

Handbook of Cultural Sociology

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Access to pleasure

Aesthetics, social inequality, and the structure of culture production

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Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) preoccupation with cultural capital as a resource to be deployed in the competition for advantage or "exchanged" for other forms of capital has obscured the ways that aesthetic pleasure matters for its own sake. *Distinction* (1984) analyzes how the exercise of socially shaped cultural taste—the "distinctions" people make, which in turn "distinguish" them—advantages or disadvantages people in the competition for social advantage, especially in the educational system. Cultural knowledge and taste become a kind of "capital" that can be exchanged at specific "ratios" for capital in other realms. Even *The Rules of Art* (1992), which focuses on culture creators rather than cultural consumption, deploys vast erudition about Flaubert and his contemporaries to argue that culture creators are driven by concern about rivalries and sources of distinction in an existing artistic field, or by the aspiration to define a new artistic field in which they are supreme. Lost in Bourdieu's approach is the idea that a culture creator might be driven by the desire to create a certain aesthetic effect—to move, astound, delight, entertain, terrify, or simply *affect* an audience.

Here I explore a different, but no less significant form of cultural stratification: the differential availability of aesthetic pleasures to those with differing social resources. I focus on the production of cultural objects, performances, and meanings; on the ways audiences are brought into relationship with cultural creators; and on the organizations and practices that frame aesthetic experience.

I start from the premise that aesthetic pleasure is one of the great goods of life. The view that people participate in playful aesthetic experience only as a poor substitute for something else—politics, class struggle, the pursuit of power or status—is inadequate, both as an ideal of how people ought to live and as a description of how they do live (Stromberg 2009). I include under the broad category of "aesthetic pleasure" all forms of entertainment, from watching a wacky TV sit-com, to cruising YouTube for the latest political video, to the sometimes excruciating pleasures of serious drama, ballet, opera, or demanding music. Cultural expertise and the exercise of discriminating taste can serve to assert status, to intimidate others, and perhaps in some cases to gain access to material and other rewards. However, the Bourdieuan preoccupation with cultural distinction—both the amount of culture people "know" and the skills needed to decipher it—weakens

cultural analysis by assuming that culture's major role is to reproduce inequality (by either mystifying class hierarchy, legitimating inequality, or serving as the opiate of the masses).

Taking the aesthetic function of culture seriously directs attention to the social-organizational factors that create differential access to aesthetic pleasure and to the social arrangements likely to produce such pleasure in greater or lesser measure. Social arrangements can stimulate or inhibit the creation of resonant cultural objects that appeal to particular sorts of audiences, and they can make the conditions for such enjoyment more and less available. Economic and educational inequalities matter partly because they deprive some groups of access to a full share of aesthetic pleasure—access to culture as a form of group expression and solidarity and access to intense, deep, rich, or thrilling cultural experience.

Meaning in social context

A sociologically useful approach to aesthetic pleasure focuses on “conventions”—the shared expectations that link culture creators and their audiences and allow them to communicate (Meyer 1956; Becker 1982; Griswold 1987; Olick 1999). As Becker argues, conventions help the producers of cultural works to coordinate their efforts, as when the conductor and members of an orchestra all know the conventions of musical notation or performance styles. But the deeper significance of conventions for aesthetic pleasure comes from what happens when conventions are broken—or rather when the aesthetic expectations that have emerged within a cultural genre allow creators and performers to create what Leonard Meyer called “emotion and meaning.”

In *Emotion and Meaning in Music* (1956), Meyer argued that the arousal, violation, and resolution of expectations are fundamental to the creation of aesthetic “meaning.” Conventions help to create expectations; slight violations of those expectations generate aesthetic tension—which, when resolved, produces aesthetic pleasure. When audiences and creators share conventions, creators have a set of expectations to work with to produce aesthetically powerful effects. Variations on a melodic theme, puzzlement about “whodunit” in a murder mystery, or suspense about the outcome in a well-matched sporting event (Geertz, 1973) produce just this sort of aesthetic tension and excitement for knowledgeable observers. Pleasurable anticipation, heightened attention, and absorbed involvement are the hallmarks of successful aesthetic engagement. For audiences who lack the relevant conventions, however, even a highly refined artistic product of an unfamiliar aesthetic tradition (Chinese opera for a Westerner unfamiliar with the genre, for example) may create no aesthetic pleasure.

The sociological question is: What allows some groups more than others (1) to develop a set of shared conventions and to refine or extend them so that variations on those conventions will be aesthetically meaningful, and (2) to support creators who will produce cultural objects or performances that respond to, develop, and continually renew those conventions? Since aesthetic pleasure depends both on shared expectations and on the creation of innovations that can surprise, unsettle, and delight, explaining differences in the availability and richness of aesthetic pleasure requires paying attention both to social forces that organize audiences and creators so that they share aesthetic conventions, and to social arrangements that stimulate extensions, refinements, and innovations that deepen or intensify cultural resonance.

If we examine class differences in aesthetic experience, we do not need to start from Bourdieu's (1984) essentializing claim that higher-class people, freed from material necessity, are inherently more likely to "aestheticize" experience (the fanciful "styling" of the dress of poor teenagers, or the stylized aesthetics that Tom Wolfe [1965] described in varied American subcultures easily demonstrates the fallacy of such an argument). Instead we can ask what resources different groups have to create and preserve cultural objects and practices that offer them depth, meaning, resonance, or excitement—objects and practices that can convey intense or gratifying aesthetic pleasure. Of course, such pleasure does not come from cultural objects alone, but from an interaction between an object and the educated skills, capacities, or interests of the appreciator (see Griswold 1986 on meaning as metaphor; Baxandall 1972 on the "period eye").

Revisiting the mass-culture debate

The debate over "mass culture," which roiled intellectuals in the 1950s and 1960s, has largely faded. In part this is the result of the important work of Paul DiMaggio (1982; see also Levine 1988), showing that the contemporary distinction between high and popular culture was socially constructed by particular groups, in a specific historical era. The history of how, in the mid-nineteenth century, popular performances might mix Shakespearean orations, popular song, ribald humor, and classical music, while by the end of the nineteenth century classical music and high art were carefully segregated in museums and symphony halls, seemed to show that the distinction between "high" and "popular" culture is a purely artificial one. By this logic, high culture is any culture created and monopolized by social elites who want to preserve their exclusivity and assert their superiority. Museums, orchestras, and ballet and opera companies then simply police the (arbitrary, artificial) boundary between a valued elite culture and a devalued popular culture.

A focus on cultural enjoyment, rather than cultural prestige, however, suggests the need to give attention to organizational and structural factors that shape opportunities for aesthetic pleasure. Groups differ in their access to satisfying cultural experiences due to systematic differences in the organization of cultural production and the structures that link potential audiences to culture creators.

Organizational bases for cultural pleasure

Two major, under-appreciated texts: Paul DiMaggio's (1987) "Classification in Art" and Robert Escarpit's (1971) classic, *The Sociology of Literature*, provide a starting point for analyzing social variations in access to aesthetic pleasure. DiMaggio argues that distinctive cultural genres emerge from groups' need to define or bound themselves. Cultural knowledge, including knowledge of specific cultural genres, he argues, operates not mainly to legitimate group claims to privilege, but to provide material for sociable interaction, for conversation, among those who want to enact or assert solidarity. This interpretation of cultural capital makes sense of the finding (one Bourdieu never explained satisfactorily) that social taste hierarchies are not exclusive. Higher status and more educated people have taste for and participate in all sorts of culture, including classically high culture, whereas the less educated participate in a narrower range of less high-culture activities (on the growing "omnivore" pattern in high-status groups

see Peterson and Kern 1996; and for France, Coulangeon 2005). This makes sense if, as DiMaggio argues, higher-status people want to be able to form sociable bonds with people like themselves by signaling familiarity with high culture, but also to benefit from friendly relationships with people from all social strata (Erickson 1996, 2007). Of course, familiarity with a diverse array of cultural forms can itself be a status marker (Peterson and Rossman 2007; Sullivan and Katz-Gerro 2007), but the proliferation of artistic genres (Lena and Peterson 2008) and group and individual engagement with aesthetic experience suggest that much more is going on than the assertion of status distinctions. People seek aesthetic pleasure in entertainments that they share with others; and all sorts of groups have an interest in developing and promoting cultural genres that represent, express, and reproduce their collective life.

DiMaggio's perspective complements the valuable insights of Robert Escarpit in *The Sociology of Literature* (1971). Escarpit distinguishes not high and popular culture, but two ways of organizing communication between culture creators and their audiences—the “Cultured Circuit” and the “Popular Circuit.” Although these two organizational forms may be associated with high versus popular culture, folk cultures grounded in a cohesive community may have the structural features of the cultured circuit, while certain elite cultural genres may lack them. The cultured circuit is characterized by extensive feedback from the consumers of cultural products to those who create them, usually via critics, who both shape audience taste and transmit critical understandings back to creators or producers. Escarpit notes that in the cultured circuit authors often receive active feedback on their work from likely audiences (these authors' friends tend to be the same sort of people as their readers) and from critics, who both respond to the work and organize and educate audiences. The popular circuit (mass-market paperbacks or network television, for example), in contrast, lacks feedback except through the market: culture producers for the popular circuit know what to create only by observing what has sold in the recent past (see Hirsch 1972). Culture produced for the popular circuit thus tends to imitate successful formulas, or, like the “recombinant” TV shows that Todd Gitlin (1985) describes, to combine currently popular themes in slightly new ways.

The distinction between popular and cultured circuits can be used to analyze groups' varying access to culture that reinforces group solidarities, responds to their tastes, and builds on shared tastes to innovate in ways that delight or entertain. And this organizational distinction may not always correspond to what we think of as high versus popular culture. Traditional high culture may stagnate—especially when those eager to maintain its boundaries rigidly patrol its content so that it does not evolve in response to the interests of its audiences. Some popular forms, such as jazz (especially in its formative period [Lopes 2002]), “indie” rock, or Hip-Hop dance parties, on the other hand, might bring culture creators face to face with knowledgeable, interested audiences who give direct feedback about what moves or excites them. Thus some popular genres are produced through structures resembling the cultured circuit, and some “high culture” genres may not have structures of production and distribution that generate vibrant cultural experience. In general, however, groups without wealth and leisure are also disadvantaged in their access to structures of cultural production that create the greatest possibilities of aesthetic pleasure.

What circumstances are likely to promote the discrete, bounded genres that DiMaggio (1987) analyzes or the responsive feedback circuits that Escarpit describes? DiMaggio points out that however much those who create a new genre would like to keep it exclusive (as the youth cultures that generate new musical styles try to do

[Hebdige 1979; Frith 1981]), commercial market interests seek to broaden audiences, thus diluting the symbolic exclusivity of a group's identification with a specific genre and weakening the link between culture producers and a specialized audience to whose sophisticated tastes they can respond. The commercial "massification" of any cultural genre is thus likely to make its cultural products more stereotyped, less innovative, and less exciting to the original fans, because now the genre also has to please less knowledgeable audiences, who are less experienced in the genre's particular conventions.

Diversity and innovation

Peterson and Berger's (1975) classic article "Cycles in Symbol Production" analyzed sources of innovation and diversity in culture production. They distinguished periods of market concentration (in which a small number of producers control production and distribution of cultural products and inhibit innovation) from periods in which many producers compete, creating more diverse and innovative cultural products. Building on Peterson and Berger, Lopes (1992) distinguishes not only between different degrees of concentration among producers, but between more segmented versus unified markets. In a segmented market, culture is distributed through specialized channels, reaching more homogeneous audiences. When, for example, radio diversified after television enticed away the mass audience, radio stations developed new formats geared toward small segments of the audience, creating specialized stations for jazz, soul, country, gospel, and rock (versus radio's pre-TV fare of variety shows, news, soap operas, dramas, and comedy). Diversified radio stations created specialized distribution channels for recorded music, which in turn led to a flowering of varied genres of music and to the creation of dynamic new genres. Market segmentation allows specialized producers to thrive and makes it more likely that cultural producers will be able to find those who share their tastes and appreciate their aesthetic conventions, encouraging the rapid development of cultural products that speak to those tastes.

Culture produced for a mass market is likely to satisfy average tastes reasonably well, since producers have an incentive to maximize their appeal to the broadest group of consumers. But such culture is not likely to develop a deepened aesthetic vocabulary, innovative variations on existing conventions, or enhanced power to move audiences (including the power to thrill, shock, or delight): creators cannot presume an audience whose aesthetic vocabulary they know and share, and the mass market does not have rich feedback mechanisms through which a knowledgeable audience can communicate its responses and thus stimulate cumulative development of intensified meanings. Jazz in its early development had all the structural advantages of a segmented audience and a "cultured" feedback circuit: it was played by musicians for musicians in after-hours venues, so audiences consisted largely of other musicians, who could respond immediately and knowledgeably to what they heard (Lopes 2002). "Massified" culture, in contrast, is not directed to a particular audience's taste; its aesthetic power is limited if there are few shared conventions that allow creators to pursue cumulative innovation by working new changes on "educated" tastes (by "educated" I mean, for example, the knowledgeable tastes of teenagers who have played many video games and are looking for the next heightened thrill, of movie-goers who have seen every horror film and are looking for a zombie-fest to top the last one, as well as of aesthetes who can appreciate the slightest variation in the movement of a ballerina's hand).

Structural sources of elite aesthetic advantage

If decidedly non-elite subcultures, like those of early punk rockers (Hebdige 1979) or Hip-Hop, can produce vibrant, aesthetically powerful culture, then why in general should those with greater wealth and privilege also have access to more aesthetic pleasure? The examples of punk music and Hip-Hop suggest one immediate reason: the subcultures that produce vibrant aesthetic experience have great difficulty maintaining control of that culture, which rapidly succumbs to commercial pressures that dilute the culture's meanings and separate culture creators from knowledgeable audiences.

Maintaining specialized relations between creators and audiences

The aesthetic advantages of elites go beyond simple freedom from pressures to "massify" their favored cultural products. Escarpit (1971) points to some obvious ways in which those with greater material resources secure for themselves the advantages of more deeply embedded cultural production. The wealthy are more likely to be able to pay for specialized cultural outlets (like bookstores, fashion houses, specialized magazines, or book review journals) that bring together audiences of those who share similar tastes. Second, they are more likely to be able to support specialists in feedback, like literary critics, who let producers know what audiences like, and who tell audiences what to watch out for. (Janice Radway [1984] described a bookstore owner who performed this function for women romance readers, but perhaps the fate of local bookstores makes the point about the disadvantages faced by non-elite culture consumers.)

DiMaggio (1982) describes how the nineteenth-century Boston upper class created an organizational infrastructure that set high culture apart. He also describes powerful aesthetic advantages that accompanied the new structure. Enormous organizational effort and considerable financial resources were required to create the organizational basis for a distinctive high culture—in the case of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, a canon purged of popular music, specialized musicians who performed only classical work, and special venues (a symphony hall) where audiences and performers or creators could reliably meet.

Aesthetic advantages of control over space and time

DiMaggio (1982) describes new norms that elites imposed in such venues as museums and symphony halls—sacralization, a hushed reverence (in contrast to the cacophony of a London theater, or the sometimes rowdy behavior of audiences in the vaudeville or popular performance circuit). Although the reverent decorum of high-culture venues is contested in some contemporary art, it is worth noticing what these audience norms permit aesthetically. Creators who know that audiences will spend time and effort trying to fathom their work can create subtle effects that those who have to grab their audiences' attention cannot afford. Both music and theater can use silences as expressive devices. Where audiences commit themselves to attentive engagement, a story can start slowly and build gradually. If audiences accept conventions of reverent waiting, art can create ambiguity, because audiences will tolerate it, waiting until the "meaning" seeps in. Of course these conventions can also lead to sterile, pretentious, or vacuous works, with audiences squirming miserably in their seats as they try to seem engaged by some piece of

abstruse high culture. But the bounded spaces for cultural reception that elites can create—and the reverent attitude they inculcate—can give creators aesthetic resources with which to produce a range of effects, from the dramatic sound that shatters a silence, to the complexity of poetic language, to the exquisite variation in a soprano's aria that only an opera lover could appreciate.

Art "versus" market

It is part of the institutional delineation of "high" versus "popular" art forms—the "classification" and "framing" described by DiMaggio (1982)—that high culture is insulated from commercial pressures. From the poorest art-school student to the most eminent symphony conductor, the claim to be doing serious art has depended in part on (at least the pretense of) indifference to—or insulation from—market pressures. Indeed, the ideal of creators pursuing their autonomous aesthetic vision connotes indifference to or insulation from market forces. And the ideal of art as a purely aesthetic enterprise depends on the notion that someone somewhere—a wealthy patron, an endowed museum, an orchestra's wealthy board members—will protect the art from unmediated audience demands.

Why, however, should protection from market pressures be important for the creation of vibrant, aesthetically gratifying culture? After all, if people do not enjoy or appreciate a cultural form enough to pay for it, then it probably lacks the ability to move or excite them. For an answer to this question we have to return to DiMaggio's central point in "Classification in Art." The inability to buffer a genre against market pressures virtually guarantees that it will be diluted to satisfy a broader set of tastes than those of the group whose interests gave rise to it and brought initial success. It will then be less likely to have a rich set of shared conventions and to develop dynamic innovations and aesthetic intensification to delight a specialized group of skilled appreciators. At the same time, of course, culture that is so buffered from audience demands that it need move and excite no one at all—what is sometimes referred to as "academic" culture (Crane 1976)—can become sterile, providing very little aesthetic gratification. Nonetheless, the ability to buffer a genre against market pressures is not just a way of achieving the status of "art" (as Becker 1982 describes potters trying to do by slashing their ceramic bowls or making impossibly large or otherwise non-functional objects, to distinguish their "art" from "crafts"). Insulating one's genre against market pressures—as youth cultures from punks to "house" music aficionados try to do—is fundamental to being able to keep a genre dynamic and to preserving a direct relationship between culture creators and a specific audience that shares their conventions.

Collecting and preserving

The last critical element that has differentiated the high and popular arts is the ability to preserve and teach the history of the genre, adding what I would call cultural depth—a rich reservoir of potential associations—as an aesthetic resource that creators can draw upon. Artists who can visit museums—and who can take for granted that those who see their art have also visited museums and absorbed the history of the form—can make allusions, employ visual vocabularies, or challenge conventions that they know are shared.

Elites can afford to establish repositories for the history of their preferred genres, from the collections of antique batiks that wealthy Indonesian families preserve over centuries, to the collections of art museums, to the repertoires of theaters and orchestras. Elite institutions also maintain specialists who conserve and teach the inherited repertoire, analyzing it for new understandings and reproducing an educated audience of those who have studied “music appreciation” or “art history.” Literature classes provide a background that those who write for educated readers can take for granted, even as universities and colleges revise and rearrange the canon that writers and educated readers share. Such “preservation” has typically been the way that new elites made claims for the value of “their” genre (as when new elites formed the Museum of Modern Art and, shortly after, the Whitney). It takes money to do this, and preservation—the attempt to raise the status of a genre by preserving its history and by having specialists catalog and analyze that history—is one of the fundamental acts that raises the stature, but also the shared aesthetic vocabulary, of a genre. The creation of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences and the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences were attempts by cultural creators to raise the stature of their products. Film departments in universities create such a critical and canon-defining function for movies. The recognition of jazz as a serious art form (Lopes 2002) depended in part on the emergence of critics, collectors, and eventually academics, who preserve and interpret its history.

These elements of “art-ness”—special places and moods (which bring audiences and creators together as well), protection from commercial pressures, preservation of the history of the genre—all permit richer meaning making. And these are advantages that the privileged are more likely to be able to create and maintain for the genres that they favor.

Technological change and aesthetic pleasures (Yelp!)

If cultural vitality and aesthetic pleasure derive from the structural features of systems of cultural production and distribution, rather than from the supposed qualities of elite versus less-elite culture consumers, then technological changes can alter culture and the possibilities of aesthetic pleasure in fundamental ways. As the internet has made it possible for musicians to find and to produce music for tiny, geographically dispersed audiences—and as websites that critique and recommend music to those with shared musical tastes proliferate—there has been a revolution in the amount of musical creativity (and the consequent possibilities for powerful aesthetic experience for both creators and audiences) (see the examples in Tepper and Ivey 2007).

New technologies also make it possible for more genres to preserve their histories (movies and TV series on video) and thus for culture creators to presume a shared vocabulary of associations, references, and expectations. With the web’s discovery of “customer reviews,” many more subcultures can share tastes with bebies of like-minded others who revel in good local barbecue reviewed on Yelp!, or “swoon” (in Zagat’s favorite terminology) at exquisitely subtle sushi. Almost any subculture can develop the shared conventions and the discriminating judgments that stimulate the creation of vibrant culture and intensified aesthetic pleasure. Such culture exercises pleasurable powers of discrimination, builds solidarities, and heightens appreciation. Such technologies widen the possibility of knowledgeable, cultivated taste, and its concomitant aesthetic delights.

To understand culture as a source of meaning and pleasure does not require that we ignore its important role in signaling group membership and enacting social hierarchy. But ignoring the social factors that shape possibilities for aesthetic enjoyment—and neglecting that enjoyment as one of the fundamental elements of a good life—also misses a major cost of social inequality.

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