Chapter 2
Adverse Selection in the Culture Industries

2.1 Consumer Navigation in Culture

Until consumer collaborative filtering arrives, navigation will continue to be the burning issue for present-day culture. There are no books or articles giving clear, systematic consideration of the problem. This is odd, because how well people are able to find their way around in the available offerings of culture directly affects both their aesthetic experience and their outlook on life. Those working commercially in the cultural sphere target as large a proportion of the public as they can, and today the technological tools at their disposal are more powerful than ever before: anything that can be digitised can be delivered almost instantaneously to any place at minimal cost. Cultural goods are universally accessible, but the downside of such profusion is the problem of what to choose.

The manufacturer wants to direct attention to his product and has no inclination to reduce the circle of his potential customers by targeting publicity too accurately. Junk mail deluges the consumer, who cannot tell from the outside of an envelope whether the contents are important or not. He is forced to sift through mountains of information that is of no conceivable interest. Advertising of the most diverse character, quality, and purpose circulates through an informational irrigation system which gushes from radio, television, the Internet, and the press. These may be coordinated or not, may or may not back each other up, but all of them ultimately come up against the limit of what a human brain can assimilate. On the surface there appears to be a great abundance of leisure offerings; the consumer’s choice appears to be unfettered; but what is really being held out is freedom to choose the wrong product. The consumer is faced with a smorgasbord of dishes he cannot discriminate between.

At first sight there seems to be no shortage of helpful recommendations: the genre of the entertainment—comedies, thrillers, farce—is clearly documented. Within each genre you can be guided by the reputation of the actors and directors, by the competitions and prizes they have won or failed to win. Yet still people are perplexed, not least by the dilemma of which television programme to watch. The ones they would like to see are broadcast at thoroughly inconvenient times, while peak viewing time is a desert of films with ‘universal appeal’ or ageing classics which are

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1There are many indications that the 1970s and 1980s ushered in the previous period in culture: fashions began to change more rapidly, blockbusters appeared... The next twist of the spiral came towards the start of the millennium with the new Internet technologies, including peer-to-peer networks.
only too familiar. Ploughing through the television guide is an unproductive chore and, faced with five reasonably hopeful films, none of which is a clear winner and all of which are being broadcast virtually simultaneously, half an hour or an hour of channel-hopping is enough to ruin anyone’s evening.2

Choosing which film to watch on television is not the worst of the consumer’s predicaments. Every year there are perhaps a dozen or two films which everyone talks about. You get to hear about another fifty or so by word of mouth, by which time you have probably been alerted to nearly everything that is reasonably worthwhile, if in a fairly haphazard manner. It is a bit of a struggle, but there is a fair chance you will find the films which interest you. When we turn to books the situation is far more dire.

How do you choose the one book out of the hundreds of thousands on offer which you will really enjoy reading without first reading it or at least browsing through it? How helpful are bookshop catalogues, advertisements, the literary prizes? Perhaps readers should just go by the results of the Booker or Whitbread Prizes? Alas, in Russia at least, few readers know what made the shortlist or even who won.3 Advertising is far more powerful than informed opinion: a thought-through promotional campaign—and Coelho is a classic, Murakami a gripping read, Houellebecq the greatest intellectual in Europe. In 2006 we saw Dan Brown propelled to eminence.4 Even book publishing, though, is not the most impenetrable jungle—information about good authors and titles does get around and improves your chances of stumbling across a personal favourite. With the theatre the situation is downright disheartening.

If you are not an insider, the chances of missing an outstanding production are high since the critics alert you to major events only after the event. The culture sections of the press provide rear mirror navigation by reviewing performances which have already taken place: ‘Yesterday this exceptionally talented German performer delighted his audience. His next visit is three years from now.’ If you just take pot luck, you find most performances provide less to delight their audience than the average movie.

The public are, if anything, even more at sea with the contemporary music scene, but this is perhaps unsurprising since the music industry targets primarily a particular sub-species of adolescent.

Am I exaggerating the difficulties of navigation? Are people not managing their cultural leisure time well enough, enjoying music, visits to the theatre, art galleries

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2A programme glanced at in passing picks up a point in the viewer figures without advertisers actually being deceived. In reality it would be better for them if commercials did not intrude at some exciting moment and get up the nose of their target audience.

3I once asked students at the Moscow Institute of Economics to name one international and three Russian literary prizes. No response. I asked them to name just one. Still no response. I asked who had won a prestigious prize a few days previously, which had been well covered in the press. More silence.

4Dan Brown, author of *The Da Vinci Code*, was instantly added to the ranks of the world’s foremost intellectuals.