

How We Ended Up in the Era of ‘Quantitative Aesthetics,’ Where Data Points Dictate Taste

The Humanities Crash and the McNamara Fallacy in culture.

Ben Davis, March 30, 2023



Sam Bankman-Fried attends via video call during the 2022 Forbes Iconoclast Summit at New York Historical Society on November 03, 2022 in New York City. (Photo by Arturo Holmes/Getty Images)

Let us pause to recall how proud Sam Bankman-Fried was to say that he could prove, with mathematical certainty, that Shakespeare was overrated.

As a matter of fact, the crypto wunderkind who now faces up to 115 years in prison for various crimes, once said the following:

I'm very skeptical of books. I don't want to say no book is ever worth reading, but I actually do believe something pretty close to that. I think, if you wrote a book, you fucked up, and it should have been a six-paragraph blog post.

In the very recent past—as in a few months ago!—this was considered an obvious example of the unconventional thinking associated with a visionary.

The bit about hating books comes from a worshipful, now-scrubbed interview Bankman-Fried did with Sequoia Capital. As for his bold stand against reading Shakespeare, that dates to 2012, from the personal blog he kept while a student at M.I.T., titled “Measuring Shadows.” There, the future shitcoin entrepreneur held forth on sports statistics and preached the gospel of “effective altruism.”

The Shakespeare line appears in a post called “The Fetishization of the Old” which argues that people only pretend to like *Much Ado About Nothing*, or *Pride and Prejudice*, or, for that matter, *Citizen Kane* (“an almost unwatchably empty film”), because they are too deferential toward tradition. People have made good fun of his reasoning. But more notable to me than his ostentatiously callow take on literature is the method Bankman-Fried used to prove it:

About half of the people born since 1600 have been born in the past 100 years, but it gets much worse than that. When Shakespeare wrote almost all of Europeans were busy farming, and very few people attended university; few people were even literate—probably as low as about ten million people. By contrast there are now upwards of a billion literate people in the Western sphere. What are the odds that the greatest writer would have been born in 1564? The Bayesian priors aren't very favorable.

Simple statistics!

I thought of Sam Bankman-Fried’s numbskull posturing recently when I finally read Nathan Heller’s article about the “The End of the English Major” in the *New Yorker*. The most-shared tidbit from that piece had a professor lamenting that her Ivy League students who are social-media natives no longer have the attention for reading literature: “The last time I taught *The Scarlet Letter*, I discovered that my students were really struggling to understand the sentences as sentences—like, having trouble identifying the subject and the verb.”

Heller’s account of the collapse of undergraduate interest in the humanities touched off a lot of anguish, pained tweets, and op-eds this past month. For me, it also clarified something about the trajectory of culture in the recent past, and made me think about the increasing widespread popularity of something I’ll call Quantitative Aesthetics—the way numbers function more and more as a proxy for artistic value.

The Shifting Language of Prestige



A view of Harvard Yard on the campus of Harvard University on July 8, 2020 in Cambridge, Massachusetts. (Photo by Maddie Meyer/Getty Images)

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, the trend among undergraduates in the last decade is clear: Between 2011 to 2020, not just literature but almost everything humanities-related is down by double-digit percentages. The corresponding growth of the S.T.E.M. fields was even more pronounced. Most dramatically, “computer and information technology” more than doubled its share of degrees.

(Contrary to stereotypes about anti-establishment youth, “business” remains far and away the most popular degree. It grew by a modest 5 percent in this period—but since it already had a base of over 350,000 in 2011-12, that still means there are some 20,000 more business majors every year, almost double the *entire* number of people who study “philosophy and religious studies.”)

What’s going on? We’re talking about the period since 2011, the first college class since the introduction of the iPhone, and it is logical that mass adoption of such seductive and pervasive consumer technology has changed people’s relationship to culture. But 2011-12 is also the first full college class since the financial crisis of 2008, and the other obvious culprit is the greater ruthlessness of the economy post-Great Recession, the flight away from the “softness” of the humanities in a time when

studying anything not directly seen as useful is viewed more and more as an unsustainable luxury.

Ultimately, the reason behind the current plunge in humanities is probably a bit of push and pull, and reflects factors sweeping all of society, not just campuses—partly the positive financial incentive and new glamor of tech; partly increased anxiety in a more uncertain economy.



A curator stands in a projection of live data feeds from Twitter, Instagram and Transport for London by data visualisation studio Tekja at the “Big Bang Data” exhibition at Somerset House on December 2, 2015 in London, England. (Photo by Peter Macdiarmid/Getty Images for Somerset House)

But the reason I’m writing about the subject here is because of the passage Heller wrote about the changing theory of cultural prestige that emerges from the shift in emphasis. He floats the idea that, as the balance between the humanities and the sciences has shifted, the “language of statistics” has more clearly cemented itself as the default code for being a serious person.

As one student says in the article, “Even if I’m in the humanities, and giving my impression of something, somebody might point out to me, ‘Well, who was your sample?’ I mean, statistics is everywhere. It’s part of any good critical analysis of things.” This provokes Heller to reflect, “I knew at once what [the student] meant: on

social media, and in the press that sends data visualizations skittering across it, statistics *is* now everywhere, our language for exchanging knowledge.”

Which, in some ways, is for the good. There are real benefits to asking, “who’s your sample?” If you looked at art auction prices, you’d think that one set of artists are the most influential in the world. But if you try, by contrast, to count which artists appear the most in biennials, you get a different set of artists, representing different values.

Nevertheless, there’s something called the McNamara Fallacy, a.k.a. the Quantitative Fallacy. It is summarized as “if it cannot be measured, it is not important.” The Heller article made me reflect on how a version of it is now very present, and growing, at the grassroots of taste.

Taste in Numbers



Changing images of prestige: A storefront near Times Square advertises the Marvel x Pandora line of diamond jewelry. Photo by Ben Davis.

On one level, this is seen in a rise of a kind of wonky obsession with business stats in fandoms, invoked as a way to convey the rightness of artistic opinions—what I want to

call Quantitative Aesthetics. (There are actually scientists who study aesthetic preference in labs and use the term “quantitative aesthetics.” I am using it in a more diffuse way.)

It manifests in music. As the New York Times wrote in 2020 of the new age of pop fandom, “devotees compare No. 1s and streaming statistics like sports fans do batting averages, championship, wins and shooting percentages.” Last year, another music writer talked about fans internalizing the number-as-proof-of-value mindset to extreme levels: “I see people forcing themselves to listen to certain songs or albums over and over and over just to raise those numbers, to the point they don’t even get enjoyment out of it anymore.”

The same goes for film lovers, who now seem to strangely know a lot about opening-day grosses and foreign box office, and use the stats to argue for the merits of their preferred product. There was an entire campaign by Marvel super-fans to get *Avengers: Endgame* to outgross *Avatar*, as if that would prove that comic-book movies really were the best thing in the world.

On the flip side, indie director James Gray, of *Ad Astra* fame, recently complained about ordinary cinema-goers using business stats as a proxy for artistic merit: “It tells you something of how indoctrinated we are with capitalism that somebody will say, like, ‘His movies haven’t made a dime!’ It’s like, well, do you own stock in Comcast? Or are you just such a lemming that you think that actually has value to anybody?”

It’s not just financial data though. Rotten Tomatoes and Metacritic have recently become go-to arbitrators of taste by boiling down a movie’s value to a single all-purpose statistic. They are influential enough to alarm studios, who say the practice is denying oxygen to potentially niche hits because it “quantifies the unquantifiable.” (Funny to hear Hollywood execs echo Theodor Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory*: “If an empirically oriented aesthetics uses quantitative averages as norms, it unconsciously sides with social conformity.”)

As for art, I don’t really feel like I even need to say too much about how the confusion of price data with merit infects the conversation. It’s so well known it is the subject of documentaries from *The Mona Lisa Curse* (2008) to *The Price of Everything* (2018). “Art and money have no intrinsic hookup at all,” painter Larry Poons laments in the latter, stating the film’s thesis. “It’s not like sports, where your batting average is your batting average... They’ve tried to make it much like that, like the best artist is the most expensive artist.”

But where Quantitative Aesthetics is really newly intense across society—in art and everywhere—is in how social-media numbers (clicks, likes, shares, retweets, etc.) seep into everything as a shorthand for understanding status. That’s why artist-researcher Ben Grosser created his Demetricator suite of web-browsing tools, which let you view social media stripped of all those numbers and feel, by their absence, the effect they are having on your attention and values.

“Visible metrics don’t just draw our attention, but I argue that we are compelled by this deeply ingrained desire for more—a desire to make them larger simply because we can see them—based in an evolutionarily developed need for esteem,” Grosser told Slate. “It intersects with capitalism in the way that capitalism treats value as a quantifiable thing, and there’s this endless need for growth.”

Loss of Distinction



Wine bottles are on the shelf at a retailer. (Photo by Oliver Berg/picture alliance via Getty Images)

All this also throws into relief the other types of value that have lost ground.

Traditionally, “taste” is about standing out from the average, and thus favors values that were not optimized for the greatest *number* of *anything*. Even 10 years ago, when Bankman-Fried was snarking about “The Fetishization of the Old,” this type of taste-making was more clearly in the saddle.

Into the 2010s, the “hipster” was a major image of youth culture, and hipster taste was centered around an identification—or the posture of identification—with things that were outside the dominant, below the radar. (You know the joke: “How many hipsters does it take to screw in a lightbulb? You wouldn’t know—it’s kind of an obscure number.”)

On a different register, “theory” still had a prominence in writing about art at that time that seems diminished now. Ultimately, this represented a kind of prestige determined by an invocation of a rarified, definitely not-popular academic sophistication. It has waned along with the humanities in general. (Indeed, literature scholar Katie Kadue, reflecting on Heller’s *New Yorker* essay, reports on the waning of the “star theorist” as an orienting figure in English departments.)

Again: Data analysis, done with care, can yield insights of great depth (Albert-László Barabási has even argued for “dataism,” his name for treating a kind of sophisticated data analysis as an artform). But as an instrument used to justify consumer preference within a landscape of complex values, a Quantitative Aesthetic often just becomes a way to deal with the problem of not wanting to spend much time thinking—the opposite of deep thought.

If you walk into a wine store, you *could* get descriptions of various wines, taste them, decide whether you want something more “foxy” or more “herbaceous.” But most people will probably just pick the bottle based on the price point, using the number to estimate about the level of quality they are shooting for.

McNamara Style



American politician US Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara (1916 – 2009) points to a map of Vietnam during a press conference, Washington DC, April 26, 1965. (Photo by Marion S Trikosko/PhotoQuest/Getty Images)

The “McNamara Fallacy” is named after one-time defense secretary Robert McNamara—a Harvard grad, incidentally, like the students in the *New Yorker* piece. A numbers whiz, he was also the architect of the U.S.’s murderous, ultimately catastrophic Vietnam policy, and known for his obsession with “body counts” as the key metric of success.

McNamara apparatchik Leslie H. Gelb later recalled in *Time* magazine the debacle fueled by this quantitative mindset:

McNamara didn't know anything about Vietnam. Nor did the rest of us working with him. But Americans didn't have to know the culture and history of a place. All we needed to do was apply our military superiority and resources in the right way. We needed to collect the right data, analyze the information properly and come up with a solution on how to win the war.

That’s the upper bound of the stakes, as a society. Clearly, the stakes are quite a bit lower when we are talking about something as silly as the critical habits and cultural tics like the ones I’ve mentioned above. I’m nostalgic for indie culture and think art theory is actually important, but I don’t imagine I will convince anyone to cry for the loss of hipster affectation or inscrutable artspeak. Still, even at these lower altitudes, there are stakes.



A person walks by a ‘Toxic Skulls Club’ NFT billboard in Times Square during the 4th annual NFT.NYC conference on June 20, 2022 in New York City. (Photo by Noam Galai/Getty Images)

The dominance of Quantitative Aesthetics, I'd argue, softened the brain for the Great NFT Bubble of 2021-22. When the image of cultural value is reduced to just a) what generates measurable attention online, and b) what makes "line go up" (i.e. the metric of rising price), you are vulnerable to mistaking—oh, I don't know—some cartoons spit out by an algorithm for a durably valuable cultural trend. Back in 2021, when Sam Bankman-Fried scrawled out the word "TEST" and sold it as an NFT for \$270,000, here's how he justified it to Axios:

Visual aesthetics are not a thing that I understand or that appeal to me very much. Paintings in general, I actually don't get it. I don't personally understand the appeal of a Rembrandt painting. So when I see NFTs, part of me is like, I don't get the appeal of some of these; but part of me is like, I also don't understand the appeal of the 'Mona Lisa.'

And so, a micro-generation gets its pockets picked by grifters using digital art to fish for suckers—and finding them at exactly the intersection where the tech takeover of public life meets the increasingly frantic economic scramble, the two factors behind the humanities erosion in the first place.

Daniel Yankelovich, the sociologist who coined the term "McNamara Fallacy," actually outlined it as a *process*, one that could be broken out into four steps of escalating intellectual danger. Here they are, as it is commonly broken down, with his commentary on each:

- 1. Measure whatever can be easily measured. (This is OK as far as it goes.)*
- 2. Disregard that which can't be easily measured or to give it an arbitrary quantitative value. (This is artificial and misleading.)*
- 3. Presume that what can't be measured easily really isn't important. (This is blindness.)*
- 4. Say that what can't be easily measured really doesn't exist. (This is suicide.)*

Based on the data I have, I'd say that we as a culture are approaching somewhere between the third and fourth steps.

