

# Questions of taste.

## Diderot and the stratification of aesthetic judgement

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«The further one goes to find a definition of “good taste”, the wider off the mark one gets; taste is nothing but the ability to judge what pleases or does not please the majority». This incisive definition by Rousseau, which could find many supporters, is as true as any persuasive definition, yet does not explain much. It is nonetheless incontestable that in eighteenth century France the term “taste” assumed extremely diverse and at times divergent meanings and connotations. These meanings and connotations met or clashed in Diderot’s method of thinking.

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### Foreword

«The further one goes to find a definition of “good taste”, the wider off the mark one gets; taste is nothing but the ability to judge what pleases or does not please the majority»<sup>1</sup>. This incisive definition by Rousseau, which could find many supporters, is as true as any persuasive definition, yet does not explain much. It is nonetheless incontestable that in eighteenth century France the term “taste” assumed extremely diverse and at times divergent meanings and connotations. These meanings and connotations met or clashed in Diderot’s method of thinking.

Taste seems to be a collection of individual preferences that are nevertheless collectively recognised and shared within a given community. Diderot’s *Salons* interpret this dichotomy in a more striking way: on the one hand they highlight the subjective taste of their writer, while on the other they express the culture and history of the art of a specific era<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> J.-J. Rousseau, “Émile ou de l’éducation”, in id., *Œuvres complètes de J.-J. Rousseau*, with notes and analytic table, eds. G. Petitain and Musset-Pathay, A. Houssiaux, Paris 1852-1853, vol. ii, p. 620. «Plus on va chercher loin les définitions du goût, et plus on s’égare; le goût n’est que la faculté de juger ce qui plaît ou déplaît au plus grand nombre».

<sup>2</sup> See E. Lavezzi, *La Scène de genre dans les Salons de Diderot*, Hermann, Paris 2009; P. Frantz, E. Lavezzi, *Les Salons de Diderot. Théorie et écriture*, Presses universitaires de Paris-Sorbonne, Paris 2008; G. Cammagre, C. Talon-Hugon (ed.), *Diderot, l’expérience de l’art. Salons de 1759, 1761, 1763 et Essais sur la peinture*, CNED-PUF, Paris 2007; A. Gaillard, *Pour*

In the eighteenth century, at a time in which the judgement of taste became the manifestation of a sentiment that one sought to share, a strong objectivist legacy remains, as can be seen in the articulation of the voice *Goût* (Peinture), the *Encyclopédie*, by Paul Landois. In this, the subjectivity of taste is placed in brackets, and its ability to recognise a “genre” is enhanced: taste is the distinctive brand of a nation (the sociocultural element), of a school (the technical element), of a single man/woman (the “style” or his touch).

GOÛT, *se dit en Peinture, du caractere particulier qui regne dans un tableau par rapport au choix des objets qui sont représentés & à la façon dont ils y sont rendus. [...] Il y a goût de nation, & goût particulier: goût de nation, est celui qui regne dans une nation, qui fait qu'on reconnoît qu'un tableau est de telle école; il y a autant de goûts de nation que d'écoles. [...] Goût particulier est celui [...] par lequel on reconnoit que tel tableau est de tel peintre, quoiqu'il y regne toujours le goût de sa nation.*<sup>3</sup>

Taste is tied to rules of composition and execution, its definition being closer to the precepts of “poetics” than to the reflections of aesthetics. While Diderot, the writer of the *Salons* and the playwright, does not refute the conventions of “high genres” such as historical painting or tragedy, he nevertheless assigns to the emerging bourgeois theatre – enacted onstage and depicted in painting – an innovative potentiality that surpasses the limits of the *grand genres*. For this reason, even if we hear the echo of the “hierarchy of genres” in these reflections and of an aesthetic of *ut pictura poesis*, Diderot is putting his reform into action. This reform will find its fulcrum in the theatre, that is in the sense of the scene; in painting, in the taste for the composition; in nature, as a search for truth; in aesthetics, as a search for the limit.

### **Evaluating, judging, while enjoying**

Evaluating, that is giving or negating artistic value, is a difficult exercise. At times the “machinery of judgement” becomes flooded and jams; it jams due to the multiplication of descriptions, the lack of certain attribution, the

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*décrire un Salon: Diderot et la peinture (1759-1766)*, Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, Bordeaux 2007; E. Lavezzi, *Diderot et la littérature d'art. Aspects de l'intertexte des premiers Salons*, Paradigme, Orléans 2007; S. Lojkine, *L'Œil révolté. Les Salons de Diderot*, J. Chambon, Actes Sud, Paris-Arles 2007; Ph. Déan, *Diderot devant l'image*, L'Harmattan, Paris 2000.

<sup>3</sup> *Goût* 1757, 770.

fragmentation that characterises the reconstruction of a critical approach, leaving space for the principle of pleasure, for subjectivity and the incommensurable marvel of enjoyment.

The comparison between art forms, painting, theatre and vice versa, poetry and painting respectively, may be fertile from the point of view of the philosopher, but confuses the critic. The latter may be of help regarding technical analysis, on the one hand, and on the other hand awareness of one's own limits: the limits of a human being who has his own passions, inscrutable as the "je ne sais quoi".

In uncertainty, Diderot elaborates an empirical yet more often experimental method, which comes to bear fruit. It is a method that, in an original way, recuperates aesthetic disinterestedness. This disinterest does not imply a lack of participation: quite the opposite. Rather, what it refers to is an "educated" involvement that is under the control and intensification of a gaze that observes from the correct distance.

Une manière de me décider, qui m'a souvent réussi, et à laquelle je reviens toutes les fois que l'habitude ou la nouveauté rend mon jugement incertain, car l'une et l'autre produisent cet effet; c'est de saisir par la pensée, les objets; de les transporter de la nature sur la toile, et de les examiner à cette distance où ils ne sont ni trop près, ni trop loin de moi. Appliquons ici ce moyen. Prenons deux comédies, l'une dans le genre sérieux et l'autre dans le genre gai; formons-en, scène à scène, deux galeries de tableaux; et voyons celle où nous nous promènerons le plus longtemps & le plus volontiers, où nous prouverons les sensations les plus fortes et les plus agréables, et où nous serons le plus pressés de retourner.<sup>4</sup>

Given these premises, and wishing to reinstate a little order, I would like to identify, in the stratification of meaning, originated from Diderot's thought, some fundamental points that I will analyse briefly: taste as a perception of relations; taste as a limit; taste as an ideal; taste as a technique. Each aspect is closely intertwined with the other, and can be applied to our own method of consumption. Indeed, little escaped Diderot.

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<sup>4</sup>D. Diderot, *De la poésie dramatique*, CFL, III, pp. 416-417.

## Taste as a perception of relations

The idea of taste as the perception of relations is one that clearly demonstrates the oscillations of Diderotian thought, and puts us onto the right interpretative path. Initially, Diderot affirms that:

Since the perception of simple ratios is easier than complex relations, and since equality is the simplest of all, it was natural to prefer that ratio; and that is precisely what has been done. This is why the wings of a building are equal and the sides of the windows are parallel. In the arts, for example in architecture, the frequent moving away from simple ratios and the symmetry they generate, means constructing a mechanism, a labyrinth, and not a building. If reasons of utility, variety, location, etc. force us to abandon equality of relations and simple symmetry, this happens with regret and we hasten to return by means that seem, to superficial men, entirely arbitrary.<sup>5</sup>

Such a rigid articulation of relations significantly decreases and becomes a subjective rather than prescriptive principle. Immediately afterwards, Diderot affirms that the perception of relations should apply to all arts irrespective of the techniques that are employed. «Taste in general is the perception of relations. A beautiful picture, a poetic work, a beautiful piece of music please us only because of the relations we perceive in them. The same applies for a beautiful sight or a fine concert»<sup>6</sup>.

Indeed, Diderot had already presented his theory of the perception of ratios in a text of 1748, *Mémoires sur différents sujets de mathématiques*, and took it up again in a paradigmatic way in the *Traité du Beau*, where we read: «I then call beautiful outside of myself, all that contains in itself what can awaken in my understanding the idea of relations; and beautiful in relation to me, everything that awakens this idea»<sup>7</sup>.

Beauty originates from the order of things, but at the same time we also find beautiful that which stirs in us the idea of “relations”, even if these have not been created in nature or recreated in art with a compass and ruler. The passage from objectivism to subjective pleasure is evident, and comes to define the century.

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<sup>5</sup> D. Diderot, “Lettre sur les sourds et muets, à l’usage de ceux qui entendent et qui parlent: avec des additions”, in id., *Œuvres philosophiques et dramatiques*, Amsterdam 1773, vol. ii, p. 139. See also D. Diderot, “Letter on the Blind”, in id., *Early Philosophical Works*, Lenox Hill, New York 1972, p. 210.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 145-148.

<sup>7</sup> D. Diderot, “Traité du beau”, in id., *Œuvres philosophiques et dramatiques*, vol. iii, p. 68.

Knowledge, passion, capacity for comparison and education of the senses are all necessary to taste. But which of the senses are fundamental to the judgement of taste? Diderot has no doubts on this point: it is sight, first and foremost, that is the only complete sense.

In Diderot's thought, though a blind man may have a taste for symmetry (but be careful not to confuse the perception of relationships, which is the basis of a sentiment of beauty, with the mere perception of symmetry), he can have no sense of beauty. The blind cannot judge beauty "at first view", that is in the immediate. The blind person can only report the opinion of those who can actually see the object.

Beauty for the blind is but a word when divorced from utility, and, wanting an organ, how many things are there with the utility of which escapes them? Are not the blind very much to be pitied in accounting nothing beautiful unless it be likewise good? How many admirable things are lost to them? The only compensation for their loss is that their ideas of beauty, though less extensive, are more definite than those of many keen-sighted philosophers who have written prolix treatises on the subject.<sup>8</sup>

If Chartres's deaf man (cited by La Mettrie) does not connect any notions of sacredness or spirituality to the gestures carried out during mass, Diderot's blind man, namely the intelligent and cultured mathematician Saunderson, not only scandalizes the reverend Holmes on his deathbed by stating that *if you want me to believe in God, you must make me touch him*<sup>9</sup>, but does not possess any idea of beauty. Yet,

The blind man is a good judge of symmetry. Symmetry, which is perhaps a matter of pure convention among us, is certainly so in many respects between a blind man and the sighted. A blind man studies by his touch that disposition required between the parts of a whole to enable it to be called beautiful; and then at length attains to a just application of that term.<sup>10</sup>

The tactile object is, on the one hand, the referent of experience, and on the other hand something which is present to the subject, strictly connected with their corporeality. Tactile experience always positions the subject as being

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<sup>8</sup> D. Diderot, "Lettre sur les aveugles à l'usage de ceux qui voient", in id., *Œuvres complètes de Diderot*, eds. J. Assézat et M. Tourneux, Garnier Frères, Paris 1875-1877, vol. i, p. 281. See also D. Diderot, "Letter on the Blind", in id., *Early Philosophical Works*, p. 71.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. D. Diderot, "Lettre sur les aveugles à l'usage de ceux qui voient".

<sup>10</sup> D. Diderot, *Early Philosophical Works*, p. 70.

entirely absorbed in the perception of his environment. In contrast, in visual perception, the “detachment” between that which one sees and one’s corporeality is immediate and spontaneous. Visual experience may be an act of contemplation, a performance set at a distance, and thus, more so than touch, is disconnected from any dynamic that involves practical or operative interests.

Diderot is well placed, then, to recognise the pure sense of beauty in sight, and with this seems to make his own aesthetic reflection that links beauty to the theme of disinterestedness, so that aesthetic objects are positioned beyond the contrast between existence and non-existence. For the seeing subject, the world is a performance to contemplate; in contrast, tactile experience, for Diderot, clashes with the pragmatic dimension of existence.

### **Taste as a limit**

For Diderot the limits of representation are directly aesthetic limits: «In my letter, I maintain that what is a beautiful moment for the poet is not always one for the painter». Neptune’s head, which «in the poem rises so majestically above the waves», gives a «bad effect on canvas»<sup>11</sup>. The body of Neptune emerging from the water can be described in poetic lines that extend in time and give life to the god as he rises from the waves. This cannot be represented in painting, because he would appear deformed, even truncated, decollated, creating an overall effect that is anything but majestic. Whereas the sculptor and the painter are forced to respect the identity of the vision that is represented, the poet has more liberty in giving life to the acting characters, that is to “actions”. Aesthetic limits cross over the barrier of representational technique. However good a painter is, however skilled in conveying the effect of transparency, a body immersed in water will always look distorted or faded, so that the viewer is obliged to concentrate on the part outside the water.

For Diderot as well as for Lessing, the limits of representation are associated both with the means of expression that are specific to each art

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<sup>11</sup> D. Diderot, “Additions à la lettre sur les sourds et muets”, in *Œuvres complètes*, éd. Assézat et Tourneux, Garnier Frères, Paris 1875-77, t. i, p. 403.

(painting, sculpture, music, poetry, etc.) and with the content to be represented.

Why should I not like the Hippogriff on canvas, which pleases me so much in the poem? I shall give a reason, which may or may not be a good one. The image, in my imagination, is only a fleeting shadow. The canvas fixes the object under my gaze and forces me to recognize its deformity. There is the same difference between these two imitations as between what may be and what is [...]. A painter with good taste would never use his brush to paint *Ulysses' Companions Transformed into Pigs*. Although Carracci did so in the Palazzo Farnese. Do not paint me the Po unless you cut off the bull's head. Lucian tells of a country whose inhabitants had the unfortunate privilege of being able to remove their eyes from their heads and, if they lost them, they could borrow their neighbours' eyes. "Where is this land?" But you who ask me this question, which country do you come from? Horace said "Ne pueros coram populo Medea trucidet". And Rubens showed me Judith Cutting off Holofernes' head. Either Horace was talking rubbish or Rubens got it wrong.<sup>12</sup>

Diderot comments: the subject may even be terrible but it must be justified by some moral idea. If there is no lesson for the observer, the work is "mute", in other words it is not met with taste. «Judgement of the moral aspects concerns everybody with taste; judgement of the technical side, only concerns artists»<sup>13</sup>. For Diderot a lack of truth is a lack of taste; it is not the immorality of the subject or of the topics that shocks him, but rather the act of betraying the verisimilitude. A painter, a poet or an actor who fails to respect a system of relationships, a code almost more theatrical than pictorial has poor taste; according to which every character has to behave in a way that is coherent with his or her own personality and in accordance with the other characters.

Indeed, «if morals [les mœurs] are *corrupt*, do you think taste can remain pure? No, no, that cannot be, and if you think it can, you're unaware of the effect of virtue on the fine arts»<sup>14</sup>. Corrupt arts keep a community in a state of barbarity, in the same way as an uneducated community creates money-grabbers who sell their art to obtain success<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> D. Diderot, "Pensées détachées sur la peinture, la sculpture, l'architecture et la poésie, pour servir de suite aux 'Salons'", in id., *Œuvres complètes de Diderot*, vol. xii, pp. 176-177.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>14</sup> D. Diderot, *On Art – II (Salons 1767)*, ed. by J. Goodman, Yale University Press, New Haven-London 1995, p. 81.

<sup>15</sup> «Art remains poor within an ignorant community. It advances quickly within an educated community». See *Salon 1769*. It is well known the criticism Diderot levels against those private collectors who, only because of their power and their privileges given by their wealth, obtain art works that in this way are hidden from the community.

## Taste as an Ideal

But then, what drives the genius in life? It is the “ideal”. Diderot identifies, while writing the *Salons*, two models in which differences are far from being as neat as they seem. The first, theorised in *Essais sur la peinture*, describes the nature – defined as an immense living organism where all parts are strictly interconnected – as an organisational and compositional set. The second one is again inspired by nature, but this time it is perfectible by the painter’s patient and perspicacious experience, repeated in time.

The first model is inspired by his vision of nature as a monistic and at the same time metamorphic force, which harmonises in its organic unity matter, life and consciousness. Diderot develops a theory of the sensitivity of organic components that reassesses, alongside the mechanistic law of interaction of the parts, the idea derived from Newtonian physics according to which matter is intrinsically both motion and action. The hypothesis of the sensitivity of matter aims to defend the physical unity of the *whole* by overcoming the discontinuity between living and lifeless matter.

Everything changes, everything passes away. Only the totality remains. The world begins and ends without ceasing. At every instant it is at its beginning and at its end. It has never been anything else and never will be anything else. In this immense ocean of matter, no single molecule resembles any other, and no single molecule resembles itself for more than a moment: *Rerum novus nascitur ordo*, there is its eternal slogan.<sup>16</sup>

According to Diderot, nature is in a dynamic state of balance that the artist must take into account. Each element of a given artwork aims at the beauty of the whole, and the work of art always requires some unity, in the same way as nature is a unified whole. «There is nothing but a huge entity, and that is the whole»<sup>17</sup>. It is a compositional principle according to which the “whole” is always under the influence of the individual parts and of their modifications.

In the essay *Composition* written in 1753 for the *Encyclopédie*, before his well-known theatrical works and before the *Salons*, Diderot claims that the

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<sup>16</sup> D. Diderot, “Le Rêve de d’Alembert”, in id., *Œuvres complètes*, t. ii, p. 142.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 149.

art of composition is the art of making all the different parts of a painting a unity as organised as an animal body.

Look at this woman who's lost her eyes while still young. The progressive deepening of her sockets hasn't increased the extent of the surrounding pockets. They've sunk into the cavities hollowed out by the organs' absence; they've shrunk [...]. These alterations have affected all parts of her face, in proportion to their proximity or distance from the principal site of the accident. But do you think that the deformity has been restricted to this oval? Do you think her neck has been completely unaffected? And her shoulders and throat? [...] Nature will tell you; this is the neck, these the shoulders, and this the throat of a woman who's lost her eyes while still young.<sup>18</sup>

If all this is true for the human figure, it is even more so for nature; and the poet or artist has no choice but to subordinate him or herself to a universal law.

Yet, there is a second model, represented by the «ligne vraie» and fully developed in the *Salon 1767*, where the naturalistic perspective is substituted for some sort of «ideal in nature» that is to be patiently and tenaciously sought after by the artist through a continual series of experiences<sup>19</sup>. The Ancients, first and as yet unmatched by anyone, were able to reach the model, to distil it from nature. There is no doubt that in these pages nature only represents the starting point, whereas the Ancients' "work", their experience, their technique truly are the highest example of painterly gestural expressiveness.

Addressing Grimm, Diderot stresses that

The most beautiful model, the most perfect man or woman, will be a man or woman superlatively well adapted to all of life's functions, who will have attained the age of mature development without having exercised any of them. But seeing that nature never vouchsafes such a model to us, either in whole or in part, as all its products are corrupt; seeing that the most perfect ones issuing from its workshop are subject to circumstances, obligations, and needs that deform them still further, such as the primal need for self-preservation and reproduction, they become progressively distant from truth, from the primary model, from the mental image, such that there is not, has never been, and never will be either a whole or a single portion of a whole that has not been tainted. So, my friend, do you know what the ancients did?<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> D. Diderot, *On Art – II (Salons 1767)*, p. 191.

<sup>19</sup> See H. Molbjerg, *Aspects de l'esthétique de Diderot*, J.H. Schultz Forlag, Kobenhavn 1964, chap. V.

<sup>20</sup> D. Diderot, *On Art – II (Salons 1767)*, p. 12.

Through «a long observation, and consummate experience, by means of a taste, an instinct, a kind of inspiration vouchsafed only to rare geniuses»<sup>21</sup>, the Ancients succeeded in elevating humankind above its condition «and impressing a divine character upon him», beyond those sorrows, discordances, alterations and ties to which our existence is subject. A long, slow and “timorous” path and a painful “groping”, alongside «an infinitude of successive observations since lost to memory but whose effects remain»<sup>22</sup>, lead to a true reform of painting, which reaches out to the most marginal parts of the body: nails, hair and eyebrows. The “true line” is an ideal model of beauty «which existed only in the heads of Agasias, Raphael, Poussin, Puget, Pigalle, Falconet». Of this model, «lesser artists have but an incomplete notion» and the artists cannot teach it to their pupils «however rigorous their course of instruction»<sup>23</sup>.

The true line is the boundary between truth and image of truth, between nature and image of nature, methodically sought after by the work of genius. The model, therefore, does not exist before its own thoughtful creation; the model strictly demands the technique, the work of the hand that works in unison with the brush and blending together with the intention of the artist whose masterpiece derives from his experience.

Once the ideal model has been identified, taste moulds to it and proceeds by comparison. It may seem easy, but it is not.

### **Taste as technique**

I will now start to draw my conclusions.

In the entry *Art*, which Diderot wrote for the *Encyclopédie* (1751), the idea of “artistic object” is defined within the technical frame and the rules according to which the object has been produced. Once again, a trace of objectivity serves to animate the concept of taste.

As a demonstration of the difficulties met when approaching the theme of the separation between art and technique, Diderot relates the concept of art

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

not only to the beautiful productions of the genius, but also to the technical productions of the artisan. The lack of an essence-based separation between arts and sciences is justified by acknowledging their communal belonging to the general system of mankind's theoretical and practical knowledge.

However, having acquired the technique also means having the chance to reach an ideal. «There are passions that are very difficult to represent; they have almost never been seen in nature. Where is the model, then? Where does the painter find it? What brings me to claim that he has found the truth?»<sup>24</sup>. At this point, the pages of the *Salons* meet the *Paradox of the actor*, where the value of both intelligence and technique is celebrated, and the representation of passions must be directly inspired by a model that is “out of them”. An actor, to be a «great» actor, will be «clever», «calm», «cool», will have great skills of «penetration», will be capable of fitting any role, will be an effective impersonator and, above all, will be «lacking any sensibility»<sup>25</sup>. The real actor will never seek a compromise between himself, his own sensibility and the role he ought to play. As he does not need to abide by the “small model he has in himself”, he will be able to be a perfect and “astonishing” impersonator «of sensibility, avarice, hypocrisy, duplicity and of every other feature other than his own, of every other passion that he does not experience»<sup>26</sup>. Model and technique, form and gesture: there is no automatism between passion and expression. Any automatism is far from those who skilfully look out for the form, the great model that is not in them but in a nature that ought to be represented.

The technique is therefore a process of creation, concretely evident and eternally analysable. It is an experience that captivate your feelings through the active participation of the hand and the body, and through a succession of masterful and repetitive gestures. «It is often said that an artwork is beautiful because it is vivacious also when it represents the games of inanimate forms or the livid immobility of a corpse. Yet it is only the technique that is vivacious or deep!»<sup>27</sup>. The technique is the art of seizing

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<sup>24</sup> D. Diderot, *Salon 1761*, in *Œuvres complètes*, t. x, p. 133.

<sup>25</sup> D. Diderot, *Paradoxe sur le comédien*, in id., *Œuvres complètes*, t. viii, p. 375.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 428.

<sup>27</sup> Ch. Lalo, *Notions d'esthétique*, Alcan, Paris 1927, p. 31 and p. 36.

nature and saving some of its “dissonances”, erasing that which cannot be represented as art on canvas; it is about being able to “choose” one’s own sky and recognising that it will never be as clear and starry as the one nature gave us; it is about knowing that, in art, one both loses and gains something, and that the “great magic” consists in making every part lose and gain *in proportion*; it is about being aware that nature can never be rendered as it is, and that the artist can only provide its “translation”<sup>28</sup>. In painting, to think means to build something on a form that exists only in its concreteness. It is there, amongst the senses, that takes origin gesture and technique, as an undisclosed yet conscious perception; a knowledge that is erudite and practical altogether. There is a bond between the necessity of an artistic action and the universality of its being a form; as the form, the perfect form, is universal, it is the model.

The technique is not a sterile virtuosity and must, once more, substantiate the impatience of a passion. Conversely, the gesture of those who only possess a *manner* is monotone, it follows a codified pattern, it is cold and does not satisfy our taste, and certainly not Diderot’s!

Well, I am back to my starting point. In Diderot’s thought, subjective pleasure and aesthetic judgement meet each other without stretching, but with some contradictions, in a dynamic flow that characterises not only one philosopher’s thought but that of a century. The “Ideal” and the technique, the idea of “perception of relations” and subjective preference, everything partakes of taste; and this becomes the ability of reading, interpreting, feeling, using the senses and, of course, enjoying. Taste multiplies and spreads on different levels. It does not stop; on the contrary, it expands, because when it is set to learn it becomes eager and insatiable. To learn how to taste means to be always hungry. At the same time, it means to know one’s own limits and to recognise one’s inability to translate into a judgement the whole range of subjective and objective layers that the judgement entails. I conclude with Diderot’s words, as he addresses his friend Grimm:

Do you know what one would need, my friend, in order to describe a *Salon* in a way such as to please us both? Every sort of taste, a heart sensitive to everything

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<sup>28</sup> D. Diderot, *Salon 1763*, in *Œuvres complètes*, t. x, p. 198.

appealing, a mind easily moved to an infinite number of different enthusiasms, a variety of style that can suit the variety of the paint brushes; one needs to be great and voluptuous with Deshays, simple and honest with Chardin, delicate with Vien, pathetic with Greuze, and to produce all sort of illusions with Vernet; but, tell me, where is such a Vertumnus? To find him, perhaps one should travel all the way to Lake Geneva [here Diderot points sharply to Rousseau]. And again, if one were standing before the painting he is describing; but it is far away, and as we investigate its composition and we take our head in our hands or let our gaze wander around, our mind gets tired, and we only write cold and dull lines.<sup>29</sup>

However, the pen is not as dry as Diderot would like us to believe. It is a prolific pen, as is taste: Diderot's, yours, and mine. Due to the fact that one cannot stop tasting (what statement is more common than "I like it" or "I don't like it"?) as much as one cannot stop breathing. Only few, though, are aware of doing so. Diderot was one of them.

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 170.