

Rethinking Low, Middle, and High Art

Abstract: What distinguishes middle, low, and high art? In this paper, I give an ameliorative analysis of these concepts. On what I call the Capacity View, the distinction between low, middle, and high art depends on the relation between an artwork's perceiver (specifically her aesthetic responsive capacities) and the perceived artwork. Though the Capacity View may not align perfectly with folk usage, the view is worth our attention due to three attractive upshots. First, it explains how an artwork's status level can be elevated or lowered in status over time and why biases can lead to mistaken judgments about such statuses. Second, it sheds light on the idea of a cultural inheritance and why certain forms of aesthetic deference may be justified. Finally, it explains how high, middle, and low art each make distinctive contributions to the good life.

Introduction

What distinguishes low, middle, and high art? We might worry that these aesthetic concepts are dated or have nothing to do with an artwork's aesthetic qualities.¹ For example, one might think that instead of low, middle, and high art, there are just different ways of engaging with art (e.g., ivory tower academic analysis, journalistic criticism, casual consumption, etc.). Or one might think that these concepts reinforce class structures or dated conceptions of the solitary artistic genius.

Despite these skeptical worries, I will provide an ameliorative conceptual analysis of what distinguishes low, middle, and high art.² On what I call the Capacity View, these distinctions in status depend on the relation that holds between a perceiver (more specifically, their capacity to respond to an artwork's aesthetic qualities) and the accessibility of an artwork's aesthetic qualities.

I provide an ameliorative rather than a descriptive conceptual analysis for two reasons. First, it is unclear whether folk usage of these concepts demonstrates consistent patterns that are amenable to neat descriptive analyses. Second, my aim is to provide an analysis of low, middle, and high art that carries certain advantages if adopted. In particular, the proposed analysis will help (i) illuminate how the categories of low, middle, and high can be reasonably fluid, (ii) give us a workable notion of cultural inheritance and aesthetic deference, and (iii) explain how low, middle, and high art each

¹ See Timberg (2008) for discussion of the phrenological roots of these concepts.

² For further discussion on ameliorative conceptual analyses in general, see Haslanger (2006).

make distinctive contributions to a good life. Thus, even though the present analysis will not be completely alien to ordinary use, I do not aim to be maximally faithful to it either.

Here is the roadmap for the paper. In section 1, I develop the Capacity View and address four immediate objections. In section 2, I consider advantages to thinking of low, middle, and high art in terms of the Capacity View. In section 3, I further develop the Capacity View by responding to three additional objections.

Section 1 The Capacity View

1.1 *The Capacity View*

According to what I call the Capacity View, the primary feature that distinguishes low, middle, and high art is the accessibility of its significant aesthetic qualities to perceivers. Here is a first pass at the view:

High Art (first pass): An artwork *A* is high art just in case its significant aesthetic qualities (i.e., the important qualities that a perceiver must possess and respond to in order to fully appreciate it) are generally inaccessible to perceivers given their aesthetic responsive capacities.

Middle Art (first pass): An artwork *A* is middle art just in case its significant aesthetic qualities are generally accessible to perceivers given their aesthetic responsive capacities.

Low Art (first pass): An artwork *A* is low art just in case its significant aesthetic qualities are easily accessible to perceivers given their aesthetic responsive capacities.

Though I'll clarify the terminology above shortly, this rough pass seems to get the key cases right. On this proposal, James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* will count as high art, a well-crafted and thought-provoking blockbuster such as Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* will count as middle art, and a children's book like *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* will count as low art.

Though this first pass has some intuitive appeal, it ignores the fact that not all perceivers are similarly situated to respond to an artwork's significant aesthetic qualities. I might belong to an aesthetic community deeply knowledgeable of the lyrical and production prowess of rappers such as Nas or Kendrick Lamar. You might belong to an aesthetic community consisting of experts on

contemporary classical composers such as Missy Mazzoli and Kaija Saariaho. While we might be unable to fully appreciate each other's preferred music choices, perhaps our musicologist friend is capable of fully appreciating both.

If this is correct, then not all artworks will neatly fit in our first pass account of low, middle, and high art. The above categories serve as limit cases. Some artworks may well be high or low for every potential perceiver. Perhaps some examples of abstract poetry are mostly inaccessible even to academics and the aesthetic qualities of most (though perhaps not all) pornography is accessible to anyone. But for most artworks, their accessibility will depend on the capacities of the perceiver in question.

One might take this relativity to be a reason to give up on providing an account of what divides low, middle, and high art altogether. On the contrary, I propose that we build this relativity into the Capacity View as follows:

High Art: An artwork A is high art for a perceiver P just in case its significant aesthetic qualities are generally inaccessible to P given her aesthetic responsive capacities.

Middle Art: An artwork A is middle art for a perceiver P just in case its significant aesthetic qualities are generally accessible to P given her aesthetic responsive capacities.

Low Art: An artwork A is low art for a perceiver P just in case its significant aesthetic qualities are easily accessible to P given her aesthetic responsive capacities.

To better understand the proposal, let's examine the terminology used above and then address some immediate objections.

1.2 Significant Aesthetic Qualities and Aesthetic Qualities as Reasons for Appreciation

For the present discussion, the aesthetic qualities of an artwork are reasons that make it fitting for or deserving of appreciation. Thus, the account will not be directly concerned with reasons that do not

directly make the artwork fitting for or deserving of appreciation (e.g., you'll get paid to appreciate it, it will help you make friends or appear intelligent, etc.).³

Second, said aesthetic qualities need not be completely intrinsic properties of the artwork. For example, a film may have many intrinsic qualities that make it good (e.g., well-paced narrative, riveting music, etc.), but it may also have qualities that can only be fully appreciated in relation to other films or with background knowledge of its genre (e.g., subversive genre commentary, upending audience expectations, etc.).

Third, though I am sympathetic to a realist construal of aesthetic qualities as reasons for appreciation, I will not assume any specific version of such a view. Instead, the present discussion relies on more minimal assumptions. Aesthetic qualities are instantiated in artworks, they are reasons for appreciation, and we usually respond to them rather than something we subjectively or socially project onto art. Thus, what I say here should be compatible even with certain Neo-Humean accounts of aesthetic qualities.⁴

Finally, the emphasis on *significant* aesthetic qualities highlights that not all of an artwork's aesthetic qualities are equally important in determining its aesthetic merit and thus what it takes to fully appreciate it. Admittedly, full appreciation and importance are not precise terms, but we should not impose more precision than reality admits. We can instead illustrate the point with an example. Marvel films contain dozens of references to other films or characters in comic books that may be inscrutable to casual fans or novices. Granted, understanding these references might add to our appreciation of them. But Marvel films are not high art for such perceivers even on the Capacity View. Instead, most Marvel films plausibly count as middle (and maybe low) art because the significant aesthetic qualities that make them fitting for praise or criticism (e.g., pacing, character development, humor, dramatic tension, emotional stakes, etc.) will be accessible to a wide variety of perceivers even without awareness of any inside references.

1.3 Aesthetic Responsive Capacities and Levels of Accessibility

³ That said, an artwork's qualities can make you feel various simple or complex emotions which may also be fitting reasons for appreciation.

⁴ For example, Ross (2020) develops an account of aesthetic qualities around the notion of an ideal critic that is generally consistent with the claims made in this paper.

What is an aesthetic responsive capacity (i.e., a capacity to possess and respond to the aesthetic qualities of an artwork as reasons to appreciate it)? My answer draws from Lord's (2018) account of reasons possession. The general idea is that in order to possess and thus respond to some fact as a reason for some action or attitude, one needs to be able to use that fact in their deliberation about which action or attitude to adopt.

Consider an example involving a reason for action. Suppose you are a gym novice. I am an inexperienced and overly eager personal trainer. If I start citing elaborate studies in exercise science or give you specific lifting cues that you have no idea how to implement, I may be stating facts that are decisive reasons for you to exercise in specific ways. Nonetheless, you may fail to actually possess these facts as reasons to do anything because you have no idea what they mean. You cannot use them in your deliberation about what to do. Once you are provided with the relevant background information to be able to use these facts in deliberation, then you are in a better position to possess them as reasons for action.

The same point applies for reasons for aesthetic appreciation. It may be the case that all perceivers have a universal and rather basic course-grained set of capacities to appreciate aesthetic reasons just as we may have a universal and course-grained set of capacities to appreciate and respond to reasons for action. For example, humans respond positively to repetitions in music and symmetry in faces. There may also be universal psychological bases for experiences of tension and suspense when perceiving art.⁵ But as with our gym example concerning reasons for action, our capacity to fully possess and respond to a specific domain of aesthetic reasons can be rather fine-grained and contingent on background knowledge and experience.

For example, someone completely unfamiliar with the street layout and geography of early 20th century Dublin and lacking extensive knowledge of Western philosophy, literature, and Irish turn-of-the-century culture may find it difficult to get past the first chapter of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, let alone fully appreciate its significant aesthetic qualities. Likewise, someone who has no knowledge of Compton, California, what it was like to live there as a black teenager in the 90s, lacks general knowledge of the Bible, and has never seriously engaged with hip hop, will not be able to fully possess and appreciate the significant aesthetic qualities of Kendrick Lamar's album *good kid*,

⁵ See Margulis (2013) on repetitions in music, Grammar and Thornhill (1994) on facial symmetry, and Lehne and Koelsch (2015) on the psychology of tension and suspense.

m.A.A.d. city. On the other hand, if a perceiver works to gain the background knowledge and experience just mentioned, then they could develop the responsive capacities that would allow them to fully appreciate these works of art.

Lastly, let us turn to levels of accessibility which will be relevant for our discussion in section 2.3. High art for some perceiver P will contain significant aesthetic qualities that will generally be inaccessible to P given her aesthetic responsive capacities. Even when she exercises her aesthetic responsive capacities to the fullest and carefully attends to the art in question, she will still fall short. Low art for some perceiver P will contain significant aesthetic qualities that are easily accessible to P given her aesthetic responsive capacities. Little effort is required for her to appropriately respond to this kind of art. The interesting case resides in middle art for P. Here, the significant aesthetic qualities are generally accessible so long as P exercises her aesthetic responsive capacities fully. The idea is that middle art taxes but does not exceed the responsive capacities of its perceivers. Putting it colloquially, middle art for P is art that she can actually ‘get’ if she is properly attentive to it.

1.4 Four Initial Objections

At this point, one might object that the revised and relativized Capacity View makes counterintuitive predictions about what counts as low, middle, or high art. In particular, the relativization to a perceiver’s aesthetic responsive capacities seems problematic. Note that my aim is not to give a purely *descriptive* analysis but an *ameliorative* analysis of these concepts. Thus, I am willing to sacrifice some descriptive accuracy if adopting the Capacity View carries certain practical advantages. Before turning to those advantages, let me address four objections.

Objection 1: The Capacity View entails that art from another culture or art that you are unfamiliar with would thereby count as high art. For example, the view seems to predict that the music of rapper Cardi B would count as high art to a classical music expert unfamiliar with hip hop.

Response: First, even if Cardi B’s music is unfamiliar to the expert on contemporary classical music, that expert may still be able to appreciate most of its *significant* aesthetic qualities. The music may still count as middle art. As someone conversant in music, he can recognize the artistry in Cardi B’s production values. He can also appreciate Cardi B’s humor and vocal delivery. Admittedly, our classical music expert might not recognize Cardi B’s crafty feminist twist on the masculine braggadocio verse trope, but that does not prevent him from recognizing the aesthetic qualities that

are most important for appreciating her music.⁶ Thus, it isn't the case that unfamiliar art from another culture has to automatically count as high art.⁷ Whether the artwork's significant aesthetic qualities are accessible to the perceiver is what matters – not necessarily whether the artwork or its genre are familiar or unfamiliar.

Second, the objection seems to assume the following asymmetry: that the twelve-tone compositions of Schoenberg should be high art for someone like Cardi B, but Cardi B's music should not be high art to a contemporary classical music expert. But why assume this? One *might* try to link high art with good art (which I have avoided) and then argue that twelve-tone music is better than Cardi B. *Maybe* we can make that case. But we can just as easily replace Cardi B with Lauryn Hill in the example to reject the asymmetry intuition. It may well be true that Lauryn Hill's music is high art to the classical music expert. On the flip side, the hip hop connoisseur may find many classical works to be high art. This is precisely because these works may contain significant aesthetic qualities that neither side are able to fully grasp just yet.

Objection 2: The Capacity View seems to predict that the more a perceiver is familiar with an artwork, the lower its status level will become for that perceiver. But this seems incorrect.

Response: First, some artworks may contain significant aesthetic qualities that remain generally inaccessible even after repeat experiences by experts. Perhaps Bach's most complex contrapuntal works or the *Goldberg Variations* are like this. They forever remain high art even for experts and will continue to reward repeat viewings.⁸

Second, it *is* plausible that some artworks can become middle or even low art for us after we have increased our aesthetic responsive capacities. For example, the classical music expert may have started off as a child listening to box sets such as *The 50 Greatest Pieces of Classical Music* but has since moved on to appreciate more obscure or complex contemporary compositions. The compositions in these box sets may now count as middle or low art for him. But note that this is still compatible

⁶ Though I think critics of 'mumble' rap are unfairly negative, we can point out that even if the classical music expert is unfamiliar with it, it may still be low art for him.

⁷ Likewise, we need not assume that films from a different country or culture would automatically count as high art for us. Case in point, a French action film may be on the same art status level as an American one.

⁸ See Denk's (2012) humorous praise for the *Goldberg Variations*. His criticism is that it is too perfect. It has all of best qualities of humanity but none of its flaws.

with his judgment that they are great works of art. We can move on from Beethoven's *Symphony No. 5* without denying its greatness.

I suspect the worry is that on my view, if an artwork's status is lowered for some perceiver, it also becomes worse relative to that perceiver's aesthetic responsive capacities. But there is no such entailment on the Capacity View. Though I won't give a theory of what makes for good art here, I am not committed to the claim that the goodness of an artwork is also a relational property. Good art need not be co-extensive with high art either. Thus, I agree with Swirski's (2014) claim that good works of art are not limited to a particular status level and many great works contain a mixture of high, middle, and low elements.⁹ Most children's books may be low art for most adults, but that does not preclude their being good or even great art (e.g., *Charlotte's Web*). Others are terrible. Likewise, *Finnegans Wake* may be high art for just about anyone, but we can reasonably debate about whether it is actually any good.

Objection 3: The Capacity View is simply too relativistic. On the present view, there seems to be no sense in which what counts as low, middle, or high art are as stable as we might expect.

Response: First, while I'm open to the idea that whether an artwork is good or bad may be an objective matter that is not relative to individual standards, I do not see why we have to also accept that what counts as low, middle, or high art has to be invariant in a similar way across all perceivers at all times. It may even be a good think that there is some diversity in the artworks that we appreciate and our ability to appreciate them so long as we remain open-minded.

Cohen's (1993) discussion is useful here. Cohen accepts, like me, that an artwork's qualities may objectively merit our appreciation and we are inclined to call certain works "art" precisely because we think others should care about and appreciate them too (1993, 153). But it is also the case that as individuals with distinctive personalities, tastes, and interests, it is good for us to share, appreciate, and be connected by some works of art and not others. Cohen (1993, 156) puts the point well:

Hamlet and *The Marriage of Figaro* connect me with most of you, I would guess, perhaps all of you. Elaine May's movie *Ishtar*, which I am very fond of, leaves me virtually alone. That's all fine: I need to be with you, and I need to be alone. I need to be like you, and I need to be unlike you. A world in which you and I never

⁹ I elaborate on this point in section 3.1.

connected would be a horror. And so would a world in which we were exactly the same, and therefore connected unfailingly, with every object on every occasion.

Second, while the objector might worry that a relativized account of low, middle, and high art would entail divergence rather than convergence on these categories, this worry may be increasingly misguided. Given the globalization of entertainment, the onset of online streaming for music, television, and film, and the increased access to high quality cultural criticism, the public's aesthetic responsive capacities may be far more homogenized (for better or worse). If so, we should expect that what counts as low, middle, or high art is more stable and less idiosyncratic than what the objection predicts given the Capacity View.

Third, we may expect that some works are simply low art or high art for everyone. At the extremes of the spectrum, we find limits to the relativization predicted by the Capacity View. Here, King's (2017) discussion on what makes an artwork subtle is useful. King writes "When we make judgements about which things are subtle, we have in mind a range of relevant audiences or contexts. If something does not count as subtle for any of those, then it does not count as subtle (2017, 121)." As previously noted, *Finnegans Wake* may be high art with features that count as subtle for any context or relevant audience (experts in 20th century Irish literature included). On the flip side, a children's book may be low art that lacks any kind of subtlety for any context or relevant audience (except maybe toddlers).

Objection 4: Even if the Capacity View is independently plausible, it seems utterly ahistorical and unconnected to how the distinction between low, middle, and high art has been drawn historically.

Response: First, since I am engaging in a primarily ameliorative conceptual project rather than a history of aesthetic distinctions, I ask the reader's forgiveness and point the reader to Swirski (2014) for much more detailed historical discussion. Nonetheless, the Capacity View is conversant with and takes this history seriously. Unlike the romantic elitism of Woolf (1942) or the moralism of Plato, we'll see that the Capacity View takes low, middle, and high art to make distinctive and positive contributions to a flourishing life. In addition, the Capacity View avoids problems with prior views that either make the distinction between low, middle, and high art too deflationary *pace* Bourdieu (1989) (i.e., the distinction is purely socio-economic, or power based while ignoring the qualities of an artwork) or too objective (i.e., focuses only on its qualities and makes no room for differences in aesthetic responsive capacities).

Section 2 Advantages to Thinking in Terms of the Capacity View

Having stated the Capacity View, let's consider some of its practical advantages.

Two preliminary points for the reader. Though I believe the relational version of the Capacity View is more fundamental and helps us secure the advantages discussed in sections 2.1 and 2.2 below, I would be satisfied if the reader ends up finding only the first pass view plausible because it still offers the advantages to be discussed in 2.3. Second, for ease of exposition, I will drop the relativization parameters when discussing low, middle, and high art. Simply assume them unless explicitly stated otherwise.

2.1 The Fluidity of Status Level and Correcting Mistakes

Why is it that some compositions in jazz and hip hop have now gained widespread acceptance and recognition as high art when historically they were regarded as low art not worthy of serious consideration?

One (false) answer might be that works of jazz or hip hop have evolved so that their significant aesthetic qualities are more complex, subtle, and takes more training to appreciate though this was not the case before. On the contrary, the Capacity View allows us to provide a more accurate and illuminating answer. The reason why certain artworks or even genres have attained the status of high art is not just because artists have created more challenging art. There may have always been higher and lower examples of hip hop and jazz since their inception. Instead, the change in recognition may be a correction of prior mistakes due to various cultural, social, or even racial biases.

On the Capacity View, societal attitudes or the preferences of tastemakers are not the ultimate determinants of what counts as high art. Instead, it is a matter of whether the significant aesthetic qualities of an artwork are accessible to a particular audience. Societal attitudes on what counts as high art *can be mistaken* and the Capacity View can be used to diagnose those mistakes.

Cultural critics with their own biases may have lacked the background knowledge needed to fully appreciate certain musical compositions. They may have dismissed them as low art due to these biases. Putting it bluntly, the bias that jazz and hip hop compositions were created by and for uneducated or uncultured Blacks resulted in dismissive and mistaken judgments about their merits and their ability to challenge our aesthetic capacities. Hip hop and jazz were never monolithic genres of music. Instead, these genres contained a mixture of low, middle, and high artworks throughout

their history. Ironically, because cultural critics lacked the background to fully appreciate the significant aesthetic qualities in certain hip hop and jazz compositions, said compositions are actually high art for them on my view!

Note that on the Capacity View, we can also make predictions about artworks that can decrease their status level over time due to cultural familiarity, overexposure, or an increase in aesthetic education among the public. Yet another recording of the *Prelude* to Bach's *Cello Suite No. 1* will fail to challenge us let alone kitsch performances of Pachelbel's *Canon* at weddings. Unless a conductor really tries to bring something new in their interpretation, orchestral musicians and audiences can only put up with so many Beethoven symphony cycles. Thus, given the wide availability and study of these works, it might well be the case that for a growing number of the musically literate, they are now middle or even low art – matching or falling below the limits of their aesthetic responsive capacities. That said, as noted in section 1.4, these works may still be just as good even if their status as high art has been demoted.

Summing up, the Capacity View can help us realize that no particular culture holds a monopoly over high art throughout time. What counts as low art, middle art, and high art may be rather fluid. As the previous examples suggest, Western culture produced by predominately white men does not have a grip on what counts as high art for everyone. On the flip side, artworks from cultures or groups that were once thought to produce only low art are now getting increasingly recognized as high art.

2.2 High Art, Cultural Inheritance, and Aesthetic Deference

Thinking in terms of differences in aesthetic responsive capacities can also help us make sense of the idea of a cultural inheritance and why aesthetic deference is sometimes appropriate. Growing up in or joining an affective community with a shared background and set of cultural experiences can give a perceiver a set of aesthetic responsive capacities tailored to the art that is produced or frequently appreciated in that community - capacities that might not be as well-developed by an outsider. I take this to be a plausible way of understanding what it is for someone to have a cultural inheritance.

Note that this idea of a cultural inheritance is not limited to the children of atheist English professors currently attending elite institutions of higher learning. Perhaps such children will know their way around Shakespeare's sonnets or Blake's poems but may have far less success navigating Lamar's *good kid, m.A.A.d. city* compared to someone who grew up in Compton with a working

knowledge of the Bible and a different set of aesthetic responsive capacities. Likewise, if said children were to read Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*, they may lack the context to appreciate the staid yet complicated mental life of a well-meaning small town congregationalist minister in Iowa. For those who grew up in such a setting, that could well be the mind of someone they know in their family.

Note also that recognizing differences in our aesthetic responsive capacities can also make it rational for us to defer to the aesthetic judgment of others in some cases. At the very least, we can rationally recognize that we are not yet in the best position to judge or compare certain artworks given our present capacities when compared to others.

That said, the notion of a cultural inheritance and rational aesthetic deference, while real, should not be taken to an extreme. Doing so can lead us to reinforce racial or social biases associated with art. Suburban white youth can understand complex conceptual hip hop albums. Shakespeare's plays are accessible to the vast majority of high school students who take the time to understand them – including non-white non-suburban students whose parents aren't English professors.

2.3 The Role of Low, Middle, and High Art in the Flourishing Life

Lastly, the Capacity View can help us understand how low, middle, and high art each play their own distinctive roles in contributing to a flourishing life.

Turn first to high art. How does engaging with high art improve our lives? Given the Capacity View, such art improves our lives by challenging and expanding our general capacity to respond to aesthetic reasons. Insofar as there is value to adopting challenging and worthwhile endeavors such as appreciating and understanding art outside of our comfort zone, there is value to engaging in high art even if it isn't always immediately pleasurable or comfortable.¹⁰ The increase in our aesthetic responsive capacities may also carry over to different genres of artwork that now become more accessible to us as a result of our efforts. Being able to appreciate the conventions of a surrealist novel can also help us appreciate similar works in film, music, painting, or sculpture.

An additional benefit depends on whether an increased capacity to respond to aesthetic reasons carries over to reasons responsiveness in other normative domains. Perhaps an increase in our

¹⁰ This is particularly the case if you agree with Katsafanas (2013) that the aim of action is to take up and overcome challenges.

aesthetic responsive capacities also carries over to an increase in our capacity to respond to moral reasons. Increasing one's capacity to understand the motivations and goals of characters in novels or plays may help us to understand the motivations and goals of people that we interact with in real life.

If Murdoch (2014) is right that the metaphor of vision is central to the moral life and that a just and loving gaze of someone is crucial to a proper moral response to them, then an increase in our capacity to attend to and respond to high art may result in an increase in our capacity to attend to and respond to moral reasons generated by the qualities and needs of others (though not necessarily the motivation to act in accordance with those recognized reasons). At the very least, the idea of training one's attention to try to notice aesthetic qualities that might not be immediately accessible to us can carry over to attention and patience for people we find difficult to interact with or figure out. This would suggest that the contribution of high art to our lives is not just a luxury to occasionally indulge in but a valuable part of our moral education.¹¹

Turning to low art, what value is there to incorporating art that is easily accessible given our aesthetic responsive capacities? The simple answer is that engaging with such art can be soothing or just plain fun. Granted, some of it can be insulting to us as just noted. There is low art that is also just bad art. However, much of it need not be so. We can enjoy a good children's book with our kids. Even a serious critic such as *Vanity Fair's* Richard Lawson can appreciate laying on the couch and watching a reality T.V. show such as *Love is Blind* (a reality T.V. show where contestants pair themselves up without being able to see each other).¹² Here's another example. With a bit of tongue-in-cheek, New York Times critics A. O. Scott and Manohla Dargis ranked Keanu Reeves as the fourth best actor in a list of 25 best actors of the 21st century thus far.¹³ Meryl Streep (the doyenne of middle to high art films) is not even on the list. Note that Keanu Reeves has not acted in a prestige project in years. Nevertheless, he always understands the assignment. Watching Reeves's laconic but physically intense and brooding performance in action films like the *John Wick* series is a delight even if neither the films nor the performances were ever intended to be profound or challenging meditations on loss. This may well be an example of low but good art. Think of engaging with this

¹¹ Granted, if our problem is meanness towards others, the best practical advice might be to work at improving our interactions with them rather than isolating ourselves with the company of high art.

¹² See Lawson's (2020) article. However, note that though low art may contain aesthetic qualities worthy of our consideration, we may also have moral reasons not to view it. This might be the case with reality T.V. shows that perpetuate harmful stereotypes.

¹³ See Scott and Dargis (2020).

kind of art as eating the occasional brownie. Only eating brownies will not be healthy, but life shouldn't just be all vegetables and no dessert either.

Now for the tricky part. How does engaging with middle art bring value to our lives? The answer is that incorporating this kind of art into our lives provides a distinctive kind of pleasure. The idea of pleasure that I am appealing to is not just an attendant positive physical sensation. Instead, the idea is closer to Aristotle's (2012) view of pleasure as the natural accompaniment of unimpeded activity or Csíkszentmihályi's (2000) notion of psychological flow. The general idea is that engaging in a challenging activity that matches our capacities leads us to experience an intrinsically rewarding state of confidence and concentration. In such a state, our awareness of ourselves as well as the passage of time fades as we focus on the activity.¹⁴

I propose that engaging with and appreciating middle art which challenges but matches our aesthetic responsive capacities puts us in a state of flow that is not available to us when engaging with too challenging art (i.e., high art) or too banal art (i.e., low art that is also bad art). This idea has empirical backing from Wanzer et al. (2020). Researchers found that there is a flow-like component to positive aesthetic experiences.

To illustrate, when watching a middle art movie that challenges us just right, we get pleasantly absorbed in it and lose track of time. The average movie goer viewing *Avengers Endgame* for the first time may have no idea that three hours has passed since they first sat down. This absorption is a symptom of flow. On the other hand, when we watch a movie that insults our intelligence or is too abstract for us to grasp, we are painfully aware of just how much time has passed and how much more time is left in the movie. These latter experiences might still be rewarding for other reasons, but it won't be the same as the pleasure derived from a film that challenges us just right.¹⁵

If this is correct, then we could reject Woolf's (1942) use of the term 'middlebrow' as a negative epithet for dumbed down or bad faith art. The Capacity View gives a distinctive value to engaging with middle art that is not available when engaging with high or low art.¹⁶ Middle art is not just 'in betwixt and between' high or low art. It is not always better to avoid middle art in favor of either the

¹⁴ For discussion of the value of engaging in atelic activities in one's life, see chapter 6 of Setiya (2018).

¹⁵ Granted, we might ironically watch a terrible movie like *The Room* and enjoy it precisely because it is bad.

¹⁶ See also MacDonald (1962) for negative attitudes on 'masscult' and 'midcult'.

low or the high. On the Capacity View, middle art gets its own praise for the distinctive contribution it makes to a flourishing life by inducing flow when we engage with it.¹⁷

Section 3 Objections

Having laid out the Capacity View and some of the advantages in thinking about low, middle, and high art this way, let's consider three more objections to the view. This will help bring it into greater focus.

3.1 *The Mixture Objection*

Objection: Don't artworks often contain a mixture of the low, middle, and high? On the Capacity View, artworks seem to be placed in discrete categories. Your view seems to lack the ability to capture this nuance in many artworks.

Response: Though I disagree with Swirski's (2014) criticism of the high/low distinction in favor of a 'nobrow' approach to art, he is correct that many artworks do contain elements of the low, middle, and high. He is also correct that pieces of art are not aimed at just one kind of audience.

First, note that the Capacity View does not place art into discrete categories. Instead, low, middle, and high art lie on a spectrum relative to an agent's aesthetic responsive capacities. Thus, even if an artwork can contain some significant aesthetic qualities that are easily accessible to a perceiver, if it also contains many other significant aesthetic qualities that are less accessible to that perceiver, it can still count as high art for them. Think of the Capacity View as giving us a way of providing a summary judgment of the overall status level of an artwork without denying that it contains elements of the low, middle, and high.

Second, the Capacity View can help us better understand how one and the same artwork can contain a mixture of low, middle, and high elements. This is because we can think of these elements as

¹⁷ Now, one might worry that on the Capacity View, increased familiarity with a work of high or middle art would make it low art for us and thus no longer induce a state of flow. First, even if an artwork becomes low for us, that does not make the artwork any worse in quality and it may still reward revisiting even if it does not induce flow in us. Second, the worry is not all that counterintuitive. Assuming that Christopher Nolan's *Dark Knight* is a middle art film for most, we should not expect the tenth repeat viewing to induce a state of flow in us. It may well become a movie that we simply put on as an enjoyable distraction that we can dive in or out of on a lazy afternoon. Finally, the fact that high art may one day become middle or low art for us may demonstrate that our capacity to appreciate different kinds of art is growing. This is good!

aesthetic qualities of the artwork – some of which will be more or less accessible depending on who is perceiving it.

For example, many Pixar films deserve praise because they simultaneously contain aesthetic qualities that are aimed at different audiences. They are arguably what Cohen (1999) would call “bilateral” artworks. Such works have an intended audience that consists of non-overlapping groups who appreciate the same work of art for very different aesthetic qualities. *WALL-E* contains a simple love story between two charming robots that children can appreciate. At the same time, there are beautiful homages to silent filmmaking and sharp criticisms of vapid consumerism and environmental degradation that only adult audiences will be equipped to appreciate.

3.2 The Convergence Objection

Objection: If aesthetic responsive capacities begin to converge, wouldn't we also thereby converge on what counts as low, middle, or high art? But note that the debate as to what counts as low, middle, or high art is always ongoing.

Response: First, it is unclear whether our aesthetic responsive capacities would converge in the first place. But more importantly, even if they did, it need not foreclose debate on what would count as low, middle, or high art. This is because people with similar aesthetic responsive capacities can reasonably disagree on which aesthetic qualities are more significant in determining an artwork's merit. I might think that the propulsive plot of a novel is both accessible and its primary significant aesthetic quality. You might think that the novel's most significant aesthetic quality is something much more obscure, subtle, and generally inaccessible. Thus, while I think the novel is middle art, you might think that it is high art instead *even if we have similar aesthetic responsive capacities*.

3.3 The Deflationary Objection

Objection: On reflection, if what counts as low, middle, or high art is already relativized to a perceiver's aesthetic responsive capacities, why not just go for a more deflationary approach? Perhaps there are only low, middle, or high audiences.¹⁸ Or there are only low, middle, or high forms of aesthetic engagement. Why think that there has to be anything about the art itself (i.e., its significant aesthetic qualities) that even partly determines what makes it high, middle, or low?

¹⁸ The view bears some similarities to Bourdieu's (1989) critique that there is no objective or independent notion of aesthetic taste separate from the preferences of a ruling class or societal elite.

Response: Though the Capacity View involves a form of relativization to a perceiver's aesthetic responsive capacities, it is also anchored in the fact that artworks have aesthetic qualities that merit appreciation. We have good reason to resist the idea that the aesthetic qualities of an artwork play *no* role in these matters.

Consider the first option. Are there just high, middle, and low audiences?¹⁹ Suppose that these audiences are differentiated by socio-economic status or education level. Assume that high audiences are the wealthy or highly educated elites who are taught to appreciate what other wealthy elites appreciate in elite institutions. Or maybe they are romantic artists creating art for its own sake. Are what they like the sole determinants for what counts as high, middle, or low art? I doubt it. Granted, members of this group now appreciate Kendrick Lamar's albums. But even if they didn't, his best albums have significant aesthetic qualities that challenge the aesthetic responsive capacities of even the most attentive fans of the genre let alone casual observers. It should count as high art (perhaps even *simpliciter*) even if it were ignored by traditional high audiences. Again, the Capacity View allows us to predict (rightly) that traditional high audiences can make mistakes about what artworks are high and what are not.²⁰

Furthermore, the Capacity View is consistent with a more inclusive account of high audiences. Rather than thinking of a *single* high audience, we can think of *many* high audiences from many different socio-economic, ethnic, racial, or educational backgrounds. Recalling section 2.2, this is because the capacity to respond to the aesthetic qualities of an artwork can itself vary along these factors. Marilynne Robinson, Kendrick Lamar, and James Joyce are not equally accessible to everyone. Granted, the Capacity View points out that, by definition, high art challenges the aesthetic capacities of its perceivers. Perhaps such art may only be fully appreciated by smaller communities that are bonded by an appreciation for it. Thus, though some form of elitism is unavoidable, it need not always be insidious or troubling. It can be liberating.

Consider the second option. Are there just high, middle, or low ways of appreciating art rather than distinctions in the artwork itself? Granted, there are extremely high or academic ways of appreciating

¹⁹ For discussion of how the distinction between high and low audiences and high and low art fail to line up, see Cohen (1999). Cohen points out that creators of both low and high art can aim for audience exclusivity and both kinds of artworks can find appreciators in low and high audiences.

²⁰ Though I have pointed out that high art is not the same as good art, it is instructive to point out that members of the recording academy voted to reward Macklemore's *The Heist* over Kendrick Lamar's *good kid M.A.A.d. city* for 2014's Best Rap Album. This has now been seen as one of the worst snubs in Grammy history. See Vulture (2020).

an artwork. For example, Paul Fry (2012) applies different literary theories to a simple children's book *Tony the Tow Truck* in order to illustrate the different ways one can engage with a text. One can also go to the Louvre and take selfies with the art rather than try to engage with any of it in good faith. There are certainly differences in how much intellectual or reflective engagement we bring when perceiving an artwork.

Nevertheless, we should not collapse these distinctions. While it can be worthwhile occasionally to engage with low art in a high manner, it is not the level of engagement that determines the status level of the art. Instead, it is the other way around. The *John Wick* movies are plausibly middle or low fair for most, but they are nonetheless highly enjoyable quality action films. Often, a well-crafted movie hints at how the viewer should enjoy it. The best way to engage with the *John Wick* series is not to meticulously comb the dialogue or the interior lives of its characters. Instead, the best way to experience them is to accept the world on its own terms and to enjoy the well-crafted and choreographed action sequences as they come. Some art does not bear the weight of high aesthetic engagement well and nor is it the best way to enjoy or appreciate their value.

On the other hand, some art demands higher forms of engagement from us and rewards us for such engagement. If everyone casually listened to Kendrick Lamar's *good kid M.A.A.d. city* just because they appreciated its radio ready singles and production value without ever trying to understand the album's narrative, its intricate literary qualities, or its musical creativity, this would not entail that *good kid M.A.A.d. city* is low art because it is only engaged in a low way. Instead, perhaps more of us should increase our level of aesthetic engagement because the album calls for it. Though we should not disparage or downplay the value of simply enjoying the album on a road trip, there are more valuable ways to engage with the album that is called for by its aesthetic qualities.

Conclusion

My aim in presenting the Capacity View is to provide a defensible account of the distinction between low, middle, and high art that is neither elitist nor deflationary. It avoids elitism because it does not claim that high art is a fixed category determined solely by intrinsic qualities that just a few highly educated aesthetes or artists can appreciate. It also avoids deflating the distinction of its aesthetic significance. What counts as high, middle, or low art is not a function of whatever a particular societal class prefers. The aesthetic qualities of an artwork play a role in determining its status level and perceivers can be mistaken about its qualities.

Instead, the Capacity View takes the idea of objectivity in art seriously while also being sensitive to the fact that different people have different capacities to respond to an artwork's aesthetic qualities. Since people have areas of aesthetic expertise as well as aesthetic blind spots, there are rational differences in what art we appreciate and how we appreciate it.

Finally, the strongest point in favor of the Capacity View is its attractive implications. First, it can provide us with a plausible account of how the status level of an artwork can change and how we can be mistaken on the matter especially if we accept certain negative biases. Second, the Capacity View opens up the possibility that many different cultural groups can be producers of high art and that there is an intelligible notion of a cultural inheritance as well as aesthetic deference. Most importantly, the Capacity View allows us to see how low, middle, and high art all provide their own distinctive contributions to a flourishing life.²¹

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