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Abstract

Internal coherence is of great importance for how we think about appreciating objects of aesthetic worth. A disagreement between what we judge to be worthy and what we affectively favor can prevent us from properly grasping its value. However, it is also assumed in the aesthetic domain that our taste changes over time, jeopardising such coherence constraint. These changes can lead to a mismatch between new aesthetic judgments and old aesthetic preferences. This chapter explores a number of issues that emerge from this tension. Using Taylor Swift's re-recording as a case study, we will explore the relation between fan loyalty and personal authenticity, as well as the role of biographical taste in the reception of these newly recorded albums among Swift's long-time fanbase.

1. Appreciation and Changes in Aesthetic Taste

A central aspect of Taylor Swift's re-recordings has to do with the kind of valuing or appreciation these albums demand, especially among her longtime fans. The question is: how should fans relate to these albums? Although Taylor's Versions are regarded as almost sonic duplicates of her earlier albums, there are still notable differences, both aesthetic and moral, that suggest a need for a renewed appreciation. However, altering or revising one's taste can be challenging, especially when it involves the creations of one's favorite artist. The aim of this chapter is to examine the contrasting "old" and "new" love for Swift's music as experienced by her fans in light of the re-recordings.

As I will argue, Taylor's Versions invite longtime fans to reevaluate their emotional attachment to the original albums and engage in an active aesthetic investigation of their aesthetic merits. This dual exploration will delve into the complex and transformative journey of taste experienced by both the artist and her audience. Throughout the discussion it will become clear that some of the main difficulties concerning the appreciation of the re-recordings stem from (a) the nature of the attitudes involved in our valuing activities and (b) the intricate relationship between such attitudes. Let me clarify these two points.

First, appreciating an aesthetic object, such as an album, is a matter of exercising one's aesthetic taste. As some scholars have argued, aesthetic taste has a dual character: perceptual and emotional (see Levinson 2006; Korsmeyer 2013; Martínez Marín and Schellekens, 2022). Taste, on the one hand, refers to the ability to perceptually recognize the features that make an object worthy

of aesthetic appreciation and to judge it as worthy on the basis of such perceived features. On the other hand, it is commonly thought that those aesthetic objects that we tend to value positively are those that reflect our ideals and personal commitments. Taste, in that sense, is also partial, personal, and highly selective. Thus, a full-blown act of appreciation is a hybrid process that encompasses a particular combination of attitudes: a positive judgment based on the perceived merits of an item and a kind of affection towards it. Fans are deep appreciators in this sense, given their capacity to form judgments about the value of the products of their favorite artists in an autonomous way and their strong affectionate connection to these same products.

Second, what we *judge* to be valuable and what we *like* are importantly connected in the process of valuing. This is because exercising our aesthetic taste involves a relational interplay between perception and emotion, where they mutually influence one another. We can say that, “in exercising taste, aesthetic agents *attune* themselves to an aesthetic object insofar as they align or calibrate their emotional sensibilities to the perceived aesthetic character which that object exhibits” (Martínez Marín and Schellekens 2022, p. 70). However, there are instances where our attitudes fail to influence each other, impeding a proper engagement with aesthetic objects. Substantive changes in taste are an example of such breaks, leading to an internal conflict as our previous valuing attitudes clash with newly formed ones. To illustrate this point, consider the following example.

Imagine discovering, thanks to the art history and media studies courses you have been taking, that your favorite TV show lacks significant aesthetic merit. Despite this realization, you still enjoy it. While acknowledging its limited aesthetic value and forming a new judgment about it, you might continue to experience certain pleasure watching it. However, it wouldn't be accurate to say you now *fully* appreciate the show, considering the changes you have experienced in your perceptual sensibility. In this case you would have to abandon your liking for the show in order to align it with your newly formed negative judgment of it. Now that you can identify the show's flaws, sustaining the same level of affection for it may prove challenging. One might also question the 'aesthetic' nature of the attachment given the negative judgment formed. Moreover, your newly formed negative judgment about your favorite show could motivate you to explore other aesthetic objects, potentially leading to a shift in your aesthetic preferences. During this transition, you may experience an internal conflict, questioning whether abandoning your previous likes means losing something important about yourself or whether there's something to gain from changing your taste.

I believe that Swift's fandom in coming to appreciate the re-recordings may experience this sort of conflict. By closely examining some of the features of Taylor's Versions and how they have

been received by Swift's fan, it will become clear how their appreciation of these albums can result in an incoherent combination of attitudes: between the earlier likings of Swift's original albums and the newly formed judgments regarding the importance of the re-recording project. Appreciating the re-recordings thereby entails aligning one's judgments about them with one's felt responses to them. This will include exploring the relation between fan loyalty and personal authenticity, as well as the role of biographical taste. Ultimately, the aim of this chapter is to shed light on this particular challenge that longtime fans encounter when trying to come to appreciate Taylor's Versions while also offering a potential resolution to the conflict.

2. The Challenge: Fan loyalty vs. Personal Authenticity

The motivations behind Swift's decision to want to own her master recordings are well-known. In brief, after her former label, Big Machine Records, sold her first six albums to music manager Scooter Braun, Swift publicly expressed that her re-recording project was a response to bullying,¹ manipulation,² and a means of gaining artistic control over her music.³ However, there is a less discussed aspect that is crucial in understanding the underlying rationale for this project (and its success, so far). This has to do with the unique nature of Swift's fandom. It is safe to say that the feasibility of Swift's project owes much to her devoted fanbase. Now, what is so special about Swift's fans?

Taylor Swift's fandom, affectionately known as Swifties, stands out as one of the largest, most active, and devoted communities in today's music industry. In addition to the relatable and confessional qualities of Swift's lyrics, her innovative use of social media and technology has been key in cultivating this fiercely loyal following (Perone 2017, pp. 78-81). This loyalty and trust in Taylor Swift's persona offers insights into the artist's unprecedented decision, and monumental task, to re-record an important portion of her catalog. From a fan's perspective, particularly for longtime fans, this project offers an opportunity to revisit valued memories, discover new material "From the Vault", and deepen their connection with their beloved artist. Moreover, the re-recordings encourage fans to play an active role in their appreciation of Swift's music. Fans can exercise their agency by choosing to stream the re-recorded albums instead of the original ones, thereby showcasing their loyalty through direct action.

¹ Swift holds Scooter Braun partly responsible for Kanye West's controversial song "Famous" and its music video.

² Swift revealed on Tumblr, on June 30th 2019, that Big Machine Records extended her an offer to gradually regain ownership of her old masters, one album back at a time, in exchange for every new album she turned in.

³ Swift accused Braun and Big Machine head Scott Borchetta on social media of preventing her from playing a medley of her older songs at the American Music Awards of 2019 and of making use of older songs or performance footage in her Netflix documentary *Miss Americana* (2020). Taylor Swift, "Don't know what else to do" tweet, 15 November 2019. Retrieved June 21, 2023.

This is not the first time that Swift has called on her fandom to take action. Most notably, after she broke her political silence in an Instagram post revealing who she would vote for in the 2018 US midterm election, Swift encouraged her audience to register and exercise their right to vote. In that post, she openly criticized Marsha Blackburn, a Republican senate candidate with a voting record against equal pay for women, the reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act, and gay marriage. The post resulted in 65,000 new registrants and garnered more than two million likes (Nisbett and Dunn 2021). As highlighted by Simone Driessen (2020; 2021), the discussions among Swifties after the artist's political statement revealed an emotional investment in Swift's persona that went beyond her music. While a certain part of her fandom was critical of Swift's declarations, and interpreted it as a potential career strategy, others considered it a necessary act in America's turbulent political landscape. Either way, the ways in which fans navigated Swift's declarations in her "transition from pop-star to celebrity politician" (Driessen 2022) demonstrated a deep caring for Swift that transcended her music.

This response can be attributed to what are known as "parasocial attachments," which refers to the kind of one-sided relationship that individuals can develop with media figures (Horton, D., & Wohl, R. R. 1956). This same parasocial relation can also help us better understand how Swifties have been responding to the re-recordings, even though there are important differences between these two moments in Swift's career. When the artist revealed her moral stance on important social issues, this act either strengthened or weakened the connection between Swift and her fans on a political level. This act influenced our perception and understanding of Swift as an individual. In contrast, Swift's decision to re-record her albums has had a direct impact on the appreciation of her music. While the project undoubtedly has serious political and ethical implications, the central focus in this case remains on the music itself. In this situation, the audience can perceive themselves as being *aesthetically* empowered because of their capacity to actively support Swift's decision to regain control over her musical works. However, things are not that simple from a fan's perspective.

A conflict arises for longtime fans as they feel compelled to stop listening to the original albums that Swift herself deems problematic and instead embrace Taylor's Versions. The tension can be described as follows: On the one hand, for fans, engaging with Taylor's Versions is an important way of demonstrating their support for Swift and her ethical campaign about music rights. On the other hand, one might worry that the re-recordings prevent fans from engaging with the original recordings of songs they love, preventing them from accessing cherished memories and nostalgic feelings associated with these tracks.

Preserving and privileging aesthetic experiences and objects that are dear to us has important benefits; it can help explain the enduring relationships that we form with particular aesthetic objects as well as provide a sense of self (see Cross 2022). As Felix Bräuer puts it: “our aesthetic tastes are central to our conception of who we truly are and, correspondingly, that imagining a radical change here goes hand in hand with a feeling of loss of self. In short, it seems to us that, in part, we are what we like and that radically changing what we like would change who we are” (2023, p. 12). On this basis, fans have a reason to cultivate their engagement with those aesthetic objects that are related to (or reflect) their current aesthetic interests—in this case, Swift’s original albums.

To be more precise, the worry is that longtime Swifties might struggle to develop an authentic attachment to Taylor’s Versions. If fans merely *evaluate* the project positively, they will not be able to fully appreciate the re-recorded albums. *Liking* or *coming to love* Taylor’s Versions is crucial, as mentioned in the previous section, since liking is an essential component of aesthetic appreciation. But why exactly is liking so important for appreciation?

While our aesthetic judgments are linked to our reasoning skills and our capacity to being receptive to certain aesthetic qualities via perceptual means, our aesthetic likings reveal something more personal about how those objects relate to us and our broader system of beliefs. Aesthetic liking also aims to make sense of the idea that valuing, in general, entails an overall caring for what is considered valuable from an appreciator’s perspective. Furthermore, if Swifties are not affectively moved by Taylor’s Versions, it will be difficult for them to participate in several appreciative practices that depend on the motivational dimension of liking. It is our likings that drive us to want to experience a song repeatedly, recommend it to friends, or invest energy and time in better understanding it. When our aesthetic engagement lacks liking and is solely based on a judgment about the object’s worth, our aesthetic experiences are impoverished, as liking is what ignites our curiosity, interest, and love.

In summary, fans may feel like they are being pulled in two opposite directions—torn between cultivating their love for the original albums *and* remaining loyal to their favorite artist. To put it differently, Swifties may find themselves in a situation where they have good reasons to assess the artist’s re-recordings positively and yet to continue engaging with the original albums. While Swift has not explicitly asked fans to cease engaging with the original albums but rather to stop buying and streaming them (thus preventing any further enrichment of Scooter Braun), a sense of solidarity with Swift is likely to make fans feel less like true fans if they persist in listening to the originals. It is important to note that, in this scenario, a fan’s conflicting attitudes are not logically incompatible (as it is possible for them to hold both simultaneously) but rather incoherent.

This incoherence is relevant because it impedes fans from fully appreciating Taylor's Versions. Only when fans positively judge and also come to love Taylor's Versions can we consider them as truly appreciating the aesthetic worth of the re-recordings. The question, then, is how fans can balance their motivation to support Swift while developing a personal attachment to Taylor's Versions. For the rest of the chapter, I will explore issues related to aesthetic improvement and personal growth as a means of alleviating this tension.

3. Revising One's Aesthetic Judgments

For fans, one way of coming to align their evaluation about the worth of the re-recordings and their affective relation to them starts by revising their original aesthetic judgment of Swift's albums. Fans need to 'see' for themselves the aesthetic merits or demerits of the new recordings if they want to be in a good position to appreciate, or not, this project. It is not only important to share Swift's idea about music rights or to care about her well-being, but also to fully engage with the different re-recordings in an autonomous manner.

Taylor's Versions are not mere indiscernible sonic duplicates; rather, listeners, especially longtime fans, can perceive important differences between them and the originals. Critics and fans have pointed out variances in phrasings and vocal inflections, but also richer vocals and an improved quality in the musical production. As critic Katie Goh writes,

Swift's vocal performance is stronger on the re-recording, and she's freshened up some originally muddy enunciation. The fidelity is also considerably cleaner: guitar riffs are more isolated, given space to shine, like on *You Belong With Me*, and the drumming is more roundly finished, occasionally tuned a degree lower than the original to match Swift's deeper, more mature tones. ("I made my peace: fans divided over Taylor Swift's re-recording project". In *The Guardian* 15 April 2021)

From a fan's perspective, the act of comparing Taylor's Versions with the original recordings can be viewed as a collaborative appreciative enterprise. Fans assist each other in identifying the most subtle differences within the songs. Online discussion forums on *Reddit* and elsewhere are filled with extremely detailed aesthetic descriptions of the distinctions between the albums. This valuing practice is of special significance, not only because it allows fans to enhance their aesthetic skills but also because it contributes to the ongoing development of connections and relationships among Swifties.

Another important aspect to consider when revising one's aesthetic judgments about Swift's music is how the advantageous epistemic standpoint from which the adult artist sings alters the meaning of certain songs, a claim that Alex King supports in Chapter 6 of this volume. If you

once found it hard to take seriously the insights and advice shared by a young Swift, her mature voice lends a heightened sense of realism to her storytelling and conviction to some of the lyrics. These changes add depth and nuance to the re-recordings and infuse them with a newly acquired emotional undertone, a “she knows what she is talking about” experience. Some of her most popular heart-break songs, like “All Too Well” or “Dear John,” hit different in Swift’s adult voice. The distance from where they are being sung convey less anger and frustration, due to the gracious way in which she appears to be treating her younger self.

Furthermore, being aware of the motives behind the re-recordings reshapes some of Swift’s songs. Her persona—a concept which Ley David Ellette Cray examines at length in her chapter in this volume—comes across as stronger, more secure, and in control of her own life, giving tracks like “Mean” a prophetic, if not comical quality. These differences are also noticeable in the album covers of *1989* and *1989 (Taylor’s Version)*. In the former, we don’t see her entire face, and the image is dark and faded, resembling an old Polaroid. In the new cover, we see her whole face, she is smiling, and the image is bright and clear. These visual differences not only signify the different place, both personally and professionally, where Swift finds herself now but also help set the tone of the new recording. The new recording, featuring Swift’s smiling face in clear detail on the cover, exudes a luminous quality, whereas the original album carries a more angsty vibe.

Despite numerous positive instances, singing about the past from a present-day perspective can also lead to some aesthetic losses. For example, particular emotions such as the hope and optimism found in the original “Change” (2008), which appeared right after Obama’s first election, are impossible to fully recreate due to the different historical moment we live in now. Additionally, certain lyrics that felt witty, wise, and sophisticated when sung by a teenager may now appear naïve and even prejudiced and un-feminist. One could see the controversial change to the lyrics of “Better than Revenge” as a response to this very problem. Vrinda Jagota (2023) in her *Pitchfork* review of *Speak Now (Taylor’s Version)* notes how the loss of some of the teenage angst that marked this record makes the songs “slightly anonymous, more like lullabies and folk songs than expressions of pressing concern.” On a similar note, critic Laura Snapes (2023) worries that Swift’s skilled voice has killed her “youthful twang” which “made these songs kick harder in all their dressing-downs and rabid desires, emphasising the sense of a girl wading into adult waters.” Swift’s sound might be less vindictive and affected by the themes and events that inspired her original writing. However, it remains open to discussion whether this is a positive or negative aspect of the re-recordings.

What is clear is that both sonic differences and variations in artistic meaning carry significant aesthetic weight. Moreover, these changes are not unintentional; they directly respond

to Swift's desire to enhance the overall aesthetic quality of her recordings. As a result, by paying close attention to certain aesthetic features of Taylor's Versions, we can determine that there are good reasons for longtime fans to judge them positively—and even to prefer them to the older versions—based on their aesthetic merits. Or, as one critic eloquently stated about the re-recording of *Speak Now*: “If you loved the original album, then you’ll love *Taylor’s Version* even more” (Lowe 2023).

Aesthetic considerations play a key role in helping fans navigate the conflict between their personal attachment to Swift's previous albums and their loyalty to her as an artist. By revising their original judgments and realizing that, in many instances, Taylor's Versions are aesthetically superior, fans have found an additional reason to appreciate the re-recordings. This reason is significant because it is grounded in the aesthetic value of the music itself rather than in one's allegiance to Swift as an individual. However, a worry remains: Can these judgments about the aesthetic merits of Taylor's Versions truly replace or alter longtime fans' appreciation of the original albums?

We can imagine a scenario in which a longtime fan is able to judge positively Taylor's Versions, based on their aesthetic superiority, and still feel unmoved by them.⁴ As mentioned earlier, acknowledging the aesthetic merits of an artwork is not enough for a full appreciation; there's a need to also emotionally favor or like the work. If that's the case, recognizing the aesthetic value of the re-recordings marks just the initial step for fans to establish a meaningful connection with their value. Therefore, the next question we must address is: How can fans develop a genuine love for Taylor's Versions?

4. Biographical Taste

Taylor's Versions provide longtime fans with a unique opportunity to actively compare the different features of Swift's old and new recordings. This aesthetic investigation invites for collaborative interactions within the Swiftie community and leads to richer aesthetic experiences. However, fully appreciating the re-recording project requires not only acknowledging the aesthetic merits of the new versions, but also reassessing one's personal attachment to the original ones. Fans can find a way of coherently relating to their value and thus incorporate them into their life when they understand how to *both* positively judge *and* affectively respond to Taylor's Versions. In

⁴ Note that Swifties do not need to like the versions as much as they like the originals, being coherent in their aesthetic judgment and aesthetic liking about their value is enough. It's only problematic when they judge them to be good but dislike them.

this last section, I intend to provide an answer to the delicate question of why fans may want to revise their love for the original albums in favor of the re-recordings.

As previously discussed, our attachments to objects of value play a role in shaping our identities. The things we love and care about, including artworks, reveal much about our ideals and ourselves. Consequently, longtime fans may fear losing a significant part of themselves in the process of appreciating Taylor's Versions. This apprehension derives from Swift's petition to her fans to refrain from streaming the original recordings—an act that symbolizes a cut-off from certain experiences associated with those tracks. But what makes these experiences so meaningful?

For many fans, Swift's original tracks served as the soundtrack of their adolescence—a formative period characterized by moments of joy and freedom, but also by loneliness and confusion. Not every period in one's life is as easy to relive. Teenage memories are often best left untouched; revisiting them is much like the uneasy and cringy sensation of re-reading one's personal diary. What is intriguing about Taylor's Versions is that they offer more than an opportunity to re-open that diary; they are also an opportunity to rewrite it and transform those memories. We can see Swift as (intentionally or not) inviting fans to revise their attitudes toward who they were in the past, in the same way that she's revising her past self through the re-recordings. *Were you a good friend? Did you forgive too readily? Were you too young to be messed with? Do you still believe it when somebody tells you they love you?*

As mentioned earlier, the cover for her album *1989 (Taylor's Versions)* is another clear example of the very different relationship Swift has with these songs. Interestingly, she maintains the same cover style for the other three Taylor Version's. It will be exciting to see if there are any differences with her debut album, *Taylor Swift*, and with *Reputation* (which, in an important sense, is an album about reclaiming one's image).

Appreciating the re-recordings also involves a revision of one's own biographical taste. Fans are being asked to reevaluate their caring and love for the songs as they were originally recorded, while carefully attending to the memories associated with each record. This process is not merely an exercise of nostalgia, but also one of personal change and growth. As Tara Chittenden (2013) has argued, Swift's music is a case of “nostalgic reverse” for younger fans who have not experienced most of the “firsts” mentioned in her songs (romantic relationships, break-ups, leaving home). Instead, these fans substitute their own missing past with Swift's.

What I find more interesting about the re-recordings is that longtime fans now have a former self to draw upon when making sense of those songs. It is time to include their own knowledge and place it at the center of their appreciation. Placing ourselves at the center of appreciation comes with a new sense of understanding and intimacy. As longtime fans listen to an

adult Swift as adults themselves, they gain a new perspective on how to best interpret and evaluate some of the situations described in Swift's songs. Fans who were too young when the original albums were released now have the tools and knowledge to make sense of them. This newfound understanding can help create a deeper bond with the albums and even with the artist. Rather than seeing Swift as an older sister figure or an 'oracle of experiences,' fans can now relate to her as a friend—not just with sympathy, but also with understanding. This is an understanding built upon a common ground of shared emotions and experiences, something which was perhaps lacking in the earlier albums due to a young audience's limited lived experiences and, in some case, a perceived lack of authenticity on Swift's retelling of such experiences—not to mention her young age.

In the same way that the revision of one's aesthetic judgment involves collaboration with other fans, revisiting one's past through the re-recordings can be positively enhanced within this same community setting. Swifties do not need to face their past alone, which, as mentioned above, can be quite daunting. Given the common lived experiences that Swift refers to in her songs, it is easy for fans to revisit their pasts together when discussing Taylor's Versions. Engaging in this shared retelling of one's past can hopefully lead to a certain clarity and a communal feeling of belonging. This outcome would be far more challenging to achieve if one were to understand this process merely as an individualist and personal endeavor.

In sum, fans do not need to worry about the re-recordings representing a break with their past selves, but should see them as an opportunity to build new memories by gaining a deeper understanding of their pasts. These new memories are key since they can help fans ground their love for Taylor's Versions, and also ease the worry that they might be putting their identities at risk by ceasing to cultivate their love for the original versions of songs they grew up with.

5. Conclusion

From a fan's perspective, appreciating Swift's re-recordings is a complex and demanding task. The strong parasocial relationship that Swifties experience with their favorite artist gives them reasons to engage with Taylor Versions. However, for longtime fans, it might be too much to ask them to stop streaming the original albums, given their emotional attachment to these songs. So, we can imagine cases in which fans simultaneously evaluate positively the re-recordings but prefer the original versions to Taylor's Versions.

To appreciate is a matter of both perceptually responding to the good-making features of an object and favoring or liking that same object. This is because aesthetic appreciation requires the cooperation of both one's perceptual and emotional capacities. Both need to be in place to

account for the estimative and partial dimensions of valuing. The concern, then, is that for fans holding incoherent attitudes towards Taylor's Versions, it would prevent them from fully appreciating them. A proper aesthetic appreciation of the re-recordings demands both a positive judgment based on their aesthetic features and a liking.

Addressing this conflict reveals a dilemma between fan loyalty and personal authenticity. I have attempted to provide a solution to this dilemma by highlighting two considerations in favor of appreciating Taylor's Versions. The first consideration has to do with the aesthetic merits of the re-recordings. I have emphasized how Swift's richer vocals, improved musical arrangements, and variations in artistic meaning contribute to an enhanced aesthetic experience. The second consideration revolves around the personal growth that arises from critically reassessing long-standing relationships with objects of value. While this revision risks longtime fans cutting themselves off from certain cherished past memories, it also enables them to place their present selves at the center of appreciation and to relate to Swift's music in a more authentic manner.

Ultimately, with this chapter I have tried to show that for a longtime fan, coming to fully appreciate Taylor's Versions is a challenging and messy exercise. As we have seen, it demands not only an aesthetic openness to revise one's previous aesthetic judgments, but also an acknowledgement that our identities, including our aesthetic selves, are not static. Change and improvement are fundamental aspects of our aesthetic educations, and engaging with Taylor's Version offers a valuable opportunity to practice and embody these transformations.

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