

Quality is overrated – the mechanics of excellence in music

By [Stefan Goldmann](#)

In “[Everything popular is wrong](#)” I claimed that the more artists deviate from the known and established, the better their chances are for success. But why should this be so? Here comes a detailed examination of the psychosocial framework that underlies what we listen to, looking into the factors that decide what is culturally relevant and what not – with surprising results. Why exploring the unknown is not only more fun, but also more rewarding.

The amplified champions

In Kurt Vonnegut's novel *Bluebeard*, its protagonist Rabo Karabekian muses on the origin of special talents and the diminished opportunities in modern societies: “I think that could go back in time when people had to live in small groups of relatives – maybe fifty or hundred people at the most. And evolution or God or whatever arranged things genetically, to keep the little families going, to cheer them up, so that they could all have somebody to tell stories around the campfire at night, and somebody else to paint pictures on the walls of the caves, and somebody else who wasn't afraid of anything and so on. [...] of course a scheme like that doesn't make sense anymore, because simply moderate giftedness has been made worthless by the printing press and radio and television and all that. A moderately gifted person who would have been a community treasure a thousand years ago has to give up, has to go into some other line of work, since modern communication has put him or her in daily competition with nothing but the world's champions. The entire planet can get along nicely now with maybe a dozen champion performers in each area of human giftedness.”¹

Science has had a thought on this subject, too. This development has been named the Superstar Effect², in which presumably only miniscule differences in talent or slight advantages in competitive situations snowball into the domination of a whole market by one or a few performers. If you want to buy a recording by a soprano opera singer, you'll most likely want to buy one by the best – the number two soprano will have a hard time moving any CDs, since the presumably slightly better number one will have preempted the market. The CDs cost about the same, so why spend any second thought on lesser talent? The superstars obtain what I'd like to call a “first call” position: it is not just about income, but mainly about opportunities. That's where things strike culturally. Everybody prefers the top performers. A festival wants to present and a label wants to sign the best artists, a movie producer wants to hire the best actors and playwrights, who goes to court wants the best lawyer... Only affordability and availability seem to give the rest of the list any chance. That's why the superstar gets the greatest choice to pick from the best opportunities, earning disproportionately more rewards and spreading out to even wider recognition, while the other contestants service whatever is left over.

This cumulative aspect of superstardom has been described by sociologist Robert K. Merton as the Matthew Effect³, named after the verse from the Gospel of Matthew: “For unto every one that hath, more shall be given, and he shall have abundance, but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath.” In other words, the rich get richer, the poorer get poorer and success breeds success.

What are rewards?

An artist feels rewarded when she receives the attention of the audience and of those mediating between artist and audience. Rewards are people coming to hear a performance, spending time on listening to recordings, learning the specific style, recommending the music to others and following the further offerings of the artist. Rewards are receiving critical acclaim by experts and peers, finding followers who copy the style, getting the aesthetic message distributed with the help of those who service the media or manage the venues where artists meet the audience. In short, the more social interactions the artist's efforts produce, the more those efforts have been rewarded. That's the way

¹ Vonnegut, Kurt: *Bluebeard* (1987).

² Rosen, Sherwin: *The Economics of Superstars*, in: *American Economic Review* 71 (1981): pp.845-858

³ Merton, Robert K.: *The Matthew Effect in Science*, in: *Science* 159 (1968):pp.56-63.

society views an artist to be “excelling.” On the economic side, all these interactions produce fees, royalties and other sorts of material exchanges. People pay to attend concerts, to listen to recordings or to consume media coverage. In varying shares, these payments eventually reach the artist. Usually income will develop in parallel with these social interactions. Respectively some economists have argued that social relevance and monetary rewards match, i.e. whoever ends up earning more is also the better artist, offering the higher quality works of art.⁴ Such reasoning makes most of us cringe simply because we don’t trust the market to be a good judge on matters of quality and relevance. Investigating this assumption, in what follows I’ll discuss some theories that separate quality, relevance and the rewards system and examine how they interact.

Intriguingly, so far there haven’t been many attempts to unlink material from immaterial rewards (like for instance offering all painters a unified fee per work of art, redistributing all earnings from paintings equally). The closest we have come to this has been the internet, redirecting the proceeds from people’s creativity into the pockets of IT companies’ stockholders – thus replacing material rewards with a promise of “attention.” As we now know, attention is as always reserved for the top performers. While many at the mid and bottom are willing to give in to exploitation in exchange for the opportunity to get a few clicks, the premium segment won’t comply. The top performers are not much threatened in their position within the rewards system. Their positions might slide down relatively on the scale, but the continued demand for leading performers’ services will ensure that there’ll always be a material reward component for them. The cultural economy therefore remains one of the most unequal and least regulated capitalist labor markets around.

Birth of the star

But how do we decide who is “best”? Even experts often disagree on the qualities and talents of top performers. And we all have encountered the notorious prevalence of some cultural product that no one we know in person seems to consider even “good”, yet it is inescapably all over the place. We are also not all listening to the Rolling Stones (or whoever dominates the stadium act category in music). There are many artists who comfortably occupy a place of their own without having the reach of a stadium act. So there must be something else going on as well.

Reasons given for the emergence of superstars range from differences in talent, amplified by mass media⁵, to the need to communicate about the same topics when socializing with others.⁶ I don’t think these models match what we experience in reality. I’d like to offer a different explanation based on the effects of mental shelf space limitation and social proof. The concept of mental shelf space is analogous to the shelf space limitations in retail: a shop can store only that many CDs, books or brands of cereal. In any given category our minds only comfortably deal with between 3 and 7 items and zone out on the Long Tail, limiting the number of names we can memorize.⁷ Most people will not bother to regularly follow more than a few novelists, musicians or movie actors. There are simply not the psychological capacity, enough time and funds to compare thousands of contestants in order to figure out who should receive our limited attention. The search costs would be too high. Therefore we try to minimize them by employing shortcuts. Sticking with the best is one of those shortcuts. And in order to quickly identify the best we look out for social proof. Social proof is a psychological principle that states that one means we use to determine what is correct is to find out what other people think is correct.⁸ We assume that enough of the others have gone through the search process and have identified the best when choosing one over the others. Whenever we are uncertain of what to look for, we’ll try to figure it out by looking at the choices of others.

⁴ Grampp, William: Pricing the Priceless. Art, Artists and Economics (1989): p.37.

⁵ Rosen (1981).

⁶ Adler, Moshe: Stardom and Talent, in: American Economic Review 75 (1985): pp.208-212.

⁷ Miller, G.A.: The Magical Number Seven, Plus or Minus Two: Some Limits on Our Capacity for Processing Information, in: Psychological Review 63 (1956): pp.39-50.

⁸ Cialdini, Robert B.: Influence (1984 / rev. 2007): pp.114-166.

That can go to bizarre extents: Participants in an experiment were told that two shown, obviously different geometrical objects were the same. Astonishingly, when social proof is overwhelming (actors pretending to be other participants identified the objects as being identical), an MR imaging of the brain indicated that the objects were actually *seen* as being identical.⁹ In other words: In the right social context, we override our own judgments and rewire our brains to see, feel or hear what's actually not there.¹⁰

Music is a means of social distinction, too. We actually do want to associate with certain groups of people and disassociate with others. With social proof we can figure out what others do and match our behavior accordingly. Social proof is so attractive because it helps us socialize, identify our group *and* save a whole lot of time, too. We might end up watching a mediocre movie, but we'll enjoy the company of likeminded friends. In cultural contexts we rarely ever experience severe pain from following that strategy. Well, unless the movie was "Cowboys & Aliens" of course. In the bigger picture, social proof and limited mental shelf space promote diversity of categories and monoculture *within* categories at the same time.

These psychosocial factors are the reasons why the Long Tail doesn't work (within one category) and people flock to the upper end of the scale. Against what a lot of propaganda claims, no distribution model or technological measure has ever changed this. Only a few geeks and professionals will ever bother to check out more than a few alternatives, and we all end up with the superstars. In a self-fulfilling prophecy these eventually do get better than the rest since they are exposed to better opportunities, get more funds to reinvest in their work and education, as well as better access to and allocation of other supportive means.

Quality is overrated

A nineteenth-century French novelist named Arsène Houssaye coined the phrase "the forty-first chair" to describe the plight of talented individuals, deserving of rewards or recognition, which are nevertheless bypassed as these rewards are garnered by a select few. Houssaye's phrase was inspired by the Académie Française. This elite institution, founded in 1635 during the rule of Louis XIII, was designed to identify and reward the nation's greatest talents. If you are elected to one of the 40 seats you retain your position for life. These positions are so important to French society that the members of the Académie are called the "immortals." The immortals that have held seats include some of France's most famous citizens, from Dumas to Poincaré to Voltaire. It is intriguing though that the likes of Descartes, Molière, Rousseau, Saint-Simon, Diderot, Stendahl, Flaubert, Zola and Proust never got in. It was not that they lacked the ability. It was just that the limitation in numbers made them inhabitants of the "forty-first chair."¹¹

Houssaye's phrase is a good analogy to what happens to the other contestants within one category. Once the shelf is full, they are relegated to the forty-first chair no matter how great or valuable their actual contributions are. Mental shelf space has two varieties though, a vertical and a horizontal one. Vertically, within one category there are a few superstars and many inhabitants of the forty-first chair. Horizontally though there are many more individual categories, each with its own superstar structure. That's why we don't all listen to the Stones only, but also to Theo Parrish, Carsten Nikolai, Pierre Boulez, Meshuggah or Fred Frith. This is intriguing, since horizontal mental shelf space (for anything) seems to allow for the coexistence of much more items than vertical: we know more separate supermarket product categories than brands of ketchup for instance. In marketing theory the according strategy is known as *category positioning*: if you can't be number one in an existing category, create a new category. That might be a good explanation why culture is always changing. The contestants' determination to reach "first call" status (and the impossibility to get ahead on crowded paths) makes them invent categories. Whoever gets a new category into the mind of the people first is likely to be associated with it due to social proof snowballing effects.

⁹ Berns, G.S.; Chappelow, J.; Zink, C.F.; Pagnoni, G.; Martin-Skurski, M.E.; Richards, J. : Neurobiological Correlates of Social Conformity and Independence During Mental Rotation, in: *Biological Psychiatry* 58 (2005): pp.245-253. For the pioneering study on conformity see Asch, Solomon: *Studies of Independence and Conformity*, in: *Psychological Monographs* 70 (1956).

¹⁰ Now that's just what Adornians have been waiting for. Before you get too excited having found the proof that we are all brainwashed, don't forget that conformity phenomena occur in any social group, including any gathering of non-conformists.

¹¹ I owe to Cal Newport, who uncovered Houssaye as the author of the 41st chair equation in: *How to be a college superstar* (2010): pp.132-133.

The horizontal dimension is a social one in the first place. Individuals don't follow all categories available, but have preferences of a few, becoming "fans" of a style and its representatives respectively. Still, whenever we decide to engage with something less familiar ("let's go to the opera tonight"), we consult social proof again. Then we join the already existing fans and skyrocket the chosen superstars' social exposure. That is why who is considered best by the public is not defined by talent or social chatter, but by category leadership, which is usually obtained when the category receives its initial public recognition ("oh, that's interesting – who does this?"). That's why the actual quality, say of works in a new style of music, doesn't matter much for success. This explains why often artists creating great works later on receive seemingly unjustly little recognition, while others reap the rewards. Some had their names identified with the category earlier on. Deepening a category is an activity that leverages those already on top. It is a paradoxical situation in which increased competition actually helps the predetermined winners by inflating the category's rewards (more attention and funds flowing in).

This failure of readjusting the "class" structure within a category once the positions have been distributed is also named the Ratchet Effect¹²: those on top do not fall much behind. It would cost the audience too much brainpower to readjust regularly. If you wonder why someone is still around artistically despite failing to keep up the quality that's the reason. "Once a Nobel laureate, always a Nobel laureate" as Merton put it.

That effect is not always obvious. For instance I recognize that virtually all techno superstars of the last decade now seem to lose their grip on dominating the distribution of recorded music. Their singles and albums don't move that much anymore and their labels are shrinking to levels where they have to be cross-subsidized (even if that's through the cheap labor of ever new interns). Still, their touring schedules are packed to the max. They *do* lose some ground, but no one replaces them. The Ratchet Effect applies to the internal hierarchy, not to the category itself. Categories often decline or get repositioned by other (sub-) categories, but even the captain of a sinking ship is still its captain.

Categorical morphology

In music, categories are often defined by, but not limited to styles. One might be the leader of post-minimal tecnocumbia, but acting in a movie or wearing a mouse mask might do the job, too. "Gimmick categories" like these are usually exactly one artist deep, but at the same time they are subcategories of wider styles of music, too.

Things often get mixed up and attributes from outside music define what artists stand for – especially a lot of pop has been highly influential on unimpressive musical foundations, but inflated political, social or other agendas. Eventually such agendas help to break new aesthetics, too. Punk's social and political relevance was probably earlier understood than its groundbreaking musical implications.

An initially small stylistic category might grow big and then split up into subcategories. Think of rock, having branched out in tree-like fashion with countless levels of subcategorization. It is sometimes hard to draw the line whether contestants happen to be in the same or in separate categories. Each of the forty members of the Académie has his own story, and so have the artists on top in a bigger category. They share an audience, but develop individual profile in order to make it worthwhile for the audience to engage with more than one artist (even if that means putting on the mouse mask). The clearer the differences are the more likely we look at separate categories.

On a higher level, a subcategory might grow to become so enormous that entire other subcategories get repositioned. Once minimal outgrew loop techno (you know, the stuff Adam Beyer used to do), automatically the leaders of minimal became "bigger" than those of loop techno. The personnel's structure within the subcategories didn't change, but the metacategory ("techno") found itself being transformed.

¹² Duesenberry, James S.: Income, Savings and the Theory of Consumer Behaviour (1949): pp. 114-16. Also see Merton (1968) p.57.

Life cycle: crystallizing fields and the avant-garde

For an obscure speech, held in 1961 in the German city of Lübeck, anthropologist Arnold Gehlen designed one of the most accurate descriptions of how culture works in the big picture. If there ever was a valid explanation of how cultural styles emerge, grow and die, that's the one. Let's have a look:

He called the concept "crystallization":¹³ any new, emerging field of culture grows to the point where its boundaries, basic rules and antitheses are found. Once these are accepted, the field "crystallizes", which means it doesn't grow further beyond, but develops ever smaller subdivisions and variations within (ever smaller categories). Novelty and some surprises still occur regularly, but the field's boundaries are not crossed and the basic rules don't get violated anymore. Basically any metacategory of 20th century music of the western world seems to have reached the stage of crystallization, be it jazz, rock, contemporary classical or techno. Since all big subcategories within these have been discovered and occupied a long time ago, we now have shallow novelty of the kind of "disco edits" or "slowhouse." When there is no clear path ahead, moving back and searching for the overlooked crumbs is just as good an option (in the earlier stages no one bothers looking back). Becoming aware of crystallization effects is the reason why we feel there was greater music being created in the past. When a new cultural field opens up, exciting new categories emerge and those discovering and promoting them have a far greater time at it than later explorers of the field.

Along these lines we can also define a widespread term: Those pathfinders traveling virgin roads are described as the "avant-garde." In the language of the military, avant-garde used to refer to those troops of the cavalry who went into the battle first. In the arts, avant-garde means nothing but identifying a new category and occupying the lead position in it. Then it is all about waiting for the flood to set in. It is the only definition I can think of that makes sense in conjunction with the military meaning of the term. It is not about making weird sounds and shocking the public as often assumed. Once something has been established, it doesn't make much sense to label mimicking or preserving efforts avant-garde anymore. The association of avant-garde with earpain is grounded in a different observation: every truly new aesthetic seems alien and unpleasant at first. Only later we learn to process it and enjoy its characteristic features.¹⁴ That usually happens when more artists enter the scene. When no one follows the avant-gardist, things stay alien.

Extended cycles: museum categories

Categories emerge, grow and eventually fade away. So do the careers of their inhabitants. When no one is interested in one category, leadership doesn't mean much. Even most successful styles and fashions in music disappear sooner or later. Those categories that survive along their representatives often exist for the lifespan of the fans that spent the time to learn the category's cultural codes. You know those concerts where everyone is 60+. Some categories are so strong that they live on for centuries, if not almost infinitely. Probably ever since someone beat a stick on a stone for the first time there has been some equivalent to the 4/4 beat we call techno today.

Every generation rediscovers the category and feeds it with its own stars. This is most obvious with classical music where every few decades there is the new superstar soprano, conductor or violin virtuoso. It is also a "museum category" preserving the live performances of works written sometimes centuries ago (a recording is still a poor substitute for an acoustic live performance). So does every new generation form its own rock superstar and a lot of electronic music seems to enter a similar road. In a crystallized environment eventually a prototypical subcategory is deemed worth to become a museum category. Then there come musicians who want to sound like the prototype from back in 1715, 1923 or 1988.

Case study: Minus vs. Richie Hawtin

Let's examine the story of the Minus label. When Richie Hawtin founded it as an outlet for his own productions, he already was the main exponent of minimal techno with a string of hit singles and extremely refined albums under the moniker of Plastikman (most notably "Sheet One", "Concept 1"

¹³ Gehlen, Arnold: Über kulturelle Kristallisation. In: Anthropologie und Soziologie (1963): pp.311-328.

¹⁴ Berlyne, David: Aesthetics and Psychobiology. New York (1971): p.193.

and “Consumed”). The Plastikman project was so influential and successful that people had its logo tattooed. When he opened Minus up to other artists, two things had happened: The first wave of minimal was over, leaving basically only Hawtin and Basic Channel as still widely reknown artists. And Hawtin had almost stopped releasing new original material (except for the artsy album “Closer” and two mix CDs). Minus formed a crew around Magda and Troy Pierce, and facilitated associates like Marco Carola and Mathew Jonson. A second wave of minimal techno swept the world, much bigger than the first one and went on to dominate dance music almost to a degree only trance had reached before. The Minus crew was probably at the top of it, accompanied by the likes of Ricardo Villalobos, Luciano and many others. Intriguingly Richie Hawtin, who hadn’t released one track contributing to the renewed minimal style, peaked his career in terms of reach and reaped rewards, becoming techno’s DJ no.1. Compared to stadium rock, minimal techno is still a miniscule niche market. Yet its leading artist mentioned in a recent interview that he sometimes plays up to three performances a night, often in different countries, which is only made possible by employing the services of a private jet.

It is a wonderful example of how categories develop. After helping to form a first minimal subcategory of techno, Hawtin was recognized as its leader. Branding the Minus label and opening it up to others, their efforts accelerated his position as the one “owning” the style in the minds of the audience. With thousands of enthusiasts and artists jumping on the bandwagon and deepening the category to gargantuan proportions, Hawtin got leveraged proportionally to the size of the category itself. Once it outgrew the other subcategories of techno, he automatically became the leading artist of “all techno”, although the thousands of tracks that actually formed and defined the second wave of minimal were all produced by others. The critical point was making the transition of personal “first call” status from old minimal to new minimal. As we see, this can be achieved even without actually producing any new music in the style in question. This is not to be misinterpreted as unjust recognition though. Hawtin had shifted away from primary production to pushing new means of production, presentation and distribution. He spearheaded promoting a whole industry from Native Instruments to Ableton to Beatport, shaping the infrastructure of new minimal and beyond like no other artist. He’s also a really nice guy.

The gap between the category leader and the next on the ladder might be so wide that it even tolerates severe flaws in the primary sector: you might get away with continuously unexciting or even bad performances. In several interviews Hawtin cultivated an attitude of method over content, claiming he doesn’t even listen to the tracks anymore before he plays them and instantly forgets about them afterwards. I listened to a 3 hours set of his recently and indeed it seemed like watching a factory production line rather than a performance of music. It’s alienating and amazing at the same time, truly avant-garde in its dedication to taking things to the extreme. A new *arte povera* (a 60s Italian movement of making art from trash materials) seemed to have formed. As you see, at the end of the case study we are not with the label anymore, but with its leading artist. That’s what category leadership does.

The artist: category elasticity and time factors

Most great categories are discovered rather quickly by those who manage to move in boldly without giving it too much second thought. Whatever is possible will eventually be done. That is also why the audience doesn’t grant artists too much time to prove their talent. For visual arts, Chris Dercon, head of Munich’s Haus der Kunst museum, once estimated an artist has about 7 years to break through.¹⁵ In music it might be less. Especially after you have some initial success there will be limited time for your full “potential” to unfold. Slow growth is a concept punished severely by the social environment. If people come to your concert in order to find a half empty room or you deliver a poor performance, they are unlikely to try again unless they have some very good reason to believe next time will be dramatically different. If you already spent a couple of years on the circuit that’s an unlikely scenario. Also the media and promoters will think you aren’t “hot” anymore if you don’t deliver accelerating results early enough. That is also why a cover story or other overblown exposure too early in an artist’s career might bring things to an early end: rewards associated with fully shown potential require just that. It is of benefit to an artist’s development if rewards and recognition lag slightly behind her actual level.

¹⁵ Dercon, Chris: Wir sind eine Marke. Interview, in: Sueddeutsche Zeitung (March 10, 2006).

Then also once you have your name associated with a category, it is extremely hard if not impossible to move on to a different category. Once people know you as a black metal goddess, you won't seem credible in pumping out dubstep tunes. It is actually easier to change when you are below superstar status. The only super-prominent historic counterexample that comes to mind is Miles Davis, who changed over the whole jazz world every couple of years throughout a career that lasted half a century: Birth of the Cool, Kind of Blue, Bitches Brew, On the Corner and Decoy are just a few examples, all differing wildly from each other. Yet they include some of jazz's biggest (including *the* biggest) commercial successes ever plus separately inspiring thousands of musicians to follow and deepen the styles Davis designed. Although he regularly alienated his fans, he also managed to build up new followings every time change stroke. If the fans stay, it usually indicates that you didn't leave your category.

On a side note, superstars also regularly fail to take into account that they are such only within one category at a time. Jeff Mills and Ellen Allien are still all over as DJs, but their fashion lines never went anywhere for instance. Miles Davis' appearance in Miami Vice didn't quite make him a Hollywood celebrity and his much advertised late paintings didn't make it into the MoMA so far, too. The ultimate fallacy is when established artists try to reposition themselves by reacting to new developments imposed by others: they regularly fall to the bottom. When wild pitch pioneer DJ Pierre started to play the postminimal hits of the day, it was the last time we heard of him. Unless you have pioneered the new thing, you'd better ignore it entirely.

Do we still need marketing?

Don't expect a description of how hits are crafted or what kind of supportive promotional efforts are necessary for an artist to actually get his categorical findings into the minds of the audience. That's a slightly different thing and too deep to discuss here. Yet the relation between category leadership and marketing efforts should be clear: no marketing effort will get an obvious "me too" artist's profile sufficiently off the ground (this is the one point 100% of music marketing books fail to discuss). Within the range of the possible, the avant-gardist of a new category will have the biggest chances to be considered the best and therefore will be the easiest to promote. All categories are not created equal though. Some will have bigger potential than others, since they will address a need that is culturally relevant to more people. That's usually where trial and error begins and predictions fail. Categories compete, too. The bigger the gap between them the smaller become the competitive effects. An isolated, small category might have bigger problems initially communicating the means necessary for understanding and enjoying it. So the initial promotional effort will have to be bigger. Once it is established though it will be more stable because fewer other categories will overlap with its position. Vice versa, a new category closer to existing ones is easier understood, but also more threatened by competition. It is quicker to establish and quicker to be forgotten. Closeness to the known is the prerequisite for hyped fads. That's why we regularly encounter two word style names that start on "new" (or "nu", for that matter).

Of course, marketing allows for some severe distortions, too. The most notorious is known as "payola", referring to bought exposure. In its contemporary form, usually ad money leads to overexposure of certain artists (attention they wouldn't get without money being exchanged). When a song is on rotation on the radio it must be popular, social proof teaches us. Even in cases in which the connection is obvious we seem to assume that if an artist is willing to invest more than others there must be a reason (i.e. his talent justifies the investment).¹⁶ And we move along too often. I know of concert promoters who booked artists on the basis of the number of "fans" on their social networks, even when they did know those numbers were manipulated by a piece of software adding random people.

Randomness and self-regulation

Ancient Greek philosopher Democrit (circa 460 – 379 BC) used to define "chance" as the ignorance of the hidden cause of an event.¹⁷ Often we attribute some unexpected outcome to random factors, since we don't see any pattern that would allow us to explain what happened. The arts seem to be a field whose dynamics we regularly fail to understand, which results in a constant stream of surprising events. The very nature of competing categories means the other rules are constantly changing, making exact predictions regularly sound idiotic. One would wish to have clarity at least that the arts

¹⁶ Compare Frank, Robert H. / Cook, Philip J.: *The Winner-Take-All Society*, New York (1995): p.192.

¹⁷ Quoted in Bennett, Deborah J.: *Randomness* (1998): p.84.

are a contest of ideas and the bolder new idea shall win. In reality, crossfire comes from even more factors than just marketing abilities. Someone figured out that pianists competing at a piano competition regularly had greater career chances if they played later than others. Jurys happen to be in a better mood in the afternoon. Years later those who played in the afternoons had more concerts and better recording deals.¹⁸ It is impossible to identify all such biases. When you hear someone lamenting that “the time wasn’t right”, he might be referring to this complexity of the unknown. The deep insecurities of which outcomes to expect actually promote diversified culture. Many attempts that turn out to have no chance to succeed nevertheless do get initial support (“trial and error”). A lot of category depth has been gained by the belief that what worked once might work twice. And a new category’s reach won’t be obvious before it has been actually built and tried.

Yet the concept of category leadership by definition works for a minority only. When it seems to install the same hierarchical structure in any new category, this is only true as long as the majority wastes its time chasing categories that already exist. Innovation seems possible because we clearly know what the mainstreams are. If every artist would first and utmost try to differentiate from all others, we would face a self-regulating process. If the mainstream gets fragmented new rules will emerge, requiring new approaches.

The garden of the closing paths

If the above descriptions hold some truth, it is not the most hostile environment to be in. Most musicians have marveled over which marketing strategy would help them and how to adapt their sound to fit “the market” – just to wonder why what worked for someone else simply doesn’t work out for them (exactly *because* it worked for someone else). In the light of the mechanics of category leadership such considerations seem plainly wrong. The need to differentiate from the established encourages experimentalism and individuality – not the worst things around. On a sad note, going deeper in an established category is not rewarded. For the cultural (and economic) success of any piece or style of music quality is overrated. Eminence is gained because of the potential for social distinction. Any social group within a new generation builds its identity to differ not only from previous generations, but also from its social peer groups. That’s why it will embrace anything that seems new and different, no matter how stupidly new or different that might be. Listening to a “better” song never did the job, exactly because it lacks the effect of clear cut social distinctiveness.

Our culture is not so much cluttered with successful bullshit because we have no taste, but because our brains are built to pay more attention to novelty of form than to variety within a form (stone age application: your chances of survival increase when you recognize clearly unfamiliar patterns than variations of familiar patterns. It’s some kind of deer, so eat it. But beware of that new snake, insect or other tribe with unclear intentions). Quality helps only later on to sustain the life of a category (not necessarily the life of the one who delivers it). Once we grow aware we’ve been listening to trash, we eventually move on and the category fades. On the other hand our culture is cluttered with *unsuccessful* bullshit, too, because we simply don’t learn about how our minds function. It is a default on the side of the musicians, concert promoters, labels and distributors of culture, deeply misunderstanding the audience. Instead of pursuing individualism, they keep searching for repeatable formulas. As the joke goes, “I don’t understand why nobody is interested in my music. It sounds exactly like anybody else’s.” Ironically, what is called “commercialism” regularly fails in the market at an astonishingly high rate.

Once we learn the aesthetics of one category, we stick with it. People are very loyal in their tastes of music. We only change our preferences on flat fads and fashions. Search and learning “costs” are too high to change complex, deeply built tastes regularly. That’s why our parents still enjoy the same music they enjoyed when they were twenty (“gerontorave” becomes a less futuristic outlook every day). This encourages artists to build categories aesthetically as deep and strong as possible in order to engage their audience “for life.”

¹⁸ Ginsburgh, Victor/van Ours, Jan: Expert Opinion and Compensation: Evidence from a Musical Competition, in: American Economic Review 93 (2003), pp.289-298.

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