

# Debunking Taste

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(This is a pre-proof draft. Please cite the final version, forthcoming in  
*Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*)

ABSTRACT: We are often confronted with attempts to debunk our aesthetic tastes, like: “You only like jazz because you’re a pretentious hipster,” or, “Your love of the Western canon is just colonialism speaking.” Such debunking arguments often try to give a socio-historical accounting, intended to de-legitimize our tastes by showing that they arise from processes uninterested in real aesthetic value. One common version is the Art Populist debunk: that claims of aesthetic expertise in esoteric arts are really just elitist gatekeeping. Then we have its mirror twin, the Art Expert debunk: that the populist love of simple arts serves the interests of profiteering entertainment corporations dispensing simplified slop. Suppose we accept one of these debunking arguments. How are we supposed to get on? Are we supposed to not like the things we like, or force ourselves to choke down food we don’t enjoy? And suppose we accept both of these debunking arguments — what then? Are we supposed to simply give up our grip on beauty altogether? This is hard to imagine. Aesthetic debunking arguments have a harder time getting a grip on us, because aesthetic life involves a distinctively tight relationship between our felt aesthetic phenomena and our aesthetic judgments. Aesthetic life gives us phenomenal resistance to debunking arguments, when our felt loves lag behind our endorsed beliefs. I suggest a way through that offers a livable accommodation. We may be able to treat such debunking arguments, not as targeting the positive content of our taste, but as targeting the boundaries and limitations on our taste. That is, a Populist may not be able to debunk my deep felt love of opera, but they may be able to debunk my dismissal of dance-pop. In this case, we can take onboard both the Art Expert’s and the Art Populist’s debunking arguments, as targeting different varieties of narrowness and dismissal. These debunkings, then, move us, not towards aesthetic nihilism, but aesthetic expansionism.

If your life has been like mine, then you have occasionally been confronted by somebody trying to explain away your aesthetic loves — trying to debunk your tastes. This might take the form of explaining away your tastes in terms of your tribal affiliation: “You’re just into coffee because you’re a hipster.” Or explanations in terms of your class aspirations. “You just like opera because you want to be all classy,” or its close opposite twin: “You just like rap because you want to stand out from all the bourgeois normies.” Such explanations often reject the legitimacy of your tastes by pointing out some causal

origin: that you just like Jane Austen because you were raised by Brit-worshippers, or that you find Taylor Swift pretty because your mind has been colonized by imperialist, patriarchal and fatphobic standards which have guided your sexual tastes exclusively towards the thin white women with a certain perfectly symmetrical aristocratic vibe. And debunking arguments aren't just supposed to offer an explanatory story for my tastes, but to offer an explanatory story that undermines and de-legitimizes them. It is not just that my taste is explainable, but that is explainable in a way that reveals it to be somehow wrong, bad, false, or inauthentic.

But what is the point of presenting such debunking arguments? What are we trying to accomplish? Sometimes, we are simply accusing one another of insincerity — of pretending to have a taste that we do not actually feel. What's going on there is familiar and uncomplicated. Nobody likes a poser. The really interesting cases, though, are when we all acknowledge that the tastes involved are sincere. You and I agree that my love of coffee, rap, or Taylor Swift is genuine and heartfelt — but you are trying to debunk my taste anyway. What's going on? In that case, you aren't accusing me of insincerity or false. You're saying that there's something is wrong with my actual felt tastes and preferences, that my heartfelt loves are wrong in some way. My culinary pleasures, my loves in art, my romantic attraction have been formed in some problematic crucible.<sup>1</sup>

Suppose I accept your explanation of the social or historical origin of my tastes. What

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<sup>1</sup> A methodological note: one might immediately worry about what aesthetic judgments are, such that they can be de-legitimized in this way? Are they subjective expressions of felt experience, are they reportings of plain external facts, or some complex hybrid of the two? I actually find the nature of our aesthetic judgments unclear, and what it is that makes them legitimate or illegitimate quite difficult to understand. My methodology, here and elsewhere (Nguyen 2019, 2023), has been to use our intuitions about what makes aesthetic judgments legitimate, and our practices of making accusations of the illegitimacy of certain judgments, to get clearer on what aesthetic judgments *are*. The method of this paper, in part, is to note that certain kinds of debunking claims seem intended to undermine an aesthetic judgment, and then use that to make headway on what we must think our aesthetic judgments are like, such that this kind of response could possibly be undermining.

am I supposed to do now? Is it just a historical curiosity, an extra biographical fact? I take it that, in such accusations, something more is going on: the debunker is trying to get me to change my own attitudes somehow. But how? Am I supposed to stop feeling what I'm feeling and stop taking joy in my morning coffee? Am I supposed to notice the alignment of my tastes with my history and simply stop loving classical music, or stop vibing to rap? Or, perhaps your accusations are designed bring me to distance myself from my feelings – to admit that my love of Hall & Oates is just a guilty pleasure, and not somehow a real, proper, full-fledged aesthetic judgment, whatever that means. Alternately: perhaps the debunker isn't intending to get me to change my tastes, but is trying to defend their own. Perhaps the debunker is attempting to explain away my tastes so that they can ignore the challenge to *their* tastes. Then, they can dismiss my claim to their attention and comfortably return to ignoring rap, or British literature, or opera, or comics, safe in the reassurance that there isn't a real demand to look over there – that they haven't been missing anything after all.

Notice also: many such debunking arguments come with a hidden flip-side version. If you, who are into classical music accuses me of listening to sludge metal just to be different and fit in with my Los Angeles hipster friends, can I not immediately reply with the equal and opposite debunk? That you, in fact, listen to classical music just because you were raised by class-aspirational immigrant parents, and that you've been inculcated with the desperate subconscious desire to prove your worth to the white colonial overlords?

Sometimes it is easy to expose the falsity of my tastes. I have, before, become convinced that my professed affection for some band came from peer pressure, and seen the shallowness of my affections. But when our aesthetic judgments are detailed and heartfelt – when they arise from a detailed and loving perception of the thing itself – it seems

unlikely that either debunk will bite all the way down. When you actually feel the overwhelmingly perfect conceptual architecture of Beethoven's late string quartets, or you actually feel the precise sad clarity of Tove Jansson's gloriously strange novel, *True Believer*, that experience of beauty has a pretty firm grip on you. So are aesthetic debunking arguments simply toothless? I don't think so, either. If one has been really pierced by a debunking argument, perhaps one may still find the same pleasure in comics or opera, but with a shaken grip on the legitimacy and correctness of one's taste. After debunking, we may keep loving the same things, but debunking may leave us expressing our loves in a softer register.

The situation I'm most interested in here is the one where convincing debunking arguments meet sincere and loving judgments. I think of my twenty year old self, who had a passionate love for Beethoven and Bartok, Dostoevsky and Chekxo. But I also understood the logic of colonialism and systemic racism. And I had something real to worry about, when somebody pointed out to me that my bookshelves and my music collection was stocked exclusively with white European and European-descended authors. Racism and internalized colonialism is a really plausible and convincing explanation here. What am I supposed to do, in the face of such a debunking challenge?

Much will depend, I think, on getting a clearer picture on the purpose and impact of aesthetic debunking arguments. And here, I think it will be useful to focus on one particular debunking argument: that your exclusionary taste is just a matter of elitism. That argument, and its flip-side partner, turns out to be particularly revealing of the purpose and power of aesthetic debunking arguments.

## **Marxist Debunking Arguments**

Here is a common debunking argument: that some claim of aesthetic expertise turns out to be just a form of elitism or gatekeeping. Here is a rough sketch of how it can go, with the social niceties removed, to lay bare the guts and teeth:

ART POPULIST: I really love this simple thing — this PF Chang’s orange chicken, this Marvel superhero movie, this Broadway rap opera. It’s really amazing and incredibly beautiful and I love it.

ART EXPERT: You only think it’s amazing because you’re inexperienced and brainwashed by corporate crap. If you really had as much as experience with real Chinese food, or real cinema, or real comics, or real rap, you’d see that what you love is kind of simplistic mass-produced crap.

ART POPULIST: You’re just an elitist gatekeeper!

The Populist’s response here descends from familiar Marxist critiques of aesthetic elitism. There are many forms, but perhaps the most well-known is Pierre Bourdieu’s (1987) discussion of cultural capital. Bourdieu suggests that a certain kind of cultural knowledge is used by class elites to function as a gatekeeping tool. Expressing the right tastes is a sign of having the right class background. In an earlier era, for example, upper class elites were raised with the right background in classical music, impressionist painting, and Greek poetry, and so expressing an appreciation for such things is a signal that one was brought up right. Crucially, Bourdieu thinks that the form of cultural knowledge is a moving target. The lower and middle classes — the aspirational classes — will want to try to game the system by giving their children the right education. But the elites can simply move the goalposts — change the code, come up with a new secret

handshake.<sup>2</sup> My own immigrant, class-aspirational parents made sure I had an education in classical music so I could pass with the elites and move up the social ladder. But when I arrived at my fancy East Coast undergraduate institution, I quickly discovered that the cultural elites had moved on. They were now all into free jazz and esoteric post-punk and obscure house music. Traditional classical music was for the class-aspirational immigrant proles.

This form of argument is particularly interesting because it seems to be an attempt to debunk *aesthetic expertise*.<sup>3</sup> The Art Expert, in our story, is claiming that they know more than a novice about some terrain, that they've had the experience and cultivated the sensitivity to see better. The Art Populist's argument is a claim that the Art Expert has, in fact, no real expertise, but is simply functioning — perhaps unknowingly — to safeguard class boundaries and maintain the oppression of the lower classes. (The Art Populist's argument might be aimed narrowly, at this one particular Art Expert, or more broadly, at the whole class of culturally sanctioned art experts, or perhaps anybody who claims any form of art expertise whatsoever. I will attempt to treat all these types of populist debunking strategies together.)

Most of us have occupied both sides of this debate, in different contexts, and know how either side *feels*. I've been, at one stage in my life, a novice to rap, excited by the first

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<sup>2</sup> See Trigg (2001) for a useful summary of the structure of various class-based aesthetic debunkings, especially from Veblen and Bourdieu.

<sup>3</sup> Note that the Art Expert and the Art Populist's debate here is really about the existence of expertise. Though these two positions often track what we might call the high art and low art distinction, it doesn't have to. Expert gatekeeping can happen using expert knowledge of "low" arts just as much as the "high" arts. (You might think, in fact, that what it was to be a "hipster" is to be an elitist about what are usually taken to be low-culture practices.) What's in the background here are the complexities that arise once you start worrying about gatekeeping practices, but no longer think that there is a single group — upper class wealthy people — that do all the gatekeeping, but rather allow that different tribal groups can gatekeep in different ways. One might, for example, easily imagine a version of this debate over boardgames, where the Art Expert role is played by a relatively impoverished and culturally marginalized expert about the aesthetics of esoteric indie boardgames, and the Art Populist role is played by a wealthy New York museum-goer who likes Monopoly — a game generally derided by the boardgame snobs as for the plebes. Gatekeeping can be for everybody.

rap album that I really understood (*The Miseducation of Lauren Hill*), totally in love with it — only to have my love condescendingly dismissed by some long-term rap aficionado. My love, he said, was just the shallow fancies of a total rap newbie, taken in by some engineered corporate product. And, at a much later stage in my life, I've been somebody soaked in rap listening for two decades, listening to newbies excited by what was to my ears a simplistic and corporate-engineered pop-rap atrocity ("Thrift Shop", Macklemore), begging people to try some *real rap* instead.

The Art Expert is often portrayed, in popular culture, as a total snob and ruthless asshole. But note that the Art Expert has a pretty reasonable position, on the face of it. If an aesthetic domain requires any expertise to perceive — if perception and apprehension of a terrain requires some kind of experience, training, or sensitivity, then a person with that experience and sensitivity would have better, more legitimate judgments. The Art Populist, on the other hand, is offering a kind of debunking argument of aesthetic expertise. As with any other debunking argument, they are offering a *causal and historical* explanation of a belief or claim, which is supposed to undermine that belief. In this case, the Art Populist is saying that the best explanation of some claim of aesthetic expertise is not best explained by actual expertise, but rather by a story about class struggle, of power and exclusion.

A brief look at the general functioning of debunking arguments will help us here. It is not enough to tell a story about where a particular belief came from, because many stories explaining the origin of a belief are compatible with the accuracy of that belief. In debunking arguments, we need an explanation about the origin of some belief by which that belief turns out to be false — or, at least, that we have no reason to think it true. Much of the recent discussion of debunking has concerned *evolutionary debunking arguments*

*about moral beliefs.*<sup>4</sup> According to these arguments, our moral beliefs are best explained as arising from various evolutionary processes of kin selection. According to that theory, those kin-groups that held various pro-social beliefs — like that you should help out people in need — survived better, and so were selected for by evolutionary forces. But, according to this debunking argument, there is no reason to think that this evolutionary process will yield true moral beliefs. Rather, it will yield whichever beliefs which, if believed fervently, will help the survival of kin-groups. There is little reason to think that the beliefs which help kin-group survival would also track the moral truth. So this debunking argument is supposed to undermine our moral belief by showing that the best available explanation for those beliefs shows that they emerge from processes that have no particular attachment to the truth. Similarly for Gerald Cohen’s (2000) proposed debunking argument about political beliefs.<sup>5</sup> Cohen notes that most political liberals were raised by liberal parents, and political conservatives were raised by conservative parents. The best explanation for such a belief, then, is that it arose from one’s happenstance of upbringing, and not from some process that tracked the truth.

The structure of the Art Populist’s argument can be understood in a similar way. The best explanation for a purported art expert’s aesthetic judgments isn’t that they track true facts about what is aesthetically good. Rather, the best explanation is that the supposed expert is repeating a set of inculcated tastes that work as a kind of cultural capital, and play some kind of gatekeeping role in a class struggle. (Interestingly, aesthetic debunking arguments seem to center around Marxist critiques of capital and class struggle in a way

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<sup>4</sup> The literature on this is large and growing; Some highlights of the evolutionary debunking arguments of morality include include Street (2006) and Vavova (2021). For two useful surveys of the space, see Vavova’s (2015) survey of evolutionary debunking arguments of morality, and Korman’s (2019) survey of debunking arguments in general.

<sup>5</sup> For a further discussion of this type of debunking argument – “if you’d been raised differently, you’d have different beliefs”, see Sher (2001), DiPaolo and Simpson (2016), Vavova (2018), and Egeland (2022).



that moral debunking arguments usually do not.) The Art Expert's, on the other hand, probably believes that the difficulty and esoteric qualities of their beloved arts is deeply connected to their quality – that it takes time and experience to really catch onto the subtleties and complexities of Emily Dickinson or free jazz or classical Japanese cuisine. The Art Populist is accusing the Art Expert of just fetishizing the esoteric for its own sake. That is: the best explanation of the esoteric and difficult qualities of the Art Expert's preferred forms are, not their actual aesthetic value, but the way that such esoteric features function as social gatekeepers.

I'm not, here, going to litigate whether or not the Populist's proposal is actually the best explanation. I am interested in what happens if we accept the debunking argument – in how we can and should react in those cases where we accept the debunker's causal story. Are we supposed to somehow give up on our tastes, and abandon our loves? The aesthetic case is distinctive here, because our particular felt aesthetic experience has a particularly tight relationship to our aesthetic actions. Most of our aesthetic actions should be in tune with our actual, felt aesthetic responses. And paying attention to the aesthetic case will, I hope, show some new possibilities for how we might react to debunking stories in general.

Importantly, the Populist's debunking argument can be interpreted in two very different ways. First, we might take the debunking argument to be attack, not on the particular content of our tastes, but their rather their supposedly superior cognitive status. That is, the Art Populist might not be challenging the Art Expert's love of avant-garde cinema and indie rap, but only challenging the Art Expert's claim that their judgments are superior to the Populist's. The Art Populist is not attacking the felt subjectivity of the Art Expert's love, but rather attacking the Art Expert's claims to superior expertise over a domain that admitted of such expertise. Let's call this the *expertise undermining reading*. And

I take it that the expertise undermining argument is often voiced, not just as a particular challenge to one person's expertise, but as a general challenge to a whole class of expertise. It is often presented as a general challenge to any claim that one person's tastes can be better than another's.

Alternately, the debunking argument might be taken as an attack on the specific content of the Art Expert's tastes – that they, in fact, just like the wrong things. The Art Populist might be taken to be arguing that the Art Expert's tastes have no particular bearing on real aesthetic goodness, because those tastes were shaped to function as gatekeepers. In order to serve in a gatekeeping role, a taste has to be relatively esoteric — require some special knowledge, or involve some trained ability — for example, the ability to catch the complex cascade of obscure pop cultural references in a rap verse from MF Doom. But according to the debunker, the trained ability doesn't grant some special access to some realm of aesthetic value. Rather, we have an undermining explanation for the sort of thing the Art Expert prefers. The taste for such esoterica is there not because it actually tracks real beauty, but because its esoteric quality is exactly the kind of thing you'd need to play a gatekeeping role. I have been *programmed with* such esoteric loves in order to play out my role in class warfare. Thus, as with the evolutionary debunking argument, the thing that shaped our expressed tastes has little relationship to any process which would give us accurate tastes. Let's call this the *accuracy undermining reading* of the Art Populist.

The two arguments are very different. The expertise undermining argument leaves, in a sense, the expert's particular tastes untouched; it only seeks to blunt their claim to superiority. It doesn't say to the Art Expert, "your tastes are wrong" -- but rather "you're no better than me." The accuracy undermining argument is an attempt to assault the expert's particular tastes themselves – to say the Art Expert's tastes have been corrupted by

some irrelevant influence.<sup>6</sup>

With this distinction in hand, let's return then to the original question. What are we to do in the wake of a debunking argument? Suppose that I am the Art Expert so targeted, and that my tastes are sincere — that, at the very least, I see aesthetic loveliness in the works I praise, that I feel it in my gut and soul. In that case, I can imagine being convinced of the expertise undermining argument. I can imagine what that life would be like; I at least know how I would go on. I could still express love in my authentic Sichuan corner restaurants and my favorite indie mumblecore rappers, but that love would simply be that — an expression of devotion, a registering of my personal pleasure. It couldn't approach the valence of objectivity. The debunking argument might convince me to give up thinking that I had any basis for thinking my judgment better than yours in this domain.

But what about the accuracy-undermining version? How should I behave if I come to think that my felt aesthetic reactions are just false? In some cases, we don't need to make a decision. Sometimes, being convinced by the debunking argument will immediately alter my aesthetic perception, and my felt aesthetic responses will immediately fall into line. I've had this happen before: somebody points out that this action movie I love is based on cheap pleasures about power-trip fantasies; I see it and my experience of the movie completely alters. Now it just seems cheap and tawdry. If so, I'm in luck — my felt aesthetic experience and my cognitive beliefs about the legitimacy of aesthetic experiences have stayed nicely in line. (Though I've noticed, most of the time this actually happens, it's because I've the debunking argument has caused me to look again at the artwork, and what I found there changed my mind. That is, the process helped me see something more about the *artwork itself* and not just about *me*.)

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<sup>6</sup> See Vavova (2018) for a further exploration of this form of debunking argument.

But in many cases, I don't experience such an immediate shift in my feelings. Debunking arguments often leave us in a state of *dissonance*, where we are convinced that there is a problematic origin to our tastes, but our felt aesthetic experiences don't change. One of my friends – a leftist social justice activist who is fully aware of the logic of structural racism – once told me that she fully understood that her preference for gentle NPR-style singer-songwriter music, and her inability to enjoy rap at all, was surely a legacy of being raised in an all-white community by racist parents. But, at the same time, she could never experience rap as anything but ugly and hostile, and could only find beauty and spiritual ease in genteel and soothing NPR coffeehouse music. I have heard many similar confessions from people about the kinds of people they could find romantically attractive, about the kinds of food they could like, about their preference for European literature – that, despite fully buying into a cultural critique that showed the problematic nature of their taste, their felt tastes remained unchanged. What people seemed to say in the end was: “Well, I guess I like what I like.”

Let's call this experience *phenomenal resistance* – when our felt experience comes apart from what we are convinced is right or true. I think the experience of phenomenal resistance is very common in aesthetic debunking cases. Suppose I accept the debunker's undermining, and believe that the best explanation of my tastes is some sort of complex social process — that my tastes are expressive of, and function to, maintain a certain sort of social power. Suppose I accept that my loves were trained into me to have a gatekeeping role, and that they have little to do with what's really aesthetically valuable, what's really beautiful or fine or wonderful. But still — I love these things, they make me happy, and I experience them as beautiful. Should I just stop seeking them out, even though they fill me with joy?

Here aesthetic debunking arguments have a very curiously different impact from

their moral analogs. Suppose you offered me a debunking argument of my particular substantive moral beliefs. Suppose, say, I grew up being taught that men were supposed to be in charge, and women subservient, and that's how it should be — and then you convince me that these beliefs arise from an oppressive and patriarchal society. I know what to do in this case. Even if I feel those old intuitions, I can still discount my feelings . This is because the phenomenal feel of those beliefs has some significant distance from my actual commitments and actions. I can alienate myself from my intuitive moral gut, and believe something else instead — and act on my new, unintuitive beliefs. I can come to decide that all my moral feelings and gut are the result of false consciousness and social programming, and try to follow instead the thread of some moral argument — about, say, the basic moral equity of all people — and override my gut with my rational commitments. Moral beliefs are supposed to drive action, and the way they drive action can survive a surgical detachment from one's moral feelings. In the moral case, I may feel some form of phenomenal resistance, but it is rationally comprehensible to override it. It might be better, in the long run, to retrain my gut with better intuitions, but until I've been retrained, I can force myself to act well, against my felt responses.

But things are different with *aesthetic phenomenal resistance*. Our felt aesthetic experiences have a much more direct relationship to action than our felt moral experience. Even if we are not strict subjectivists about our aesthetic tastes, we must admit that there is a deep tie between our direct experience of aesthetic qualities and our practical reasons for action.<sup>7</sup> It is hard to imagine living a life where the majority of my aesthetic actions that depart too deeply from my felt aesthetic phenomena, even if those felt responses have

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<sup>7</sup> Here one could cite almost the entirety of philosophical aesthetics, but for a recent – and penetrating – discussion, see Keren Gorodeisky's (2019, 2021) work on the link between positive aesthetic judgments and pleasure and "liking".

been debunked – and even if we cognitively stand with that debunking.

Suppose that you have convinced me that my love of Marvel movies and fast food is the result of my tastes being formed by capitalist interests, so that I will be a willing consumer of easy, reliably manufactured corporate entertainment product. I accept your arguments, but still find myself deeply entertained and cheered by the Marvel jokes, and tear-jerked by the Marvel sentimental moments, and I still find McDonald's French fries delicious as hell. Am I going to stop watching that stuff and eating that stuff if I they make me laugh and cry, if those fries still taste yummy as hell?

Or suppose you notice that I am exclusively attracted to, and exclusively find beautiful, skinny blonde white women.<sup>8</sup> You tell me that my taste is best explained by a particularly horrific stew of colonialism and patriarchalism, that my sexual and romantic tastes have been formed to support patterns of oppression, to represent white interests in cultural dominance and to represent male interests in maintaining a misogynistic society. Suppose I am convinced; I accept that our society is deeply misogynistic, accept that I was raised that way, and see that my precise tastes are exactly what one would expect to emerge from that oppressive stew. Still, I might respond: "But what am I supposed to do, date somebody that I'm not into?"

This is not to say I'm helpless. I can certainly embark on a long-term project of trying to change my desires, and maybe that will work in the long run. But our tastes, though they may be somewhat malleable in the long-run, are often recalcitrant in the short-run. And it is hard to imagine that we should ignore our felt tastes and felt sexual desires entirely, especially in our choice of long-term romantic partners. As Ann Cahill puts it, the idea that we should entirely ignore our felt responses and bodily impulses, and

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<sup>8</sup> This is not actually true, by the way.

“corral the wayward body, and... deny its demands and inclinations, in favor of political, and ultimately intellectual commitment” reeks of the kind of “Western somatophobia that is so closely associated with sexual and gender inequality” (2016, 283). We don’t want to demand that our intellectual beliefs override our felt responses entirely, especially in the aesthetic sectors of life – at least if we are to maintain any loyalty to our actual embodied and emotional existence.

When I was in college, I was in love with my closest friend, who didn’t return my feelings. She told me at one point that I checked every box of her romantic desires, except that I was Asian, and she just wasn’t into Asian dudes. She admitted it was probably some latent racism, too. It was sad, but there it was. What else could I do but accept it and move on? You can’t argue somebody into dating you by calling them a racist. You might hope, perhaps, that in the long term they’ll get over their biases and transform their tastes. But it seems to go to far to hope that that somebody ignores the current reality of their felt experiences and responses, in something so personal and peculiar as dating.<sup>9</sup>

We can imagine debunking arguments getting a partial grip on our actions, even in the face of phenomenal resistance. Suppose my heart stirs only to European classical music and the European novel. I am convinced that my tastes have been formed in the crucible of colonialism; my aesthetic soul has been thoroughly debunked. I might be willing

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<sup>9</sup> As A.W. Eaton (2016) offers an interesting wrinkle. In her discussion of fatphobia and fat oppression, Eaton wrestles with how we are supposed to respond to the ethical demand to change our tastes, given their recalcitrance. She suggests an Aristotelean approach: an attempt to habituate our tastes in a more ethically laudable direction – by employing, for example, media images that aestheticize fat bodies. She briefly considers the possibility of habituating oneself through forced action. A person who wants to like vegetables might *act as if* they liked vegetables, until they formed sufficient positive association. But I take it that the suggestion here, in the fat oppression example, might involve taking various actions that embody the aesthetic appreciation of fatness, like admiring fat models. But I doubt that includes a directive to enter a long-term relationship somebody one is unattracted to out of a moral imperative – even though one might have every reason to pursue the long-term project of transforming one’s attractions. The point here is not that we can never choose to act in a way that is tension with our felt aesthetic responses, only that in general there is a tight connection between aesthetic experience and aesthetic action. This is, however, an extremely complex topic, which deserves far more attention.

to take all kinds of more distant actions based on accepting that debunking: I might be fully in support of decolonizing the syllabus, of making sure that libraries and writers rooms are adequately diverse. But the closer our actions are to the realm of our own personal aesthetic lives, the harder it seems to be to ignore our felt experiences. If I can't vibe to heavy metal, there's only so long I can play it to myself in my car on long drives. At some point, I'm going to listen to what I love. The debunking may influence some of my more distant and official actions – like my choices about what to put on a syllabus – but in the day-to-day personal life of listening to music, reading books, watching movies, and picking who to date, our actions are usually driven by our felt aesthetic phenomena, and aesthetic debunkings can start to seem curiously toothless, even when we find them intellectually convincing.

The heart of the matter is this: our aesthetic actions and responses are at the crossroads of two very different sets of considerations. On the one hand, we want to be true to ourselves and our felt experiences. Our aesthetic responses can seem so clear, so powerful, and, in the moment at least, so out of our control. Aesthetic choices are the last bastion of the personal. If we can't decide what to eat, what to watch, and who to date, out of our own sensibilities, it seems like the last vestige of discretion will have been extinguished from our lives. On the other hand, our aesthetic responses have surely sometimes been formed in a problematic crucible – just like with the rest of our personality. And those aesthetic responses can be the site of obvious injustice, since aesthetic responses are tied up with how we give social power, with how we disburse our connections and affections. So how are we to live, as aesthetic beings emerging from an often-disgusting historical process?



## Flipping the debunk

Which brings us to another oddity. One of the most interesting things about the Populist vs. Expert exchange is that there is, once again, another opposed argument on offer. The Populist has offered a debunking of the Expert's purported expertise — that it serves the interests of dominant classes in the class struggle. But the Expert has some perfectly good counter-debunkings available in response. The Expert, in fact, can offer a neatly mirror-opposite analysis of the Populist. The Expert can claim that the Populist's tastes also arise from socio-historical forces. The Expert can claim, for example, that they arise as part of a power-grab, an attempt to undercut aesthetic expertise for somebody else's gain. And the Expert has a particularly good explanation for a certain kind of populist taste, again in the key of Marx. For if the people's tastes stay simple and predictable, it is easier for corporations to profit by making rote, repetitive entertainment product.

The Expert has a meta-debunking argument available, in response: they can claim that the Populist's debunking argument is, itself, a tool of corporate capitalists. After all, if the usual art experts are right, we should be struggling against the mind-numbing effects of simple-minded corporate art, to grasp, instead, the subtle, the esoteric, the difficult — to find the difficult and scarce thing which is real beauty. But, the Expert can point out, the Populist's debunking argument functions to remove our motivation to struggle to understand difficult or distant art. So the Populist's debunking argument itself turns out to be a very useful device for large-scale corporate producers of entertainment product. If the Populist debunk convinces us to stop believing in art experts, to stop trusting experts who tell us to look beyond what we're currently into, then we are more likely to rest easy in our simplistic tastes. So we will be easier targets for those who profit from the large-scale production of simplistic corporate entertainment product. And note that the

Populist has access to a very nice response to the Expert: that the Expert's meta-debunking of the Populist's debunking itself serves the ends of gatekeeping. Each side has the resources, internal to its picture, to explain away the other side's debunking provocation,

These anti-populist debunking arguments are well-known. What I've offered, in the name of the Art Expert, is a quick and schematic simplification of familiar arguments from figures such as Theodore Adorno and the Frankfurt School. What's particularly interesting is that the Populist's debunking argument and the Expert's debunking argument both arise from the same set of background considerations: the basic Marxist view that there is a class struggle, and that various forms of false consciousness have been instilled in people to serve the interests of the upper class owners of capital. I have found it interesting that the Populist's debunking argument is currently very popular with progressive intellectuals, but the Expert's debunking argument has mostly fallen by the wayside — despite their both arising from the same basic Marxist framework.

Notice that neither of these debunking arguments depend on target's intentions. The target of a debunking argument may be perfectly sincere expressions of their tastes and beliefs. The debunking arguments work by noting how a certain class of belief *functions*. It may perfectly well be that the Populist truly loves their simple pleasures, and the Expert truly loves their fancy esoteric stuff. The debunking arguments are offering a diagnostic explanation of where those loves were formed. The Populist is saying that the Expert's standards function extremely well as a class gatekeeper, and the Expert is saying that the Populist's standards make the Populist function very nicely as a stooge of capital forces. Each will explain the others' sincere tastes and beliefs as the result of inculcation by some larger social force.

So what are we supposed to do with these debunking arguments, especially given the fact that we have such a neatly opposing pairs? Do we get to dismiss the other side's

debunking argument as part of their already-debunked position? Does one trump the other? Do they cancel each other out? Or is there some possibility of a synthesis — of taking onboard both the Populist and the Expert's debunking, together?

For those who are familiar with Amia Srinivasin's (2019) discussion of debunking arguments: Srinivasan stages a key part of the argument around a similar-looking pair of opposed debunking from the feminist and the patriarchalist. Each says that the other's beliefs arises from their social position. The feminist says that patriarchalist has been programmed with a certain misogynist mindset; the patriarchalist says the feminist has been brainwashed by the social justice left. Srinivasan argues however, that the two sides don't cancel each other out. One can stand fast on one's position, because it is viable to think that one has, by luck, had the right social position to arrive at the right beliefs – just as somebody who believes in evolution can believe that they have, by luck, been born at the right time to be educated with evolutionary theory. Each side is, at least, internally coherent when it denies the other.

Notice, however, a key disanology between Srinivasin's sample debunking and the arguments we've looked at here. In Srinivasin's discussion, the feminist and the patriarchalist have essentially contradictory world-views. If one accepts the feminist world-view, one cannot accept the patriarchalist's debunking story, and vice versa. What's interesting about the opposed debunking positions in the Art Expert vs. Art Populist is that they arise from the *same* set of background presumptions: a Marxist reading of the social landscape. The Art Expert's and Art Populist's debunking story are entirely compatible. In fact, one might think that a good Marxist should believe both stories: both that elitist gate-keeping can explain away the Art Expert's tastes, and that capitalist re-programming can explain away the Art Populist's tastes.

But what are we supposed to do in that case? It seems, at least, a pretty sad life if both

expert and populist tastes get explained away. What are we left with, and how are we supposed to live?

### **Towards aesthetic expansionism**

So is there a way to give and receive debunking arguments that might have an actual impact on how we live? Much depends on which interpretation we give the arguments. Under the *expertise undermining* interpretation, the Art Populist isn't trying to change the Art Expert's particular tastes, but trying to undermine the objectivity and purported superiority of the Art Expert. In that case, the Art Expert's meta-debunking argument is intended to defang the Art Populist's, and restore to the Art Expert to possibility of genuine expertise. These two debunking stories are genuinely opposed and contradictory. I am tempted to say, in this case, that the two balanced arguments cancel out — that the presence of two opposite debunking stories, emanating from the same background critical framework, gives us a reason to ignore the debunking attempts altogether. Or even if you don't think that opposing arguments can cancel each other out, we can say this: whichever position we have, we have a plausible recourse to a debunking story that makes our own position stable. There is much much more to say here, but I will leave the epistemic complexities of the expertise undermining argument to another day.<sup>10</sup>

I would like to focus here, instead, on what becomes of the *accuracy undermining* interpretation of the debunking argument – and on exploring some different forms it might take. Notice that some of the debunking arguments aren't aimed quite at taking away

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<sup>10</sup> See Srinivasan (2019) for a further discussion of the defensibility of standing your ground in such parallel debunking cases.

your tastes, but rather at expanding them. I, in a populist mood, might attempt to debunk your attachment to high classical music and ballet, in order to get you to pay more attention to the dense aesthetic possibilities outside your narrowly classy repertoire — to give comics and street dance and electronic music a chance.<sup>11</sup> You, in an expert mood, might attempt to debunk my attachment to Marvel movies and fast food in order to get me to spend the energy to get difficult arty or and ultra-dense drum 'n bass or subtle Japanese mushroom broths. Our interests, in this mood, lay less in attacking the felt reality of each others' loves, and more in expanding the scope of what the other could love. This is a very distinctive kind of debunking.

What we've uncovered here is a potential asymmetry in the impact of aesthetic debunking arguments. Much depends on their precise target and their goals. Are they subtractive or expansionist? When we take debunking arguments at face value, they can often sound as if they're aimed only at producing a negative, subtractive effect. If you tell me my love of opera arises from my narrowly constrained background, it sounds like what you're saying is that my love is somehow false, that I should get rid of it. And certainly, that could be what I'm trying to do. But, as we've said, such arguments are often toothless in the face of aesthetic phenomenal resistance.

But there could be another point to your criticism. You could be aiming, not at my love for opera itself, but at the narrowness of my love. You could be offering a debunking aimed at the *boundaries* of my taste. This is a peculiar kind of accuracy criticism – aimed more at what you have dismissed. Let's return to the Populist's debunking argument, aimed at my taste in opera. The Populist says: it arises from a gatekeeping impulse. Here are two ways to interpret the argument, which differ in the precise target of the debunk:

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<sup>11</sup> I do not take this kind of expansionism to be part of Bourdieau's original project – but a common use of aesthetic debunking in popular discourse.

1. Subtractive: My taste *in opera* arises from gatekeeping forces and thus fails to track anything good.

2. Expansionist: My *narrow* taste in opera arises from gatekeeping forces, and what's excluded from my taste fails to track genuine boundaries on what's good.

Notice that under the Expansionist interpretation, the Populist is still aiming at a certain kind of debunking of the Expert's pronouncement. Let's say the Expert says that opera is far better than rap. Under an Expansionist interpretation, the Populist isn't denying that the Expert sees real beauty in opera. The Populist is undermining the Expert's capacity to pronounce on the superiority of opera over rap, because the Populist is debunking the Expert's ability to adequately judge what is beyond the bounds of their taste.

There is now a large matrix of possible debunking claims that could interact. Let's look at some of the simplest combinations. Imagine that both the Expert and the Populist are offering *subtractive* debunking arguments. Since the Expert and Populist position are logically compatible, it is quite possible to synthesize these arguments. The result, however, leaves us in a really sad place. It's possible to both believe the Expert that the Populist's tastes arise from corporate interest in training people to buy what's easily producible, and so doesn't track aesthetic value – and, at the same time, to believe the Populist that the Expert's tastes arise from gatekeeping forces. Suppose we generalize a typical form of the debate, and take the Populist as undercutting all the fine arts, and the Expert as undercutting all the popular arts. Then, it can start to seem, we are left with nothing. The combined debunkings threaten to leave us, collectively, with no access to beauty or aesthetic value whatsoever. Both sides have lost; it is a nuclear winter of aesthetic debunking.

This is, perhaps, a *reductio ad absurdum*. At the very least, it's a pretty undesirable place to end up. What I've just said bears a slight resemblance to a well-known response to evolutionary debunking arguments of morality. One powerful response to the moral debunking argument is that the argument is self-undermining.<sup>12</sup> That is, the arguments that purport to debunk our moral beliefs, if successful, should also debunk the normative standards that underlie our rationality. Recall: the evolutionary debunking argument of morality says that the best explanation of our moral beliefs is that they help us survive, not that they track the truth. But we can respond to these debunkers by pointing out that their argument is too strong. By the very same logic, their argument also applies to our rational abilities; the best explanation of our rational faculties is that they helped us survive, not that they track the truth. So a philosophical argument that is strong enough to debunk our trust in our moral reasoning is also strong enough to debunk our trust in our philosophical reasoning. So the evolutionary debunking argument of morality is self-undermining; if we accept it, then it will debunk the very basis of that acceptance. (There are echoes here of Bernard Williams' (1993) old observation: that the moral nihilist cannot think that *you should believe in moral nihilism*, since a general rejection of normativity also entails a rejection of the normativity of rationality.)

Aesthetic debunking arguments of the sort we've looked at don't quite have the same self-defeating quality, since they are more narrowly aimed at our grip on aesthetic matters, rather than widely aimed at the whole of the normative domain. The explanatory stories are specifically about, say, the gatekeeping function of our aesthetic tastes, and not about some general evolutionary function of all our normative beliefs. But there is still a sense that the arguments are too strong. It is an echo of a more inchoate perhaps

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<sup>12</sup> Most powerfully argued by Vavova (2014).

even more convincing response to moral debunking arguments. Which is: after our moral beliefs are completely debunked, how are we supposed to go on? We still have to decide what to do, who to help, and who to vote for. How are we to make decisions, deprived of any sense of normativity? Similarly, if we follow the logic of aesthetic debunking arguments, and also see how many plausible ones there are, we can end up in the place where it starts to look like all our tastes are incorrect, and we have no reason to think we have any grip on real beauty whatsoever<sup>13</sup>. But how, then, should I go about my aesthetic life? Which curtains should I hang, which movie should I go see, what should I cook for dinner tonight?

Much depends here on the scope of the debunking attempts. I can imagine what it would be like to accept, and try to live under, an very narrowly targeted forms of accuracy debunking. Cahill's offers a useful example here. Take a person who realizes, to their dismay, that their sexual preference for Asian women turns out to arise from racist stereotypes about the submissiveness of Asian women (289). I actually do know how to go on in light of such a targeted criticism. The target here is narrow, so I can imagine what to do. Cahill suggests, a person might try to perceive and appreciate Asian women as sexual beings without relying on racist associations (290). I myself have gone through a debunking of my sense of the beauty of diamonds. I was convinced by a socio-historical account that the beauty I found in diamonds actually arose from a network of associations between diamonds, permanent romantic relationships, and social status, that had been

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<sup>13</sup> I am distantly inspired here by Vavova (2021), where she argues that the evolutionary moral debunking argument requires us to adopt either an assumption that we have some grip on the moral domain – in which case we can self-correct after the debunking, and our grip on the moral domain isn't entirely threatened – or asks us to reject the assumption that we have some grip on the moral domain, in which case we have no reason think we can properly evaluate the evolutionary debunking argument's as having any impact on morality at all.



specifically implanted by a systematic advertising campaign run by the diamond industry.<sup>14</sup> And I know exactly what to do about that, which is not to waste my money on a diamond engagement ring.

But many of the Marx-ish debunking arguments we've seen are far more widely scoped. They are often presented as *systematic* taste debunkings – claims that *all* of a person's tastes are the product of corrupt social forces. And, even if we accept such an argument in a philosophical mood, it's very hard to imagine how we are to go on in that light, as human beings who have to keep on eating, reading, dressing ourselves, and decorating our homes. Are we to think that all beauty, all aesthetic perception, is a load of hooey, and systematically rid yourself of any aesthetic life, in order to, I guess, increase our productivity or our moral uprightness? Perhaps. But I suspect that end-point of wholesale aesthetic nihilism was never the goal for many debunkers. I can imagine going on in the aftermath of a precise debunking, which surgically targeted one particular bit of my taste. But more wide-scoped aesthetic debunking arguments seems much harder to live under. I think a lot of us would rather live with some aesthetic grip on the world, then to give it all up the name of socio-historical debunking. (Though certain hypocrisies are available. I've known plenty of people that happily offer debunking arguments for anybody else's taste, but are unwilling to entertain any debunking arguments of their own. This strikes me as a rather ludicrous form of self-exceptionalism — where all the other people must live as socio-historically embedded beings, but you yourself are somehow magically free of such causal influences.)

But notice that the *expansionist* debunking arguments have a happier possible synthesis. It may both be true that the Expert's tastes are too narrow, because they have been

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<sup>14</sup> <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/02/how-an-ad-campaign-invented-the-diamond-engagement-ring/385376/>

subject to social forces turning them into a gatekeeping enforcer. And it may be true that the Populist's tastes are too narrow, because they have been subject to capital forces that have pushed their tastes towards the simple and easy. In the wake of the debunkings, the Expert now has a reason to look outside the class, and the Populist now has a reason to try to grapple with difficult or strange art. The expansionist versions of the debunking arguments permit a happier synthesis. The Populist's debunking argument, and the Expert's, turn out to be compatible because they are additive. And the synthesis yields a world that is stuffed with beautiful things — one where the Expert and the Populist both might one day hold hands and enjoy opera and superhero comics together.

Why are the subtractive and the expansionist arguments so different? The subtractive argument aims at debunking a *positive taste*, where the expansionist argument aims at debunking a *boundary on taste*. The subtractive argument is trying to convince somebody who is in the grips of the experience of beauty and emotion that their grip is false. It is trying to take away their positive aesthetic judgments. The expansionist argument leaves the positive judgments relatively untouched and seeks to shake up the negative judgments (though that may, in turn, shake up our sense of uniqueness about the positive judgments).

Perhaps this seems ad hoc, and perhaps I now seem like some kind of saccharine optimist. ("Can't we just all get along and love everything?") Why the asymmetry? Why might it be better to debunk boundaries on taste, than positive taste itself? There are two answers. The first is practical. It is less motivationally compelling to lose a love and source of joy we already have. The promise of a new source of joy, however, is an easy source of motivation. This is not to say we can never be motivated to lose a source of joy — as with Cahill's case, sometimes we can become convinced that one of our aesthetic joys is so deeply morally corrupted that it's worth the sacrifice. But the negative move, at least,

swims against a compelling and natural motivational current.

The second is that it's just quite plausible that our aesthetic tastes are subject to overly narrow boundaries. This is because aesthetic life is subject to attentional loops. Much of aesthetic life is *subtle*. Subtle art requires some considerable time and effort to see what's good about it. It takes experience with the medium, time spent soaked in the genre, to develop the sensibilities and sensitivities. So it's easy to fall into a dismissive loop. If you don't think that some aesthetic category is worthwhile, you won't spend the time and effort to develop the sensitivity required to actually see its worth.<sup>15</sup> If you've been raised steeped in classical music, you can hear all the dense complexities in its harmonic and melodic structure. But you might not hear that in rap, because you haven't been steeped in form enough to catch onto all its rhythmic complexities, all the subtle nuances of how a rapper's flow can play with and against the beat. So it becomes easy to dismiss whole forms of art, especially when that dismissal comes backed with a theory — about how all that music on the radio is corporate trash, or all those opera fans are just elitist classist gatekeepers. The very subtlety of aesthetic perception makes it more likely that we will dismiss things too quickly – whole realms of art, in fact,

What I mean here is no more than this: having had the rapturous experiences I've had, it seems basically impossible for me, to even conceive of a world in which Beethoven turned out not to be beautiful, rapturous, astonishing. But it is easy to imagine a world in which it turns out that a form I had dismissed as worthless — like rap — turned out to be full of more astonishing wonders, which I missed because of internalized racism and classism.

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<sup>15</sup> This is a summary of ideas I've developed in more detail in "Trust and sincerity in art" (Nguyen 2021).

## **Conclusion**

This expansionist synthesis isn't the only available response to the Art Populist and the Art Expert's opposed arguments. All of the various possibilities are still on the table. But my point has been that the expansionist synthesis is a particularly appealing possibility. I don't know how I would live under a broad-scaled subtractive synthesis, but I know exactly how to be a broad-scaled expansionist.

I myself have gone through multiple stages of accepting a debunking argument of my own tastes and taking expansionist action. When I was in college, somebody pointed out to me that my bookshelf and music collection consisted almost exclusively of white artists and authors. It wasn't hard to figure out all-too-plausible sociohistorical explanation. I had gone through an American public school education which had featured almost exclusively white American or European authors. I had been raised by South Vietnamese parents who had attended French-established universities in Vietnam, which had offered them an extensive education in French literary classics. And they had been raised in the kind of post-colonial environment where the Vietnamese cultural landscape was dominated by American and British popular music.

This realization didn't immediately change by experience of music and arts. And it is hard to imagine how that line of thinking could undercut my intense love of Dostoevsky and Beethoven. But it easily gave me a reason spend effort and explore things I hadn't. And I followed it. The thought that my education had been narrowed, for clearly racist and colonialist reasons, gave me reason to try and push harder, to spend time with music and literature that I had before quickly dismissed. It took some effort, but the first thing that happened after that was I figured out how much I'd been missing from the world of

rap and hip-hop – and what followed was one of the more intensely pleasurable aesthetic awakenings of my life.

As Anthony Cross (2017) puts it, aesthetic conversation often doesn't directly transform our aesthetic vision, but it gives us practical reasons to do things – to look again, to try harder, to look in a different way. And, with the expansionist synthesis, the path forward is motivationally straightforward. We spend effort, we look again, we read things and listen to people that might clue us into what we've missed. We may not reliably be able to will ourselves into seeing, as beautiful, that which we immediately do not, but we can simply decide to take actions which increase our exposure and develop our sensitivities into terrain. And such actions are more motivationally coherent. It is more difficult to motivate myself to take actions that would decrease my aesthetic enjoyment of the world – though sometimes the moral pressures, as in Cahill's case of racist desires, may sometimes provide sufficient motivation to overcome the loss of pleasure. But, at least for myself, it seems far easier to find the motivation to take actions that might increase and expand my aesthetic sensibilities. And it is far easier to think of myself as having missed out, than to deny the beauty and richness and comedy I find in what I presently adore. And, in any case, if our foundational interest is to root out injustice in appreciation, the expansionist path gets us there too, more pleasantly. Basically: it's hard to want to give up my loves in the name of social justice, but it's easy to try to expand my tastes, and bring the missing areas up to parity.

What matters here is really seeing the full broadness of the impact of the Marxist critique. Once one sees the two flipped versions of the critique, then a lot of the Marxist aesthetic debunkings we see happen in our everyday lives can start to seem a bit self-serving. People often seem to pick one side of it – either the Expert or the Populist debunk – that matches their natural tastes. And they deploy the debunking arguments to justify

sticking with their own tastes. But what some of this analysis suggests is that, at least in the case of these Marxist arguments, things aren't so easy. Since the Marxist framework naturally lends itself to both directions of debunking, we should take it as generally unsettling of all our tastes. Perhaps the lesson is that, under conditions of capitalism, no form of taste is entirely safe. Both elitist and populist tastes might bear some corrupting mark. And if you find this sort of sociological debunking story convincing, then you should also find yourself, at the very least, unsettled. The debunking stories that we so often use outward bound weapons, aimed at the tastes of others, when taken seriously, should expand to discomfit our relationship to our own tastes as well.

But there is an upside: the Marxist debunking gun isn't only confined to taking away tastes. It can also tell us to expand our aesthetic awareness. But that expansion will involve a fair bit of self-dissection -- to study exactly the crucible in which our tastes have been formed, and take a harsher look at exactly what has structured the boundaries of our attention, and shaped the placement of our dismissal<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> I'd like to thank Brian Soucek, Melissa Zinkin, and Anthony Cross for all their useful advice about this article.

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