

Familiarity breeds beauty: Collective aesthetics and the Mere exposure effect

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Central questions:

- How are canons created?
- How and why do they change?
- How is literary value constructed?
- What are the roles of individual preference, collective influence, and literary form in producing classics?

Mere exposure and aesthetic response

- Zajonc, 1968: Ratings for “goodness of meaning” improved the more subjects saw a given stimulus (nonsense words or Chinese ideograms)
- Over 200 studies of mere exposure conducted from 1968-1988 (Bornstein, 1988)
- Robust effects for different age groups, genders, nationalities, species, stimuli
- Parallel effect shown in learning and assessment of artificial grammars

Cutting, 2007: Mere exposure and the impressionist canon

- Is aesthetic preference correlated with objective “quality” or with frequency of exposure?
- Subjects viewed one Caillebotte painting and one control painting before stating their preference
- Preference for paintings correlated with frequency of publication/display
- Preferences could be reversed by increasing passive exposure to nonpreferred paintings

“Composition as Explanation”: Stein’s experimental grammar

- Difficult syntax, repetitive phrasing is initially frustrating, foreign
- Repeated engagement with the text facilitates smoother processing
- As with repeated exposure to artificial grammars in mere exposure experiments, Stein’s text becomes more intelligible and more appealing

“Composition as Explanation” (Stein, 1926)

“So then naturally it was natural that one thing an enormously long thing was not everything an enormously short thing was also not everything nor was it all of it a continuous present thing nor was it always and always beginning again.”

“And so there was the natural phenomena that was war, which had been, before war came, several generations behind the contemporary composition, because it became war and so completely needed to be contemporary became completely contemporary and so created the completed recognition of the contemporary composition.”

“Composition as Explanation” (Stein, 1926)

“And so now one finds oneself interesting oneself in an equilibration, that of course means words as well as things and distribution as well as between themselves between the words and themselves and the things and themselves, a distribution as distribution. This makes what follows what follows and now there is every reason why there should be an arrangement made. Distribution is interesting and equilibration is interesting when a continuous present and a beginning again and again and using everything and everything alike and everything naturally simply different has been done.”

How does mere exposure contribute to the literary canon?

- Cannot explain all dimensions of canon construction and literary value
- Could explain the acquisition of fluency, increasing the accessibility of the text
- Exposure over time could therefore play a role in the collective adoption of new genres and styles of artistic expression