

On Common Tastes

Heterogeneity and Hierarchies in Contemporary Cultural Consumption

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In both contemporary aesthetic theory and sociology of art there is a tendency to conceive formation of taste not primarily as segmentation and status marker, but rather as connections and exchanges crossing traditional hierarchies. In this way they seem closer to a Kantian aesthetics than to Pierre Bourdieu's social critique of the judgment of taste. The aim of this article is to examine this tendency. To do this I will briefly introduce first the idea of subjective universality as formulated by Kant, secondly the segmentation into different cultures of taste as described by Bourdieu, and thirdly some views on the function of taste in the contemporary context of globalization and aestheticization. More in depth I will discuss some recent sociological surveys which indicate an increasing heterogeneity in contemporary cultural taste and consumption. These will be related to the theories of Kant and Bourdieu as well as the more recent views. Combining an aesthetic and a sociological perspective I will consider the social functions of taste and discuss the implications for social hierarchies and communities of a more heterogeneous consumption of culture.

Subjective universality

As a theoretical concept, taste achieved its modern meaning in the 18th century when it became important in the rise of modern aesthetics. In Kant's *The Critique of Judgement* (*Kritik der Urteilstkraft*, 1790) taste plays a crucial role in establishing a connection between individuality and humanity. An aesthetic judgment (or judgment of taste) is a reflective judgment of the beautiful, and the beautiful is something that causes disinterested and universal pleasure. Reflective judgment is thus separated from more private judgments of what is pleasurable to one's senses. Everyone has private sensual preferences, but in its general disinterestedness the

reflective judgment of taste expects a *sensus communis* and demands the agreement of others. When one claims something to be beautiful, “he judges not merely for himself, but for all men, and then speaks of beauty as if it were a property of things”.¹

On the other hand, aesthetic judgment is also different from logical judgments of reason. A judgment of taste does not follow a determinate concept of beauty and has no general rule or principle to relate to. This is stressed by Kant’s famous words that “there may be contention about taste (although not a dispute)”.² The validity of the judgment cannot be decided objectively by proofs and concepts but only in actual social encounters. We cannot subsume the particular under a universal as in determinate judgment. But we proceed with our judgments as if it was possible to go from the particular to the universal – claiming “subjective universality”³ in the aesthetic relation.

This is what Kant calls the antinomy of the judgment of taste: that while, on the one hand, we presuppose that there is no objective correlate to the subjective judgment, on the other hand we invoke it exactly by expressing the judgment. In this way Kant creates a link between the individual and the universal. All it takes to make the link work is the general possibility of disinterestedness. Through disinterestedness it is possible to separate reflective taste from all the particular and inferior desires, corporeal pleasures and so forth.

Kant’s ideas were taken up and elaborated in various ways by Wilhelm von Humboldt, Friedrich Schiller and others. In Humboldt’s theory of *Bildung*, the individual should realise both his own individuality and what is common to all mankind, giving “in our own person ... the concept of humanity ... as large a content as possible”.⁴ And Schiller elaborates on a parallel line of thought in his *Letters upon the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1794), criticising the consequences of the increasing differentiation of the modern world, namely that man is “eternally chained down to a little fragment of the whole ... instead of imprinting the seal of humanity on his being”.⁵

For both Humboldt and Schiller the solution for modern man was to turn to the aesthetic. While in other occupations man achieves specific abilities, only the aesthetic “play”, to use Schiller’s word, leads to the unlimited and thereby to pure humanity. In the aesthetic condition we are all free and equal – released from individual particularities, dealing with what is common to everyone, and thereby belonging to a human community free of the otherwise all-inclusive social divisions and conflicts.

Dissolving the common

Seen from the distance of more than 200 years, the early modern confidence in aesthetic freedom from social interests seems more problematic. In the early modern period there were many good reasons to highlight what was common to everyone and to insist on the individual's possibility to acquire and cultivate taste. These viewpoints had a democratic potential significantly stronger than the traditional understanding of good taste as the exclusive property of the aristocracy.⁶ However, the confidence in aesthetic equality did not make the social barriers disappear. Today Kant's notion of subjective universality, Humboldt's ideal of realising humanity in the individual and Schiller's argument for an aesthetic short-cut to freedom and equality appear closely connected to the rise of the universal subject of bourgeois ideology. In this way, the early modern conception of universality was itself not universal, but bound to a historically and socially specific bourgeois way of relating the self and the world.⁷

The critique of the bourgeois claim for universality emerged in the 1950s and grew stronger and more explicit through the 60s and 70s. The originally British but now international tradition of Cultural Studies played an important role in this development. Focusing on working class culture, popular culture and more or less marginalised sub-cultures, it rejected the claims of more universal aesthetics. In the Cultural Studies tradition "culture is ordinary" – to invoke the title of a famous Raymond Williams essay – but taste is neither disinterested nor common to everyone. On the contrary, the notion of disinterestedness has been replaced by analyses of various and complex interactions between culture and social interests, taste and power. Class, gender and ethnicity have become important prefixes to culture, and the elitist, aesthetic notion of culture is left behind in the effort to include the "whole way of life".⁸

By analysing different cultures and relating taste to social interests, ideology and power, the Cultural Studies tradition detached itself from the basic aesthetic principles of disinterestedness and commonness. In a related line of thought, Pierre Bourdieu attacked the same principles from a philosophical as well as sociological point of view. In *Distinction (La Distinction, 1979)* – bearing the Kantian subtitle *A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* – he opposed high aesthetics since Kant in two ways. Drawing on an extensive, empirical survey of taste patterns in French society he demonstrated a homology between tastes in areas like art, food, drinks, indoor decorations, leisure activities, clothing, behaviour and friendships. By doing this he contested the division and hierarchy between pure, reflective pleasure and facile, sensuous agreeableness so dominant in mod-

ern aesthetics.⁹ Instead he treated aesthetic consumption as part of ordinary consumption and argued that preferences in art as well as in dinner menus are not innocent but mark and reproduce class distinction.

Bourdieu's second point of critique thus regards the notion of subjective universality in the aesthetic judgment. According to him a disinterested aesthetic point of view is neither universal nor natural, but a distinctive ability appreciated and acquired by the dominant social class from early childhood. Moreover the aesthetic dispositions of the dominant group are not only different but made in opposition to the cultural goodwill of the middle class and the taste for necessity of the working class. In this way it marks a distinction, just as the taste of the middle class expresses distaste for the taste of the lowest status groups. Taste – and discourses about taste – therefore does not unite people in what is common to everyone. On the contrary it helps keeping the distance between the various social groups: "It functions as a sort of social orientation, a 'sense of one's place'."¹⁰

When taste is everywhere

Bourdieu's *Distinction* has been very influential both in demonstrating how cultural taste can be investigated and in going beyond the empirical data of the survey and theorising the links between taste, social status and class. It has made it significantly more difficult to support the early modern idea that by cultivating taste we are able to overcome the particularities and divisions of modern life and approach what is common to all. On the other hand, this idea also seems hard to leave behind, and lately it seems to have had a revival – however, not on the basis of the enlightenment and humanism of Kant and his contemporaries, but on the basis of a late modern globalization and aestheticization.

In many ways the actual globalization and aestheticization make the question of taste's ability to overcome cultural differences even more important than it was for Kant and Bourdieu. Globalization has increased both the connectivity of the world and our sense of the world as a whole and thereby made cultural diversity an important part of everyday life, the media and cultural theory.¹¹ Aestheticization seems just as conspicuous, in the staging of shopping experiences, the branding of companies, countries and universities, and the styling of cities, television programs, homes, kids and lives. Advanced aesthetic strategies and devices are obviously used not only in the arts, but also in commercials, fashion and the design of the media we use to communicate and the world we live in. Reality appears increasingly as narrative, performative and all in all changeable, and there is talk of a general aesthetic turn.¹²

But what does this dissemination of (appeals to) aesthetic judgments mean for community in a global world of cultural differences? In a way the general aestheticization seems to confirm the 'vulgar' aspect of Bourdieu's theory: his denial of a radical difference between high aesthetics and the lower sensual pleasures. But does the expansion of aesthetic judgment thereby also democratize taste and level the symbolic hierarchies? Or does it on the contrary make the aesthetic distinctions even more omnipresent than in Bourdieu's analysis, confirming his statement that "Nothing is more distinctive, more distinguished, than the capacity to confer aesthetic status on objects that are banal or even 'common' ..., or the ability to apply the principles of a 'pure' aesthetic to the most everyday choices of everyday life, e.g., in cooking, clothing or decoration"?¹³ This is being investigated in contemporary aesthetics, cultural analysis and sociology of art.

As if there is a community

In contemporary aesthetic theory the Kantian principles still play a central role when arguing for the social relevance of the arts. An example is Danish aesthetic theorist Morten Kyndrup, who pays his debt to Kant, describing how aesthetic judgment generates a passage from the individual to the community, from 'I' to 'we'. According to Kyndrup, the expansion of aesthetic judgment gives reason for optimism regarding our communities, but not because of any naïve confidence in a given *sensus communis*. Even more than Kant, Kyndrup emphasizes that judgment is set forth not because, but "as if" there is common sense able to firmly anchor it objectively.¹⁴ However, his optimistic point is that this "as if" works quite well –

the enunciation of the judgment creates a passage from 'I' to 'we', a connection between the isolation of a subjectivity thrown upon itself and the communicating individual equally definitively thrown upon community, upon sociality. This passage is created in the single individual and simultaneously objectivizes the subjective and subjectivizes the objective.¹⁵

The idea of subjective universality is only an idea, but an extremely effective one. According to Kyndrup, it is of cardinal importance for modern processes of civilization and for sociality as such. Escaping, on the one hand, the despotism of radical objectivism and, on the other, the unpredictability of radical subjectivism, it avoids the two extremes that would both lead to the end of argumentation and communication. Kyndrup therefore – although rather cautiously – regards contemporary aestheticization as a

positive quantitative and qualitative development of the subjective universality of the judgment of taste. By being neither purely objective nor purely subjective, aesthetic judgment is something that we can and do meet and communicate about. It is thus anything but turned away from the world and its communities. On the contrary, by enunciating an aesthetic judgment one “puts oneself and one’s own subjectivity in play by making it visible; one establishes an I/we-passage inside one’s own subjectivity, this being in itself an appeal to and an approval of sociality”.¹⁶ In other words, by appealing increasingly to judgments of taste, aestheticization can both challenge our identities and bring us together.

Sense of plurality

But what is the social potential of aesthetic judgment from the point of view of a cultural analyst? Turning to Wolfgang Iser for an answer, one also gets a rather optimistic response. Unlike Kyndrup, Iser bases his argument not on an appeal to community, but rather on aesthetic plurality. In this plurality lies the potential to become more tolerant towards the differences of the world. In his argument he turns his attention not to early modern aesthetics, but towards high and postmodern aesthetics. Inspired mainly by Adorno’s *Ästhetische Theorie* and *Negative Dialektik*, he argues that the value of an aesthetic unity depends on the manifold itself. Contrary to political justice, it does not cause differences to disappear for the benefit of formal equivalence. An aesthetic unity has “the ideal of doing justice to the heterogeneous”.¹⁷

While Adorno mainly focused on the heterogeneity inside the single work of art, Iser emphasizes the heterogeneity between works of art, genres, traditions, modes of perception and reception. 20th century art obviously does not contain one artistic standard or canon, but a plurality of highly varying paradigms setting forth their own values and criteria. It makes no sense to judge pop art with criteria taken from expressionism or poems with criteria used for novels. Aesthetic judgment is – just as Kant argued – singular and concrete and cannot be based on a general rule.

What art can provide is thus a sensibility towards differences. A thoroughly aestheticized culture would according to Iser pay critical attention to borders, differences, exclusions and injustice, and not only regarding artistic creations, but equally in everyday life and social relations.¹⁸ This does not mean, however, that visiting a museum or reading a poem automatically turns us into better human beings. But a reflective aesthetic consciousness has a potential regarding sensibility which can indirectly become socially relevant: “What is made possible however, is a transfer

of aesthetic sensibility to social issues through a specific analogy between conditions in art and in life. Their common denominator is denoted by the watchword 'plurality'.¹⁹ If we use this possibility, if we transfer aesthetic sensibility to a social standard, we will become more attentive to the specific logics and rights of various life forms. And by this means aestheticization will indirectly contribute to a political culture where acknowledgement and justice replace dominance and suppression.

Tasting a bit of everything

The third answer to the question about the contemporary changes in the social functions of taste – and the one I will discuss more in detail – comes from research on 'omnivore' cultural consumption initiated in the 1990s by the American sociologist Richard A. Peterson. In various seminal writings Peterson and his colleagues pointed out significant changes in elitist taste.²⁰ Comparing two empirical surveys of the musical taste of Americans from 1982 and 1992, respectively, Peterson and Roger M. Kern argued that people in high status occupations became increasingly omnivorous and were more omnivorous than lower status groups. Up through the 1980s and 90s there seemed to have been "a qualitative shift in the basis for marking elite status – from snobbish exclusion to omnivorous appropriation".²¹ While the snobs preferred highbrow culture and avoided both middle- and lowbrow activities, the omnivores were open towards appreciating them all.²² Not only did they consume more highbrow culture than others, they were also more involved in a broad spectrum of low status activities. The omnivores did not necessarily like everything, but as Peterson and Kern wrote: "Perfect snobs are now rare in the United States."²³

The finding of an increasing diversity of cultural consumption attracted much attention, and the notion of omnivore has spread in contemporary sociology. Over the past decade there has thus been a multiplication of studies elaborating on Peterson's research, and the hypothesis of a shift from elitist snobbishness to eclectic and omnivore inclusion has been qualified in numerous empirical surveys based on data from various countries in North America, Canada and Europe.²⁴ The methods and results vary but in general the sociologists agree that the diversity of taste is increasing, and cultural consumption is becoming more heterogeneous and unpredictable.

One might object that this is old news and that Peterson and the other sociologists supply little else than empirical support to insights that have been common sense in the humanities ever since the theories of the post-modern. Over the last decades there has been a general shift in sociologi-

cal, cultural and aesthetic theory “towards conceptualising the self, culture, and society as multiple, fluid, and fragmented in contrast to a past pictured as unitary, stable, and coherent” (Ollivier: 121).

However, the sociologists transcend common sense and become relevant to the argument of this article because they also discuss the relationship between cultural taste and social life. They are not satisfied once they have demonstrated the increasing diversity of cultural consumption and the dissolution of fixed hierarchies. They also ask *why*. Is the spread of omnivorousness an indication of growing democratisation and tolerance in contemporary culture? Does cultural openness equate to social and political openness? Or has omnivorousness just replaced participation in and knowledge of high culture as the predominant marker of distinction?

Where is high, who is low, and why?

The above questions are hotly debated in contemporary cultural sociology. So are of course the very notion of omnivorousness and the methods by which to measure it. For how do we distinguish when the division between art and popular culture has been attacked from both sides since the 1960s? How do we measure the diversity of cultural consumption if not only the boundaries between high and low culture, but the very concepts themselves have become problematic? While some sociologists ignore this difficulty, others openly confront “the lack of objective criteria to determine what constitutes high, legitimate or elite forms in the contemporary context”.²⁵ Some sociologists solve the problem by turning from quantitative data to qualitative interviews, thereby being able to investigate the reasons for and meaning of omnivorousness, the “*manner* of appropriation” instead of just “the *matter* that is appropriated”.²⁶

Regarding the reasons for omnivorousness, the interpretations have had both optimistic and more sceptical notes. In “Changing Highbrow Taste: From Snob to Omnivore”, Peterson and Kern offered the following five explanations for the development they had observed empirically: (1) social mobility and the mass media increase familiarity with the taste of others; (2) youth culture is not necessarily considered a stage to go through but a viable alternative for adults as well; (3) the art world itself has experienced a change from fixed standards (cf. Welsch) to multiple evaluations and appropriations; (4) there is a general trend towards greater tolerance of people with different values; (5) omnivorous inclusion seems to fit an increasingly global world managed by those who make their way by incorporating and showing respect for the culture of others.²⁷

With this argument that common (American) culture is becoming

more tolerant towards the taste and values of others and consequently less oppressive and hierarchical, Peterson and Kern might at first sight seem to contest the validity of Bourdieu's theory of taste as a distinction and status marker. That fixed hierarchies dissolve and elitist culture of taste opens up towards what was previously excluded, does not, however, necessarily mean that status hierarchies disappear. It might not be the function but only the criteria of taste as a status marker that has changed: high status is no longer based on familiarity with a specific elitist canon of art works and lifestyles but "gained by knowing about and participating in (that is to say consuming) all forms".²⁸

This interpretation is confirmed in the most recent research on American culture. In the anthology *Engaging Art: The Next Great Transformation of America's Cultural Life* from 2008 it is thus a common premise that the position of high culture arts as cultural capital is declining. One reason for this is that "commercial popular culture has become so pervasive and so finely segmented (as nichecasting has replaced broadcasting in fields as diverse as fiction publishing, cable television, the music industry, and film) as to overwhelm the ability of universities and nonprofit cultural institutions to maintain their cultural centrality".²⁹ The development of the media and the internet has highly augmented the abundance, rate and variety of cultural information and aesthetic artefacts, thereby making it much more common to engage with the arts via the media than by attending live performances or visiting museums.³⁰ And as some surveys suggest, the increasingly private access to cultural products favours popular culture.³¹ Finally the variety and mixing of genres is also reinforced by the universities and the art world themselves. In the art world the criterion of a single standard as well as firm boundaries between high and popular culture are long dead, just as the universities for many years have studied both.

Identifying oneself with a specific cultural and aesthetic regime is thus regarded an indication of a limited horizon and understanding. Today, omnivorousness is a normative standard for good taste, and openness to the taste of others is socially valued by both omnivores and others: "middle-class respondents in the 1950s knew it was conventional to report an exclusive involvement with the traditional high arts ... Correspondingly, respondents today know that it is more fashionable to express an involvement with a much wider range of cultural forms".³²

This means that the notion of omnivorousness has changed. It is not as closely associated with the social elite and highbrow cultural forms as it was in the 90s, but a much more general phenomenon. A recent survey thus shows that there is a strong statistical frequency of omnivores or

'dissonant profiles' within all the major social groups, all levels of education and every category of age – although much more likely for those with high social position, with long education and the younger generations, than amongst those with lower social position, lower level of education and older age, respectively.³³ There is a more consonant profile “at the bottom’ (i.e. in terms of the least legitimate cultural activities) than at the ‘top’”.³⁴ Many surveys result in similar conclusions: that it is very common to combine various cultural registers (high-/middle-/lowbrow, classical/avantgarde/pop) – but also that it is much more common for high status people to embrace the popular arts than for working class people to embrace the fine arts.³⁵

An explanation of this, which would be in line with Bourdieu’s theory of social taste hierarchies, is that the former elitist omnivorousness has now diffused out into lower status levels of the population. Omnivorousness has become “an increasingly common measure of high status over the second half of the 20th century in North America, Europe and beyond, and just like the criterion of high-status snobbery before it, it will eventually pass”.³⁶ In fact Peterson’s most recent survey from 2002 may already signal the coming of a post-omnivore period but this is not confirmed by other surveys and may according to Peterson himself be a (partly) erroneous finding.³⁷

A new sense of necessity?

Another reason could be that the open-minded flexibility of the omnivore is not only high status but a necessary social and professional competence. Elaborating on Gerhard Schulze’s theory of lifestyle milieus in *Die Erlebnisgesellschaft* (1992) and Simon Frith’s differentiation of musical discourses, Koen van Eijck has identified the cultural omnivore with the new middle class.³⁸ The emergence of the cultural omnivore reflects moral qualities highly appreciated and rewarded in our still more rapidly changing society. This holds good especially of the ability and will to keep our possibilities open and adjust to new phenomena and requirements – skills more and more in demand in a labour market characterized by flexibility and dynamic changes. As Richard Sennett writes in the *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism*: “The emphasis is on flexibility. Rigid forms of bureaucracy are under attack, as are the evils of blind routine. Workers are asked to behave nimbly, to be open to change on short notice, to take risks continually, to become ever less dependent on regulations and formal procedures.”³⁹

These requirements of contemporary management practice seem to be

reflected in cultural consumption. Mobility and networking in strongly differentiated societies require and generate omnivorousness. Through their openness and flexibility the omnivores represent a profile most likely to achieve professional success in 'the new capitalism'. They are able to comprehend situations that do not correspond to their prior experience, and to internalize heterogeneous socializing influences. Seen from this perspective, the new omnivores are not primarily characterized by their inclination towards cultural multiplicity, but rather by submitting to the social and economic requirements of flexibility, mobility, employability and networking. They adapt to the new conditions, internalize a plurality of the cultural offering as well as a plurality of social groups,⁴⁰ can appropriate and enjoy almost everything, and are thus able to express "a range of quite different tastes as the circumstances demand".⁴¹

If this is true, it might be useful to reconsider Bourdieu's theory of homology between personal values and qualities, cultural consumption and position in the labour market. With the concept of homology he turns the attention from production to consumption and thereby anticipates more recent theories of experience economy. According to Bourdieu, the new economy demands a change of ethics:

The new logic of the economy rejects the ascetic ethic of production and accumulation ... in favour of a hedonistic morality of consumption, based on credit, spending and enjoyment. This economy demands a social world which judges people by their capacity for consumption, their 'standard of living', their lifestyle as much as by their capacity for production. ... [T]he new taste-makers propose a morality which boils down to an art of consuming, spending and enjoying.⁴²

This "capacity for consumption" is exactly what the new flexible omnivores possess. But it is also something that they have to possess. And in the years that have passed since Bourdieu's *Distinction* from 1979 the necessity of this capacity seems to have spread from a rather exclusive new bourgeoisie to a much larger middle class.

Hierarchies and communities

The question remains of what heterogeneous and unpredictable cultural consumption does to our communities. If the general ability to consume and enjoy a broad variety of aesthetic artefacts increases, does this also mean that we – quantitatively as well as qualitatively – become more inclined to follow what Kant defined as the maxim of the judgment of taste: the "enlarged thought",⁴³ where we put ourselves in the position of

everyone else? And in so doing do we satisfy the claims to universality of early modern aesthetics, as well as those of Kyndrup's 'I'-'we' passage and Welsch's acknowledgement of plurality?

The answer seems to be negative, at least regarding Kant, Humboldt and Schiller. Their confidence in the social potential of the aesthetic presupposes a rather exclusive judgment of taste. For them it is of crucial importance to keep distance to the vulgar sensual pleasures and in general to exclude all individual and social interests. Kant's description of how we are to put ourselves in the position of everyone else does not imply adopting the actual particular standpoints of others, but comparing one's judgment with "the merely possible judgments of others ... as the result of a mere abstraction from the limitations which contingently affect our own estimate".⁴⁴ The social potential is placed in an intellectualized and transcendental judgment of taste and excludes a good deal of contemporary cultural consumption.

To Kyndrup and Welsch, things look a little different. In accordance with the general tendencies in contemporary theory, they both acknowledge the presence and importance of the particular and also distance themselves from the traditional exclusion of vulgar sensuality. However, the hierarchies seem to reappear when Welsch distinguishes between a "surface" and a "deep-seated aesthetization", and when he stresses that it is not "the enjoyment of art as such, but only a reflected aesthetic consciousness according to today's conditions that affords the potential for sensibility which can also become socially relevant".⁴⁵ A similar ambivalence is present in Kyndrup's theory. He avoids the traditional hierarchy of the sensuous by explaining how aesthetic relationships can be established with all kinds of objects and situations in everyday life. But, at the same time, he finds it "obvious that not all evaluations of something, not all idiosyncrasies or preferences constitute judgments of taste".⁴⁶ They require the ability to "see oneself see". Also in these late modern versions of aesthetic and cultural theory there is thus a tendency to situate the potential for an acknowledging or exchanging community in analytical, articulate and reflective minds rather than in inarticulate and sensuous bodies.

In the theory of the omnivore it seems to be the other way around. What is important in the notion of the omnivore is not intellectual reflection but rather consumption and enjoyment. Taking the metaphor seriously, the omnivore seems to indicate another form of material and bodily appropriation. The omnivore can easily consume cultural artefacts without reflecting on or talking about them – like some survey respondents who indiscriminately say that they e.g. "like all music".

But maybe omnivorousness is the wrong metaphor, or a metaphor that only fits part of what is going on. Many surveys point at a much more selective “picky omnivore” that differs from the traditional snobs not as much in degree of selectiveness as in preference for innovative experiments and hybrids instead of perfection in well-defined genres.⁴⁷ The openness of the omnivores is often partial and qualified. They accept many things but “dislike particular items in particular ways”, and their omnivorous orientation “is itself a way of negotiating and demonstrating a form of distinction”.⁴⁸

It is therefore also problematic, as some sociologists do, to associate aesthetic omnivorousness with a more general openness towards cultural and social diversity, “spontaneously drawing up a flattering portrait of the new elites as being more tolerant, more eclectic, less sectarian (we might say “culturally cosmopolitan”) than the popular classes who are labelled more constrained, less tolerant, and less open”.⁴⁹

But this tendency among sociologists – as well as among aesthetic and cultural theorists who believe that art has a social and humanistic potential of challenging our own beliefs, opening up towards other experiences and communities, and doing justice to the heterogeneous – is also problematic in other ways. One is that it is far from obvious that disliking certain cultural genres necessarily indicates intolerance. Disliking something is sure possible without questioning the rights of others to like it.⁵⁰ Another is more complicated. It regards the manner of consumption. For how do we know if the various artefacts are consumed with the sensible minds and reflected eyes described by Kyndrup and Welsch, or if, on the other hand, they are consumed as commodities, as objects made for consumption, with all the required homogenization, accessibility and exchangeability? Our swift everyday alternation between pasta and sushi or between Argentinean tango and hip hop clearly shows that our consumption does not necessarily imply a deeper cultural knowledge or acknowledgement. Instead of being seen as expressions of a more fundamental otherness, of other ways of understanding the world, of other cultures or other forms of life, the artefacts may just as well be judged according to an immediate domestication and appropriation. Understood in this way, the omnivores who find expressions of all sorts from around the world open to aesthetic appropriation give a false impression of the ease by which cultural differences are overcome.⁵¹

What is clear, however, is that the hierarchies have not disappeared. When the picky omnivores include popular culture instead of avoiding it, they thereby elevate themselves by showing that they can look beyond

their own niches and understand this too. This is especially relevant as cultural niche-casting and niche-marketing is increasing, thereby dividing audiences, citizens and consumers into ever more narrowly defined groups and presenting them only with information and products they are likely to want.⁵² In some ways this contradicts the demand of flexibility, openness etc. described above. But it is rather the flip side of the coin. It is because and not in spite of cultural diversity and different lifestyle niches that it is high status to be able to transgress your own limited milieu. This is cultural capital, defined in another way than Bourdieu did it 30 years ago, but with a similar hierarchy.

At the top is the ideal type of the picky omnivores who have the knowledge and ability to judge everything aesthetically. They pick and choose from the cultural abundance, finding what is interesting and using it in a creative way. They know and dare enough to sort out, challenge established hierarchies and make aesthetic judgments. This is an ideal type no longer relying on the prescriptions, concepts and rules of Kant's determinate judgment. It is a character able – just as Kant described the judgment of taste – to act without given rules and maybe even produce new ones. In the middle are the flexible and more indiscriminating omnivores who out of necessity and/or goodwill internalize the requirements of the new capitalism. They have the capacity for consumption, and adapt and appropriate as the circumstances demand. Finally, at the bottom, are the univores, unable to profit from the cultural abundance and unable to leave their own cultural and social niche.

The hierarchies have not disappeared in cultural life, and neither have they disappeared in the contemporary debates about taste and cultural consumption. The elite way of appropriating arts and culture is once again portrayed as the most elevated – just as it has been for the last couple of hundred years in the aesthetic tradition following Kant. What has changed is probably that it now requires even more time and cultural capital, than it did when Bourdieu wrote his social critique, to acquire the elite way of appropriation. In other words the fact that the hierarchies are less firmly defined does in no way mean that they are less strong.

Notes

1. Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, translated by James Creed Meredith, 2004/1790, §7, <http://etext.library.adelaide.edu.au/k/kant/immanuel/k16j/index.html> (accessed November 11, 2008).

2. Ibid. §56.

3. Ibid. §6.

4. Wilhelm von Humboldt, "Theorie der Bildung der Menschen", in *Werke in fünf Bänden, Band I*, ed. Andreas Flitner and Klaus Giel (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1960/ca. 1793), 235.

5. Friedrich Schiller, *Letters Upon The Aesthetic Education Of Man*, 1794, Hoboken, N.J. BiblioBytes (NetLibrary), 6th letter, p. 11. <http://www.netlibrary.com/Reader> (accessed November 11, 2008).

6. According to this tradition, the aristocrat is distinguished from the 'common people' by being a 'man of taste', and taste is often described as an inherited rather than acquired quality; cf. Heinz-Dieter Meyer, "Taste Formation in Pluralistic Societies", *International Sociology*, vol. 15 (1), London 2000: 33–56.

7. Cf. e.g., Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990).

8. In the early years of Cultural Studies (represented by such theorists as Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart), the focus was mainly on working class culture and the 'whole way of life' (cf. e.g. Raymond Williams: "Culture is ordinary", in Raymond Williams, *Resources of hope*, London: Verso, 1989/1958). Later on, various minority cultures have attracted more attention.

9. As Wolfgang Iser has pointed out, this hierarchy is not only characteristic of Kant and Schiller's thinking, but of modern aesthetics generally, which is dominated by "the elevatory principle". The principle states that "in perceiving, keep yourself free of sensuous sensation, disregard it, rise above it!", and "don't heed primary vital pleasures, but also exercise the higher, peculiarly aesthetic pleasure of reflective delight!" (Wolfgang Iser, *Undoing Aesthetics* (London: Sage, 1997), 63.

10. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, translated by Richard Nice, (London: Routledge, 1984/1979), 466.

11. A search in the Web of Science database comparing the second half of the 1980s to the second half of the 1990s shows an increase of 1700 per cent of citations containing the term cultural diversity, cf. Michèle Ollivier, "Modes of openness to cultural diversity: Humanist, populist, practical, and indifferent", *Poetics* 36 (Amsterdam: Elsevier 2008), 121.

12. Cf. Iser 1997. Iser distinguishes between a "surface aesthetization", towards which he is critical, and a "deep-seated aesthetization". Most of the above-mentioned phenomena belong to the surface, while the deep-seated aesthetization mainly refers to changes in technology and production processes, foregrounding virtuality and modellability and changing both reality's mode of being and our conception of it.

13. Bourdieu, 5.

14. Kant is less clear regarding the ontological status of common sense. He asks:

“But does such a common sense in fact exist as a constitutive principle of the possibility of experience, or is it formed for us as a regulative principle by a still higher principle of reason, that for higher ends first seeks to beget in us a common sense? Is taste, in other words, a natural and original faculty, or is it only the idea of one that is artificial and to be acquired by us, so that a judgment of taste, with its demand for universal assent, is but a requirement of reason for generating such a consensus, and does the ‘ought’ ... ? These are questions which as yet we are neither willing nor in a position to investigate” (Ibid., §22).

15. Morten Kyndrup, “Kunstværk, dom, subjektivitet”, *Passepartout* nr 22 (Århus: Institute of Aesthetic Studies 2003), 72.

16. Ibid., 78.

17. Welsch, 70.

18. Ibid., 25.

19. Ibid., 26.

20. Cf. especially Richard A. Peterson and Albert Simkus, “How Musical Tastes Mark Occupational Status Groups”, in *Cultivating Differences*, ed. Michèle Lamont and Marcel Fournier (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), and Richard A. Peterson and Roger M. Kern, “Changing Highbrow Taste: From Snob to Omnivore”, *American Sociological Review*, vol. 61 (1996, October).

21. Peterson and Kern 1996, 900.

22. Ibid., 901. In a historical survey of snobbery in the US, Peterson argues that high- and lowbrow stem from the 1880s when the importance of cultural capital and the stigmatization of the popular emerge. It is not until the 1930s that middlebrow is used for the many “who were too respectable to be called lowbrows and were too Philistine to be called highs” (Richard A. Peterson, “The rise and fall of highbrow snobbery as a status marker”, *Poetics* 25 (Amsterdam: Elsevier 1997), 84). The development was not unidirectional, however, the snobbery being attacked at least since the 1920s when the interest in jazz was one among several highbrow fascinations of lowbrow culture.

23. Ibid.

24. Cf. Richard A. Peterson, “Problems in comparative research: The example of omnivorousness”, *Poetics* 33 (Amsterdam: Elsevier 2005), 261.

25. Alan Warde, David Wright and Modesto Gayo-Cal, “The omnivorous orientation in the UK”, *Poetics* 36 (Amsterdam: Elsevier 2008), 155.

In the early research Peterson and his colleagues used some rather simplistic divisions, e.g. that lowbrow music is created by socially marginalized groups, while middlebrow is identified as commercial mainstream. The former included country, bluegrass, gospel, rock and blues, the latter mood/easy-listening, Broadway musicals and big band music (Peterson 1997, 901). Such a division is problematic in several respects. To mention one, aesthetic categories and hierarchies change

fast, and 'rock' from 1982 and 1992, respectively, is not the same. If intellectuals were fonder of rock in 1992 than they were in 1982, it is therefore not necessarily because they are less snobbish, but maybe because rock and the status of rock have changed. In the latest research Peterson has paid more attention to the complexity of the art world. For other interesting analyses that confront the contemporary blurring of boundaries and mixing of genres, cf. also Michèle Ollivier, "Modes of openness to cultural diversity: Humanist, populist, practical, and indifferent", *Poetics* 36 (Amsterdam: Elsevier 2008) and Bernard Lahire, "The individual and the mixing of genres: Cultural dissonance and self-distinction", *Poetics* 36 (Amsterdam: Elsevier 2008).

26. Ibid., 149.

27. Peterson and Kern 1996, 905–906.

28. Peterson and Simkus 1992, 169.

29. Paul Dimaggio and Toqir Mukhtar, "Arts Participation as Cultural Capital in the United States, 1982–2002", in *Engaging Art: The Next Great Transformation of America's Cultural Life*, ed. Steven J. Tepper and Bill Ivey (New York/London: Routledge 2008), 275.

30. Cf. Richard A. Peterson and Gabriel Rossman: "Changing Arts Audiences", in *Engaging Art: The Next Great Transformation of America's Cultural Life*, ed. Steven J. Tepper and Bill Ivey (New York/London: Routledge 2008).

31. Cf. Lahire.

32. Peterson 2005, 265. Cf. also Warde, Wright and Gayo-Cal, 164.

33. Lahire, 170. Lahire prefers the notions of dissonant/consonant to omnivore/univore. Profiles are dissonant when they combine activities and genres belonging to very legitimate and much less legitimate cultural registers, while consonant profiles combine activities and genres that are either exclusively legitimate or exclusively illegitimate.

34. Ibid., 170–171.

35. Peterson and Rossman, 313.

36. Peterson 2005, 263.

37. Ibid.

38. Koen van Eijck, "Richard A. Peterson and the culture of consumption", *Poetics* 28 (Amsterdam: Elsevier 2000).

39. Richard Sennett, *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism* (New York/London: W.W. Norton & Company 1998), 9.

40. Lahire: 172.

41. Peterson 1992, 184.

42. Bourdieu 1994, 310–311.

43. Kant §40.

44. Ibid.

45. Welsch, 26.

46. Kyndrup, 73.

47. Koen van Eijck: "Richard A. Peterson and the culture of consumption", *Poetics* 28 (Amsterdam: Elsevier 2000), 216.

48. Warde, Wright and Gayo-Cal, 164.

49. Lahire, 184.

50. Lahire, 183.

51. Cf. Jonathan Friedman's critique of the superficial cosmopolitan way of dealing with cultural differences. They are handled as "quite homogeneous in their diversity. The consumptive mode is the major form of this appropriation of otherness, one that is not a direct engagement with real-life differences in all their frightening incommensurability but with the domesticated products-for-us of their existences" (Jonathan Friedman, "Globalisation and the Making of a Global Imaginary", in *Global Encounters*, ed. Gitte Stald and Thomas Tufte (University of Luton Press 2002), 27).

52. Peterson 2005, 267. According to Peterson market researchers who in the early 1980s divided US-families into nine lifestyle categories have in the late 1990s identified 62 distinct lifestyles.