

Middlebrow is the new lowbrow – mainstream taste the only taste for which you still have to say you're sorry. And there, taste seems less an aesthetic question than, again, a social one: among the thousands of varieties of aesthetes and geeks and hobbyists, each with their special-ordered cultural diet, the abiding mystery of mainstream culture is, "Who the hell *are* those people?" Perhaps Komar and Melamid are right: the way to the heart of taste today may be through a poll.

from Carl Wilson, LET'S TALK ABOUT LOVE: WHY OTHER PEOPLE HAVE SUCH BAD TASTE (2014)

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Let's Talk About Who's Got Bad Taste

The poll I have in mind was conducted in the mid-1960s in France by a team of researchers under sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. It surveyed thousands of people on what kinds of culture they knew, liked and participated in – not just in the arts, but sports, hobbies, foods, styles of dress and furniture, the newspapers and TV programs they followed, etcetera. All this data was correlated with information about their incomes, education levels, family backgrounds and occupations, and supplemented with interviews in which people were asked to discuss and defend their preferences.

The result was a milestone of social science, Bourdieu's 1979 tome *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Note the subtitle, a flip of the bird to Kant's Enlightenment notion of disinterested aesthetic judgment: For Bourdieu, taste is always interested – in fact, self-interested – and those interests are *social*. His theories press the point that aesthetics are social all the way down, just a set of euphemisms for a starker system of inequality and competition: if you flinch at seeing a copy of *Let's Talk About Love* or *The Da Vinci Code* on a friend's shelves, what

you are trying to shake off is the stain of the *déclassé*, the threat of social inferiority.

What made him think so? His survey data had confirmed stereotypes to a staggering degree: almost exclusively, French people with working-class jobs knew and liked only relatively "lowbrow" culture; the middle classes liked "middlebrow" stuff; and the better-off were patrons of "highbrow" culture. Aesthetic and lifestyle choices even clustered along more minute divisions within classes: workers in factories had different tastes than workers in shopping centers; office managers differed from small-business owners; surgeons' tastes were unlike those of corporate executives.

But it was in asking people the reasons behind their choices that Bourdieu exploded the assumptions embedded in the whole "brow" system (which originated in racist nineteenth-century theories about facial features and intelligence). What he found was that poorer people were pragmatic about their tastes, describing them as entertaining, useful and accessible. But from the middle classes up, people had much grander justifications. For one thing, they were far more confident about their dislikes, about what was tacky or lame. But they also spoke in elaborate detail about how their tastes reflected their values and personalities, and in what areas they still wanted to enrich their knowledge.

Bourdieu's interpretation was that tastes were serving as strategic tools. While working-class tastes seemed mainly a default (serving at best to express group belongingness and solidarity), for everyone else taste was not only a product of economic and educational background but, as it developed through life, a force mobilized as part of their quest for social status (or what Bourdieu called symbolic power). What we have agreed to call tastes, he said, is an array of

symbolic associations we use to set ourselves apart from those whose social ranking is beneath us, and to take aim at the status we think we deserve. Taste is a means of distinguishing ourselves from others, the pursuit of *distinction*. And its end product is to perpetuate and reproduce the class structure.

His argument may seem less counterintuitive if you put it in terms of evolutionary psychology: if human beings are driven to advance in status in order to acquire mates and provide security to their offspring, Bourdieu was proposing that taste is a tool of those instincts, used to gain competitive advantage; and in a capitalist society, class is how this competition is structured (and exacerbated), to the advantage of the dominant elite.

Was he saying that when you become a bank manager, you automatically start liking the music other bank managers like? No, nothing so mechanical. Unlike previous, reductive Marxist theorists of culture, Bourdieu wanted to account for the fact that we experience tastes as both spontaneous attractions and personal choices. To square individuality and agency with the consistency of his data, he needed new conceptual terms. He made an analogy with economics: Imagine that capital comes in forms other than money and property, such as *cultural capital* (knowledge and experience of culture, ideas and references) and *social capital* (personal connections and influence), terms he coined that have come into common usage. As with money, cultural and social capital's value depends on scarcity, on knowing what others don't. Sometimes forms of capital are interchangeable: I can buy cultural knowledge through education, which may lead to a better job and connections. Often they are not: a university professor may have top-flight cultural and social capital, but she cannot command a CEO's salary. For Bourdieu, class is

determined not just by income or occupation but by how much of all these forms of capital you have, and in what combinations.

The class segment you're born, raised and schooled in produces what Bourdieu called your *habitus*, meaning both your *home base* and your *habits*: the attitudes, abilities and expectations your upbringing has nurtured. You then make choices, consciously or unconsciously, to maximize your satisfaction in life within the bounds your *habitus* makes thinkable: it does not dictate what you do, but it serves as a filter for your predilections and decisions. It's like a jazz musician improvising on a standard: You can alter the notes and rhythms of the melody, but your improvisation is limited by the tempo and chord changes available in the song. To choose otherwise would be to play "badly" and discordantly and risk failure and ostracization. (On the Bourdieuvian bandstand, there is no free jazz.)

Along with *habitus*, the other major social structures for Bourdieu are *fields* – social institutions or networks through which we pursue our goals, such as the political, cultural, corporate, academic, legal, medical or religious fields (each including subfields with their own rules and pecking orders). The pursuit of distinction takes place in those fields. Tastes are the result of the interaction of *habitus* and field – attempts, informed by our backgrounds, to advance our status by accumulating cultural and social capital in particular spheres – and, perhaps more importantly, to prevent ourselves from ever being mistaken for someone of a lower status. Bourdieu wrote that "tastes are perhaps first and foremost distastes, disgusts provoked by horror or visceral intolerance of the tastes of others."

His point is not that people are only pretending to like or dislike the culture they like and dislike, trying to con people into thinking highly of them. The pleasure of listening to music or playing a sport

is obviously real. The argument is that the *kinds* of music and sports we choose, and how we talk about them, are socially shaped – that the cultural filters and concepts that guide my interests in and reactions to music, clothes, films or home decoration come out of my class and field. At worst I am conning myself, but to what I feel is my advantage.

It's not so strange an idea that there are social subtexts to our tastes: You might be a Julliard music student with a trust fund who associates authenticity with the inner city or the backwoods, and feel a little realer yourself when you kick it to Snoop or clean the condo with some bluegrass on. You may be less enamored of what you imagine about frat boys or soccer moms, and avoid music that conjures up such listeners. Or if you *are* a soccer mom, you may want to be the soccer mom who listens to Slayer, because you want to stay a little young and wild, not like those soccer moms who listen to Sheryl Crow.

In early twenty-first-century terms, for most people under fifty, distinction boils down to *cool*. Cool confers status – symbolic power. It incorporates both cultural capital and social capital, and it's a clear potential route to economic capital. Corporations and culture-makers pursue it as much as individuals do. It changes attributes in different milieus. As much as we avow otherwise, few of us are truly indifferent to cool, not a little anxious about whether we have enough, and Bourdieu's theory may illustrate why that's not merely shallow: Being uncool has material consequences. Sexual opportunity, career advancement and respect, even elementary security can ride on it. To ignore cool may mean risking downward mobility at a time when many people are falling out of the middle class.

Even being *deliberately* uncool doesn't save you, as that's an attempt to flip the rules in your favor. Having a "guilty pleasure," for instance,

can be an asset in this system of cultural capital because it suggests that you are so cool that you can afford to risk it on something goofy, ungainly and awkward – which makes you that much cooler. A few people with real panache, like an Andy Warhol or John Waters, can assemble taste profiles that consist of nothing *but* guilty pleasures and be ultra-cool, but that takes at least social capital, so that the kitsch connoisseur can be distinguished from the doofus who just likes goofball stuff. (For you to be cool requires someone else to be less cool.)

The clearest way to understand distinction may be in high-school terms: Say you're a white, nerdy fifteen-year-old boy who listens to *High School Musical* (if you're too old to know what *High School Musical* is, substitute the Andrew Lloyd Webber of your choice) but you come to see you have a chance at becoming friends with the tough kids who smoke behind the school. So you start listening to death metal and wearing hacked-up jean jackets. This isn't a ruse: you just start to see what's *plausible* and *exciting* for you about those tastes. Here, death metal is cultural capital, high-school cliques are the field and your *habitus* is what's likely to determine whether you can carry off the slang and the haircut. Your instinct is to distinguish yourself from the nerds by becoming one of the tough kids, who, incidentally, hate *High School Musical* (or *Cats*) with a vengeance, because that's what nerds listen to. That's distinction.

The indie-rock cliché of "I *used* to like that band" – i.e. until people like *you* liked them – is a sterling example of distinction in action. In fact, distinction helps explain the rapidity of artistic change (artists are competing for distinction) as well as some of the resistance: changing styles threaten to bankrupt some people's cultural capital, to lower the status of those who associated themselves with the older style. Bourdieu argues innovation will usually come from individuals

in a field who do not yet have secure positions, attempting to change the game to their own advantage, while established artists, curators, critics, producers, etcetera, try for as long as they can to preserve the rules by which they were winning.

Distinction might also demystify Kant's claim that taste always desires others' agreement. Your love of hip-hop or hatred for Céline Dion (or vice-versa) is part of your cultural capital, but it only gains value in the competition for distinction if it is *legitimated* in the contexts that matter to you. Unlike Kant, though, Bourdieu would say the last thing you want is that agreement be universal: you want your taste affirmed by your peers and those you admire, but it's just as vital that your redneck uncle thinks you're an idiot to like that rap shit. It proves you've distinguished yourself from him successfully, and can bask in righteous satisfaction.

To the extent we agree that coolness and lack of same are enormously influential – and that coolness is a social category, not a natural attribute (with the possible exception of Keith Richards) – we are all Bourdieuvians.

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One of Bourdieu's most striking notions is that there's also an inherent antagonism between people in fields structured mainly by cultural capital and those in fields where there is primarily economic capital: while high-ranking artists and intellectuals are part of the dominant class in society thanks to their education and influence, they are a *dominated* segment of that class compared to actual *rich* people. This helps explain why so many artists, journalists and academics can see themselves as anti-establishment subversives while most of the public sees them as smug elitists. And this

opposition between cultural and economic capital carries down into less-privileged class strata, perhaps helping to motivate school teachers to vote for Democrats (currently the party associated with cultural capital) and auto workers to vote Republican (symbolically the party of economic capital).

Artistic taste is most competitive among people whose main asset is cultural capital. That's why high school serves as such a vivid backdrop for illustrations of how distinction in artistic taste works: Not only is high school a field we all know, it's one in which there's practically nothing but cultural and social capital; money plays more of a backstage role. In adult life, it's only in culture-centered fields (the arts, academia) that musical or other artistic taste matters the way it does in high school. However, recall that Bourdieu defines taste very broadly, to include tastes in clothes, food, leisure activities, architecture and interior decoration, sports, news sources, etcetera, and you can see how much taste continues to count for the social position of adults in business and political life.

The theory of distinction is reminiscent of Thorstein Veblen's famous critique of conspicuous consumption, but it is less liable to self-congratulatory misreading. It's not that some people are in the grip of a craven obsession with keeping up with the Joneses while less materialistic sorts can stand aloof. *Inconspicuous* consumption can be distinction-oriented too: It distinguishes us from those tacky, materialist people. No one is exempt.

And neither is any artistic field. Bourdieu's tools also offer a revision of the mid-century Frankfurt School critique of the Culture Industry, in which Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (having witnessed the Nazi use of mass communications for propaganda) talked about popular culture as if it were a quasi-fascist conspiracy to

dull and numb the masses. What if, instead, the mass-cultural field is just another zone of competition for distinction, no more or less venal than others? Bourdieu (who died in 2002 at age seventy-one) disliked mass culture himself, but his theories imply that high culture is at least as culpable for social inequity as popular culture is, riddled with gambits to raise its own status and derogate its inferiors. By Bourdieu's lights, if there's such a thing as false consciousness, then everybody has it, at least until they become self-conscious of the social nature of their tastes. It's a useful corrective to the biases of fans and critics who think alternative or independent music is somehow inherently less status-seeking, more real, than pop music. (Which is simply a less-coherent repeat of Adorno's anticommercial attack on jazz.)

The translation of *distinction* to *cool* leads us to one of the problems with applying Bourdieu's model nearly forty years after his research: his original survey did not reflect the relatively recent shakeup in taste categories, the seeming collapse of high and low culture into a No-Brow society in which an in-depth knowledge of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Japanese *ganguro* fashions and the latest graffiti artists may carry more cachet than a conversance with Molière, Schoenberg and Donald Judd. Does that mean his theory is outmoded?

No. For Bourdieu, it doesn't matter what the objects of good taste are at any moment. Change the value of x and the equation stays the same. He notes that a once-refined or highbrow piece of music, such as the *Moonlight Sonata*, can be reassigned to middlebrow culture when it has become overly familiar. Its relative uncoolness is an attribute not of the composition, but of its commonplaceness. Cool things gradually become uncool.

Still, in a hyper-mediated, mass-production culture, a lot of reference points are shared across classes. Almost everyone now will

wear jeans. Nearly everybody has spent time listening to rock music. So there is more mixing and matching than Bourdieu's theories would seem to permit. American sociologists Richard Petersen and Roger Kern in the mid-1990s suggested that the upper-class taste model had changed from a "snob" to an "omnivore" ideal, in which the coolest thing for a well-off and well-educated person to do is to consume some high culture *along* with heaps of popular culture, international art and lowbrow entertainment: a contemporary opera one evening, the roller derby and an Afrobeat show the next. They speculate that the shift corresponds to a new elite requirement to be able to "code switch" in varied cultural settings, due to multiculturalism and globalization. (Bourdieu's own son Emmanuel, now a film director in his forties, is a perfect omnivore, according to a recent profile in the *New York Times*: "He's capable of speaking equally seriously about Leibniz's philosophy and about Antonio Banderas's *Legend of Zorro*.") Petersen and Kern thought it likely that the less privileged would, correspondingly, have narrower patterns of cultural consumption; other researchers think there might be distinct upper-, middle- and lower-class omnivore styles.

But nobody is a true omnivore. To have taste at all means to exclude. It's one thing to prove that well-off people now listen to classical *and* rock *and* hip-hop, read literary novels *and* watch sitcoms, but to show there aren't subtler hierarchies of preference would require dauntingly in-depth research. Most available studies suffer from an inbuilt bias: academics, as the studies themselves show, are nearly the only group in contemporary society that still pays most of its attention to high culture. So when they design their surveys, they ask people to choose between Bach, Philip Glass and hip-hop, not between, say, pop-chart hip-hop, cocaine-rap mixtapes

and politicized underground rap, even though each one carries status and identity implications. Distinctions in a culture that valorizes omnivorism are simply that much more fine-grained, fast-changing and invidious.

Even without more meticulous divisions, though, you can still detect class bias in omnivore tastes: In a paper titled "Anything But Heavy Metal": Symbolic Exclusion and Musical Dislikes," Princeton sociologist Bethany Bryson compiled data on musical tastes and political attitudes, by education level, from the 1993 General Social Survey (conducted annually by a research center at the University of Chicago). Sure enough, she found that the most educated, high-cultural-capital respondents (who were also the most politically liberal and racially tolerant) disliked the fewest forms of music. In particular, highly educated white people were much less likely to reject Latin, jazz, blues and R&B than other white respondents; Bryson described them as maximizing their "multicultural capital." But they did have music they disliked – the four types that had the *least-educated* fans: rap, heavy metal, country and gospel. Since in 1993 anti-rap feelings cut across all groups, in fact the white omnivores were distinguishing themselves quite specifically from "white trash." (Is this perhaps a reason Céline is more swiftly and rudely ejected from music discussions than her black-diva counterparts?)

As well, even when they're enjoying the same stuff, the classes still have different motivations. In a study in the *Journal of Consumer Research* in 1998, sociologist Douglas B. Holt found that there was plenty of high-and-low cultural mixology going on among the people he interviewed in a small Pennsylvania town, especially among higher-status subjects. But the "low cultural capital" interviewees talked

about their cultural choices as practical, fun, community-oriented and easy to relate to. Meanwhile the "high cultural capital" subjects described their preferences as showing authenticity, uniqueness, quality, cosmopolitanism and personal creative expression. Overall, to quote the Starkist tuna ad, lower-class respondents said what they liked "tasted good," while the higher-class ones said what they liked was "in good taste." Just as in France in the mid-sixties, the privileged felt their tastes set them apart from the common horde and made them special.

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At this point I should say that I don't think Bourdieu was entirely right.

Recent studies indicate that while social status – income and education – does correlate significantly with tastes and distastes, it is not nearly as all-explanatory as it seemed in Bourdieu's study. Other factors turn out to play a comparable role, such as ethnicity, gender and regional background. Other times tastes don't fall into any sociologically measurable categories. Perhaps France in the 1960s was unusually rigid and orthodox in its class stratifications (although in North America, class-mobility data says the average person is much less likely to rise in status today compared to thirty years ago). More likely, his research was unconsciously designed to present the strongest case for what he already believed, as research so often is: you might say Bourdieu's taste in survey questions operated to increase his own cultural capital. More generously, he was overcorrecting against the insular, ivory-tower view of taste and aesthetic "disinterestedness" that had come down from Kant through the cultural elite for two centuries, and shouting to make his point heard.

On top of that, his tendency to blame everything unpleasant about the way taste functions on modern capitalism was, well, very French. I suspect that the status-seeking reflex he was describing would re-emerge in any complex society: it can be ameliorated but not eliminated. Besides, we didn't start loving beauty, enjoying songs, making pictures and discussing them solely for competitive advantage. While they may be shaped partly to that end, we also do them for their own sake, for all the benefits traditionally ascribed to artistic experience. But even if Bourdieu was only fifty percent right – if taste is only *half* a subconscious mechanism by which we fight for power and status, mainly by condemning people we consider "beneath" us – that would be twice as complicit in class discrimination as most of us would like to think our aesthetics are.

And his account does feel at least half-accurate as a description of what is happening when I react allergically to Céline Dion. I'm intuiting that there's no sleight of hand or subtle reinterpretation I can use to fit her music into my store of cultural capital: it can only make me dorkier if I listen to it, so I push it away hard and fast. Conversely, her fans, from another class or field standpoint, find something in the music that seems to increase their own cultural capital, the value of her voice or her romanticism or her westernness, so they latch on.

Besides being a bright caution light against rushing to call musicians naff, tacky or *kétaine*, this thought is discouraging for our experiment: Even if I can set my prejudices and status anxieties aside in a more fundamental way than Hume ever imagined, and find aspects of Céline's music to embrace, the research suggests that I'm not going to appreciate her in the same terms her fans do. The very act of writing this book suggests an effort to plug her back into my pre-existing, class-based sets of culture processors ... perhaps

by granting her a role in a social critique. Indeed you could fairly say that my experiment is an attempt to expand my cultural capital among music critics, to gain symbolic status by being the most omnivorous of all. My only answer is that any move I make as a critic is open to similar charges. What can you do? The game of distinction may reproduce class structure, but it also makes the world go 'round.

Still, that all depends whether Céline fans and I really, as Bourdieu would predict, come from different walks of life, at least enough so that I would want to distinguish myself from their "bad taste." That jerk in the *Independent* who said that Céline's fan base must be in "some middle-of-the-road Middle England invisible to the rest of us" was indulging in a bit of speculative Bourdieuvian sociology, extrapolating from taste to characterize her devotees as "grannies, tux-wearers, overweight children, mobile-phone salesmen," images straight out of the BBC's class-hatred comedy series, *Little Britain*. I'd prefer something a bit more empirical, but I don't have a team of researchers to phone up thousands of households. Luckily, Céline's record company does.

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The NPD Group, a market-research company in New York, assembled a demographic profile of American Céline Dion consumers for Sony from January of 2005 to December of 2006. It doesn't tell us whether they are overweight or sell mobile phones but what it does say is suggestive. It compared Céline listeners to US music consumers as a whole: In age, for example, the Céline Dion buyer was seventy-five percent less likely than your average music buyer to be a teenager. Aside from a bump in the early twenties (perhaps because those people were teens when *Titanic* and *Let's Talk About Love* came out),

her audience skews to the over-thirty-five – in fact, around forty-five percent of Céline listeners were over fifty, compared to only twenty percent of music buyers overall. Add to that the fact that sixty-eight percent of her listeners were female: Grannies? Check. In fact, Céline fans were about three-and-a-half times more likely to be *widowed* than the average music listener. It's hard to imagine an audience that could confer less cool on a musician.

Céline fans were less likely than the average music buyer to be black, though thirteen percent of them were. Reflecting her global-star status, they were more likely than most music fans to be neither black nor white. They were less likely to live on the coasts than in the "red" or "fly-over" states, the US equivalent of "Middle England," plus that haven for older ladies, Florida. They tended to buy their Céline albums from big-box discount stores, and often they discovered her on TV. They were *much* less likely than other consumers to be downloading songs on the Internet, legally or illegally.

But let's get to the meatier socioeconomics: A disproportionate part of her audience was in the lowest income bracket, under \$25,000 a year, and again in the next-lowest category. Her fans were relatively underrepresented in the high-income brackets (over \$75,000 a year), but a quarter of them did claim to make at least that much. It was education that gave me a surprise: Céline fans were significantly *less* likely than the average music buyer to have only a high-school education or less. The shortage of teenagers helps explain that, but not entirely. More often, they had "some college," meaning an incomplete degree (or perhaps a community-college certificate), but the number of college graduates was only slightly below average, and those with "post-college" schooling slightly above (which could mean grad school but could also mean continuing education).

It's vague, but it does stimulate the imagination. Rather than the abject losers of the *Independent's* fantasy, what I picture is a striving bunch (grannies included), many of them with training in what I would guess (combining the education and income stats) are the ill-paid "helping professions," such as nursing, teaching, public relations, human resources and other middle-class service careers. Bourdieu painted these people (with far less sympathy than he had for manual workers and petty clerks) as the ultimate middlebrow sector, "the new petite bourgeois," who he said demonstrated an excess of "cultural goodwill": Having disconnected from their likely roots in working-class culture, they were gamely but not very suavely trying to adjust themselves to what they believed were "the higher things." In his interviews he found that they held a fairly strait-laced set of moral values, tempered by a sentimental streak. Full of aspiration, but with prospects much lower than their dreams, they might fairly be guessed to overlap with readers of self-help books and attendees of motivational seminars. And based on their low Internet usage, not to mention the retro character of Céline's schmaltz, there probably aren't a lot of bloggers and tech heads. In the wealthier part of the listenership, you'd probably find much of the Vegas crowd – middle managers, lower-rung executives and their families (or their widows), with a sizable smattering of business immigrants and ESL students. The survey didn't ask about sexual orientation, but with diva audiences, and Céline's in particular, there's little doubt gay men and lesbians are also represented, possibly skewing up the income and education curves.

Widows and grannies aside, what occurs to me is that this midlevel cultural-capital audience is not as far from the average white pop critic as we might have expected. We usually make middling incomes

or worse, and while most have university degrees, our expertise is usually more self-taught than PhD-certified, a pattern Bourdieu believed would produce an anxious, fact-hoarding intellectual style in contrast with the relaxed mastery of a fully legitimated cultural elite. (If you've met any pop critics, you'll see his point.) When a critic or heavily invested music buff says, as they often do, that discovering music or writing "saved my life," I think what lurks behind the melodrama is a feeling that a facility with pop culture and words has saved us *from* the life of subservient career, suburban lifestyle and quiet desperation we imagine befalls people like Céline Dion's white American fans, as well as fans of Billy Joel, Michael Bolton and the other midlevel musicians whose names so often serve us as epithets. Perhaps our scathing tongues are enacting what Freud called the narcissism of small differences, in defense of what Bourdieu might call a very fragile distinction. If middlebrow has been designated the new lowbrow, maybe this is why.

Enough surveys, then. It's time to go out and meet some Céline fans. At least to say I'm sorry.