

University of Arkansas Press

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Source: *Philosophical Topics*, SPRING 2024, Vol. 52, No. 1, Beauty, Self, and Society (SPRING 2024), pp. 139-160

Published by: University of Arkansas Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/48822821>

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Aesthetic Ranking: Tomatoes, Parker Points, and Pitchforks

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ABSTRACT: Despite the sustained social critique of the idea of an aesthetic canon, rankings of aesthetic items are ubiquitous and influential: film rankings, year-end lists, wine scores, album scores, social media about who or what is worse, better, and best. Why do we persist in doing this? Is it legitimate? A glance at some of the more influential ranking systems like Rotten Tomatoes, Pitchfork, and others reveals deep epistemic flaws—they tend to be exclusionary, distorted, or evaluatively opaque. How can we reconcile the ubiquity and apparent importance of aesthetic ranking with its manifest shortcomings? Here I argue that aesthetic rankings are “epistemically expropriative”. They are fundamentally aesthetic goods, and as such the norms of aesthetic valuing can override the epistemic rules that govern ranking systems. As aesthetic goods, these rankings promote the social exercise of our aesthetic capacities by promoting engagement, aesthetic conversation, comparative evaluation, self-expression, and aesthetic community. Aesthetic ranking may be epistemically flawed but it can be, even because of that, a powerful tool for the social practice of aesthetic valuing.

1. INTRODUCTION

In 2023 *Rolling Stone* released “The 200 Greatest Singers of All Time”, a sprawling list of many of history’s most iconic singers.¹ The magazine found their inspiration for the list in a quote from Aretha Franklin, who sits at number 1. She characterized the driving force of her singing as a plea for intimacy and connection, as “Me with my hand outstretched, hoping someone will take it.” *Rolling Stone* writes, “That kind of deep, empathetic bond between artist and listener is the most elemental connection in music. And you can think of our list . . . as a celebration of that bond.”

They did not seek to rank the most powerful and musically precise voices—opera singers do not appear—and while popular music is their purview, Broadway singers make no appearance, not even crowd favorites like Patti LuPone or Julie Andrews. Barbara Streisand does appear, however, at number 147 in the list, but the magazine is clear that she’s there on her extra-Broadway merits:

. . . there’s a reason she’s here and her show-tune peers aren’t. Start with her chops: an unconventional mezzo-soprano that can span octaves, be brassy and sassy, and hold notes for stupefying long periods of time. And that voice isn’t merely capable of putting across cabaret and Sondheim, but pretty much the entire range of American popular music . . .

That description fits Streisand like a cocktail dress, but it also applies to another singer who is conspicuously absent from the list, French-Canadian superstar Celine Dion, among the best-selling musical artists of all time with a fan base whose intense love rivals that of the Swifties (Taylor Swift lands at 102, well below Usher at 97). “Look, I’m considered this kind of . . . institution thing. I play for middle-class audiences in Vegas.” That might sound like Celine but it’s Streisand, talking to *Rolling Stone* in 1971. Both Celine and Streisand spent many years in Vegas, performing for their popular fanbase and cementing their cultural authority. They even sing together in the 1997 duet “Tell Him” (in case you forgot).

Celine fans were incensed by her exclusion from the list. Some traveled to the *Rolling Stone* office in New York City to protest, holding signs that said “Justice for Celine” and “How Can You Forget Celine?”. Considering Celine’s iconic if controversial cultural status, her definitive success in the music industry, her deep connection with her fans, and her marked similarities with other singers on the list, it seems that the magazine straightforwardly erred in excluding her. One of the fans, Line Basbous, told a representative for *Rolling Stone*: “Obviously, you made a big mistake forgetting her name on the big list you published last week. We wanted to make sure that you understand that you missed the best singer in the world. She should be the first name on your list.”

1. “Voices of the Ages: The 200 Greatest Singers of All Time”: <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-lists/best-singers-all-time-1234642307/glenn-danzig-2-1234642319/>.

Well, no, Aretha Franklin should be the first name on the list. But is it true that *Rolling Stone* made a mistake? If so, does this undermine the list? Should *Rolling Stone* issue a correction? Notably, they haven't.

Here are some other curious facts about the list: Not only did Usher beat out Taylor Swift and Barbara Streisand—he ranks higher than Elton John (100), Leonard Cohen (103), and Bob Marley (98). The following iconic and influential singers are nowhere to be found: Tom Waits, Paul Simon, FKA Twigs, Ian Curtis, Nat “King” Cole, Tori Amos, Sting, Sinéad O'Connor, and Cat Stevens. And while obviously deserving of a very high ranking, Sam Cooke sits at number 3, just ahead of Billie Holiday (4) and Ray Charles (6), and well ahead of Beyoncé (8), Al Green (10), and Freddie Mercury (14). If the list really is a celebration of the bond between singer and audience, then we might wonder what is going on here.

While the all of the examples I will discuss are recent, there is a long tradition of aesthetic ranking practices wherein artists, art historians, critics, and philosophers rank artforms, genres, artworks, and artists. In the 20th century, Harold Bloom (1994) combatively defended the Western literary canon. Clement Greenberg (1939) famously championed the aesthetic superiority of avant-garde art, especially abstract expressionism, and distinguished it from inferior “kitsch”. He figures in a long tradition that distinguishes between “high” and “low” art (Cohen 1993), which itself derives from the system of “fine” as opposed to the inferior “decorative”, “applied”, and “popular” arts. Hegel, Schopenhauer, and Kant all argued for a hierarchical system of the arts, with Hegel and Kant championing poetry above all and Schopenhauer championing music. Architecture was at the bottom for each. Wolff championed architecture. Hobbes, Mendelsohn, Batteaux, Burke, and many others devoted serious time to classifying the arts and commenting on their relative superiority. In 1669 André Félibien writes, characteristically for the period, that genre paintings, and the artists who produce them, are hierarchically ordered.

He who produces perfect landscapes is above another who only produces fruit, flowers or seashells. He who paints living animals is more estimable than those who only represent dead things without movement, and as man is the most perfect work of God on the earth, it is also certain that he who becomes an imitator of God in representing human figures, is much more excellent than all the others . . . a painter who only does portraits still does not have the highest perfection of his art, and cannot expect the honour due to the most skilled. (Duro 2007)

Earlier still, Renaissance and Medieval writers argued for various sorts of hierarchy, and even philosophers who do not so explicitly rank the arts often provide the means for such a ranking. Plato denigrated poetry for being a mere imitation of a mere shadow of reality. Any art that inches closer to reality, or is otherwise less misleading, could play a positive role in culture. Aristotle highlights the cathartic arts, among which tragedy seems the most powerful. Beyond all of this lies the

influential idea of a “canon”, an authoritative list of great works, artists, forms, etc. (Brzyski 2007).²

I assume here that it is possible to legitimately rank aesthetic items, but there are limits worth noting. Félibien’s ranking of portraits over landscapes is ridiculously general. And it is pointless, or maybe impossible, to rank items across radically different practices: it makes no sense to ask whether A Tribe Called Quest’s *Beats, Rhymes and Life* (1996) is better than Picasso’s *Guernica* (Anderson 1997, p. 99). These limits aside, there are obvious facts about comparative value that ought to be represented in a ranking. Imagine a list of authors that put Ogilby above Milton, or a list of pop music performers that ranked Britney Spears leagues above Elvis Presley.

Despite the sustained social critique of aesthetic canons and hierarchies as racist (Morrison 1992), classist (Bourdieu 1984), sexist (Nochlin 1971, Showalter 1977), and ideological (Eagleton 1998), aesthetic rankings are still common and influential: year-end lists in the film and literature industries, music award shows, ratings in the restaurant world, points for wine, best-of-the-decade lists compiled by teams of critics, the 50 best albums of the year, and everyday arguments on the Internet or with friends. “We do love to rank and sort!”, writes New York Times film critic A.O. Scott, after lamenting rankings and before offering his own.³ No aesthetic practice is immune from having its goods discussed as if they can be scored and ordered. And aesthetic rankings can be powerful, influential, and otherwise significant. They influence us to seek out certain aesthetic goods, to focus our aesthetic valuing in various ways, and even configure how we think about the whole history of an aesthetic enterprise. Thinking of the apex of filmmaking in terms of Akerman’s *Jeanne Dielman* is quite different from thinking of it in terms of Welles’s *Citizen Kane*.

Some aesthetic rankings are relatively comprehensive and detailed, like *Rolling Stone*’s list of singers, or *Sight and Sound*’s decennial ranking of the 100 best films of all time. Others are more coarse-grained. The annual Booker Prize for English literature releases their longlist, then their shortlist, then their winner: these are better than the rest; these are the best of those; and this is the best of all. While aesthetic value is gradable, it is notoriously difficult to specify the degree of aesthetic value an item possesses. Nonetheless, people eat up the more quantitative aspirants. Witness the power and prevalence of Rotten Tomatoes’ n/100 percentage system, Robert Parker’s “100-point” scale system for wine, and Pitchfork’s very specific 0.0–10.0 rational number system for music releases.⁴

2. I have focused on the history of Western ranking practices, but similar traditions appear elsewhere. Consider the influential principles of the Kanō school of painting, which dominated Japanese art from the 15th to the 19th centuries or Xie He’s “Six Principles of Chinese Painting” from the 6th century.

3. From A.O. Scott and Manohla Dargis’s discussion of the 2022 *Sight and Sound* list of 100 greatest films: <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/07/movies/sight-and-sound-greatest-films.html?smid=url-share>.

4. I am overlooking some complications related to the differences between scoring and ranking. By including scoring systems like Parker’s and *Pitchfork*’s I rely on the thought that scoring typically implies a ranking.

As ubiquitous and influential as the practice of aesthetic ranking is, even the more socially sound rankings tend to fail some of the basic epistemic standards for ranking. The typical aesthetic ranking is like *Rolling Stone's* list of the 200 greatest singers, blatantly in violation of these standards by excluding manifestly reasonable candidates, lacking transparency, causing more disagreement than it settles, and so on. Even setting these problems aside, critics themselves will lament the influence of rankings in one breath and offer their own list in another. This suggests a basic problem about aesthetic ranking:

The Problem of Aesthetic Ranking

- (1) Aesthetic rankings are important in aesthetic life.
- (2) Aesthetic rankings *qua* rankings are failures.

How can aesthetic rankings be so obviously influential and so obviously bad? I will argue that the problem can be solved by understanding what we are doing when we create and engage with aesthetic rankings. Aesthetic rankings are not *rankings of aesthetic items* but rather *aesthetic rankings*. In other words, they are rankings whose primary aim is to have a certain kind of impact in the practice of aesthetic valuing. To have that impact, aesthetic rankings must balance the satisfaction of epistemic and aesthetic norms. But given that they are primarily aesthetic goods, violations of epistemic standards can be permissible when they pay in aesthetic goods.

I begin by teasing out some of the basic epistemic standards for rankings (§2). I then look at four influential examples of aesthetic ranking and argue that each fails some of these basic epistemic standards (§3). I then survey several reasons for creating and engaging with aesthetic rankings (§4) and argue that aesthetic ranking exemplifies practical expropriation, specifically *epistemic expropriation*, wherein the norms governing an epistemic practice are usurped by the norms governing another practice (§5). Finally, I consider how we should think about aesthetic value and its place in our aesthetic lives to make sense of our practices of aesthetic ranking. Among the various theories of aesthetic value, aesthetic communitarianism is in an especially good position to make sense of aesthetic ranking as an expropriative practice (§6).

2. RANKING AS AN EPISTEMIC PRACTICE

Let's begin with a fairly minimal account of the practice of ranking as an *epistemic practice*, or a social practice that is governed by epistemic values (Fleisher 2024). To give an account of ranking as an epistemic practice, we can specify the epistemic values, aims, and rules that govern the practice.⁵

5. Two caveats. First, I am interested here in some minimal conditions for a ranking to be good, on the assumption that ranking practices can indeed be epistemically good. See Nguyen (2024) for discussion of worries about the cultural use of rankings. Second, to be sure, there are far more technical ways of understanding ranking and its epistemic significance in individual-level

Consider the well-respected Forbes ranking of colleges. The aim of this ranking is to capture the truth about the comparative value of colleges in order to generate true beliefs to that effect and help students decide which colleges to take seriously in their plans to visit and apply. Forbes starts with a varied list of 1000 U.S. colleges and only publishes the results for half. They then evaluate the colleges using information from high quality databases (e.g. the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System and College Scorecard). Each college is rated using fourteen explicitly stated metrics whose relative weights are also made explicit. These metrics include quantitative matters like student debt and alumni salary, as well as more qualitative matters like academic success, and leadership and entrepreneurial success.

The ranking aims to capture the truth about the comparative value of colleges. It identifies the category of things to be comparatively assessed, generates an extensive and inclusive list of candidates, settles on a wide range of relevant values, and then ranks the candidates in the category according to whether, and to what degree, they possess the values.

We can draw a few lessons from this example. A ranking aims at capturing the truth about the comparative value of a category of things. Successful rankings *capture the truth* about some domain to *coordinate rational preferences with respect to that domain*. In doing so, rankings guide individual and collective action via at least a rough consensus generated by the list, a consensus and coordination that requires the ranking to realize the epistemic values it aims at.

This allows us to specify some basic epistemic rules for generating an accurate ranking. At minimum, accurate rankings are *fair*, *inclusive*, *revisable*, and *transparent*.

- *Fair* rankings eliminate bias. Different evaluative considerations are fairly weighted and similar items are assessed similarly.
- *Inclusive* rankings include all relevant items and, within reason, all relevant evidence in ranking each item.
- *Revisable* rankings are appropriately revised in the light of mistakes or further evidence.
- *Transparent* rankings have specific, clear evaluative criteria and are transparent about how the criteria are applied in the ranking.

I assume there are other important standards of ranking, but these are basic, clear, and I assume uncontroversial. As such, any ranking that violates them is to that extent epistemically deficient.

3. AESTHETIC RANKING: FOUR CASE STUDIES

Consider again the *Rolling Stone* list: faced with the choice of including or excluding Celine Dion, and given her importance as a singer, the epistemic practice of

belief revision (Spohn 2012), but here I am focused more on cultural phenomena involving group behavior and the practice-level rules that govern ranking practices.

ranking requires including her, on the grounds of inclusiveness, unless they can state a transparent and fair reason for exclusion. But she is excluded and so the list is, to that extent, inaccurate. The problem with the *Rolling Stone* list is not an anomaly. Aesthetic rankings regularly violate these epistemic standards, and their violations are not subtle. Here I will focus on four widely known and influential aesthetic rankings and show how they fail to meet some of the basic epistemic standards for rankings.

3.1 PITCHFORK

Pitchfork is perhaps the most influential website in the music world. They regularly publish reviews of new albums, music news, lists, roundups, and music videos. Each review contains a numerical score on a 101-point scale from 0.0 to 10.0 and (usually) a short essay. The essay is an exercise in music criticism and is supposed to rationally support the score, but it is not the only thing that generates the score. Each album is rated by several *Pitchfork* contributors and the final score is an unweighted average of their collective ratings.

A ranking that meets the minimal standards should be transparent about how the scores are determined and fair in its determination. So how does each contributor determine their rating? They listen to the music and come up with a score. Even Pitchfork staff regard this method with suspicion: “. . . the first thing that comes to mind for many when they think of our publication—is the record review. . . . That 101-point scale, from 0.0 to 10.0, remains unique to our publication, an admittedly absurd and subjective metric that acts as the site’s calling card.”⁶

I suppose that admitting that the scale is “absurd and subjective” is a form of transparency about the ranking. But a “subjective” ranking standard is not necessarily bad as long as the critics are good, and they are probably not giving themselves enough credit. There is usually a good dose of fairness and objectivity in a decent critic’s understanding and appreciation of the music, even if that understanding does not always show up in the written review. The aesthetic value of an album can be manifest upon a good listen but very hard to articulate.

Even when there is enough subjectivity to create a problem, one can control for it in some ways. One obvious way is to have a policy for revision in the light of mistakes. Sure, *Pitchfork* messed up when it comes to Daft Punk’s 2000 album *Discovery* (6.4/10), Kid Cudi’s 2009 album *Man on the Moon I* (4.6/10), and Liz Phair’s 2003 self-titled album (0.0/10). But some years on they could issue a reassessment and revised score. Yet *Pitchfork* does not issue revisions. Like *Rolling Stone*, they do not seem to care much about getting it wrong.⁷ And in some cases,

6. “The History of the Pitchfork Reviews Section in 38 Reviews”: <https://pitchfork.com/features/lists-and-guides/the-history-of-the-pitchfork-reviews-section-in-38-important-reviews/>.

7. Matthew Strohl points out that that once, in 2021, Pitchfork published an article entitled “Pitchfork Reviews: Rescored” which includes nineteen album review scores that they would change “if they

they revel in getting it wrong. Perhaps their most famous review is of Jet's 2006 album *Shine On*, which received 0.0/10, and it may be the only review with no accompanying text. Instead of an essay, there is a video of a chimpanzee pissing into its own mouth.

3.2 ROTTEN TOMATOES

The movie review aggregator *Rotten Tomatoes* allows for some revision. They aggregate reviews of films and issue two 0/100 "Tomatometer" scores, one for "all critics" and one for "top critics". But the scores are not fixed and can update as new reviews are released. In principle, this can promote fairness by eliminating various biases. For example, film production companies spend a lot of money creating hype around a new release. The positive sentiment can bias critics in favor of the movie, and this bias can affect the Tomatometer score. As time passes, the positive atmosphere dies down and the Tomatometer can reflect a fairer assessment. Or perhaps a certain filmmaker has a reputation for making bad films. This might bias critics against the film, or perhaps even prevent them from reviewing it, leading to a potential selection bias in the score that can be corrected over time.

So how does *Rotten Tomatoes* generate their scores? The reviews of select critics are rated by *Rotten Tomatoes* curators as "generally positive" or "generally negative". A critical rating of 3/5 would be "generally positive", and a rating of 2/5 would be "generally negative". The score is generated as a *simple percentage of positive reviews over total reviews*.

This system can easily lead to absurd results. Suppose that ninety-nine of a hundred reviewers gave a film a 7/10 and only one reviewer gave it a 5/10. Since the ninety-nine 7/10 reviews are all "generally positive", the Tomatometer would report a 99% rating, rather than a 69% rating. A polarizing film might get five ratings of 5/10 and five ratings of 10/10, and the Tomatometer would report a 50% score, appearing to side with the detractors, even though half of the critics gave it a *perfect score*.⁸ The 50% score fails to capture how worthwhile it would likely be to see this film and the 99% score fails to capture how very average the first film is likely to be. Equally absurd: a film with all 10/10 scores would be rated the same as a film with all 6/10 scores.

One naturally reads a 100% score as *the highest recommendation*. But it is not. Not necessarily. It might just be that a lot of critics thought the film was slightly better than just ok. And one naturally reads a 50% score as something to avoid. But it's not. Not necessarily. The Tomatometer is wildly misleading.

could". Apparently something is preventing them from making the revision official. As they explain the revisions are merely "hypothetical", mere "ideas". And indeed there are no revised scores on the original reviews. But Daft Punk's *Discovery* is hypothetically given the 10/10 it deserves, and Liz Phair 2003 self-titled album gets bumped up to 6.0/10.

8. Philosopher and film critic Matthew Strohl, a trenchant critic of *Rotten Tomatoes*, makes a similar point in *Hard to Watch* (Strohl 2024: 41).

Robert Parker Jr. is the most influential wine critic ever and probably has a claim to being the most influential critic, period. He practically created the field of wine criticism, and throughout his career, starting in the late '70s and until his retirement in 2019, he published hundreds of thousands of wine ratings in his periodical *The Wine Advocate*. Wines are rated on a scale from 50 to 100—for some reason, simply *being* a wine gives you 50 points, which, on reflection, I'm here for—with the best wines receiving a rare 100 points. Each rating is accompanied by tasting notes and a review.

Parker first gained international attention when he predicted, contrary to more established critics, that the 1982 vintage of Bordeaux would be the best vintage since 1961. His confident judgment, based on a barrel tasting, sent 1982 Bordeaux futures skyrocketing, and to this day, despite continuing controversy about the quality of the vintage, you will spend more for a bottle of 1982 Bordeaux.

Parker *loves* Bordeaux wines and other red wines that fit a Bordeaux profile, and his love of that style shapes his criticism. By far the most represented wines among those that have received 100 points are wines from Bordeaux, Northern Rhone, and California: heavy, dark, jammy, high alcohol, highly oaked reds made from Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, and Syrah and often described as "rich", "intense", "concentrated", "complex", "unctuous", "massive", and as having a "long finish". These are big, structured, inky, and boozy wines. All of the 100-point wines range from expensive to extraordinarily expensive. Of course other "huge" reds grace the list: Barolo and Brunello, Grenache and Mourvèdre. But red wines that do not fit this profile—light bodied reds, lower alcohol, fresher without oak influence, carbonic maceration perhaps—will have no chance of nearing 100.

Why are these wines excluded from the highest ranking? Consider the fact that many wines can be perfect wines of their kind. A "perfect" Austrian Blaufränkisch is very different from a "perfect" Barbera or Kadarka—and all are quite different in general character from a 100-point 2018 Petrus. But if a wine is perfect of its kind, then why wouldn't it receive a perfect score? One cannot fault a Beaujolais for not being a Bordeaux. The only principle excluding these wines from Parker's pinnacle of perfection is Parker's preference for huge, rich, intense, concentrated reds.

Even if Parker's favored wines are not your favorite, no one in their right mind would deny their excellence. But everyone should deny their *exclusive* excellence. And yet the rise of Parker's influence suspiciously coincided with a dramatic change in wine culture: winemakers started using every trick in the book—mega purple, added tannins, industrial yeasts, chaptalization, reverse osmosis—to make their red wines fit the preferred profile. Parker's preference went global, with red wine of his favored type proliferating like (along with!) the McDonald's hamburger. Wine people call it *Parkerization*: the decades-long global homogenization of red wine production and consumption.

Here we have a highly influential violation of the fairness rule.

Since 1952, the British magazine *Sight and Sound*, published by the British Film Institute, has released a decennial “critics list” of the 100 greatest films of all time. They ask many hundreds of film industry insiders—critics, scholars, distributors, curators, archivists, and others—to submit what they consider to be the top ten “greatest” films of all time. And each critic is invited to define “greatest” however they like. Each film that makes someone’s list receives one vote, and the ranking is produced by a simple tally of the votes. There is no weight added to the submitted lists, so it makes no difference if you rank Akerman’s *Jeanne Dielman* number one or number 10. If the film is on your list, then it gets a vote that counts the same as all of your other votes.

This system can lead to Tomatometer-like results. Suppose everyone ranks film A tenth and 1% of the respondents leave film B out of their top ten. But also suppose that 99% of respondents rate film B number one. If film A has no competitors, then it will get the number one spot, not film B.

But let’s set this issue aside. The *Sight and Sound* list is admirably transparent: each respondent is listed and hyperlinked to a list of their ten choices along with any notes they attached to their response. Some of these notes include the respondent’s explicit definition of “greatest”. For example, film critic and professor Mary Wiles writes, “Daunted by the prospect of selecting the ten ‘greatest’ films in the history of cinema, I am opting instead to name those ten films that resonate with my own personal history. I paid close attention to women as creators, as actors, and as subjects.” And scholar and podcaster Veronica Fitzpatrick, reflecting on her choices, writes,

The through lines here reflect a taste for suspense, excess, and melodrama—for spectacular sensation, but also for restraint and obliquity, for desires contoured by longing versus fulfillment. “Greatness” here is therefore a measure of subjective indelibility and mutual contact. Again and again, as a spectator and writer, I reach for these moments. They reach back.

The theme of choosing based on personal “resonance” (Matherne 2024) is common, with critics choosing the best of the best by reflecting on the films that speak to them the most. Critic Soraya Roberts explains her choices:

This list says a lot more about me than it does about the state of film—the fact that I am an introvert, that I grew up with British psychiatrists for parents and a family that likes to laugh, that we travelled often through Europe, that my high school was sporty, that I have overly close female friendships, that I studied journalism, and that I like to read crime stories. Out of all of this comes my preference for taut thrillers (*The Fugitive*, *The Ghost Writer*, *Elle*), my penchant for meandering character studies, particularly European ones, particularly queer ones (*Blue Is the Warmest Colour*, *Walking and Talking*, *Weekend*), my affection for outdoor survival stories (*Touching the Void*) and the mechanics of journalism (*All the President’s Men*), not to mention,

more specifically, my love for female introverts who are stuck (Red Road) and a kind of timelessly shaggy cruel wit (Withnail and I). These are the films I watch over and over because these are the films that in various ways made me.

A personal favorite is the explanation by critic David Phelps, who regrets the list he submitted ten years earlier as “an asshole list” and writes,

I have no business being here and almost didn't participate, but I wanted to offer some kind of corrective to my submission a decade ago, which I kind of hate. It's an asshole list by the faintly lost asshole I was then, using movies to dissociate throughout the early 2010s. I still owe a lot of people apologies, and I hope I can do—be—better.

I decided to organise this list around ‘broken lullabies’—almost-musicals—partly because musicals are a bastard art which, as such, can usually leverage movies-as-a-toolkit to exemplify cinema itself as a great bastard art, sure, but also because 10 slots *really* aren't enough, and I wanted to find some way to limit my options.

In an attempt to change, and perhaps accept, his broken self, he turns to a “bastard art” of “broken lullabies” and produces a remarkably original list of quasi-musical films that deal with history and catastrophe, including Ken Jacobs's 402-minute experimental film “Star Spangled to Death” (2004) and Zora Neale Hurston's 7-minute documentary short “Fieldwork Footage” (1928). The list itself is a work of art.

If each individual list is produced in this rich and personal way, then what should we think of the process of mashing them all together to produce a single list? Supposing each critic produced their list in a similar way—by thinking not just about how technically good a film is but about how much the film means to them in particular—the final *Sight and Sound* ranking is something like a record of resonance, a distillation of the democratic magnetism that movies can possess.

We might then expect the list to be a decent candidate for creating consensus and guiding action. However, while obviously bad aesthetic rankings tend to be dismissed or ignored, good ones are frequently *disputed*—they spark aesthetic discourse, challenge our sensibilities, and invite us to engage.

The publication of the *Sight and Sound* list always causes a firestorm of critical discussion, disagreement, and incredulity. Upon publication of the 2022 list, New York Times critics Manohla Dargis and A.O. Scott weighed in. Scott wrote:

Before the poll results were published, I was prepared to let loose with a rant about the nullity of list-making, the barbarism of conducting criticism by vote and the utter emptiness of the idea that one movie could be the best of all time . . . But the ascension of “Jeanne Dielman” to the top spot was a welcome jolt to the critical system.⁹

9. “Is Sight and Sound's List of 100 Greatest Films Too Tasteful?”: <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/07/movies/sight-and-sound-greatest-films.html>.

Belgian filmmaker Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* is hard to summarize, but it is a 198-minute uncompromising study of domestic life with long unbroken shots of Jeanne Dielman (Delphine Seyrig) doing the dishes, preparing dinner, bathing, knitting, and so on. Instead of using their platform to recommend the *Sight and Sound* list, Scott and Dargis conclude the article with their very own top ten lists, noting that "We do love to rank and sort!"

Jason Wood of the British Film Institute explains that they see the list's contentiousness as a feature not a bug.

As well as being a compelling list, one of the most important elements is that *it shakes a fist at the established order*. Canons should be challenged and interrogated, and as part of the BFI's remit to not only revisit film history but to also reframe it, it's so satisfying to see a list that feels quite radical in its sense of diversity and inclusion. (emphasis added)

Even with aesthetic rankings that are relatively epistemically sound (inclusive, transparent, fair) we find a failure to create consensus and coordinate action. They *want* to provoke disagreement; doing so is a common and even sought-after value of aesthetic rankings. They are made to be mauled. When Siskel and Ebert gave David Lynch's film *Lost Highway* two thumbs down, Lynch lauded that as "two more great reasons" to see the film and made a promotional poster with "TWO THUMBS DOWN" in all caps.

4. SO WHAT ARE WE DOING?

In 2014 Chantal Akerman was asked to contribute to a film ranking. She hesitated, "I don't really like the idea, it is just like at school. . . . It is tiring and not really necessary to do these kinds of things."¹⁰ And yet we do them. Incessantly. Despite the egregious violation of epistemic rules. Why?

If we are going to countenance a ranking practice that is epistemically defective, there must be some non-epistemic value in it. Presumably we are not all crazy, obsessed with consumption, lured by click bait (though surely that is part of it), or compelled by Rousseauian instincts to obsessively compare everything. Furthermore, these days every critic is aware of the social critique of the canon. The vast majority of people who practice aesthetic ranking do not aspire to be Harold Bloom. The main lesson from the case studies is that while there are objective constraints on an aesthetic ranking—one can make unequivocal mistakes—the goal is not to provide some definitive list that everyone assents to and follows. One of the central goals in the epistemic practice of ranking appears to be diverted to other goods. So what are those goods?

10. This was Akerman's response to *Sight and Sound* managing editor Isabel Stevens in email correspondence, when Stevens asked Akerman to participate in a films poll.

A natural thought is to retreat all the way to pure preferences. Perhaps aesthetic rankings are mere lists of favorites. And some might even see in this a vindication of the familiar thought that aesthetic value is subjective, and so cannot be objectively ranked anyway. But, as we have seen, while aesthetic rankings violate *some* of the standards of the epistemic practice of ranking, they must not violate all of those standards. A list generated purely by subjective preference could too easily be exclusive, opaque, and unfair, and so would not amount to a product of the epistemic practice of ranking.

Of course, some critics try to temper the force their rankings by saying things like “these are *my* personal favorites,” but from the mouth of an expert who publishes the list for public consumption, the hedge rings hollow. If their personal favorites were wildly out of order, then they would surely hear about it from their audience, who would rightly demand a revision. And even in the hands of non-experts, when we post our ranked favorites online or send them to friends, we don’t pretend to have issued a mere list of personal preferences. We are eager to discuss and defend our choices. Aesthetic rankings are not lists of mere likings.

So we need to consider some non-epistemic reasons for why we create and engage with aesthetic rankings in the hopes that it will reveal considerations that can outweigh the loss of epistemic value.¹¹

4.1 HAVING FUN

Things that are tiresome to some people can be fun for others. It can be fun to think of our own rankings of our favorite bands, albums, movies, restaurants, cuisines, and so on. It can be fun to share our rankings with friends or online. It can be fun to gripe about rankings we disagree with and to articulate exactly why the ranking is wrong. Even the Celine Dion fans, despite their frustrations, seemed to have a good time banding together and trekking to New York City to protest. Aesthetic rankings are good sources of various pleasures: pleasures of fun and play, of puzzling and deciphering, of insight and articulation.

4.2 SHARPENING SKILLS

The rankings we really care about tend to be ones that involve the aesthetic domains we especially love. If you are a cinephile, you are more likely to engage with the *Sight and Sound* list. If you love singing, you will probably be intrigued and provoked by the *Rolling Stone* ranking. Rankings draw us into our favorite aesthetic practices and call on us to hone our skills in that practice: our skills of listening, watching, tasting, noticing, comparing, and many others.

11. Some early attempts to defend the literary canon against the social critique take this approach. Charles Altieri (1983), for example, argues that the literary canon has curatorial, dialectical, and culturally important historical value.

4.3 INVITING ENGAGEMENT

Clearly one of the more significant features of aesthetic rankings is that they invite us to engage with the items on the list. When a certain item tops a list, gets a high score, or ranks higher than you think it should, it is enticing and provocative. Similarly when something ranks lower than you think it should. The ranking invites us to check it out, rethink things, give it a listen, a watch, a taste. By inviting engagement, rankings challenge us to consider how we would organize our own rankings. In doing so we might revisit the items, deepen our engagement with them, and sharpen our aesthetic sensibility. By inviting engagement, aesthetic rankings promote the use of our aesthetic capacities.

4.4 PROVOKING DEBATE

As noted above, some of the best aesthetic rankings are designed to be provocative in this way. By inviting us to engage with, and consider our own ranking of, the items on the list, aesthetic rankings provoke debate about who should be included in the list, how it should be ordered, what 'score' should be assigned, and why. We might debate with peers online, with our past selves, with friends over coffee, or with *Rolling Stone* on the streets of New York City. And these discussions and debates seem good in themselves. They do not need to issue in some definitive revision to be worthwhile.

4.5 PROVIDING EVALUATIVE FRAMEWORKS

An evaluative framework can be as simple as a suggested comparison. You might love your local taco shop, but you can think about how great it really is by comparing it to another shop. Or you can think more abstractly about what the ideal taco shop would be and compare it to that. When *Rolling Stone* places Sam Cooke ahead of Ray Charles and Beyoncé, they provide an evaluative framework that asks us to think about why he might deserve that placement: is it the effortless and soulful quality of his voice? His originality? His influence? Should we more highly value Sam Cooke's vocal qualities over Beyoncé's power and precision or Ray Charles's range and dynamicity? Rankings invite us to evaluate aesthetic goods from new angles.

4.6 PROMOTING AESTHETIC VALUING

By inviting engagement, provoking debate, and providing evaluative frames, aesthetic rankings promote aesthetic goods along with the goods of aesthetic valuing.

Sight and Sound promoted the value of Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman* and motivated people to watch and discuss the film, arguably giving it the exposure it deserves. On the other hand, Parker promoted the value of a certain taste profile in red wines and, for better and worse, influenced a generation of wine drinkers to value wine similarly. By putting us in touch with especially good, innovative,

challenging, or otherwise noteworthy goods, aesthetic rankings galvanize us into aesthetic valuing. They expose us to new aesthetic goods, reframe our evaluative perspectives, engage and refine our aesthetic valuing capacities, help us orient ourselves to the world of aesthetic value.

4.7 EXPRESSING OURSELVES

You can tell a lot about a person by asking them where they would rank *Fast & Furious: Tokyo Drift* among the 13 (and counting) installments in the *Fast & Furious* franchise (including the prequels, sequels, and midquels). Have they seen *any* of those films? Only some? All of them, but they rank *Tokyo Drift* near the bottom? Or near the top?¹² By issuing our own rankings, or by responding to a ranking with insights, interpretations, and correctives, we express ourselves. We exercise and express our aesthetic capacities for judgment, valuing, interpretation, discernment, and so on. This is especially evident in the *Sight and Sound* respondents' notes on how they selected their top ten. Many of the lists are expressions of resonance and aesthetic love (Riggle 2015). Relatedly, creating and engaging with lists aids aesthetic self-reflection, especially in a culture of aesthetic abundance. By engaging with lists we can reflect on the music, films, literature, and so on that we really connected with over some stretch of time.

Collectives can also use lists to express themselves. Pitchfork clearly expresses something about their early 2000s hipster sensibility in giving Ryan Adams's *Love is Hell, Pts. 1 & 2* a dismal 3.1/10 for its "dripping, maudlin sentimentality" that at times aims for the "political profundity of a Thom Yorke and comes off like a diet Chris Martin."

4.8 CREATING AESTHETIC COMMUNITY

Who you choose to be around you lets you know who you are. (That's a *Tokyo Drift* quote.) Creating and engaging with aesthetic rankings can help you make those choices. Self-expression in aesthetic life goes hand-in-hand with aesthetic community because aesthetic valuing is so often (some would say essentially) social—in taking up their invitations to engage, debate, and value, we are engaging with the sensibilities of other aesthetic valuers, while sharpening, deepening, and expressing our own. I think of aesthetic community as the social promotion of aesthetic capacities: aesthetic community exists between two or more people when, only when, and because they engage in mutually supportive exercises of their aesthetic capacities (Riggle 2024). Rankings promote this kind of mutually supportive engagement, but they also key us into community in other ways, by helping us connect with the people who like what we like.

12. See episode 107 of the film podcast *Cows in the Field* for a detailed discussion of why some F&F fans love *Tokyo Drift*: <https://cowspod.com/2024/01/19/the-fast-and-the-furious-tokyo-drift-2006/>.

I do not take this to be an exhaustive list of the non-epistemic goods that we get out of creating and engaging with aesthetic rankings, but I think it is a substantive and telling list. The practice of aesthetic ranking invites engagement, sharpens skills and improves capacities, provides generative evaluative frameworks, sparks debate, promotes fun and self-expression, and creates aesthetic community.

Bringing the epistemic standards of ranking back into view, we can see that the practice of aesthetic ranking permits the violation some the standards of the epistemic practice of ranking in order to realize some of these goods. This is an example of what I call *practical expropriation*.

5. AESTHETIC RANKING AS EPISTEMIC EXPROPRIATION

Suppose *Rolling Stone* is in the process of constructing a ranking that roughly satisfies the standards of the epistemic practice. They come across a candidate for inclusion and evaluation and ask themselves: “Should we include Celine Dion?” The epistemic standards are clear: *Yes*. But our study of aesthetic ranking suggests that the epistemic answer can be overpowered by another consideration: Would *excluding* her have any of the values detailed above? Would it make the list provocative, funny, challenging, delightfully perplexing, and so on without significantly undermining the epistemic project? If the answer is ‘yes’, then there is aesthetic reason to violate the epistemic rules and exclude her. *Rolling Stone* was founded in 1967 as *the* rock and roll magazine, intended to push the boundary in musical tastes and political opinion. *Rolling Stone* is expressing something about their rock and roll sensibility in excluding Celine Dion and elevating Sam Cooke (3) and Celia Cruz (18). In contrast to the rapturous, tender, restrained, acrobatic and emotive voices in the top ten, Dion’s raw and strident voice is too unguarded, too mainstream, too populist and uncool for them.

In aesthetic ranking, then, there is a default rule that permits favoring aesthetic over epistemic value. Aesthetic rankings are *fundamentally aesthetic* goods—they aim to be good enough rankings per the standards of the epistemic practice in order to be especially good in the practice of aesthetic valuing. In aesthetic rankings the epistemic practice of ranking is highjacked for the sake of aesthetic valuing—to provoke aesthetic debate, spur aesthetic engagement, promote aesthetic valuing, create aesthetic community, and so on. A good aesthetic ranking aims to promote these goods, at the potential cost of the epistemic values that constrain nonaesthetic rankings. That is why so many aesthetic rankings accept the costs of epistemic loss for the gain of aesthetic goods. Aesthetic rankings are not *rankings of aesthetic goods*. They are *aesthetic* rankings.

This is not to say that the many epistemic problems we have noted with aesthetic rankings can always be ignored. *Rotten Tomatoes* is so epistemically flawed as to be nearly useless, and yet *nearly everyone uses it*. We are culturally misled *en masse*. This is a significant problem in our aesthetic lives and we would probably

be much better off ignoring *Rotten Tomatoes* altogether. Aesthetic rankings can be abused, distorted, misleading, and bogus—especially if we forget that they are epistemically expropriative and take them too (epistemically) seriously.

But generally, a gain in aesthetic value can justify a loss of epistemic value, especially when there are internal connections between certain aesthetic and epistemic goods. Consider *Pitchfork's* resistance to revision, or the various oddities of *Rolling Stone's* list. In both cases the violation of epistemic norms pays in expressiveness. *Pitchfork's* idiosyncratic reviews are clearly expressive of their early-Internet irreverence and bluster. Changing their scores would change, and potentially erase, their expressiveness.

In this way, aesthetic ranking is an example of *practical expropriation*: the phenomenon of dispossessing a practice of (some of) its normative force by embedding it in another practice. Here we have, more specifically, *epistemic expropriation*. Oftentimes practical expropriation is bad, as when economic or political practices expropriate the norms of experimental design or empirical reporting. Or when the norms of artistic performance are embedded in and distorted by practices of white supremacism (as in early jazz culture; see Dinerstein 2017). Can practical expropriation ever be good?

6. RANKING AND AESTHETIC VALUE

Perhaps it is in the case of aesthetic ranking. But much depends on whether we can justify its epistemic expropriation. All we have done so far is appeal to a hodgepodge of non-epistemic goods associated with aesthetic rankings and common in aesthetic life more generally. But that does not amount to much of a principled justification. A more substantial justification must show how those aesthetic goods constitute or contribute to something that can compete with epistemic value. We cannot always screw up a ranking because doing so would be super funny or lead to a wild and crazy debate! So how, if at all, can we understand many or all of those various aesthetic goods as figuring more centrally in aesthetic life, the grander effort of creating and engaging with aesthetic value. Here we should look to current theories of aesthetic value to see whether they provide more powerful justifications of aesthetic ranking.¹³

13. Doing so is especially apt in the light of the various influential critiques of aesthetic ranking. Those critiques tend to assume a certain picture of aesthetic judgment derived from Kant, with his emphasis on the universality of aesthetic judgment and the demand for agreement. They see his theory as a rather blunt tool that cultural elites can wield to establish the dominance of their class, race, gender, morals, and culture. But recent work on aesthetic value offers new ways of thinking about aesthetic judgment that characterize it in ways far less useful to clandestine elites.

Aesthetic experientialism is the view that aesthetic value is the value of experience (Levinson 1992). The aesthetic value of an item is the value of the experience it affords. The paradigmatic value of experience is pleasure, but other experience-types can be aesthetic value-conferring: thrills, frights, perplexities, and others (Peacocke 2021). And as we noted already, aesthetic ranking can be very fun and experientially valuable in other ways.

This theory of aesthetic value would seem to suggest the following explanation: aesthetic ranking is a valuable-experience-promoting practice. We create and engage with aesthetic rankings because doing so promotes valuable experience. Without them, there would be far less valuable experience in aesthetic life. And so in aesthetic life we might systematically allow the demotion of some epistemic goods to promote some experiential ones.

For this to justify the practice of aesthetic ranking, aesthetic rankings would have to generate much more valuable than negative experience. But is that true? Aesthetic rankings seem to promote a lot of negative experiences. Many denizens of the aesthetic world simply roll their eyes at aesthetic rankings, wishing they did not exist at all. New York Times film critic A.O. Scott was prepared to “let loose with a rant” about the 2022 *Sight and Sound* ranking, a pretty darn good one as they go. Surely he is not alone in his disposition to grumble at a lot of rankings. The Celine Dion fans were *pissed* at *Rolling Stone*. Of course, their anger was appropriately tempered by the circumstances—this was a ranking of singers, after all, not a matter of life and death—but upset and angry they were, even if they also enjoyed getting together for a road trip. And while this was a particularly newsworthy reaction to a rather public ranking, it is a *common* reaction. Rankings cause rancor. Even rankings that you generally like can be irritating, confusing, or annoying. The same ranking that you celebrate for lauding your hero you trash for promoting your enemy.

Of course, rankings promote the aesthetic goods they praise, but it is not clear that this produces a net positive of valuable experience. I venture to guess that the *Sight and Sound* ranking inspired more than a few people to watch Akerman’s *Jeanne Dielman*, and they were bored into disillusionment with the entire film industry. There seems to be something good about generating exposure to *Jeanne Dielman*, even for people who mistakenly lament the influence. But if there is, it cannot be found in their negative experience. Or suppose, you avoid Ryan Adams’s *Love is Hell, Pts. 1 & 2* having read Pitchfork’s expressive review and low score. You would be missing out on an extraordinary rock album. In other words, the very epistemic flaws that aesthetic ranking permits might significantly *diminish* the maximization of experiential value.

Aesthetic rankings by design produce a wide range of experiences, from elation and affirmation to frustration, annoyance, and bickering conflict. It seems a bit too sunny to suppose that the valuable experiences far outstrip the neutral and negative ones. This suggests that we should look to another theory of aesthetic value to justify our aesthetic ranking practices.

The network theory of aesthetic value (Lopes 2018) ties aesthetic value not to experience but to practices. Aesthetic value gives us reason to act in certain ways, as determined by the particular norms of specific aesthetic practices. Aesthetic practices are things like American artistic graffiti, natural winemaking in the Loire, xeriscaping in the Southern California, or Opéra comique. These practices have histories, traditions, conventions, and their own rules, experts, exemplars, and achievements that give their practitioners reasons to act in certain ways—for example, to favor drought-resistant plants and carefully consider the use of shade; to avoid unnecessary interventions and unnatural additions through primary fermentation and *élevage*; or to take an opportunity to rep your crew and get up when you encounter good spot to tag. If some of those descriptions sound a bit alien, that's the point. Aesthetic practices are specific, niche, local, and detailed. Their reasons are vivid to the insiders who care and often opaque even to nearby outsiders. You might order espresso every day and know almost nothing about the nuances of the aesthetic practice of pulling perfect shots.

In this way, aesthetic value is imprinted with the specificities of the practice that constitutes it. This puts the network theory in an especially good position to capture the way that aesthetic rankings hone our skills, engage us in practice-specific debates, and promote aesthetic community among practitioners. Aesthetic ranking would seem to be a sub-practice of specific aesthetic practices, tasked with supercharging engagement individually and socially.

However, there is a problem with thinking of aesthetic ranking as a sub-practice: there is a kind of uniformity across different aesthetic rankings, of literature, film, music, wine, coffee, restaurants, and so on. They all share roughly the same features in terms of how they are created and engaged with, as marked by the various goods surveyed in §4. This would be somewhat miraculous if the normative dimensions of the practice of aesthetic ranking were entirely derived from their being siloed sub-practices tailored to the specific practice they serve. The practice of aesthetic ranking seems to be its own practice.

The other option is to think of aesthetic ranking as a practice that mingles with other aesthetic practices, one that takes up and ranks the products of any specific practice. This would nicely explain the uniformity we observe in our creation and engagement with aesthetic rankings. However, this raises a question that threatens the network theory: what is the normative structure of the super-practice of aesthetic ranking? According to the network theory, there is no source of practice-external aesthetic value, no source of aesthetic normativity that binds the specific practices together, informs or justifies their rules, or orients them in some larger practice. But the uniformity in our aesthetic ranking practices suggests that the norms of aesthetic ranking do not derive entirely from the practice-specific norms governing the ranked goods. There must be an independent source of norms for creating and engaging with aesthetic rankings, and since rankings are rankings of *aesthetic value*, presumably those norms have something to do with the nature of our

engagement with aesthetic value, i.e. with aesthetic *valuing*. But if aesthetic valuing has some normative nature that is independent of any specific aesthetic practice, then this calls into question the idea that aesthetic value is metaphysically wedded, monogamously, to specific aesthetic practices. It would seem that aesthetic value has something to do to the norms governing aesthetic valuing in general.

Perhaps the network theorist would bite or deny the bullet. One option is for the network theory to construe aesthetic ranking as an aberration—not all aesthetic practices are worth keeping around! This would be a way of resolving the problem of aesthetic ranking by denying (1). However, considering the cultural importance and diverse goods promoted by the practice of aesthetic ranking, that is a position near the bottom of steep hill.

6.3 AESTHETIC COMMUNITARIANISM

A third theory ties aesthetic value not to practices but to a *practice*, indeed a super-practice, namely, the practice of aesthetic valuing. This view sees specific aesthetic practices as so many ways to engage in the more general practice of aesthetic valuing. What practice is that? The aesthetic communitarian argues that aesthetic valuing is a *social* practice; it is something we do together. We share artworks—those that we love and those that we make. We imitate the artists and works that inspire us—indeed, that are made to inspire us. We express ourselves—our individualities, our sensibilities—to each other via the artworks and aesthetic goods that we create, love, and share. Aesthetic valuing is like this because it is a social practice that is governed by the value of *aesthetic community*. We engage in aesthetic community when we exercise our aesthetic capacities together in a mutually supportive way—the creative, free, and loving capacities that we deploy to form our sensibilities, to become individuals with our own sense of taste and style. The communitarian thinks of aesthetic value in terms of the social practice of aesthetic valuing: aesthetic value is what is worthy of engagement in the social practice of aesthetic valuing (Riggle 2022, 2024).

Specific aesthetic practices are specific ways of engaging in the social practice of aesthetic valuing, and as such, the rules and norms of the specific practice are answerable to the norms that govern the practice of aesthetic valuing. Specific practices must, ultimately, serve the good of aesthetic community, the social exercise of aesthetic capacities. Aesthetic ranking is a practice that calls our attention to collections of aesthetic goods in ways that promote the social, aesthetic valuing of those goods. By ranking aesthetic goods we promote discussion, encourage self-expression, open our minds to new sources of aesthetic value, and create aesthetic community. In this way, the aesthetic communitarian can think of aesthetic ranking as an aesthetic practice that serves the larger social practice of aesthetic valuing and inherits its normative character from that practice.

Herein lies the justification of epistemic expropriation as it figures in aesthetic ranking. Some epistemic flaws in a ranking can be justified by appeal to the prac-

tice of aesthetic valuing. If leaving Celine Dion out is better for the social practice of aesthetic valuing than leaving her in, then a ranking with her left out could be aesthetically superior. It could be deviously funny, cause generative friction, get people to reconsider Celine and think about why she was left out, spur fans to band together and reinforce their bonds, and so on. If leaving her out can occasion aesthetic community and further the practice of aesthetic valuing, then the epistemic rule against exclusion loses force.

Consider, in contrast, the epistemic violations of the Tomatometer. These violations cannot be justified in the practice of aesthetic valuing because they not only have no aesthetic upshot but are themselves also aesthetic failures: the lack of fairness systematically fails to track what is worthy of aesthetic valuing. It is epistemically misleading and aesthetically annoying, not provocative, funny, expressive, generative of insight or debate, and so on.

7. CONCLUSION

Let's revisit the problem that set us off:

The Problem of Aesthetic Ranking

- (1) Aesthetic rankings are important in aesthetic life.
- (2) Aesthetic rankings *qua rankings* are failures.

I have argued that while some aesthetic rankings *qua rankings* are failures, others contain errors that can be explained as the result of epistemic expropriation: an epistemic rule is violated in service of aesthetic goods. I argued that aesthetic communitarianism offers the best justification for this expropriation. Aesthetic rankings are important in aesthetic life because, while striving to epistemically rank aesthetic goods, that is not their only or primary aim. They also, and more fundamentally, aim to promote the social practice of aesthetic valuing. As such, they can permit epistemic mistakes when, and only when, doing so pays off in the practice of aesthetic valuing. By ranking aesthetic goods, we amplify our social aesthetic valuing and jointly exercise and improve our aesthetic capacities: we express ourselves, open our minds to new aesthetic goods, refine our discretionary valuing, and engage in valuable aesthetic discourse. *Rolling Stone's* motivation for their ranking of singers is exactly on point: aesthetic rankings are a celebration of aesthetic community.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks to Anthony Cross, Robbie Kubala, Dominic McIver Lopes, and Matthew Strohl—discussions with and comments from them improved this paper.

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