

The Absence of Any Source: On Coldness and Gorgeousness

Max L. Feldman

“Oh, it just leaves me *cold*, Maxi!” my grandpa would say. He would pretend to shiver as he stressed the word, squirming in the green leather kitchen chair. He said that whenever we talked about art. Not all art. Just “contemporary” art. The complaint was nonspecific, though—presumably directed at minimalism and conceptual art, without naming artists or exhibitions. He wasn’t saying, “This isn’t art.” Nor was he denying obvious hard work. He was talking about an atmosphere: the real or imagined sense that this art denies you rich sensory joys—the kind of feelings you get from looking at beautiful things—and then makes you feel inferior because you don’t “get” it.

My grandpa was exactly the sort of intelligent, open, well-read person contemporary art should, ideally, want on its side. But he was born in the wrong era and social class for art-world discourses. It’s far easier to talk like his eldest son (my dad), daughter-in-law (my mum), and eldest grandson (me) could if you’re taught what Fredric Jameson calls the “complex skills of reading, listening and seeing” at university.¹ Poor Jewish boys from London’s East End didn’t have that chance back then.

The questions “What *is* art?” and “What *should* art be?” were as cold to him as the works themselves. He probably wouldn’t have liked the answer, either. The same guy who got me to read Émile Zola’s *L’Assommoir* (1877) and Albert Camus’s *The Plague* (1947) and watch *The Sopranos* also thought “A Whole New World,” the love song from Disney’s *Aladdin*, was “just so gorgeous” (so were Winona Ryder and Alison Brie, the latter of whom played Trudy Campbell in *Mad Men*).

“Cold” and “gorgeous” are not opposites, nor judgments of quality. They are as slippery as Marshall McLuhan’s disputable “hot” and “cold” media distinction. The audience of “hot” media (movies, radio, photographs) doesn’t need to fill in much information. Those of “cold” media (television, telephones, speech), by contrast, have to do some work, developing specialized habits, involving themselves “in the process” during, for example, Glenn Gould’s recordings of piano recitals or when Igor Stravinsky rehearsed the Toronto Symphony Orchestra in his pieces.² Even without being trained in art-speak, my grandpa was fully capable of taking part. He knew what readymades, installations, and monochromes were and what the artists were trying to achieve even if he couldn’t place them in a specific context. He just didn’t think it was worth it. But why? It’s complicated. What grandpa meant by coldness was, in fact, more like the “functional warmth” Jean Baudrillard saw in the color schemes of the modern home, meant to lend “atmosphere” to a sign system where we show off what we have bought.

This warmth was, Baudrillard said, a contradiction. It does not come from things’ own qualities, and less still from an organic source of heat like a fireplace. It exists only in contrast to “cold” tones that give off a sense of order and structure. What we call warmth comes, he said, from “the systematic oscillation or abstract synchrony of a perpetual ‘warm-and-cold’ which in reality continually defers any real ‘warm’ feeling. This is a purely *signified* warm—hence one which, by definition, is never realised: a warmth characterised, precisely, by the absence of any source.”³

There is a deliberate contrast between, for example, a wooden door (warm) and its metal handle (cold), but the materials do not do anything by themselves. What matters is how we calculate an emotional temperature, turning our homes into statements about our inner lives, buying and displaying things that merely connote “warmness”—an empty idea that implies warmth without us ever being able to feel it. To my grandpa, contemporary art wasn’t “cold” because *he* couldn’t make sense of a “cool” medium. He just wanted things to be what they are, not stand-ins for other things. He could take a detached, contemplative stance toward a work to decide if it did or didn’t mean something to him. He just didn’t want an unequal exchange—something that deferred the payoff or denied what is truly valuable outright. He could, likewise, think about how a work is placed in a gallery or museum space, but rejected the studied arrangement of things that refuse to look back at you on level terms.

Grandpa wasn’t confusing atmospheres, materials, and meanings, but commenting on how they seemed to imply and mutually reinforce each other. These layers of meanings that refuse to mean something are what made art cold. He didn’t want art to be “gorgeous,” but he didn’t want to tread on thin ice, either, and couldn’t bring himself to melt it.

1 Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism and Consumer Society” (1984-1988), in *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998* (London: Verso, 1998), 2.

2 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964; repr., London: MIT Press, 1994), 31.

3 Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, trans. James Benedict (1968; repr., London: Verso, 2005), 37.

43 Jean Baudrillard, *Vaucluse*, 1992. Courtesy: the artist and Château Shatto, Los Angeles. Photo: Paul Salveson

44 Jean Baudrillard, *Saint Clément II*, 1987. Courtesy: the artist and Château Shatto, Los Angeles. Photo: Paul Salveson

45 Jean Baudrillard, *Rio*, 1996. Courtesy: the artist and Château Shatto, Los Angeles. Photo: Paul Salveson



