

# Cultural consumption in the fine and popular arts realms

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## Abstract

In this paper we review recent sociological research dealing with the consumption of culture produced in the fine and popular arts realms. We note that most of the initial theoretical developments in the sociological study of culture consumption were first developed to explain audience segmentation in the fine arts realm under what we refer as the “cultural capital” paradigm developed by Pierre Bourdieu. This paradigm shift in its turn has led to the current dominance of the “omnivore thesis” in the sociology of taste. The consumption of popular culture on the other hand remained for a long time dominated by the Birmingham “resistance” and “subculture” paradigms developed in the 1970s. Recent research in the study of popular arts consumption has moved beyond the limitations of the subculture paradigm by way of incorporating the theoretical legacy of the cultural capital paradigm in order to account for patterns and audience and producer differentiation in the popular arts realm within “scenes.” This has brought the study of popular and fine arts culture consumption under a single conceptual framework after a long period of theoretical disengagement.

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## Introduction

A key feature of industrial and post-industrial societies consists of the formally organized production and market-based dissemination of cultural goods that were previously produced and procured in more informal folk and communal contexts. In this respect, the rise of mass-produced “media cultures”—at concurrently national and global scales—disseminated by new technologies of mass communication, along with the institutionalization and structuration of a non-profit organizational field entrusted with the production of “fine” arts, constitute two of the signal developments of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the Euro-American West (Calhoun 1988; DiMaggio 1991b).

The theoretical understandings of the role of culture in society that emerged in the middle of the twentieth century developed in tandem with this societal transformation (Riesman 1950). As such, the “industrialization” and “formalization” of culture production in the popular and fine arts realms respectively was greeted with elitist anxiety in both European and American shores. German theorists of the “Frankfurt School” saw the rise of mass political parties (Socialist, Fascist as well as Democratic) in the 20th as inherently tied to the decline of classical modes of culture production—and their association with traditional modes of social integration (Calhoun 1988)—and the rise of the new “mechanized” forms (although Benjamin [1968] was more ambiguous in regards to this) which hailed the destruction of these traditional social forms and the rise of an anomic, “one-dimensional” society (Joas 1992). This “culture industry” whose ideal type was exemplified by American network radio, Hollywood movies and later on television, constituted for them a new and pervasive weapon of ideological domination that political and economic elites would not hesitate in using for their benefit.

American proponents of “mass society” theory, while not sharing the Frankfurt School view that the commercialization and formalization of the popular and fine arts necessarily resulted in the decline of democracy and the imminent threat of technocratic Fascism, viewed the industrialization of culture production as leading to de-differentiation of lifestyles across social classes and as thus representing its own sort of social threat. As the label implies, mass culture theorists conceived of culture consumption publics as forming a teeming, homogenous “mass.” They saw this mass public as primarily populated by members of a constantly growing, status-seeking middle class whose tastes could easily be manipulated by market experts (DiMaggio 1987). From the point of view of mass culture theory, this volatility of opinions and practices constituted a perennial source of social instability in the postwar “affluent society” (Kornhouser 1959).

What both the mass culture approach and the critical theories of the “culture industry” had in common were highly underdeveloped models of the consumption of the fine and popular arts. From their point of view *culture consumption was unproblematic*, and thus theoretically uninteresting. For instance, Theodor Adorno (2001), taking early 20th century modernism as his paradigm for a form of culture that was not yet tainted with the exigencies of the

market and its specific form of “instrumental reason,” viewed all forms of popular culture as beyond any form of redemption from these leveling forces. From this point of view, the consumption of the fine arts was straightforward: those endowed with the capacity to appropriate the “true” forms of fine art would do so because it was the only form of culture that was redeemable under capitalist hegemony. Everybody else—the “masses” of mass culture theory—would be restricted to either the industrialized popular arts served up by the “culture industry” (primarily the working class) or subject to the ersatz aesthetic pleasures of the commercialized fine arts increasingly made available to a gullible “middlebrow” audience (primarily composed of middle class managers and other professionals).

In these respect, mass culture and Frankfurt school theorists held on to the same manipulationist view of culture consumption (where demand for cultural goods is seen as manufactured by culture-producing elites), along with an implicit Veblenian theory of engagement with middlebrow forms of commercialized fine arts as driven by an upward-looking, “status seeking” imperative on the part of the rising middle class. In addition, for Adorno, the *formal* properties of mass produced goods (i.e. formulaic repetition; a “hedonistic” unwillingness to craft works that required and effortful delay of gratification during their appreciation) were seen as corresponding—following a rather crass functionalism—and enhancing those features of the personality and character structure that were most serviceable for the organization of work and the labor process in corporate capitalism (for a critique see DeNora 2000).

## **The rise of the cultural capital paradigm**

The implicit consensus that the consumption of popular and fine arts did not need any special explanation, reigned in American sociology from mid-century through the late 1950s and early 1960s, when mass culture theory began to come under withering attack on both empirical and conceptual grounds (i.e. Parsons and White 1960; Wilensky 1964). However, it was not until the 1970s, when spurred by the work of Pierre Bourdieu in France (i.e. Bourdieu 1968), a new cohort of social scientists began to reopen the question of the *social* bases of different rates of engagement in the arts. In contrast to the early Frankfurt school and mass culture theorists, this alternative approach to the study of culture consumption was both resolutely empirical, and unabashedly sociological. It rejected the early mass culture attempt to draw up totalizing theoretical generalizations disconnected from empirical evidence about the allegedly noxious effects of commercialized culture on the modern psyche. It also rejected the Frankfurt School and mass culture theory penchant to rely on an inconsistent and poorly specified blend of crypto-psychoanalytic psychology and a behaviorist account of the formation of consumer preferences.

Accordingly, even though both the mass culture and Frankfurt school approaches were designed to account for the *demand* for symbolic goods—either by emphasizing unconscious motives for status seeking and attempts to escape (or tacitly conform to) the rationalized “iron cage” of modern society—they did so primarily by maintaining that culture industry

experts could unproblematically manipulate consumer preferences for their own products. The new sociological research inspired by the cultural capital paradigm broke with this view by emphasizing the *socially* mediated nature of demand for the arts and the role of other institutional domains—in particular the family, occupational groups and the educational system—in the formation of culture-consuming publics.

On the production side, this new research conceived of the now established complex of permanent enterprises dedicated to the production and distribution of culture not as a closed, rational and easily steered system of symbolic domination, but as an open, natural and complex *culture-industry system* (Hirsch 1972). This system was conceived as itself embedded in an hard-to-read and turbulent inter-organizational and symbolic environment in which product failure was the norm rather than the exception—to paraphrase Levine (1992) while in industrial societies, all popular culture is mass produced, most mass produced culture is *not* popular—and direct prediction (let alone manipulation) of consumer demand was impossible. Instead, culture industry managers were *satisficers* rather than rational maximizers, as they attempted to cope with uncertainty and the volatile cascades of consumer-driven fashion changes (Peterson 1990). Recent research continues to support and extend this model, by showing that culture producers are not only embedded in a complex task environment but that there is a *culture of production* that itself serves to organize and define the strategies and activities of culture industry managers along with managerial conception of their audiences that remain cognitively embedded (Negus 1999).

On the consumption side, a new interest on the statics and dynamics of *audience segmentation* in the fine and popular arts began to flourish (Peterson 1992). These patterns of audience segmentation were seen as firmly rooted in social divisions premised on social class, occupation, education, gender and other categorical forms of social division (Bourdieu 1984; Gans 1999). Empirical investigations of culture consumption patterns revealed neither an incoherent, homogenous mass, nor a strict separation between fine and popular culture styles. Instead, a more complex tapestry of forms of cultural engagement seemed to be characteristic of contemporary post-industrial societies. No straightforward one-to-one mapping of social stratification and cultural stratification—as assumed in previous mass culture theories—was forthcoming (Hughes and Peterson 1983; Peterson and DiMaggio 1975). Instead, and consistent with Pierre Bourdieu's (1984; Bourdieu and Darbel 1991) path-breaking research, large scale surveys showed that experience in the *educational system*, proved to be a critical factor in determining different forms of engagement with the popular and fine arts.

In Bourdieu's terms, education provided certain social groups with access to what he referred to as "cultural capital" (Bourdieu 1986). Cultural capital should be kept distinct from other forms of cultural competence, which DiMaggio (1991b) refers to as "cultural resources." While cultural capital is "institutionalized as legitimate and valuable at the societal level" (Mohr and DiMaggio 1995: 168) cultural resources have more localized

effects and are not subject to authoritative and ritualized forms of valuation by dominant institutions. For Bourdieu (1984), in the arts consumption domain, cultural capital consists of a generalized “aesthetic disposition” or the capacity to conceive *aesthetically* objects and styles hailing from heterogeneous realms (whether classically associated with the “fine” arts or not). In particular, this involves the unequally distributed capacity to habitually separate the *formal* properties of cultural objects from their *content* and function. Thus, “the aesthetic disposition...[can be defined as] the capacity to consider in and for themselves, as form rather than function, not only the works designated for such apprehension, i.e., legitimate works of art, but *everything in the world, including cultural objects which are not yet consecrated...*” (Bourdieu 1984: 3, italics added).

Bourdieu concluded that it was the differential—across class fractions—capacity to habitually apply this aestheticizing cognitive scheme to the different symbolic goods produced by the commercialized fields of the popular and fine arts that served as the primary differentiating factor among audiences in late-modern societies. This was also the key to understanding the cultural advantage of the more educated segments of the dominant class (DiMaggio and Useem 1978b; DiMaggio 1996). Those segments of the population who have habitual command of the relevant disposition to emphasize form over content and who had experience with the culturally accepted ways of historically organizing artistic styles would therefore be more likely to be knowledgeable about and be heavily engaged in the arts, both “consecrated” (fine) and on their way to consecration (popular). Bourdieu concluded that “...nothing most rigorously distinguishes the different classes than the disposition objectively demanded by the legitimate consumption of legitimate works...and the...capacity to constitute aesthetically objects that are ordinary or even ‘common’ or to apply the principles of a ‘pure’ aesthetic in the most everyday choices of everyday life, in cooking, dress, or decoration, for example” (Bourdieu 1984: 40).

For Bourdieu, the origins of differential access to and “investment” in cultural capital by different social groups had two sources: (1) differential socialization of children in the household (with parents with high levels of cultural capital transmitting the same dispositions to their children) and (2) access to and ability to be successful in modern educational systems, especially higher education (see Bowles and Gintis 2002 for a convergent account in regards to the role of education in other forms of stratification). In this way, Bourdieu saw two routes toward cultural capital accumulation—the *domestic* and the *scholastic* (1984: 13). Recent research shows that both of these routes to the accumulation of cultural capital provide individuals with the resources to be successful (as indexed by their higher probabilities of making key educational transitions) in secondary and higher education institutions in the U.S., with the proviso that Bourdieu may have underestimated the capacity of individuals to acquire cultural capital through the scholastic route late—and parlay this cultural advantage into educational success—later in life (Aschaffenburg and Maas 1997).

Institutions of secondary and especially higher education are both transmitters of and “definers” of what counts as cultural capital, by serving as havens where the “aesthetic disposition” toward symbolic goods is first elaborated and honed, and by providing “socio-cognitive tools” (Bourdieu 1967) with which to organize knowledge of cultural genres and styles in the fine and popular arts realms. An example of this would be the canonical classification systems for cultural works shown in art history textbooks and the often encountered historical arrangements of artistic styles into epochs, schools, and key producers connected by networks of influence. Bourdieu argues that these routine (and habitualized) cognitive heuristics picked up in the academic environment (or more rarely, through virtuoso acts of auto-didacticism) help the cultured classes to accumulate knowledge of and thus to motivationally sustain their higher levels of engagement in different cultural fields including those usually not traditionally considered “artistic” such as film and rock music (Frith 1998), thus cementing their cultural capital advantage.<sup>1</sup>

Following the model of Bourdieu’s research in France, empirical research under this new cultural capital paradigm in the U.S., produced results that were consistent with this new way of thinking of the fine arts-consumption/society linkage (DiMaggio 1987; DiMaggio and Useem 1978a, 1978b). Instead of a hierarchy of cultural engagement in the popular and the fine arts that could be easily predicted by location in income groupings (as is the consumption of traditional consumer goods), consumption of the arts is instead more profoundly connected to individual educational attainment and the educational attainment of parents. For instance, Bourdieu (1984) found that engagement in the fine arts is more intense among professionals and managers, but is highest among highly educated—in relation to their income—cultural specialists such as higher education teachers. Responding to concerns as to the “applicability” of Bourdieu’s socio-cognitive theory of culture consumption outside of France, Holt (1998), using interview data from a sample of American informants, shows that the very same aesthetic disposition that privileges form over function described by Bourdieu structures taste and perceptions of aesthetic value in the contemporary U.S. Holt finds a clear differentiation in the discourse used to speak about symbolic and material goods of those informants who come from culturally advantaged backgrounds in comparison to those who were raised in less culturally privileged households.

DiMaggio and Useem (1978b) in their comprehensive study of fine arts consumption in the U.S. found that education is a better predictor of engagement in the fine arts than income in every case, regardless of the specific art form and medium. In addition, the influence of early childhood experiences cannot be ignored, with those who are raised in households where both parents have high levels of educational attainment and those who have been exposed to informal training in arts appreciation as children or adolescents, more likely to

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<sup>1</sup> In addition to this socio-cognitive effect, higher education institutions are also primary players at the *institutional* level, through their involvement in the contests of “definition” of what counts as art and what is not art, exposing individuals to the strategies of argumentation that are used by cultural specialists in their own battles to institute their preferred forms of culture as legitimate.

be heavily engaged in the fine arts than other groups. As one descends the educational attainment hierarchy, moving toward those individuals who belong to lower service and skilled manual occupations, engagement in the arts declines concomitantly, but continues to be high among those low socioeconomic status groups with relatively high-levels of educational capital such as secondary education teachers (DiMaggio 1982, 1987; DiMaggio and Mohr 1985; Mohr and DiMaggio 1995; Peterson and Simkus 1993).

As DiMaggio notes, such ubiquitous differences can be understood with reference to Pierre Bourdieu's theory of social and cultural reproduction...According to Bourdieu, familiarity with and appreciation of high-culture art forms, including the kinds of art found in museums, represents a form of cultural capital." In particular, "within the dominant social class, class fractions invest more heavily in cultural capital to the extent that they do not control economic capital directly...those fractions richest in cultural capital (and economically weakest) adopt an aesthetic that permits them to use their cultural resources to the full and, at the same time, by justifying the rejection of the most lavishly expensive cultural forms, makes a virtue of economic necessity." This accounts for Bourdieu's finding that intellectuals, academics and other cultural specialists "tend to prize affordable but arcane avant-garde and oppositional forms" while "managers and owners of capital may prefer costly but accessible canonical high-culture art and Broadway plays." (DiMaggio 1996: 162).

A large body of evidence is in agreement with various facets of this model. Consistent with Bourdieu's account of the origins of tastes in childhood and adolescent socialization Bennett, Emmison and Frow (1999) and Smith (1995) find that cultural tastes are developed early during the life course and are largely stable thereafter. Van Eijck and Bargemann (2004) using longitudinal data for a sample of Dutch residents find evidence that education is becoming *more* important as a predictor of cultural choices over time—in comparison to other sociodemographic markers—as would be predicted by the cultural capital account. Consistent with the results reported by Bourdieu in *Distinction* (in spite of the fact that the authors misinterpret their own findings otherwise), Chan and Goldthorpe (2005) find that education and occupational status are the best predictors of extensive consumption of the fine (theatre, dance) and popular (cinema) arts fare in a sample of British citizens. In addition, they find that intensive and extensive consumption of one segment of the fine arts (the visual) is highest among the most educated groups (Chan and Goldthorpe 2007b). Silva (2006) finds that education, not income better predicts patterns of *ownership*—what Bourdieu (see Holt 1997) referred to as "objectified cultural capital"—of fine arts objects (paintings) as well as frequency of engagement with the visual arts for a sample of respondents in England.

### **"Omnivore taste" as cultural capital**

For Bourdieu (1984: 40), the aesthetic disposition constitutive of cultural capital was—despite its origins in the restricted artistic field of 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe (Bourdieu 1987)—a *generalized* disposition, with those social groups most "cultured" in the traditional sense (i.e.

more likely to be able to incorporate cultural works associated with the fine arts) also exhibiting the “...capacity to constitute aesthetically objects that are ordinary or even ‘common’ or to apply the principles of a ‘pure’ aesthetic in the most everyday choices of everyday life, in cooking, dress, or decoration, for example.” In other words, cultural capital could be recognized by the propensity to apply aestheticizing attitudes to symbolic goods hailing from *all* artistic production sectors, including the folk and popular arts in addition to the fine arts. Bourdieu (1984: 26) found ample evidence of this effect on his research in 1960s France. For example, he reports that “[c]inema-going measured by the number of films seen...is lower among the less-educated than among the more highly educated, but also lower...among provincials...than among Parisians” and that the “cultured” classes, the keepers of “legitimate culture”—and the ones most likely to be attracted to “...the works demanding the ‘purest’ aesthetic disposition” (263)—are also the ones “...most capable of applying this aesthetic disposition to *less consecrated areas*” (italics added).

Early appropriations of Bourdieu’s theory and findings in the U.S. interpreted his work as implying that the aesthetic disposition necessarily meant that cultural capital had to be defined *exclusively* in terms of fine arts consumption. This led to an unintentional rediscovery of this very same effect in American shores in the 1980s and 1990s by Richard Peterson and his associates. These researchers labeled the tendency of the highly educated to engage both the fine and the popular arts with comparable intensity as “highbrow omnivorousness” to be contrasted to the largely “univorous” taste of the working and lower service classes (Peterson 1992). Unfortunately most recent commentators have tended to interpret this phenomenon as an anomaly and a disconfirmation of Bourdieu’s theory of taste rather than as an empirical finding largely derivable from it (Holt 1997, 1998), thus creating an artificial and misleading divide in the sociological study of culture consumption between an “older” version of cultural capital theory associated with Bourdieu’s work and the “newer” research on cultural omnivorousness. For instance, Peterson (2005: 260) notes that the findings associated with omnivorousness are in “...dramatic difference from the earlier findings by Pierre Bourdieu in France” (see also Vander Stichele and Laerman 2006, 45-46; Chan and Goldthorpe 2007a, 14; López-Sintas and Katz-Gerro 2005, 300).

What is highbrow omnivorousness? The basic idea takes off from the empirical finding by Peterson and collaborators (Hughes and Peterson 1983; Peterson and Kern 1996; Peterson and Simkus 1993) and DiMaggio’s (1987) related observation and theoretical proposal of a positive association between increasing socioeconomic status and higher rates of participation in all types—both traditionally prestigious and popular—of leisure and arts consumption activities, with a concomitant drop-off in most types of most forms of cultural consumption as we move down the status ladder. In particular Peterson and Kern (1996) find, using data from the NEA-sponsored Survey for Public Participation in the Arts, that more recently born “highbrows” (defined as persons who report liking classical music and opera) became more likely to report liking a wide variety of lowbrow and middlebrow musical genres in comparison to older highbrows.

Peterson and Kern take this as evidence that the way that high status individuals approach the consumption of symbolic goods has shifted from a *elite-mass* system in which lowbrow genres were shunned by high status groups, to an “omnivore-univore” regime in which there is no incompatibility between the consumption of the popular arts and traditionally high status fine arts. For Peterson (1992: 252), “...elite taste is no longer defined simply as the expressed appreciation of the high art forms and a corresponding moral disdain of, or patronizing tolerance for, all other aesthetic expressions.” Instead, “...the aesthetics of elite status are being redefined as the appreciation of all distinctive leisure activities and creative forms along with the appreciation of the classic fine arts.” Peterson concludes that given the fact that “...status is gained by knowing about, and participating in (that is to say, by consuming) many if not all forms, the term ‘omnivore’ seems appropriate for those at the top of the emerging status hierarchy.”

Peterson (1992: 254) argues that this shift necessitates a new image of the cultural stratification regime of contemporary Western societies. We should no longer think of it as a “slim column of taste genres one on top of the other” as in the elite/mass artistic classification system established at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, mostly through urban-elite patronage of non-profit organizations dedicated to the dissemination and evaluation of certain selected forms of symbolic goods and performances as “fine arts” (DiMaggio 1991a, 1991b, 1993). Instead the new taste regime is better characterized as “...a pyramid with one elite taste at the top and more and more alternative forms at about the same level as one moves down the pyramid toward its base.” Who are those at the bottom of the pyramid? Since taste no longer appears to be ordered across hierarchically defined boundaries between high and low, the “...most descriptive appellation for those near the base of the pyramid would seem to be ‘univore’, suggesting that, unlike the high status ‘omnivore’, members of this group tend to be actively involved in just one, or at best just a few, alternative aesthetic traditions.”

The shift toward “omnivorousness” as a new basis of cultural stratification was first empirically detected in the U.S. by Peterson and associates (Peterson and Kern 1996; Peterson and Simkus 1992) and has been confirmed in more recent analyses of American culture consumption habits (Alderson et al. 2007; López-Sintas and Katz-Gerro 2005). In addition, as spate of recent research has shown that the same empirical pattern of highbrow omnivorousness described by Peterson and Bourdieu is applicable to other Western industrialized countries outside of the U.S. The omnivore-univore pattern has been shown to exist in The Netherlands (i.e. van Eijck 2001), Spain (Lopez Sintas and Alvarez 2002) Australia (Emmison 2003) and Great Britain (Chan and Goldthorpe 2007a; Tomlinson 2003; Warde et al. 1999; Warde et al. 2000), and as Peterson and Anand (2004: 325) note in their recent review of the literature, with similar results having been obtained in Canada, Latin America, Israel, the former Soviet Union and even France as well (see for instance, Coulangeon and Lemel 2007; Fisher and Preece 2003; Katz-Gerro 2004; López-Sintas and Katz-Gerro 2005; Torche 2007; Zavisca 2005). In fact the overall association between socioeconomic status—especially if measured by way of educational attainment—and the

consumption of high status culture (classical, music, opera, the arts) coupled with openness to and actual consumption of a wider range of less prestigious cultural activities is such a robust finding that it now appears rather unremarkable to note, as Lopes-Sintas and Garcia Alvarez (2002) do in their recent study of culture consumption in Spain that “omnivores show up again.” This has led most analysts to conclude that the capacity to display “omnivore” taste is the current dominant form of (multi)cultural capital in contemporary post-industrial societies (Bryson 1996, 1997; Fridman and Ollivier 2002).

## **Beyond the Birmingham paradigm in the study of the popular arts**

If the study of fine arts consumption has been dominated since the mid-1980s by Bourdieu’s cultural capital paradigm, in the study of popular culture consumption the paralyzing effect of mass culture theory was instead transcended by a group of British analysts usually grouped under the heading of the “Birmingham School.” Raymond Williams (1980), along with other practitioners of the “British Cultural Studies”—such as Stuart Hall (1980)—associated with the Birmingham Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) extensively developed a then groundbreaking type of agency-centered analysis focused on the role of local resistance and ideological reconstitution of dominant ideologies from below, instead of the exclusive focus on ideological manipulation from above favored by mid-century Marxist analyses of the culture industry.

In particular there was a move toward a concern with *ideological contestation* and *conflict* (inspired by the work of Antonio Gramsci [see also Williams 1973]) and away from concerns with the origin and reproduction of ideological *consensus*. These theorists attacked what they perceived to be the overly elitist concern of previous modes of cultural analysis with exclusively modernist and classicist definitions of culture to the detriment of more organic and popular forms of cultural expression. The Birmingham school was thus able to successfully incorporate a more *anthropological* understanding of the culture concept (in which the notion of cultural “value” is decoupled from the notion of culture as symbolic “form”), thus breaking the restrictive distinction between high and low culture that remained largely unquestioned in Western Marxism (Williams 1981).

Birmingham-school-inspired studies of symbolic re-appropriations and contestations of popular culture inaugurated a series of important investigations in what came to be known as the “subculture” studies tradition (Hall and Jefferson 1976), one of the most influential of which was Dick Hebdige’s (1979) classic *Subculture: the Meaning of Style*. This strand of research was primarily aimed at empirically demonstrating the capacity of subordinate groups to actively transpose cultural signs across different social contexts, in this manner *subverting* their dominant, socially prescribed meanings thus providing them with alternative layers of significance. The primary theoretical innovation in this respect consisted of Stuart Hall’s (1980) influential distinction between *encoding* and *decoding*. For Hall, building on previous work by Barthes (1972), the process of encoding by dominant culture producers

was akin depended on the *denotation* of a sign (the “dominant” or most obvious (i.e. intended) linkage between signifier and signified in a message). Signs however, also have *connotations* or a set of secondary meanings, allusions and contextual additions that are implicitly contained in a particular message—insofar as it is a part of a larger signifying system—or which are appended to it, especially in the context of interpretation (decoding).

Subculture studies, along with other agency-centered theoretical frameworks that spotlighted the capacity of consumers to derail the intention of cultural producers by endowing popular culture products with their own interpretations, such as the “audience-reception” approach in media studies (Ang 1985; Fiske 1987; Radway 1984) dominated research of popular arts consumption for more than two decades. Beginning in the mid 1990s, dissatisfaction with the limitations of Birmingham-inspired and audience-centered approaches has brought the study of the popular and fine arts consumption closer together at a theoretical level, largely by way of the importation of critical insights from the cultural capital paradigm to the studies of patterns of audience engagement with the popular arts.

Recent studies of the consumption of the popular arts, especially those that concentrate in the collective appropriation of popular culture in *scenes* (Bennett 2004), breaks with the anthropological understanding of popular culture inherited from the Birmingham tradition (Frith 1998; Hodgkinson 2004; Peterson and Bennett 2004; Thornton 1996; Urquia 2004). Instead, this research questions the inability of previous Birmingham-inspired analysts to conceive of the popular arts as a cultural domain that may be open to routine judgments of quality and value by both producers and consumers as an unacknowledged remnant of the denigration of popular culture in mass culture theory that the subculture approach never transcended. Inspired by Bourdieu’s (1983) work on “fields of cultural production”, more recent theorizing in popular culture studies instead conceives of the popular arts as likely to be the subject of attempts to impose hierarchies of value and taste, attempt at the construction of exclusionary canons, to establish systems of cultural currency (“subcultural capital”) and to legislate definitions of group belongingness and authenticity based on proper command of the relevant cultural codes as the fine arts .

Rather than operating according to a logic that is antithetical to that which structures fine arts consumption fields, the realm of popular culture production and consumption comes to be structured according to hierarchies of perception and evaluation that are premised upon the transcendent value of “autonomous art.” Regev (1994: 98) notes, “artistic hierarchies, which rank producers according to their aesthetic or expressive value...are becoming a central structuring force in a growing number of fields of production” including that of rock and roll, a quintessential “mass culture” product. More recently, other authors have begun to extend this analysis of the dynamics whereby other popular culture fields—such as film—come to acquire a hierarchical form modeled on the artistic field (i.e. Allen and Lincoln 2004; Baumann 2001). The adoption of this ideology of autonomous art by producers and

gate-keepers of the popular arts thus mirrors the increasing propensity of (culturally advantaged) *consumers* of popular culture to adopt a similar stance (Trondman 1990).

For Sarah Thornton (1996: 7),

comparatively little attention...has been paid to the hierarchies *within* popular culture. Although judgments of value are made as a matter of course, few scholars have empirically examined the systems of social and cultural distinction that divide and demarcate contemporary culture, particularly youth culture...[instead] studies of popular culture have tended to embrace anthropological notions of culture as a *way of life* but have spurned art-oriented definitions of culture which relate to *standards of excellence* (italics added).

Frith (1998: 9) proposes a similar reorientation of the study of popular culture consumption. Drawing on insights associated with the cultural capital paradigm developed by Pierre Bourdieu, he notes that just like in the fine arts field, where struggles to define artistic value based on what is defined as art and “not art” are constantly in play, “...a similar use of accumulated knowledge and discriminatory skill is apparent in low cultural forms, and has the same hierarchical effect. Low culture, that is to say, generates its own capital—most obviously perhaps, in those forms...which are organized around exclusiveness, but equally significant for the fans...of even the most inclusive forms...” This is in effect a rediscovery of an empirical phenomenon first noticed in Riesman’s (1950: 365) analysis of the “minority pattern” characteristic of a certain fraction of young popular music listeners, who were interested in “technical virtuosity” rather than melody, had developed “elaborate...standards of music listening” and insisted on “rigorous standards of judgment and taste.”

This new research thus addresses a key blind spot in the subcultural studies tradition: the conception of cultural hierarchy as applying solely to the analysis of ideological conflict *between* bounded subcultures and the larger society but as not being a useful conceptual lens with which to understand the dynamics of symbolic appropriation of popular culture goods *within* culture consumption scenes. Consistent with this reorientation of research on the consumption of the popular arts away from the primary theoretical shortcoming of the subcultural studies tradition, researchers now find that social scenes built around the consumption of popular culture, instead of being the egalitarian safe havens from hierarchy and power depicted in Birmingham school inspired studies, are themselves structured around multidimensional axes of differentiation and distinction (Hodkinson 2002; Thornton 1996).

Trondman (1990) for instance, applies Bourdieu’s theory of taste to popular music consumption among youth. He finds a hierarchical differentiation in the audience for different forms of rock music based primarily on educational qualifications. He finds that university-educated youth gravitate towards those segments of rock and roll that have already been accorded artistic and critical legitimation (Regev 1992) while youth with less education are more likely to gravitate toward styles of rock that self-consciously fashion

themselves as “not art.” This new empirical research dissolves the older view of popular culture consumption communities as “flat” folk cultures, judged against to the “vertically ordered” system of official fine arts distinctions (Ollivier 2006; Thornton 1996). Command of subcultural codes, demonstrated by proficiency and expertise in the appropriation and understanding of the hierarchies of value constructed around symbolic goods produced in the popular culture industry (such as Goth and Club recorded musics), become key markers of hierarchy within the scene as well as tools with which to draw sharp boundaries distinction between insiders and outsiders (Hodkinson 2002; Peterson and Bennett 2004; Urquia 2004).

## Conclusion

Reacting to the rise of formally and mass-produced culture, mid-twentieth century sociological theorists discounted the value of commercialized cultural forms, both fine and popular, and criticized audiences of such products for uncritically accepting cultural goods intended to manipulate and homogenize them. Such criticisms lost strength in the 1970s when empirical research revealed that the production of cultural goods is embedded in social environments that are more likely to feature—instead of elitist tactics of domination—a more complex interplay between perceptions of consumer demand on the part of producers and patterns of audience segmentation of culture consuming publics. In particular, the socio-cognitive and institutional effects (Bourdieu 1967; Meyer 1977) of *education* appear to be the key to unlocking the logic of consumer differentiation around, and engagement with formally produced symbolic goods in post-industrial societies.

Analysts working from the cultural capital paradigm have found a direct relationship between cultural engagement in the fine and popular arts, educational attainment and other markers of advantaged social origins, in particular as these are exacerbated by the individual’s position in a social field organized around the opposition between cultural and economic specialists. Bourdieu’s finding of the propensity of culturally advantaged class fractions to aestheticize (and thus be more likely to engage) a wide variety of cultural goods has been confirmed by numerous scholars studying contemporary Western societies, leading to the eminence of the “highbrow omnivorousness” thesis. This theoretical proposal breaks with earlier “elite-mass” audience segmentation models and confirms the importance of the uneven distribution of the generalized aestheticizing scheme across social classes noted by Bourdieu. This in its turn appears to lead to the hierarchical distribution—keyed around access to educational qualifications—of the propensity to consume a wide variety of cultural goods from both the fine and popular realms.

Scholars in the Birmingham School took exception to the comprehensive nature of the view of elite influence on mass-culture consumption, finding that consumer ability to manipulate symbolic codes influence the meaning of cultural products. Whereas cultural capital theorists conceived of members of the cultural bourgeoisie as transforming popular culture from banal and frivolous to worthy of attention, members of the Birmingham School credited consumers with intentionally subverting and enhancing the meanings attached to

cultural goods in the dominant ideology. Research in the subcultures tradition however, had to move—in order to transcend the limitations of mass culture theory—toward an anthropological conception of culture that dissociated socially constructed notions of aesthetic value from the symbolic role of culture in constituting group identity as well as from its imbrication in ideological systems of power and domination.

Recent incorporation of insights from the cultural capital paradigm into the analysis of audience engagement with popular culture within scenes has shown that within subcultural communities, consumption norms are organized not according to a logic of compliance with or resistance to external ideology, but rather by identification with internally-created and maintained codes and boundaries. These boundaries—and the “boundary work” that goes along with it—are centered precisely on processes of aesthetically mediated cultural exclusion similar to those found in the fine arts realm. Therefore, just as Bourdieu finds that only those with experience in culturally privileged environments are capable of habitually deploying the aesthetic disposition to truly incorporate and consume cultural works hailing from the fine arts field, researchers belonging to the new “scenes” and “subcultural capital” turns explain that specific forms of aesthetic competence gained through participation in subcultural life is required to appreciate many forms of popular culture and to have access to the social sites under which popular culture works and performances are consumed and re-produced. This has brought the study of the consumption of the fine and the popular arts for under a unified theoretical language after a long period of theoretical disengagement produced by the divergent reactions of the respective communities of scholars to mass culture theory.

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