Hybrid Theory, Highbred Taste: Reflections on Linkin Park

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Neither for Chester Bennington of Linkin Park nor in the last couple years for eminences such as David Bowie and Leonard Cohen have I felt a lot of grief about the mere fact of the person being gone, though the circumstances of deaths such as Bennington's and Chris Cornell's obviously tug at the heartstrings to an extent. I don't know, people die, especially musicians; or perhaps for all people I don't know, I'm totally driven by impersonal equations of justice and stochasticity, rather than personal sympathy or care. However, over the last few days, Bennington's death has revived memories from my past and occasioned broader reflections on taste and "objectivity" with respect to art that I find worth cohering as follows:

Linkin Park was inexorably popular in upper-middle-class India for teenagers in the second half of the previous decade (at least that is the only period which I can refer to). And I mean, there wasn't a single other Western music project that was at that status. It was *the thing* in early high school where and when I grew up—if you listened to Linkin Park, you were cool, it was as simple as that. I think the status has persisted till now, something people of the West don't really recognize, I think: Linkin Park was the first rock band to reach one billion YouTube hits. As of 2014, it was second-most liked music group on Facebook (curse the Black Eyed Peas…) and the fifteenth most liked Facebook page in general. As of 2015, it was the only band or artist to have two songs (Numb and In The End, of course) in the top ten of Spotify's "timeless songs" list. All this is completely the effect of the Internet affordances and social media norms of millions of South Asian millennials. In the last few days, so many of the Youtube comment tributes on its videos are from South Asia and other parts of the world whose languages I cannot tell. Seriously, my American friends, I don't think any of you really get the global sway of this band...

I really liked Linkin Park too, though I never claimed it as my favorite band ever. (The Numb-Encore mash-up between Jay Z and Linkin Park was my favorite song in class IX though; I still know it by heart.) Now I'm in a different place; I diligently follow norms of refinement, so as to have "good taste"—but I did then too! Furthermore, since those days, I've come to acquire a stronger belief for than against an aesthetic Good and Bad (though only in interrelation with and contingent upon ontology and history). Which means that when I received news about Bennington's death and revisited some of his music, given that I was tender about it, in large part due to the circumstance of suicide and the new lens with which his lyrics were now liable to reception, it was tough—why am I reacting with genuine fondness and warmth (powered by nostalgia, undoubtedly, but extending beyond nostalgia) to this music, when I know that anytime in the last few years, I would have scoffed with my friends and its tawdriness?

Death does interesting things—on one hand, rigor mortis; but on the other, correspondingly, a softening of the nerves and cardiac tissues that led not just myself, but others who would have been embarrassed to be listening to Linkin Park in public in the last few years of their lives, to enjoy that music, if not celebrate it. Some musicians who have died in the last couple years were well lauded before death (Bowie, Prince, Cohen). But others were really on some spectrum of a joke—I'm not familiar enough with the in's and out's of Anglo-American (white) social life, but I think George Michaels was one of them (though not considered nearly as vulgar as Linkin Park). As soon as he died, though, his music became a serious matter. Now with Bennington—most of the people who posted in mourning about him are connections of mine from India, but even among them, many who have over the years moved onto "better culture"—it's a similar story. Does death really imbue greater discernment on our ears, such that they are opened to things they had been missing over the years? Does death actually change the music itself, as correlative and intertextual with the stories around it? Or are we just being sentimental, and Linkin Park is still just shitty music that may have affected us when we were stupider, but still has nothing of value?

First a note surmising into why Linkin Park was so popular in India. A big reason I think is major chords and melody; stylistically it bears similarities to the exuberance of Bollywood music, so it naturally fits schemes of "proper music" that are about coded into Indian listening practices, while also, obviously, being in English and of the USA, so as to enable us conferring on ourselves the coolness we still yearn for in our never-ending postcolonial hangover. A bigger reason, though, has to be Bennington's vocals. They're clean, in the manner of most South Asian vocals. And for a Western rock vocalist, he's actually far more capable than average—Rihanna, for example, in her Instagram tribute to Bennington, called him a "vocal beast," and "[l]iterally the most impressive talent I've ever seen live." That's a very strong claim to make, obviously, but I don't find it preposterous; go see, for example, the end of the first YouTube video (from the Road Revolution DVD) that should come up when you search for "Jay Z Linkin Park live," when Bennington, from the six-minute mark, performs the 'Faint' part of the mash-up with Jay Z's 'Jigga What.'

Vocal quality is not too important an element in listening practices around Western rock and pop music, or, sorry, white music. (That really is how it is; it's not Western music, it's white music. Vocal quality is one of the things you listen to soul music for, and even the bare nature of a rapper's voice is a big part of enjoying them, but that is rarely an important aspect of rock music, if it were, the names "Bob Dylan" and "David Bowie" would mean nothing to you, and Van Morrison might be on a terrorist watchlist.) There are other elements to white music that aren't given any emphasis in Indian music, which is the biggest reason why white people find most Bollywood at best for frivolous fun and at worse pure trash—for example, in Indian popular music, instrumentation is typically supplementary, the only time it is really paid attention to, if at all, is between verses, while in rock music, you really are listening for how the various instruments complement each other and the vocals. But technical skill in singing and the sweetness (or other positive distinctive character) of a voice is immensely important in South Asian music, and, indeed, in much of the world of color. One thing both my white friends and my parents have trouble keeping up with is that you're listening for different things with different musics (and most truly, "musics," in the plural, is the only correct way to put it) and that different production and listening cultures exist that are sensitive to things other cultures miss. The musical greats have all realized this—Elvis, for example, acknowledged that "[n]obody can sing [rock 'n' roll] like colored people. Let's face it: I can't sing like Fats Domino can. I know that." It perhaps is as simple as saying that growing up in a non-European ethnic culture, you simply acquire a sense and will for vocals that you don't have if you're of European descent. And Bennington and Linkin Park, probably without having consciously planned for it, stumbled upon that significant divide in listening practices, which made them hugely popular globally.

(Talking of unifying a global audience, a brief digression, perhaps my hottest take here, on another value that stands apparent in Linkin Park and in popular "mainstream" music in general far more than indie: Linkin Park, through its associations with Jay Z, might have brought about more anti-racism than any indie rock outfit I'm aware of, no matter how progressive the values they espouse and how woke the scenes they occupy—over the last few days, I've gone through as many Jay Z-Linkin Park live performances as I've found, and I don't think I've ever seen music audiences as racially diverse as at those concerts. Of course, temporary integration doesn't solve systemic racism, but to that, first, what the hell has woke indie music done for that either, and second, there is yet great value to bringing together one demographic that at that time was probably otherwise into Green Day or Korn, and another that featured a preponderance of 50 Cent fans, as one commonly emoting entity; regardless of what leftists of today might say about all that, breaking racial barriers and facilitating racial mixing, whether formally or informally, should be a big means and end of ending racism.)

Popularity in India is the easier part of the puzzle. Okay, differences in listening practices and sociological norms mean that for a South Asian listening subject, Linkin Park legitimately wouldn't be bad music in the way it would for the Western listening subject. But what of the Western listening subject? After all, the YouTube comment tributes are littered with seemingly Anglo-American fans grieving as well. Are they all plain idiots? I have qualms about being a so-called elitist when it is required, but I've been a bit tender in my severity in the immediate wake of Chesterton's death….

Everything hinges upon the unqualified and overflowing meaning of suicide, the unrepresentable significance of the stark phenomenon of it. There are a few standards, coded into the social unconscious, according to which music (and probably all that is socially understood as "art" in its modern sense) is taken as Good or Bad. The first, most basic one is coarse biology—just as human bodies enjoy certain kinds of tactile sensations and formations, so we like certain kinds of auditory sensations and formations. Music is predicated upon this, obviously, with neat chords and what not, and I think traditional classical musics (Indian, Western, others), function predominantly on the basis of eliciting the most intense biological agitations in humans—a process that requires a consummate optimum of finesse and delicacy interwoven with directness and brawn, once the more crude peltings of chords are all exhausted. Fast-forwarding from Liszt to Linkin Park, with the latter's power chords and slick production, most of us would fall into the biosemantic trap. It isn't outright discordant, there are elements that appeal to our brains—basically, it qualifies as music.

That, of course, isn't saying much. We generally want more than that to consider something Good music. A second standard is the violation of cliché. Caring about this is an effect and generator of modernity. The easiest theoretical instance of this emphasis is in my understanding Adorno's interest in expressionism (in Western classical music), and his admiration for Stravinsky and (more so) Schoenberg for their work in breaking up set standards in tone and scale. Nowadays many of us are disdainful of top-40 music because "it all sounds the same"—not because it isn't pleasant in a simple, "primary" sense. This falls under this second characteristically modern standard–nothing new is happening, so it's lacking in artistic merit. With Linkin Park I at least am not sure able to draw a conclusion. The skeptical assessment of Linkin Park's compositions would be that either instrumentally, lyrically or otherwise, they don't really seem to raise the bar or push the boundary for musical innovation. However, within rap rock, the group did consummate the genre markers, while blending it with electronic elements in a way that did represent an innovation. Instrumentally there isn't much complex going on with Linkin Park, but the interplay between Bennington's singing and Mike Shinoda's rap was pretty neat.

But whether on this front Linkin Park is Good or Bad, it's the following touchstone, heavily interlocked with the prior one, against which Linkin Park fails. Put in primitive terms, it asks the following: does the work of art express or reflect or enable the surfacing of the subjectivity most in line with or true to the social reality of the day? (I'm aware of the philosophical presuppositions at work here: for example a Cartesian distinction required for "the work of art" as an object; the mass constitution of world-historical subjects—which I'd argue isn't a modern creation—with at least internalized consciousness of that very fact, etc.) To distill most of my thought into an inadequate but simple example, it's my wager that the biggest reason people with indie sensibilities of some sort or another can't stand top-40 music, particularly that still cloaked under an ostensible drape of "rock" (for example Coldplay or Imagine Dragons), is because it evinces a degree of exuberance or earnestness about experience that simply is out of touch with existence in postmodernity, that somehow is lost on the atemporality and ennui that should be characteristic of subjects fully awake and aware of the state of things in late capitalism. This is a benchmark of "good taste," or refinement; indeed, this tendency to always filter the production of objects in the world against the ever-present, a priori sieve of knowing what reality is really like is in my opinion the defining characteristic of hipsterism. Good art, then, captures the register in which we exist today, while bad art doesn't. If an earnest emotion is to be expressed, then, according to the sense of the well-cultivated, doing so in a style grand or unmediatedly beautiful is considered in bad-taste. For those of us savvy enough about what existence is really like, how can there be an earnest gesture? How can there be anything but pastiche and parody? If we are not to caricature or redo the past, how can we produce anything that is not subdued or has a vein of mildness to it? How can we speak, but with a voice of irony? How can we stand in a political rally and chant a slogan with a straight face? How can we sing along to a power ballad about yearning for a love and a full happy life to be lived with that love?

If such emotions are to be expressed in music, space must be created for them by compensation—bleared by irony, softened by mildness or distortion in style to dull out the passion while it still remains, ultimately, in the lyrics, for those who care enough to understand what is being sung—one must remember that Angel Olsen and Devendra Banhart sing about roughly same themes as Breaking Benjamin and 30 Seconds To Mars; but on top of the alleged lack of musical ingenuity the latter are accused of, it is very much a matter of the tenor in which they lay bare their souls that is deemed uncouth in a world which the wiser know, in sum, that there is no point, no hope, none at all—our lives are going to suck our souls out, our bodies will have nothing left in them by the time we pay off our debts, and let us not even think about whether we'll have any healthcare when we retire; oh but it won't matter because we'll be on the brink of ecologically induced extinction anyway by the time we reach that age....

But if in the end nothing really matters, to say the same in not just a plain fashion, but with puissance, ardency, urgency, with barre chords and ripped-vocal choruses—Bennington and co. didn't really get it did they? This is fundamentally why Linkin Park has been considered Bad music by those with discrimination and "taste." Except, of course, till the guy singing all this unwitting stuff kills himself, and then, suddenly, it is Good again. So, finally, is it just us being soft and sentimental, or were we missing something all along? At this point I don't quite have an answer, but I do see the implications of each of the choices on my understanding of what is considered Good and Bad art.

All great art is ultimately about the personal; even when it is about society, it is through the tales and travails of individuals, from Zola to Grandmaster Flash. But according to Good Taste, the problem isn't about music being about individual issues, as Linkin Park's has always been apparent as. The problem lies in the conveyance, the way those individual issues were expressed in a social object, a way that could be described as so "extra," as lacking an understanding of the world altogether. But against suicide, what does that matter? The guy is really struggling. OK Computer and Kid A may really capture what it means to be a subject in this era, but that doesn't matter when the chemicals in your brain make being such a subject immediately and conclusively not worth it. Good music knows that it cannot hold itself in such an emo posture, because most of us have something or the other to feel emo about, so chill out man, don't take yourself so seriously, we're not denying those emotions but are you so self-important that you'd impose that bearing on us, as if you're the only one who has issues, as if anything even matters at all, as if there is a greater purpose to our lives and our collective destiny than stock market values....

All this falls apart with suicide. With suicide in the equation, yes, he now tells us from his noose, I do have issues probably more serious than you do, I cannot chill out, insofar as my vessels stay warm, I cannot not take myself so seriously, exist by regarding my existence itself as something so irrelevant as to terminate it, and no, there isn't a greater purpose to our lives, you're welcome, hopefully this makes that crisply clear to you.

Then, one way to resolve the bind is to regard death as a special case. If art somehow captures what it is to exist as a subject somewhere and sometime, death, being about nonexistence, overturns the terms. With death, the music retroactively becomes something different from what it was hitherto taken as. Whining is emo and subjective; death is hard and objective. When we now listen to Bennington's songs, they are no longer whiny, they are veritable swan songs. (It is a similar with Bob Marley's Redemption Song, or Keep Me In Your Heart by Warren Zevon.) The music is now a tragedy in retroaction. From this angle, Linkin Park itself changes in a comprehensive sense—it isn't us being sentimental, it is actually good—but we also weren't mistaken earlier, it was bad then; as the world itself changed to become a scene of suicide, suddenly bringing teleology and meaning to a narrative that otherwise would have been among the undifferentiated mass of narratives of homogenized subjects under capitalism, so also does the art-object in the world. This standpoint would reflect the condition that existence is particular, but nonexistence general—insofar as a premise of an art-object is that is it is about some facet existence (somewhere, somewhen), if it is to be "good," it is to stay consistent with the mood of that somewhere and somewhen. Now… with the death of the author… as Linkin Park's songs ontologically become about nonexistence, or at least the drive toward it, they are liberated from those requirements.

But even in writing the above the crevices to that position become apparent, at least from the premise itself that the way the framing of Good and Bad is presented above is actually how it takes place. This is because the Good and the Bad must be universal or general, and the music was technically creating by the living and was about living, even if just hanging in there. This holds fast to the standard—even the most tragic, wrenching emotion must be enclosed in a work of art that remains in sync with the mood of the world, which today, in global capitalism, only has a limited tolerance for over-the-top emotions and earnestness that implies a greater purpose. And after all, suicide rates have risen drastically in the last 30 years in the US, so even that can be subsumed under the general psychosocial conditions of the times.

Now, this isn't a trivialization of Bennington's plight. It is more a commentary about how good taste functions, and makes no compromises. If philosophy and theory enable one to view the particular from the purview of the universal, art does the opposite—the particular opens itself up into the universal. And if it does not do that, if the full existence and affect of the created universal does not hold up against other understandings of the universal derived from experience, then it isn't (Good) art. In "refined taste," Good art tells the story of a specific subject, but does so in a way that captures the general, in a way that affirms the reality of the most elementary aspects of our existence as subjects.

The interesting implication from this is then not about Linkin Park, but about pronouncing music to be Good or Bad in this way—it demonstrates that Good Taste harbors a certain fidelity to other ontological and historical projects. Insofar as music (or other art) is considered Good for reflecting, through particular narratives, a general experience, it does two things: First, in its own affirmation, on the side of the object, it pushes for a certain understanding of the world, one devoid as it were of false consciousness, one that saw things as they are—*yatha bhuta*. "Taste," rather than being a mere means of positioning oneself socially, as Pierre Bourdieu would have it, has critique built into it, which may be erroneous, but may otherwise also penetrating and challenging. Second, on the side of the subject, by positing that there is such a thing as a general experience of the world as such, it calls into being or concretizes that very subject, which, looking at the world according to its vision, experiences reality in such a way. It is thus a means of the formation of a collective subjectivity—which could subsequently find formation as a class, polity or some other social unit. Let me state this what I'm saying plainly and explicitly: The taste of a hipster is of tantamount sociopolitical importance.

Moreover, this is the main point of such "refined taste"—it isn't to valorize or trivialize the pain of Chester Bennington, but it is to hold in place, against the vagaries and distractions of everyday life and economic flows, a collectivity of subjects that exist in conscious relation to the world as it is. If it makes pronouncements about Good or Bad, this is thus in relation to other necessities that may exist, regardless of somewheres and somewhens, regarding being as subjects, which is to say, regarding existence for us.

I don't have an answer, ultimately, to whether so many of my friends have just been sentimental in the last few days about Linkin Park. Maybe there is a way to reconcile the contingency-necessity of death and suicide with the other considerations about how we construct Good and Bad, with a full frame of reference on the world and experience at large. In the end, though, if there is some truth to my schematization and train of thought, if nothing can be done to rehabilitate Bennington's music as Good according to the taste so many of my friends and I have grown into over the years, well, good on him—even if not the archetypical dismal-but-curtailed subject of our world, he proved that he was more like himself, and less like us.