

Superlatives

Description

Iâ??ve adopted the habit when viewing a television documentary on some cultural achievement of counting the minutes before the first occurrence of that most English of adjectives â??extraordinary,â?• as in â??the Taj Mahal is an extraordinary masterpiece.â?• Some presenters may reinforce the assessment by letting the viewer in on the fact that the structure is â??of unrivalled beauty.â?•

A superlative is an adjective or adverb expressing the highest degree of a quality (best, sharpest, most beautiful), or any expression of quality that is high up the scale.



The extraordinary Villa Rotunda by Andrea Palladio

Notwithstanding common practice among travel bloggers, the art of travel writing is to save superlatives such as â??wonderful,â?• â??amazing,â?• â??exquisiteâ?• and â??extraordinaryâ?• until the last moment. They are to be used sparingly, if at all.

I like to quote the nineteenth century traveller and art critic John Ruskinâ??s exuberant eulogy to St Markâ??s Basilica in Venice as an example of descriptive excess. But apart from a reference to â??delightâ?• the passage is a model of restraint. Ruskin doesnâ??t at any point tell us that the sight of this building gives him pleasure, or that it is beautiful, fabulous, remarkable or extraordinary. Ruskinâ??s skill is to convey as much without stating it. He also leaves it to the reader to decide whether the scene so described is to her taste. He even leaves the reader in a state of ambivalence, a condition not unlike that of standing in front of the building in situ.

And round the walls of the porches there are set pillars of variegated stones, jasper and porphyry, and deep-green serpentine spotted with flakes of snow, and marbles, that half refuse and half yield to the sunshine, Cleopatra-like, â??their bluest veins to kissâ??â?? the shadow, as it steals back from them, revealing line after line of azure undulation, as a receding tide leaves the waved sand; their capitals rich with interwoven tracery, rooted knots of herbage, and drifting leaves of acanthus and vine, and mystical signs, all beginning and ending in the Cross; and above them, in the broad archivolts, a continuous chain of language and of lifeâ?? angels, and the signs of heaven, and the labours of men, each in its appointed season upon the earth; and above these, another range of glittering pinnacles, mixed with white arches edged with scarlet flowers, â??a confusion of delight,

amidst which the breasts of the Greek horses are seen blazing in their breadth of golden strength, and the St. Mark's lion, lifted on a blue field covered with stars, until at last, as if in ecstasy, the crests of the arches break into a marble foam, and toss themselves far into the blue sky in flashes and wreaths of sculptured spray, as if the breakers on the Lido shore had been frost-bound before they fell, and the sea-nymphs had inlaid themselves with coral and amethyst.

Other descriptions are put more ambiguously as in the case of his impression of a steam train standing at a station.

I cannot express the amazed awe, the crushed humility, with which I sometimes watch a locomotive take its breath at a railway station, and think what work there is in its bars and wheels, and what manner of men they must be who dig brown iron-stone out of the ground, and forge it into THAT!

In any case the identification of beauty need not be the scholar's touchstone in identifying cultural value. I would insist on the preservation of St Mark's no less, and perhaps want to see it all the more, if I thought, or was told, it was grotesque.

On my first visit to Continental Europe in the 1970s I was guided by the essential traveller's aid of the day, *Europe on Five Dollars a Day*, though I think by then it was the \$15 edition. Among other functions the travel book provided an ample vocabulary of superlatives for postcards and travel journal entries. According to my postcards St Mark's was 'amazing,' the Alps 'spectacular,' and Schloss Neuschwanstein 'out of this world.'

The propensity of the amateur commentator to pronounce such unaffected, unrestrained, and derivative (ie shared) aesthetic judgements is a vital aspect of the impulse to interpret, and to disclose our interpretations to others. The interpretation in which readers, viewers, documentary makers, listeners and travellers participate inevitably involves making judgements.

The observer doesn't first of all receive sense data about an object, order it into something amenable to description, decide its attributes, and then determine whether he likes the object or not. Judgement is inherent in the interpretative process.

This conflation of judgement and interpretation is easiest to grasp if we follow the model of interpretation advanced by philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (following Martin Heidegger), according to whom, when confronted with an art object (text, scene, piece of music) we project a pre-understanding, which is to say an opinion that is already in formation, into the moment of interpretation. Assuming I am not blinded by my prejudices then I allow this perception to undergo revision as the object, its context and the surrounding milieu of opinion speak back to me. This is a dynamic process, subject to revision and negotiation.

Mass media presentations of aesthetic judgement pose problems where they insist on telling us explicitly what to think, what judgements to make.

There's nothing wrong with a commentator disclosing his value judgements about an object or work of art. The viewer is free to agree or disagree. And sometimes the opinions of those we trust is a helpful starting point in making judgements and choices of our own.

But extraordinary beauty is not the only yardstick in assessing cultural value. In any case it is generally more satisfying for readers and viewers to be given scope to cultivate skills in critical judgement for themselves.

Bibliography

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