisation of our understanding of art, pointing to the social shaping—though not determination—of both the most intimate experiences of interaction with art-objects; and the slightest nuances in the ways art tasters use their bodies and mind while confronting their object of attention.

References


Lahire, B. (2003) 'From the habitus to an individual heritage of dispositions. Towards a sociology at the level of the individual', *Poetics* 31:329-355.


Notes

i A similar attack has been launched against exogenous explanations for the production of art. This lies, however, beyond this article’s scope.

ii For Kalmijn, taste is important in mate selection also because taste dissimilarities complicate spending leisure time together. This also applies to differences in tasting techniques (e.g. pace differences while visiting art galleries).

iii For a less voluntaristic account of this selection, see Lahire, 2003.