

Taste and Surveillance Capitalism

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1. Introduction

The title might immediately raise the question why bring taste and surveillance capitalism together? The following is an attempt to reverse this question and ask in return: How is it possible not to include taste into discussing contemporary forms of culture which also means capitalism?

I will suggest taste as a critical approach to surveillance capitalism. Approaching from philosophy I am concerned with what kind of discussions on taste and aesthetics we should take into consideration as not every discourse on taste may prove to be of interest. However, I do suggest any discourse on taste addresses questions of cultural forms because taste is a social matter. We cannot discuss taste without also touching upon social and cultural questions.

Four steps are made. The first is to set the stage for the following, i.e. what the problem is and what surveillance capitalism is. Secondly follows comments on taste as an essentially social act which leads to discussing either the interpretation of what is judged to be of good or bad taste, or the sensorial component in it. The latter is my focus. Essential in this relation is education and thirdly the question is where the sensorial education of contemporary individuals takes place, which brings us to the presence of modern consumer-world and its recent form as surveillance capitalism. Fourthly the elements of senses and education ask us to focus on the sensorial formation we are subject to. It is suggested that taste matters today because it is as a possible – one could also argue necessary – critique of the cultural condition surveillance capitalism creates.

2. Surveillance Capitalism: A Challenge and a Problem

Before addressing the question of why taste in relation to the form of contemporary capitalism called surveillance capitalism, a first step is to establish what is the problematic about surveillance capitalism.

Surveillance capitalism is how Shoshana Zuboff names the form of capitalism that emerges from the machine computing of data collected from users (Zuboff 2019). She presents this as a third stage in capitalism, the first being the introduction of mass-production in early 20th century with Ford cars as the well-known example; the second the possibility of addressing consumers' desires directly, with Apple's iPod as the innovator. The iPod enables consumers to buy exactly the music they want instead of a product like LPs and CDs with a collection of music including also things the consumer has little or no interest in (Zuboff 2019, 27 ff.). This is an important step towards the third stage which she defines in eight points. I pick up the first: "A new economic order that claims human experience as free raw material for hidden commercial practices, prediction, and sales"; the sixth: "The origin of a new instrumentarian power that asserts dominance

over society"; and the seventh: "A movement that aims to impose a new collective order based on total certainty" (Zuboff 2019, v). The challenge, and problem, is how this form of economic order lays hands on our experiences to form them and to feed us with specific experiences that take dominance over our relation to our environment.

The intention here is only to give an idea of surveillance capitalism enough for pointing out the importance of taste. Obviously, this characteristic can cause debate when we go into details, perhaps questioned, but assuming there is a point we can proceed from it when made. Two aspects should briefly be emphasized. The first concerns what it is that is under surveillance; the second involves the extent of surveillance.

The question of what is under surveillance is a more technical aspect and one I will not discuss in depth. We speak here of surveillance of the data that is left behind from any online activity – whether being online is an active choice or not as some products will transmit data even if we believe we have turned off any such transmission as one example shows: "since early 2017, Android phones had been collecting location information by triangulating nearest cell towers, even when location services were disabled, no apps were running, and no carrier SIM card was installed in the phone" (Zuboff 2019, 243). Taking out a battery may prove to be the last option for being shot off from data transmissions which also implies terminating the use of the product.

Before getting paranoid – which may perhaps not be a false approach to it – it should be added that the surveillance is of data rather than content. It is, for example, the 'likes' we give to texts, pictures, films and other activities of other users, but not necessarily what it is we 'like'. The point is that we 'like', and 'likes' can be measured to influence users' attitudes, interests and approaches to something as demonstrated through experiments made with the emotional content in Facebook users' News Feed (Kramer, Guillory, Hancock 2014). The fact that someone is willing to share data proves to be more interesting than what is in fact shared, and instead of analysing content of data the interest is in the amount of data shared that enables predictions of users (Zuboff 2019, 271 f.). In 2018, a small consultancy, Cambridge Analytica, drew headlines with such work.

The other aspect concerns the extent of surveillance, a point I will offer a little more attention.

The motive for surveillance is to enable the prediction of individuals' preferences and behaviour. This is something applicable to any cultural form and the conclusion I aim at is not one of a revolutionary different view on culture and taste but a rather trivial one: people learn from experiences how to navigate among other people, and similarly we learn to predict their navigation. In classical philosophy we find this expressed by Hume in what he sees as the foundation for any moral relation to people: we expect them to act with consistency "otherwise our acquaintance with the persons and our observation of their conduct could never teach us their dispositions, or serve to direct our behaviour with regard to them" (Hume 1975, 86). In short: "Where would be the foundation of *morals*, if particular characters had no certain or determinate power to produce particular sentiments, and if these sentiments had no constant operation on actions?" (Hume 1975, 90, emphasis in original). What I address is hence a characterisation well established in Western philosophy and culture. I turn to aesthetics and taste to do what we have always done namely to rely on how such common and consistent patterns of behaviour appear in social matters.

Assuming we navigate among people by predicting their movements one significant difference between the age of Hume and the age of Zuboff is the extent to which

information is available about people and the means to influence them. The amount of information one person can handle is little in comparison with what machine learning can cope with – which, an important insertion, does not mean machines *learn* more or better than humans. The use of the notion *learning* may here be misleading.

The amount of information matters for what it is an individual is subject to. An effect of the stream of information given to a user of internet-based technologies is the massive one-sidedness of them. Despite an increase in what appears to be information about the world, including the world far from the user's own, it may be comparable to the world of a peasant in previous ages: one living in a world limited to the farm and village depending on neighbours' and old peoples' stories and occasionally getting news from the outside world. Someone living in a world of little relation, if any, to the world of the merchants in the city or the noble people. What the internet-based technology offers is a massive stream of information which is also efficiently shielding us off from information considered to be irrelevant to the user. They are irrelevant like the nobleman's training in dancing and fencing for the peasant who would perhaps be indifferent to the delicacy and refined taste of the noble people, perhaps considering the appearance of the noble person of bad taste in its affected form while the noble people would see the peasants' simple living as rough, poorly mannered, perhaps vulgar. They would not share the same taste.

The motive for enabling prediction with the help of machine learning is not for social skills and moral judgement but to answer consumers' desires and to stimulate and create them. The latter is very much the occupation for market research and advertising which can become revolutionized in the third stage of capitalism. Advertisers may hope to provide consumers with what they ask for, being there at the right time for the questions although this hope may often be in vain. What they can hope for now is to be there to provide consumers with what they want even before asking.

An example given by Hal Varian illustrates: "One day my phone buzzed and I looked at a message from Google Now. It said: "Your meeting at Stanford starts in 45 minutes and the traffic is heavy, so you better leave now." The kicker is that I had never told Google Now about my meeting. It just looked at my Google Calendar, saw where I was going, sent my current location and destination to Google Maps, and figured out how long it would take me to get to my appointment" (Varian 2014, 28).

I began with saying there is a problem with surveillance capitalism. Now I must emphasize that the problem relates to what happens to the formation of our predictability as individuals among others, the Humean premise for social interaction. I suggest focusing on taste for analysing how we currently form society and our ways of interacting and should repeat I do not find a difference from previous ages hence bringing in taste as a classic answer. The difference between a 21st century internet user and a peasant of previous ages is here a difference in material and technical living, not in how they become formed to live in their respectively cultures. The question is: which understanding of taste is implied in this suggestion?

3. Taste and Sensorial Formation

Taste is a social matter. We utter judgements of taste for others to respond to and we hope for, or perhaps it is better to say we desire, their consent. Through taste we demonstrate our relation to a community sharing this taste. Taste is, with Kant in mind,

a sign of man who is not merely man but a refined man, a man of civilisation (*Critique of Judgement* § 41). Tastes differ and often we come across that *de gustibus non est disputandum* and similar expressions, but in fact we do dispute and must dispute exactly because it is a social matter. We react to the other person that through concrete forms of appearances such as gesticulation, language, dress and accessories reveals a character. This is subject to different form of interests in current studies (e.g. Hennion 2007), but it is also ancient knowledge and one finds a fine and elaborate discussion in Baldesar Castiglione's *Libro del cortegiano* (*The Book of the Courtier*) from 1528. Appearance may be inappropriate for judging the other: "It does not seem fitting to me, or even customary among persons of worth, to judge the character of men by their dress rather than by their words or deeds"; however, it has to be admitted that "all these outward things [walking, laughing, looking] often make manifest what is within" (Castiglione 2002, 90). It could be that we are mistaken in our judgements, but we do begin by judging the book by its cover.

Because of its social significance a dominant discourse on taste becomes how well one performs in relation to the taste of one's community, i.e. whether someone has good taste! This aspect of taste leads to discussions of what qualifies the qualities, then called aesthetic, of something being a candidate for a judgement of taste; whether qualities and standards are in the object or a preference of the subject, whether they are about beauty and a specific form of appreciation and pleasure or intellectual – and similar questions.

I will not engage in these questions but instead direct focus to the sense of taste as an essential component in the judgement. By sense here I mean literally the sensing and not a metaphorical use of it. How and why the sense of taste came to be the model for aesthetic judgement is another story though it does relate to my focus. It is of interest that a change in our approach to taste appears in more recent centuries when it was no longer "a question of sampling or tasting a particular substance. The dominant construction of taste turned on preferences, on an innate taste or inclination *for* something" (Ferguson 2011, 376, emphasis in original). Such inclination is both sensorial and intellectual revealing a social sense which is as well an understanding of norms. "Internalized into the psyche and integrated into everyday social life, this worldly intelligence of taste determines how one acts and also how one thinks of oneself" (Ferguson 2011, 381). An inclination is obviously not a mere subjective statement; no one would take much interest in mere private preferences. It is an inclination we have because we learn to convert taste from a mere sensuous reaction to an evaluation of that same reaction which requires the refinement of taste that we call education (see also Hedegaard 2019).

There is a clear physical component in taste; strong spices like chili enjoyed in Thailand and eaten there also by children will make most Scandinavian adults cry in pain. However, explanations in physiological terms such as causal affection of taste buds and how they have become accustomed and have developed over time give little explanation to why we come to like what we like and furthermore also express preferences and evaluations of tastes. Demonstrating there is a stimulation of specific neural centres or chemical reactions does not tell us what that experience *means* to us. Neither do attempts of mapping some features of how individuals react to specific elements that are considered to precede any culturally biased production whether the reactions are of neural (Ramachandran & Hirstein 1999) or psychological (Green 1995) origin. Such attempts even prove to be themselves culturally biased in their choices of examples. They do not explain *why* a specific taste appears, only *that* patterns of reactions appear. Of course, they can argue that the answer to why we prefer specific tastes as well as proportions and compositions

originate in more fundamental features of, for example, biological or psychological form. Interesting as it can be to give a descriptive approach to what happens to the individual experiencing something and how deeply incorporated into our behavioural patterns it is, causing immediate and non-reflective reactions, it does not tell us why different cultures and individuals come to relate different impressions to different valuations.

Tastes are acquired through culturally informed practices and habits. Acknowledging difficulties in characterising what good taste is one could try approaching the issue from the opposite direction through what “is an uncontroversial characterization of bad taste based on widely agreed upon examples” (Goldman 2019, 13). However, this only proves that we agree to what is bad taste due to sharing a cultural background enabling us to consider the examples as examples of bad taste. The question of determining bad as well as good taste stays with us.

I believe we must deal with the cultural aspect of adjusting to something through exercises and practices – the learning aspect; and the sensorial in the literal sense with respect to taste.

Coffee can serve as example to combine this. We find many varieties to what kind of coffee is appreciated in different countries including how it is served and how it tastes. Denmark and Italy are two countries where a lot of coffee is consumed and two countries where coffee is also a strong social element. The coffee-break is essential in Danish work-life. Despite the name one can choose to drink tea instead – or not drink anything; but in some places one will also prove to be an outsider by drinking green tea instead. The coffee consumed will largely be different from the Italian; the Danish will traditionally be filtered and not espresso – though cultural habits change and change rather fast. What is appreciated and what one expects is a matter of background – including the fact that most of us probably did not like the taste of coffee as children and have learned to drink it.

If we establish this, it becomes important to understand what influences we are subject to forming our sensorial responses whether to hot, spicy food, coffee, popular cultural entertainment or art.

This brings back the point that taste is a social matter. Of course, one is alone in tasting coffee and likewise one is alone in listening to music, reading a novel and similar activities, but one is not alone in expressing what one thinks of them. I see others around me drinking coffee and reading Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie with, apparent, pleasure and expressing how they appreciate it but I may fail in my attempts of appreciating the same and perhaps be frustrated as I then fail to be part of what I believe to be the community of good taste. Or I may in the end form my own opinion and simply express how I prefer drinking tea and read Anurandha Roy and by that relate myself to discussions about tastes.

In both drinking and reading I look towards others for evaluation and expressing views; they give me standards and a language to communicate about taste and to pay attention to what it is my judgement of taste is about. My first tasting of wine did not include all the nuances of different grapes that I now have learned to pay attention to through a language of wine tasting. My training in reading literature has moved me from childhood stories to something different. This training has also given me a foundation for evaluation of narratives that may be (too) difficult to understand being of a new and unexperienced kind or coming from a different cultural setting than mine. I may easily, with Alan Goldman above in mind, come to judge them to be poor in quality.

In any case it is a matter of learning, exercises and practices. Exercises because it is no mere instruction; we do not have manuals for good taste simply to follow and we all

know how we can utter a statement of taste that others do not agree with. The question is what the sources of learning today are? At least one answer will be the massive presence of stimulations for consuming. Users of information technology are subject to an almost permanent influence exercised by the providers of these services.

4. Sensorial Education and Consumer Culture

Exercises are essential for learning and this applies to taste in a very concrete sense. Wine does not taste good to most people in the beginning – children would prefer something different, and after learning to appreciate wine we can proceed to learn about nuances in tastes. We may find our personal preferences while also learning about what ‘one’ should prefer – and we can surrender our taste to what we believe to be the norm, or we can acknowledge the ‘norm’ still liking it different. The exercise thus also matters for more than the taste buds, they concern the judgement of qualities in cultural artefacts. The good wine at the social event, the dress of the guests, the conversation moving between appropriate subjects to maintain the social atmosphere reserving delicate or intimate talks to the proper moments, expressing cultivation in critical comments, etc. We slip from the simple sensorial impression into the standard discussion of taste.

Of interest is what forms the foundation for the exercises we have made and the knowledge we bring with us to enable our judgements. Emphasizing the social aspect of the judgement of taste it is our experiences and our ability to orientate among others and reflect what we judge to be the ideals and norms to adapt and turn into ours to acquire good taste. Two implications are to be addressed here, one only with a brief statement, the other as essential for my argument.

The brief statement is how this combination of foundation, influence, exercise and judgement points towards the formation of our sensorial and perceptual relation to the world due to influences we are subject to. If this was not the case, we would have no need for any learning process. From here on begins discussions about perception within both psychology and philosophy. Here it suffices to make a philosophical reference establishing the implications: “The first perception of colours properly speaking then, is a change of the structure of consciousness, the establishment of a new dimension of experience, the setting forth of an *a priori*” (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 35, emphasis in original). “Nothing is more difficult than to know precisely *what we see*” (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 67, emphasis in original). Following this line of thought, as I do, we learn to sense and perceive to make sense of what we encounter; and ‘making sense of’ alters our relation to phenomena – we learn to think.

Assuming the environment is essential for providing us with what we sense the other implication is about what it is that the environment provides us with? Furthermore, this is also a question of who or what forms the environment, i.e. a question of cultural, ideological and political structures. When I address surveillance capitalism, I speak of an environment of a capitalist economy which aspires to be present in each aspect of our lives. We become consumers with needs to answer, and not only are needs answered, they are created. A characteristic of Western Modernity is the transformation of natural needs into culturally created needs enhanced by modern forms of production. Needs must be historically or culturally created Marx would notice in *Grundrissen der Kritik der politischen Ökonomie (Outlines of a Critique of Political Economy)* from 1857 (Marx 1983, 244); and to be able to explain how this cultural process continues beyond satisfying

needs in a race for surplus and perpetual economic growth, needs must be transformed into desires. Needs can be satisfied, but as Gernot Böhme emphasizes in what he calls aesthetic capitalism, “desires cannot be permanently satisfied, but only temporarily appeased, since they are actually intensified by being fulfilled” (Böhme 2017, 11).

Returning to the characteristics of surveillance capitalism the point about surveillance is to predict and, which is crucial, create consumers’ desires and provide what will be wanted before consumers ask. The enormous amount of data collected is to answer what Zuboff calls the prediction imperative (Zuboff 2019, 197 ff.). It is parallel to Hume’s comment on predicting peoples’ behaviour as fundamental to any social relation only Zuboff asks for paying attention to how the parallel collapses when it is not for moral principles in a community but for generating profit for the data collectors. The third and last part of her book is dedicated to discussing the consequences in what she in the sixth definition of surveillance capitalism calls instrumentarian power: “*the instrumentation and instrumentalization of behavior for the purposes of modification, prediction, monetization, and control*” (Zuboff 2019, 352, emphasis in original). While predictions are difficult and insecure, surveillance capitalism submerges the consumer in suggestions based on the predictions to an extent where one is barred from alternatives – at least it requires an effort to access alternatives. In this way predictions will eventually become self-fulfilling prophecies. Services appearing as assisting us (Varian 2014, 29) are veiled in seductive terms such as smart and personalization. Smart is to make the user “a hapless puppet dancing to the puppet master’s hidden economic imperatives” (Zuboff 2019, 237), and personalization is the “machine invasion of human depth [...] a slogan that betrays the zest and cynicism brought to the grimy challenge of exploiting second-modernity needs and insecurities for outsize gain” (Zuboff 2019, 255).

Our social skills are learned and trained in relation to the social environment and the experiences we make, and they are all subject to how family, friends, colleagues and strangers act and respond to our presence. Other peoples’ reactions and utterances influence us, and this is no different in real life or mediated communication. But what the latter can do is to influence what communication we have, what we hear about, and what influencing information we get in a scale earlier forms of mass communication would never come close to and in a way undetectable for the subject of influence. Large scale experiments of this kind have been conducted, like what the 2010 experiment with 61 million Facebook users at the 2010 US congressional elections apparently is showing – apparently while the authors are careful to not conclude too much to instead express suggested forms of influences (Bond, Fariss, Jones 2012).

What becomes essential then is to see how surveillance capitalism comes to play a role, and possibly a dominant role, in many individuals’ relation to their environment, at least when they are consumers and users of internet services. This calls for an awareness of the extent to which our environment can be formed by media and for ways of addressing this influence. If, as I have stressed several times, this is no different from what we have always done, and if the sensorial formation of the environment and our relation to it is also what we have always dealt with in relation to taste, then taste seems to offer a critical approach and to prove it matters in contemporary critique of culture.

5. Taste as a Critical Approach to Surveillance Capitalism

So, taste matters today! The sensorial formation we are subject to, teaching us how to sense and perceive and how to express our sensorial relation to the environment in a

judgement of taste, is a formation that calls for a critique of the cultural conditions influencing us in this process. Discussions of taste take many forms depending on ideals of norms and standards for evaluating the sensorial influences, and such evaluation determine what is considered to qualify as aesthetic qualities. I will conclude with suggesting how this aspect of taste may help us in forming a critical view on cultural phenomena like surveillance capitalism.

Perhaps we should be reminded of the hermeneutic principle: one understands an expression (a text, work of art, design solution etc.) by understanding it as an answer to a question and the interpretative task is to find out what the question was. What is it a judgement of taste should answer? Establishing it as a social activity expressing orientation, understanding and position within a community the judgement answers a specific discourse of cultural interpretation. Uttering my judgement of taste, I place myself in relation to others demonstrating I have learned to appreciate something like they do – whether it is coffee or artworks.

Because of this social positioning and expected recognition from others, we may sometimes be too occupied with finding the true position and demonstrate our successful conforming to the rules. 'Too occupied' means we prioritise socialising over a critical approach to our environment. Although it will often be important to conform to and go along with the social environment, it does not imply that we always should. Being a consumer is one way of demonstrating one's ability in playing social games, as for example demonstrated in fashion. But we also need to be able to understand with what rules we play and what interests may be found hidden in them. In any social relation there will also be elements of power, and the element of power in surveillance capitalism is one of holding the consumer in a firm grip to enhance further consuming and seal off other forms of influence. Zuboff indicates the countermove: "Individual awareness is the enemy of telestimulation because it is the necessary condition for the mobilization of cognitive and existential resources" (Zuboff 2019, 306). I suggest taste matters as a countermove here.

In the discussion of taste, it is worth drawing a parallel to art discourses concerning the desire for social recognition. Do we, to make it short, appreciate the artwork in the judgement we make, or do we in fact ask to be recognized as art-lovers? The latter may be the actual outcome in more contexts like Hans-Georg Gadamer makes us aware of in what he calls the aesthetic consciousness (Gadamer 1993). The art-lover seeks to demonstrate education and knowledge of how to speak about art but may in fact prove to be more in love with the ability of performing the institutionalized art discourse. The art-lover is here trapped in what different forms of avant-garde art have struggled with, the institutional imprisonment of art. The discourse on taste becomes a confirmation of the established ideals for judging art and cultural ideals. It neglects or ignores how some forms of art may ask something of us, even demand something – like questioning our cultural ideals.

Consequently, one prevalent understanding of the relation to art is how art, and discourses on art, are free of interests in profane forms of use. Art is, in this view, primarily for the sake of cultural value, not for the utility of society, social position, or economic investments. Not that art is useless; some will argue art's utility is to question prejudices and different cultural forms, to address questions of human existence, to add different perspective to our world and lives and such 'noble' uses. Nevertheless, appreciation of art may sometimes prove to be more of a self-confirmation expressed, than it is a self-critique provoked by the questions that art can raise. Despite agreeing to the cultural

use, or importance, of art, many discourses on art keep distance from the critical reflection of art directed towards oneself to instead praise its freedom imprisoned in cultural ideals. To be educated in the good taste of the community, including the community of the cultural critique, is not always to be prepared to pull the carpet from under the critical feet. But if the education does not imply the latter and makes one question oneself, if the education does not make one try and think for oneself, the education is only half complete. The education becomes then one of what Theodor Adorno calls half-education (*Halbbildung*), one where one appears as educated by performing well on cultural parameters but proves to be no self-critical and autonomous individual (Adorno 1975, 66 ff.).

Taste, thus, proves to matter in two ways. One of analysing what we actually do in our efforts of making judgements of taste to position ourselves in the cultural environment and social relations we live in. Taste has a descriptive side to it and one where we should become aware of how the environment affecting us and forming our senses and perception is brought to existence. In the age of surveillance capitalism and its users of internet-connected services this existence is largely provided by tech companies based on their data collection used to predict needs and furthermore provide answers to the needs and create further desires in an ongoing and self-fulfilling machine.

Taste matters also in another way, namely as a possible critical approach to this mechanism of social-integration Taste enables us to question, to exchange experiences in critical discourses, to challenge and reveal the premises we work on, the prejudices we carry with us and the ideals we tend to follow. In that light we should not be mystified about discussing taste in relation to surveillance capitalism; we should instead be mystified about the absence of taste in this context.

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