Hugh Blair defines taste as “the power of receiving pleasure from the beauties of nature and of art” (955). This definition is both lovely and satisfying; anyone reading it can ostensibly rest secure in the veracity of his or her own taste and the pleasure it provides. When writing about matters of taste, in fact, Blair and others frequently raise the Latin proverb *de gustibus non est disputandum* (“there is no disputing of tastes”) for consideration (Hume 832; Blair 958). This consideration notwithstanding, Enlightenment thinkers like Hume and Blair tend to reject the proverb, frequently noting extreme examples of “good” and “bad” taste to illustrate its insufficiency:

“For is there anyone who will seriously maintain that the taste of a Hottentot or a Laplander is as delicate and as correct as that of a Longinus or an Addison?” (Blair 959)

“Whoever would assert an equality of genius and elegance between Ogilby and Milton or Bunyan and Addison would be thought to defend no less an extravagance, than if he had maintained a mole-hill to be as high as Teneriffe” (Hume 832).

Key to Enlightenment writings on taste, then, is the notion that a standard of taste does exist, and some people have a greater capacity to apply that standard than do others. As Blair claims, “in the powers and pleasures of taste, there is a more remarkable inequality among men, than is usually found in point of common sense[…]”(955-956). If Blair is correct, there must be people who find pleasure in the “wrong” things, and are moved by “inferior” beauties, as well as “experts” who find
pleasure in the “right” things and can recognize what is truly beautiful. Correct or not, this sentiment was widely accepted during the Enlightenment and manifested in the “popular desire for rules of taste, guidelines for writing and speaking, and […] examples of proper literature” (Bizzell 809). It is not surprising, therefore, that David Hume’s attempt to develop such a set of rules to govern matters of taste hinges upon the opinions of experts—or “true judges”—who have the power to derive pleasure from truly beautiful objects. Hume devotes much of his essay “Of the Standard of Taste” to profiling and detailing those qualities of true judges that make them experts. The qualities include “delicacy of taste” (834), which he defines as “a quick and acute perception of beauty and deformity” (835); practice in a particular artistic field; experience comparing various beautiful works (835); a lack of prejudice; and good sense (836). The last quality is particularly significant, as Hume and other of his contemporaries believed in an inherent human faculty that responds “naturally” to beauty (“We must […] conclude,” Blair writes, “the principles of taste to be deeply founded in the human mind” (955).). The key to becoming an expert, then, is to rid oneself of cultural and personal prejudices, and to exercise one’s natural sense of beauty—through education and experience—in order to refine it and render it more acute. Blair echoes this notion when he writes, “Placing internal taste therefore on the footing of a simple sense, it cannot be doubted that frequent exercise, and curious attention to its proper objects, must greatly heighten its power” (956). Thus, those in whom “only the feeble glimmerings of taste appear,” and who enjoy “beauties […] of the coarsest kind; and of these […] have but a weak and confused impression” (Blair 955)
lack the education and experience of those with superior tastes, and should in no way be considered bearers of the standard.

In spite of the widespread acceptance of this notion of a standard, Enlightenment scholars had to wrestle with the thorny issue of disagreement among educated, acknowledged experts. Hume admits that “[m]en of the most confined knowledge are able to remark a difference of taste […] even where the persons have been educated under the same government, and have early imbibed the same prejudices” (830), and that “a certain degree of diversity in judgement is unavoidable” (838). He attributes this to differences in age and culture, which cannot be avoided, although he expresses hope that a serious critic would attempt to stretch beyond his own ken when considering works from another time or place (838-839). Blair takes a slightly different approach, allowing that “[t]he tastes of men may differ very considerably as to their object, and yet none of them be wrong” (959). However, he holds to this latitude in matters of taste only insofar as “the objects of taste are different. Where it is with respect to the same object that men disagree […] then it is no longer diversity, but direct opposition of taste that takes place; and therefore one must be in the right and another in the wrong,[…] and [we must] appeal to whatever [we] think the standard of taste, to show him that he is in the wrong” (959).

But how exactly would an expert appeal to this standard of taste? What criteria, according to Enlightenment thinkers, should he or she employ in evaluating a particular object of taste? Neither Hume nor Blair provides any kind of exhaustive list of criteria pertaining to the various genres of art, but they nonetheless provide clues to the types of criteria they prefer. One foundation of Enlightenment criticism is certainly nature itself.
“[L]et us observe,” Blair writes, “that the greater part of the productions of genius are no other than imitations of nature; representations of the characters, actions, or manners of men” (957). Thus, he would value works that appeal to “our natural sense of beauty,” those that are “well conducted, and all the parts joined together with probability and due connexion; from the characters being taken from nature, the sentiments being suited to the characters, and the style to the sentiments” (957). Blair likewise would disdain “[s]purious beauties, such as unnatural characters, forced sentiments, affected style…”(957). A second foundation of Enlightenment criticism is broad agreement, among experts of various cultures and times, as to a work’s merit. Hume puts great stock in the “joint verdict” (837) of his true judges, calling it “the true standard of taste and beauty,” particularly when that approval has “survived all the caprices of mode and fashion […] ”(833). It is interesting to note that these criteria focus on the works of art themselves and the reactions of the critics to those works; there is no mention of the intentions or merits of the artists who produced the art. The attitude of the Enlightenment thinker seems to be that a work of art will (or will not) have merit based solely upon an analysis of its various parts. This makes sense, given the Enlightenment preference for inductive, rather than deductive, thinking. The function of the critic thus seems to be leading others in understanding the merit of the various discreet qualities of a work, based upon the critic's own knowledge of master works and techniques employed by master artists.

These issues regarding taste and those who set the standards continue to have relevance today, notably so in the field of film criticism. Although film as an art form is a relatively new concept, it has since its inception been the focus of critical dialogue. It is
likely that the earliest film critics tended to use the language of art and photography critics, treating film as a primarily visual medium. When sound was added to films in the 1920s, however, the script, story, and dialogue of a film gained a tremendous amount of importance. It thus became necessary to expand the tools used to evaluate the genre, and the tools of literary criticism were a logical choice. During the 1940s and 1950s—the so-called “golden age” when film was increasingly hailed as a serious art form—the most prominent school of literary criticism was the New Criticism, a formalist theory that reflects the Enlightenment’s preference for induction. New Criticism considers works of art self-contained, comprised of various discreet forms that determine the works’ merit apart from the intentions of the artists. Contemporary film criticism still clings to its New Criticism roots, tending to focus on such forms as plot line, character, cinematography, and sound, but rarely considering the intentions of the filmmaker (that seems to be the exclusive realm of the entertainment journalist and the “Making of…” documentary). In a recent article in the Chicago Tribune, for example, critic Michael Wilmington describes the film “Gerry” as “a perverse, poetic nightmare about two nameless guys who get lost in the desert, wandering through unfamiliar, dangerous terrain until their nerves and minds snap. Visually gorgeous and as intellectually opaque as smoked glass, ‘Gerry’ is done in long, languorous takes that unwind like a snake uncoiling.” Wilmington’s critique winds through the film’s plot, focusing on specific scenes, the characters as drawn by the actors, the camera work, and the music score. At times, he mentions writer/director Gus Van Sant’s past work, but only as a means for comparison and contrast. At no time does he mention what Van Sant intends to do or say with this particular film. Similarly reticent with the filmmaker’s intentions is Mark Caro, the Chicago Tribune’s movie
reporter (It is interesting to note here the different titles given to these two writers. Wilmington, a film scholar at the University of Chicago, receives the more coveted title of “critic”; Caro, who is “merely” a journalist, is a “movie reporter.” Are the readers perhaps being encouraged to accept Wilmington as the “true judge,” given his superior credentials?). Caro says of the film “All the Real Girls,” “the […] film is in no hurry to reveal itself. Its relaxed rhythms give you time to register the meaning of the silences as well as the words and to get a feel of the world surrounding the characters […]” Caro’s use of personification here clearly indicates that he considers the film an object unto itself.

Film criticism’s ties to the Enlightenment don’t end with New Criticism, however. Many of the issues considered by Hume and Blair during the Enlightenment are also prevalent today in the rhetoric of film criticism. Critics themselves—perhaps in an attempt to solidify their positions as the “true judges” of films—spend a great deal of time defending their craft, lamenting its impending demise in the face of smash-and-grab film “reviews.” In an article for the periodical Film Comment, for instance, Time film critic Richard Corliss embodies this lament in an attack on “Sneak Previews” regular Jeffrey Lyons, who Corliss says, “plays [a film critic] on TV. Lyons has no thoughts, no wit, no perspective worth sharing with his audience. To anyone knowledgeable about pictures, he is a figure of sour mirth” (14). Corliss considers Lyons and others like him to be mere “reviewers,” who offer quick, cute evaluations of films with little substance, what he calls “junk food…at the banquet” (18). He laments the loss of “[t]raditional considerations of directorial style, social import and the film’s place in film history […]”(14) that have been squeezed out in favor of the lightning-fast, thumbs-up or –
down, one-to-five-star ratings common in most reviews. To Corliss, a “real critic” (a true judge!) is first a good writer, one “for whom films and film reviewing are just a little more complex” (14).

Film critic Roger Ebert, in a reply to Corliss’ rant, raises the familiar issue of the discerning critic vs. the unsophisticated masses, an issue which permeated Enlightenment writings on taste. Ebert, an accepted film scholar and “real critic,” is most famous for his television work, wherein he supplies the very type of review that Corliss despises. The issue, as Ebert sees it, is that “[reviewers] are addressing a different audience from the passionate elite who followed [the film critics] of the Sixties” (49).

Ebert points out that the type of serious film criticism that Corliss praises is more widely available today than it has ever been, with film magazine circulation at an all-time high. However, “[a]ll this film criticism has not resulted in a more selective moviegoing public, nor has it created larger audiences for foreign or independent films or documentaries” (Ebert 46). For this Ebert blames the Hollywood marketing juggernaut, which leads the gullible, unsophisticated public to follow the careers of movie stars—no matter the caliber of the films in which they appear—rather than the works of proven, acclaimed film makers (49).

This lack of sophistication (Blair’s “feeble glimmerings of taste”) of the unwashed masses of moviegoers is echoed in the writings of New Yorker critic David Denby. In his article “Why don’t people love the right movies anymore?” Denby mourns the commercial failure of the film “L.A. Confidential,” which won two Oscars and a tremendous amount of critical acclaim. “What remains of vanity has dropped another notch,” he writes, “for here was the latest and most obvious sign of [critics’] sorry lack of
sway” (94). This lack of sway Denby attributes—in a striking echo of the shift between Classical and Enlightenment thinking—to the fact that “critics can no longer appeal to a commonly held set of values” (98). While older patrons are more likely to be interested in story and character, young moviegoers are too often satisfied with films that are purely “spectacle,” Denby says, and miss the fact that film, unlike photography, is not a purely visual art (97). The critic who bows to the pressure of praising the imagery of a popular, glossily-packaged film that lacks substance is, for Denby, in danger of “becoming a connoisseur of gleaming rot” (98), an epithet that certainly would tarnish the “true judge” status of any film critic. Ultimately, Denby’s frustration is piqued by the same difficulty that Hume and Blair faced: in matters of taste, diversity is unavoidable.

“Arguing with pleasure is a mug’s game. If people say that they are having good sex, you can hardly tell them that they should give up lovemaking for sunsets. You can only tell audiences satisfied by ‘Mission:Impossible’ or ‘Men in Black’ that there are pleasures they are not experiencing, and then try to say what those pleasures are” (Denby 98).

The influence of the Enlightenment rhetoricians is clearly still being felt in the world of contemporary film criticism. Film critics are convinced that a standard exists, and, much like Hume and Blair, cite extreme examples to support that claim (Ebert mentions “Ikiru” and “Weekend at Bernie’s” in the same paragraph; Denby cites “L.A. Confidential” and “Con Air”). It is no surprise, then, that the rhetoric of film criticism reflects the Enlightenment preference for inductive reasoning, and tends to look at individual parts of a film before arriving at a conclusion as to its merit. Reviews are packed with analyses of plot, character, cinematography, music scoring, and the like,
which precede the final pronouncement of the artistic merit of the piece. In addition, the
issues of qualification—what constitutes a “true judge” of film—and the frustration of the
critic faced with an unsophisticated audience haven’t changed since the days of Hume
and Blair. “Real” film critics—the serious writers and scholars of the medium, rather
than the pop culture reviewers—tend to see themselves as Hume’s “[rare] men of
delicate taste” (838), and are quite aware of the relative shortcomings of the “casual
moviegoer.” In his review of “Gerry,” for instance, Michael Wilmington acknowledges the
gap between his tastes and those of his audience in the final paragraph: “Although
“Gerry” is the kind of picture from which people walk out in droves, muttering, I liked it,
partly because I wasn’t stranded in such radically unfamiliar territory. I know the film’s
sources.”
Sources Cited


Ebert, Roger. “All Stars: Or, Is There a Cure for Criticism of Film Criticism?” Film Comment May-June 1998:45+.
