Disputing about taste: Practices and perceptions of cultural hierarchy in the Netherlands

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Introduction

‘Highbrow’ or ‘nobrow’?
The study of cultural hierarchy

The concepts ‘high culture’ and ‘low culture’ are often used in the cultural field and in the media, as well as by cultural sociologists. They indicate a hierarchical relation between cultural artefacts, and, implicitly, between their audiences. Most users share a common sense knowledge of their meanings. However, definitions of these categories cannot be objectively determined, and it is often suggested that the boundaries between them have blurred. A quick search in the archives of Dutch newspaper *NRC Handelsblad* in a time span of six months\(^1\) gives several results, which do not seem to question the classification. Below are just three examples:

For high culture one can go to the hotel Bellagio [in Las Vegas]. In order to reach the entrance of ‘The Gallery of Fine Art’, one should first find a way along roulette tables and gambling machines. In two small rooms, there are 25 paintings by the French impressionist master Claude Monet. Every six months there is a different overview exhibition. Previously, the hotel displayed paintings by Chagall, Picasso and Hockney. (6-10-2012)

[Television and musical theatre entrepreneur Joop van den Ende is] the fatherly figure, the well-respected businessman , the patron who, with his foundation, pumps millions of private money into high culture (…). (9-11-2012)

[Street artist Banksy’s] imagery often refers to forms of low culture, such as cartoons, comic books and advertisement. (10-8-2012)

These quotes do no express doubts on the existence and the nature of high (Monet paintings) and low culture (cartoons). Strikingly, most of the times the concepts are not used in an isolated way, but are (implicitly) contrasted to an antipode: casinos and entertainment moguls are generally not perceived as high culture. The quotes present surprising combinations; a crossing of borders even.

In the *NRC* quotes, both concepts are more often mentioned in one phrase. Dutch Poet Laureate Ramsey Nasr provides a ‘meeting (…) between high and low culture’ (1-2-2013), David Foster Wallace’s books contain ‘a hybrid of high and low culture, the colloquium of the gutter and the academic discourse’ (14-12-2012), fantasy series *Game of* 

\(^1\) A search for both the Dutch terms ‘hoge cultuur’ en ‘lage cultuur’ and the surprisingly often used English equivalents ‘high culture’ and ‘low culture’, ‘highbrow’ and ‘lowbrow’, between August 2012 and early February 2013. Translations are mine.
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*Thrones* and *The Walking Dead* ‘connect low with high culture by integrating human drama’ (17-11-2012), TV quiz *De Slimste Mens* ‘takes high and low culture equally seriously’ (27-8-2012), and former prime minister Balkenende even ‘canonised the mixture of high and low culture in Dutch media’ by commenting on the breakup of a celebrity couple (4-1-2013). Statements on contrasts between high and low culture are much rarer than those on the combination of the two. It seems as if the terms ‘high culture’ and ‘low culture’ are not worthy of existing by themselves, without being combined. Again, the existence and meaning of the concepts as such are not questioned.

However, it has often been put forward that the erosion of boundaries between high and low culture makes the concepts less significant. They are seen as remnants of a lost age, when cultural and social hierarchies were more important in daily life, while today more egalitarian and meritocratic ideals are cherished. Scholars in cultural studies, such as John Fiske in the US and Maarten Reesink in the Netherlands, criticise the elite audience of high culture and their distinctive goals, and they propagate the value of (the academic study of) low and popular culture. In a public lecture, Dutch graphic novelist Dick Matena\(^2\) hyperbolically compared cultural hierarchy with Nazi categorisations:

> To just plunge into the matter: I think the terms ‘high’ and ‘low culture’ are objectionable. They remind me too much of the classifications *Übermensch* and *Untermensch*, with which – in a dark past – Adolf Hitler and his gang liked to flirt. Goebbels, the brilliant brain of propaganda with the Nazis, could have invented these terms high and low culture. (...) I presume that the ‘genius’ who burdened us with these humiliating and discriminating concepts meant: (...) culture for Average Joe versus culture for White-Collar Joe. (Matena 2008, my translation)

Besides such strong anti-hierarchical opinions, others argue that cultural tastes in reality are no longer ranked hierarchically. American journalist John Seabrook (2000) does not think that pop music today is positioned lower on the ladder than classical music. In his view, the ‘highbrow–lowlbrow’ distinction has been replaced by ‘nobrow’: culture is nowadays perceived more individually. High culture has lost its status and has ‘become just another subculture’ next to other subcultures (ibid.: 66). Although Seabrook values this shift less positively as his essay progresses, his initial rejection of cultural hierarchy is often shared. Seabrook, Matena and others deny or contest the superiority of high culture. They do not perceive (or desire) a reverse cultural hierarchy, with low or popular culture on top, but rather no cultural hierarchy at all.

This is a frequently discussed matter: the alleged waning of the distinction between high and low culture, and how to value this process. Two issues are at stake here: first, can high and low culture actually be defined, and if so, how; and second, how strict and static

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\(^2\) Matena is known for turning ‘serious’ literature by classic Dutch writers into – highly praised – comic books.
are the boundaries between them? When artists such as Andy Warhol mix art and advertisements, or when the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra performs with trance DJ Armin van Buuren, does this mean that cultural hierarchy is fading? Or do high and low culture remain significant, yet with shifting meanings? This study does not aim to ‘objectively’ answer these questions, but will look at people’s perceptions of and opinions on this matter: do people actually recognise concepts such as high and low culture, and if so, how do they define them? Scholars often define them a priori in order to measure tastes and participation rates, without questioning the meanings attached to them, and without considering possible shifting classifications.

Another important question is what these shifts in tastes and in perceptions of hierarchy mean for hierarchical practices: when so-called ‘cultural omnivores’ increasingly listen to both high and low music genres, or when they alternate ‘serious’ literature with ‘easy’ romance novels, do they no longer look down on others’ tastes? Or do they do this differently? On a more general level, I ask the question whether and how cultural taste plays a role in people’s classifications and judgements of others, even when they are hesitant to judge people on the basis of class. In other words: does (cultural) distinction occur in an allegedly individualist and egalitarian society, such as the Netherlands in the early 21st century, and if so, how?

These questions are the central issue of this dissertation. In this book, I aim to unravel the perceptions present-day people in the Netherlands have of cultural hierarchy, what their opinions are on this hierarchy, and in what ways these perceptions and opinions are linked to their own cultural tastes and distinctive practices. Do they look down on others or not, and how is this related to their classifications of taste and to their ideas of high and low culture? Hence, this study aims to contribute to our understanding of the possible persistence of hierarchical practices and perceptions in a relatively egalitarian and individualist society. Also, it explores people’s — sometimes inconsistent and ambivalent — classification practices, both regarding objects (cultural items) and people (those who like or dislike these items).

I will continue this introduction with an overview of the research questions and the methodology. Subsequently, I sketch the rationale behind several aspects of these questions: 1) the sociological relevance of studying perceptions of and opinions on cultural hierarchy in a relatively egalitarian society; 2) the reason for scrutinising the logics behind cultural hierarchy and the definitions of high and low culture; 3) the choice for specific research groups, as defined by education, parents’ education, age and gender; and 4) the Netherlands as a research site. I conclude the introduction with an overview of the organisation of the book and with some notes to the reader.
Introduction

Practising, perceiving and valuing hierarchy: On research questions and methods

In this dissertation I study cultural hierarchy by concentrating on three different aspects. First, I look at the actual practices of hierarchy, by which I mean explicitly distinguishing oneself with one’s taste, looking down on people with ‘lower’ tastes, as well as looking up to people with ‘higher’ tastes. I study if and how people from different backgrounds speak about their and others’ cultural taste in such hierarchical ways, or whether they use egalitarian (‘one cannot dispute about taste’) or perhaps more neutral narratives. Second, I study people’s perceptions, definitions and classifications of cultural hierarchy. Do they rank cultural items in a hierarchical order and do they recognise specific concepts such as ‘high culture’ and ‘low culture”? If so, how do they define such concepts and how exactly do they classify and rank cultural items? I aim to find out whether there is a consensus on these definitions and rankings, or whether people perceive and define contradicting hierarchies. Third, I examine people’s opinions on cultural hierarchy. After all, perception and opinion are two different things: one can perceive a social phenomenon as existent and even define it, but nevertheless reject it. This question is particularly salient because of the potential contradiction described above between distinctive practices and egalitarian ideals. These three aspects of cultural hierarchy will be related to people’s accounts of their cultural preferences and dislikes.

Furthermore, I unravel the possible tensions within and between these three aspects and taste. For instance, does a preference for classical music (taste) automatically lead to social distinction from those who do not like this music (hierarchical practice)? If so, do they describe classical music as ‘high culture’ (perception), and do they agree with such a hierarchical classification (opinion)? Or might it also be possible to perceive one’s taste as high culture, without personally feeling the need to look down on those who prefer ‘low culture”? In short, how are culturally hierarchical practices, perceptions and opinions related?

An overarching question is how the findings on the above issues are distributed over society. The educated might be more hierarchically oriented, as they are likely to locate themselves in the upper half of the hierarchy, whereas people with less education probably more often share egalitarian ideas. We might also observe a generational shift in this matter, corresponding with theses of the gradual blurring of boundaries and decrease of distinction. Furthermore, I wonder to what extent there is a consensus on the nature of cultural hierarchy, and if not, whether deviations can be explained with background variables such as level of education, social origin (i.e., parents’ education), age and gender.

These issues result in the following research questions:
How do people in the Netherlands practise, perceive and value cultural hierarchy, and how is this related to their own taste preferences?

To what extent are people consistent in their narrative, and if not, how can contradictions and tensions be explained?

How are these practices, perceptions and opinions related to people’s social position, as indicated by education, social origin (i.e., parents’ education), age and gender?

I studied these issues by conducting interviews with a sample of ninety Dutch people, distributed over three status groups (based on education and parents’ education), three age groups, and an equal number of men and women. The range of cultural domains in the interviews was broad: music, film, television fiction, theatre and the visual arts. The interviews consisted of three parts, which shed light on different aspects of the research questions. The first part concerned semi-structured, open questions, in order to retrieve people’s perceptions of (the relation between) their own and others’ taste, and thus to explore their possible hierarchical practices. By letting people speak in their own words about cultural taste, whether or not in a distinctive way, I was able to study people’s interpretations and valuations of taste differences. The second part consisted of relatively more structured questions on concepts such as ‘high culture’ and ‘low culture’, in order to specifically study people’s perceptions and definitions of (and often opinions on) cultural hierarchy. The final part was a ranking task, in which respondents were asked to rank thirty items from the field of music, both according to their personal taste and to their perception of high and low culture. This part of the research, analysed in a quantitative way, enabled me to scrutinise the exact hierarchical rankings and the logics behind these rankings, as well as the differences and similarities between taste preferences and hierarchical perception.

By combining two methods – open interviews and card ranking – I was also able to unravel possible contradictions and tensions, such as perceiving a cultural hierarchy and uttering egalitarian views at the same time. With this mixing or triangulation of methods to study several aspects of cultural hierarchy, I aim to deliver an important contribution to the sociology of cultural taste and distinction. Chapter 2 will give a more detailed account of both methods. This introduction will continue with a more elaborate account of the theoretical rationale behind the different (elements of the) research questions.

3 The respondents were largely randomly selected, after defining eighteen quotas, based on the mentioned variables. See chapter 2 for more details on the selection procedure.
The rationale behind the research questions

**Practising cultural hierarchy in a more egalitarian society**

Although not the first (cf. Veblen 1924 [1899]; Simmel 1957 [1904]; Gans 1999 [1974]), Pierre Bourdieu is the sociologist who most extensively analysed distinction processes and hierarchy mechanisms, and he is still regarded by many – including his critics – as the scholar on this theme. In his 1979 work *La distinction*, translated as *Distinction* in 1984, he argues that social stratification is shaped and continually reproduced by means of ongoing distinctive practices. People from higher classes actively – though not necessarily consciously – distinguish themselves from those in lower strata, in particular from people in proximate strata, who are competing for the same status. They behave and speak in such a way as to exclude others, who behave and speak differently. These distinction practices mainly take place within the cultural realm, such as clothing and food, and particularly in a more narrow cultural domain: music, art, literature. Cultural taste ‘unites and separates’, ‘whereby one classifies oneself and is classified by others’ (p. 56). Because of a life-long learning process, particularly within the family but complemented at school, people have internalised such manners in their ‘habitus’, which cannot easily be learned by those who did not inherit it from their parents. As a result of these distinction processes, the ‘legitimate’ culture that elites cherish – which others call ‘high culture’ – becomes a separate domain that is continually reproduced. This legitimate culture, which serves as ‘cultural capital’, seems to have rigid and objective boundaries.

However, Bourdieu did not explicitly study people’s distinctive practices, but he theoretically interpreted quantitative material and illustrated his findings with some interviews. Furthermore, he did not study people’s perceptions of and opinions on such cultural hierarchy. He did suggest that most people, from whichever class, acknowledge this hierarchy (pp. 372-396), but he did not provide clear evidence for these claims. My study questions whether hierarchical practices and perceptions indeed go together or whether there are contradictions and ambivalences. This will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of cultural hierarchy.

This richer question becomes even more salient when studying a society where social and cultural hierarchies are less rigid than in France in the 1960s, when Bourdieu did his research. In a hypothetical completely egalitarian society status distinction from others becomes irrelevant. One does not need to hold up one’s position; cultural taste does not function as a status marker. Such a society does not exist, but many present-day societies are less hierarchical than Bourdieu sketched and share more egalitarian ideals. For instance, in contemporary Dutch society, class plays a less significant role than in
France in the 1960s. At the same time, the relation between status group (nowadays often measured with educational level) and ‘legitimate culture’ (as Bourdieu used it) remains high, but has become more diffuse. Higher educated people have a broader taste than a ‘high cultural’ one alone (particularly younger generations who grew up with ‘popular culture’), and therefore the dominance of high culture has come under attack (e.g. Van Eijck 2001; De Haan & Knulst 2000). It is most relevant to study hierarchical practices and perceptions in such a society.\(^4\) Does it imply that such practices and perceptions are less significant, and that the opinion of cultural hierarchy is more negative? Or are these practices and perceptions still prominent, but did they perhaps change in nature?

In the 1990s, some scholars on ‘cultural omnivorosity’ (starting with Peterson & Simkus 1992) have interpreted their findings on broad, boundary-crossing tastes of high status people in several countries as obsoleting or even falsifying the work of Bourdieu. The question rose what the blurring of this so-called ‘homology’ between social and cultural hierarchy meant for the significance of domains such as high and low culture and for distinctive practices (Wilterdink 2005; cf. Holt 1997). Some scholars, for instance, suggested that cultural distinction has been replaced by tolerance towards others’ tastes (Peterson & Kern 1996; Bryson 1996; Ollivier 2008a). Several omnivore scholars, though, have tried to reconcile the new empirical findings with Bourdieu’s theory, for instance by downplaying the actual breadth of omnivorous tastes (Van Eijck 2001; Atkinson 2011), by assuming the distinctive value of a broad taste as such (Van Eijck 2000; Ollivier 2008a), by retrieving distinction practices \textit{within} popular culture domains and genres (Bellavance 2008; cf. Thornton 1995; Wermuth 2002; Bachmayer & Wilterdink 2009) and by exploring the ambivalences people experience between social distinction and egalitarian values (Lahire 2003; 2008; Vander Stichele 2007; Friedman 2012).\(^5\)

This study wants to contribute to our understanding of cultural hierarchy in less-hierarchical societies by looking at the matter from different perspectives: it will explicitly study hierarchical practices, perceptions and opinions. Moreover, it will counter the \textit{a priori} definitions of high and low/popular culture that guide many of the above studies. The next section discusses the need to question such predefined classifications.

\textbf{Defining and classifying cultural hierarchy}

A second important contribution this book wants to make is to study people’s perceptions of the exact nature of cultural hierarchy, more in particular how they define the concepts ‘high culture’ and ‘low culture’, and how they classify and rank cultural objects. Several early omnivore scholars (e.g. Peterson & Kern 1996; Van Eijck 1998) predefined cultural

\(^4\) Below, I will focus more deeply on the particular case of the Netherlands.

\(^5\) More on this (now densely formulated) discussion in chapter 1.
domains, in order to measure who combines cultural items or attends cultural activities from different domains. They did not take into account how people actually perceive such items and activities, nor potential dynamics in the nature of cultural hierarchy. Similarly, the newspaper quotes in the opening of this introduction do not show doubts about the nature of high and low culture, whether they are increasingly being mixed or not. A more thorough analysis discloses many inconsistencies and ambivalences. In this section, I critically discuss several ways in which high and low culture are classified, both by sociologists and by other authors. I do not aim to give a comprehensive overview, but rather to give several examples for each classification.

The most common way to classify cultural items as high or low culture – or as ‘highbrow’ and ‘lowlbrow’ – is by placing entire domains and genres into one of the categories, as we saw above. Classical music, the visual arts, serious literature, and stage plays are often classified as high culture; low culture refers to romance novels, comic books, pulp television, B movies, and – in the Netherlands – certain Dutch-language music. Many items, such as pop music, films and television, are usually not placed in one of these categories, but are referred to as ‘popular culture’, an alternative antonym of high culture. However, adjectives such as ‘serious’ and ‘pulp’ in the above enumeration and the letter B before ‘movies’, already reveal that it is hard to decide which part of a particular cultural discipline (literature, film) belongs to which domain. Furthermore, some will contest the categorisation of a popularising classical violinist such as André Rieu as high culture. Some will claim that jazz has reached the status of high culture, others will regard it as a ‘high’ form of popular culture. And what about the blending of ‘brows’ such as in pop art? Hence, this simple classification of cultural disciplines and genres raises many problems.

A second common classification is the link with social hierarchy: high culture is what upper-class people and/or people with a higher educational level – in short: high status people – prefer; low culture is liked more by low status people; in between one can find the ‘middlebrows’. Of course, both types of classifications are linked: high status people like classical music, the visual arts, serious literature and stage plays more than low status people do, and therefore these domains are called high culture. This logic is applied by Bourdieu (1984), but is also used by later scholars who conducted factor analysis on their data (e.g. Van Eijck 2001; Vander Stichele 2007; see also chapter 1). However, the discussion on the waning of cultural hierarchy was instigated mostly by the increased blending of cultural tastes, particularly by high status people. This notion attacked the rigidity of cultural hierarchy. Hence, one could state that because high status people do not limit themselves to high culture anymore, it can no longer be called high culture.

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6 See chapter 1 for a more detailed discussion of the operationalisation of cultural omnivorousness.
However, as we have seen, many still use this term, particularly when describing such blends.

The third way to rank cultural items and fields in a hierarchical way is to define the ‘objective’ quality of the works: high culture is superior to low culture. Some literature scholars, for instance, try to assess literary quality by measuring formal characteristics of texts, such as vocabulary and syntactic structure. Most sociologists would never objectify cultural items in this way, as they regard such categories as social constructions rather than as objective realities, but defenders of ‘high culture’ in the media often do. They critically respond to both the blending of genres that they observe (both in art itself and among educated consumers) and to relativistic thinkers who either downplay or criticise the distinctions between high and low, such as Seabrook and Matena quoted above. Examples of these objectivist thinkers are the British conservative intellectual Theodore Dalrymple (below) and his Dutch admirer Chris Rutenfrans. The latter says:

They [the elite] do not take themselves seriously anymore. (...) They deny themselves by downplaying their own norms. Then one gets phrases such as these: ‘Personally I like Bach more, but when my pupils prefer to listen to 50 Cent, who am I to judge?’ Instead, we should be able to just say: ‘Bach is higher than 50 Cent. Classical music is higher than hip hop, and that’s final!’ (Rutenfrans, quoted in Veilbrief 2006, my translation)

Dalrymple showcases his objectivist opinion on a particular example of popular culture, singer Amy Winehouse, who died 2.5 weeks before he writes:

Perhaps Amy Winehouse was its finest flower and its truest representative in her militant and ideological vulgarity, her stupid taste, her vile personal conduct and preposterous self-pity. Her sordid life was a long bath in vomitus, literal and metaphorical, for which the exercise of her very minor talent was no excuse or explanation. Yet not a peep of dissent from our intellectual class was heard after her near canonisation after her death, that class having long had the backbone of a mollusc. (Dalrymple 2011)

Both in these discussions and in recent (Dutch) debates on the reduction of art subsidies, this objective quality of art and high culture is often legitimised by using specific criteria. In Dalrymple’s quote, for example, one recognises both lack of talent and moral distinctions. In the remainder of this section, I discuss several of these frequently mentioned ‘objective’ attributes of high culture.

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7 For a Dutch project, see [http://literaryquality.huygens.knaw.nl/](http://literaryquality.huygens.knaw.nl/) (visited 13-09-2013), particularly under the header ‘Proposal’.
8 Some Marxist sociologists did have a hint of objectivism in their descriptions and analyses of mass culture (e.g., Hauser 1982 [1974]).
One of the most frequently used characteristics of high culture is seniority and sustainability. Roger Scruton, another prolific example of conservative British intellectuals, defines high culture as:

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\text{the accumulation of art, literature, and humane reflection that has stood the “test of time” and established a continuing tradition of reference and allusion among educated people. (Scruton 2007: 2)}
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In other words, besides referring to the social hierarchy, Scruton contends that high cultural objects must be old and classic and must have survived the ages. Although the age of an object can indeed be objectively determined, this criterion also raises questions. It excludes much of contemporary art, present-day literary books, and ‘classical’ music from the twentieth and twenty-first century. Perhaps Scruton would classify these examples as ‘references and allusions’ to classical culture, although elsewhere he denounces many modernist and avant-garde art forms (ibid.: 8-11; 95-100; cf. 1998: 80-83).

The exclusion of newer art forms also ignores the highly appreciated value of a second important criterion in the art world: originality, innovativeness and authenticity. Cultural gatekeepers such as critics, gallery owners, programmers and funders often judge artists first and foremost for their innovative abilities and their individual, authentic touch, and so do many artists themselves (e.g. Van Venrooij & Schmutz 2010; Hekkert & Van Wieringen 1993). Bourdieu (1996) describes this criterion as the most important logic in the cultural field and one of the basic attributes of the ‘aesthetic disposition’ (1984). It opposes the cliché and the imitation, as well as the commercial, but it also seems to suggest that a taste for innovative art occupies a higher rung on the cultural ladder than for classical art. However, if both classical and avant-garde art belong to the domain of high culture, neither of the attributes can be the distinctive feature of high culture.

A third criterion to distinguish high from low culture is morality, as we saw in Dalrymple’s denunciation of Amy Winehouse’s ‘vulgar’, ‘vile’ and ‘sordid’ nature. Low culture is denounced as immoral or vulgar, because it satisfies low senses and it can lead to sexual licentiousness and/or violent behaviour. Opposite, high culture shows moral superiority and civilisation. Scruton, for instance, relates it to religious virtues (1998: 15-16; 55). This idea is not monopolised by the conservative wing of the political spectrum, as Dutch left-wing sociologist and columnist Evelien Tonkens (2010a; 2010b) shows in a debate on the ‘civilising’ aims of art and high culture. In her view, Dutch reality show Oh oh Cherso is leading us ‘away from civilisation’ rather than the reverse. However, moral

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9 Scruton does not call himself an intellectual, as he saves this term for the left-wing thinkers and dreamers that he criticises (1998: 105-115). The term ‘intellectual’ has various connotations, both neutral and subjective (mostly derogatory, referring to leftist thinkers) (Collini 2006: 45-49; cf. 15-40; 149).

10 Oh oh Cherso, on the unbridled behaviour of a group of Dutch lower educated youngsters in a Greek beach resort, is somewhat comparable to the American show Jersey Shore.
distinctions are highly subjective. Another objection is that this criterion, similar to seniority, would exclude many iconoclastic and taboo breaking avant-garde works of art from high culture that others would include.

Finally, the most frequently used criterion to distinguish high culture is complexity, as Tonkens adds to her civilisation discourse:

Shakespeare [...] less accessible (...). One has to learn how to value it. Refined cultural expressions demand knowledge, study and practice, both from the artist and from the audience. (Tonkens 2010a; my translation)

In this quote, Tonkens combines two aspects of complexity that are not necessarily connected: complexity in producing art (referring to a high degree of craftsmanship of the artist) and in understanding it (referring to the ‘decoding’ process by the viewer or listener). The latter meaning is the most common one in debates on high culture and also in social science (cf. Alexander 2003: 226/7). Ganzeboom’s (1982) theory of information processing, derived from psychology, for instance refers to people’s varying abilities to understand complex art. This explains, he argues, the differences in arts appreciation between people with high and low levels of education. Many argue that one needs training in order to ‘learn’ how to appreciate something. The question rises, however, which aspect of art makes it complex and whether this can objectively be determined. It can be the production process, as Tonkens suggests (cf. Kruithof 2006: 174, who speaks of ‘excellence’), but one can wonder whether a highly skilled Rembrandt painting is difficult to understand. More often, it is the meaning attached to the artwork that is called complex, for instance because it has been obscured or because it is multi-layered. In abstract art, for example, it is not immediately clear what the artist means or what the artefact refers to (if anything), although it often seems easy to produce. The aspect of complexity in high culture is also often downplayed or criticised (e.g., Alexander 2003: 226/7; Abbing 2009: 38-45). De Meyer even wrote several books (e.g. 2006) in order to prove that popular culture can be complex too.11

Hence, although many people – in the cultural field, the media and academia – often speak of ‘high’ and ‘low culture’, whether or not because they observe (or criticise) a blending of the two, the distinctions between high and low culture are not clear at all. Whether one classifies high culture as an enumeration (an umbrella term for specific domains), with a social logic (as the cultural preferences of high status people), or with objective measures (as superior to low or popular culture; based on often contradicting characteristics such as seniority, originality, morality, craftsmanship and complexity), a definite picture does not emerge. This dissertation therefore studies the perceptions people

11 He does try to objectify complexity, for instance by analysing the plot structure and character networks in popular TV series.
have of cultural hierarchy. I analyse in a detailed and systematic way which criteria and repertoires people apply when they define concepts such as high and low culture, as well as when they legitimise their personal likes and dislikes. I also look at the potential inconsistencies in their narrative. Do they, for instance, speak in terms of innovation and/or do they stress seniority; do they objectify high culture or do they link it to high status people?

**Cultural upbringing or education? Studying upwardly mobile people separately**

In this study I compare three different status groups and three birth cohorts, as well as men and women. In this and the next two sub-sections I explain the rationale behind these group comparisons, starting with the two groups of higher educated people: those with equally educated parents and those with parents with a lower education (the upwardly mobile people). The reasoning behind this comparison lies in Bourdieu’s claim of the influence that the parental milieu has on cultural taste compared to level of education, and in the prominent role that some omnivore scholars attribute to upward mobility.

Bourdieu (1984) analyses the lifestyles of different classes and class fractions. People from the dominant class, or bourgeoisie, are able and inclined to judge cultural objects on formal aspects rather than on function and content, he argues. They use certain arguments to value art, for example by positioning a work of art in a historical context and by appreciating originality and innovation. This ‘aesthetic disposition’ has become part of their ‘habitus’, which they learned and internalised during their upbringing in this dominant class. The habitus makes people perceive things naturally: they do not think about it, they are not aware of their perceptions, behaviour, and taste, but they take things for granted. It is embodied (pp. 11-96).12

School education also plays an important role in people’s taste for ‘legitimate culture’, but not as significant as the part played by their family. People with a middle-class background who have a high educational level still cannot speak about legitimate culture in the same way upper-class people do. They did not inherit the same amount and the same type of ‘cultural capital’ in order to develop this high class habitus; they will betray themselves with their manners and talk (ibid.).13 Hence, the alleged complexity of cultural products as such – legitimate culture is seen as more complex and can thus be

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12 Important in Bourdieu’s work are the distinctions within the dominant class, between those with relatively more economic capital (perceived as having a conservative taste) and those with relatively more cultural capital (taste for more innovative culture). This distinction did not play a role in the selection of my respondents, but I will come back to it several times throughout this book.

13 Bourdieu also extensively describes middle-class people without high educational levels, the petite bourgeoisie. He describes them as the class of ‘cultural goodwill’, i.e., aspiring to enjoy legitimate culture without knowing how. They prefer the more easily accessible ‘middlebrow’ culture. (pp. 318-371)
understood only by the educated – does not tell the complete story. People in the dominant class distinguish themselves from classes below (especially the classes most proximate) by these subtle differences in cultural talk and behaviour. As a result, the hierarchy between these classes and between taste cultures is being reproduced. Individuals are not only shaped by social structures, but in turn shape these social structures: habitus is both a ‘structuring and structured structure’ (p. 170).

Thus, when we follow Bourdieu, we can expect a difference in cultural taste and participation between educated people with educated parents, who are more likely to have acquired the habitus of aesthetic disposition, on the one hand, and upwardly mobile people on the other. Several studies have indeed shown, by means of multiple regression, that people’s class background (often operationalised by parents’ educational level and occupational status) plays a more important role than education as such (e.g., Nagel 2004; Bennett et al. 2009; for an overview see Sullivan 2011). However, Bourdieu does not delve much deeper into those who did achieve a high position thanks to a high educational level, except for his own autobiographical account (Bourdieu 2004, quoted in Bennett 2007).

Some scholars claim that upwardly mobile people are more likely to have a broad taste than people with more stable positions, because they moved between classes, and hence between taste cultures. Van Eijck et al. (2002) and De Haan & Knulst (2000) validate this claim in quantitative studies on the distribution of cultural omnivores (cf. Van Eijck 1998; 2000; see Coulangeon (2013b) for opposite findings), although they restrict their findings to certain birth cohorts. In two qualitative studies, Brands (1992) and Matthys (2010) show that upwardly mobile people in the Netherlands often feel uncomfortable with living in two different milieux. They unwillingly tend to look down on their working-class families and at the same time they do not feel completely accepted by fellow academics from higher classes. They feel they have to prove themselves more in order to reach a certain position, which is in line with Bourdieu’s theory (cf. Friedman 2012).

Although neither Brands nor Matthys focuses on cultural taste, their findings suggest a high awareness of cultural hierarchy among upwardly mobile people. Because these social climbers have experienced and observed different rungs of the ladder as well as the distinctive practices by people from higher classes, they are probably more sensitive to the social mechanisms of these hierarchies. Therefore, it is relevant to focus specifically on the distinctive practices and hierarchical perceptions and opinions of these upwardly mobile people. Furthermore, unlike Brands and Matthys, I compare them with educated people from a higher origin (operationalised as having parents with a high educational level).
**The less educated: Accepting, resisting or unaware of cultural hierarchy?**

In this study I compare these two groups of higher educated people with a third group: people with a lower level of education, similar to their parents. Bourdieu has often been criticised for his meagre analysis of the working class. Workers are underrepresented in his sample, and the chapter ‘The choice of the necessary’ has only half the length of the chapters on the bourgeoisie and petite bourgeoisie. Bourdieu argues that the working class (or ‘dominated class’) have the ‘taste of necessity’: they do not possess much capital – economic nor cultural – and simply appreciate what they can afford. They use a ‘popular aesthetic’: their taste is pragmatic and functional rather than contextual and detached from emotion. Moreover, they implicitly acknowledge the value of high culture by buying cheap substitutes, such as reproductions. They do not want to rise above their fellow class members. As a result, they tend to accept their inferior position, which is one of the factors why cultural hierarchy and social stratification are being reproduced again and again (Bourdieu 1984: 372-396).

These findings have often been contested. Rather than accepting high culture’s status, another plausible attitude would be one of indifference: they simply like or dislike certain tastes without attaching status consequences (Lynes 1949: 318-320), and they are ambivalent about the superiority of ‘high culture’ (Bennett et al. 2009: 209-212). Kuipers (2006: 77) for instance found that less educated people sometimes accidentally see ‘highbrow’ humour on television, do not understand it, and simply change channels. They do not feel stupid for not understanding high culture, nor do they reject it. One cannot acknowledge, nor reject, what one does not know.

A second objection against Bourdieu’s analysis of the working class concerns its alleged homogeneity. Bourdieu recognises many distinctions within the dominant class and within the middle class – based on the volume and composition of capital and the social trajectory – but puts the working class all in one box. However, several studies did show differences in taste and attitudes among working-class people, according to the relative amount of economic or cultural capital (Rupp & Haarmans 1994; Blasius & Friedrichs 2008; cf. Bennett et al. 2009: 205-9).

It is therefore highly relevant to systematically compare working-class people with people from other classes on specific questions regarding cultural hierarchy and distinction. Do working-class people – or, in the case of this research: people with a lower educational level, which includes the lower middle class – acknowledge a cultural hierarchy that is similar to the ranking perceived by people with a higher educational level, which Bourdieu implicitly suggests? Or do they reject this and propose a completely

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14 166 people from the working class were included, compared to 584 middle-class and 467 upper-class people (pp. 526).

15 More on the shift from class to level of education in chapter 2.
different hierarchy, for example with their own taste, which is perceived as low culture by others, on top? A final possibility would be ignorance of (other’s perceptions of) hierarchical rankings as such.

**High culture for older women? The importance of age and gender**

Besides comparing three groups based on respondent’s and parent’s level of education, two other important variables will be taken into account: age and gender. Age is an important explanatory factor for cultural taste and participation (e.g., De Haan & Knulst 2000; Van der Stichele & Laermans 2004; Nagel 2004); in the taste for music and film even the most important one (Bennett et al. 2009). Popular culture is liked more by younger than by older people (e.g., Van Eijck 2002; 2004). It is debated whether these differences stem from ageing or from differences between birth cohorts: do older people like ‘high’ culture more because they were raised in an era when it received more status, or did their interest in ‘high’ culture increase when they grew older? The Dutch Social and Cultural Planning Bureau (SCP 1998) predicts that younger generations will more often refrain from high culture, because they grew up with it to a lesser degree (cf. Bennett 2013). This would be in line with observations on the blurring of cultural hierarchy in recent decades.

De Haan & Knulst (2000) and Van Eijck et al. (2002) are even more precise: they found that Dutch people born in the 1950s are most likely to have an omnivorous taste. Older people are more often high cultural ‘univores’, whereas younger people (born from 1960 onward) more often limit themselves to popular culture.16 Hence, it is most relevant to research how people from different age groups perceive cultural hierarchy. For instance, do younger people, who are more inclined towards popular culture, nevertheless recognise the high status of high culture, and if so, what do they think of this high status? Or do they share a more egalitarian attitude than older people do, perhaps because they grew up in a more egalitarian period?

Gender, a final important variable, also plays an important role in cultural taste and participation, but its possible implication for hierarchical practices and perceptions points in opposite directions. On the one hand, in every age and education group, women are more active in cultural consumption than men are (e.g., De Haan & Knulst 2000, Katz-Gerro 2002). In the US, this difference is even increasing (DiMaggio & Mukhtar 2004). Furthermore, married women influence the cultural participation of their husbands far more than the reverse (Upright 2004), and mothers influence their children more than

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16 Bryson (1996) simply found a negative correlation between omnivorousness and age. Tampubolon (2008) found omnivores in all age groups, but distinguished old and young omnivores, depending on the kind of genres liked and disliked.
fathers do (Van Wel et al. 2006). Causes that are mentioned for these gender differences are the different ways in which boys and girls are socialised (young girls attend more music and art classes) and the fact that women more often work in the cultural and educational sector (Christin 2012). When studying actual tastes rather than participation, the differences between men and women are far more significant in the fields of television, film and reading – all narrative forms of culture – than in music and the visual arts (Bennett et al. 2009). Several authors found that taste differences between men and women are larger among lower educated people than within the higher strata of society (Bourdieu 1984: 380-4; Kuipers 2006: 52).

On the other hand, the production, distribution and reviewing of art have since long been – and are still – dominated by men (e.g. Tuchman & Fortin 1980; Schmutz & Faupel 2010; Bennett 2000: 44-46). For example, in 2003, only 38 female musicians (excluding mixed bands) were included in the ‘500 Greatest Albums’ list of Rolling Stone, the highest being Joni Mitchell on number 30. What is more, those women who did appear in the list were less often than men described as important, original or autonomous and more often as dependent on producers or on other artists (Schmutz & Faupel 2010). Feminists often argue that men have always ‘decided’ what is good art, and implicitly what counts as high culture. In literature, for instance, male tastes often count as higher on the status ladder than female tastes (cf. Meijer 2005). This contradiction between women’s roles in cultural consumption and production makes gender a relevant aspect to research practices and perceptions of cultural hierarchy.

**Between hierarchy and egalitarianism: The strategic case of the Netherlands**

This study takes place in the Netherlands, not only because of pragmatic reasons (my Dutch citizenship) and sociological tradition (a rich body of literature on Dutch cultural tastes and participation), but also for strategic reasons: it occupies an interesting position vis-à-vis other countries. This section explores this ambiguous position.

Bourdieu has often been criticised for his neglect of the world outside France: ‘The only socially relevant geographical distinctions appear to be the ones between the Rive Gauche and Rive Droite18, and between Paris and the province’, Wilterdink remarks ironically (2002b: 221, my translation). In order to explain the deviance between Bourdieu’s theory and cultural omnivorosity, which was first described in the US, several studies made cross-national comparisons with respect to cultural taste, cultural

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17 These were the main effects in Christin’s regression analysis, which also left a sizable difference unexplained. Lizardo (2006) did not find proof for the latter factor because the gender differences are even larger within economic sectors.

18 The left bank and the right bank of the river Seine, in Paris.
participation and other aspects of the cultural world (e.g. Katz-Gerro 2002; Lizardo & Skiles 2009). In some of these studies, the French appear to draw strong cultural and social boundaries and to attach status to ‘high culture’. This is somewhat similar to the UK and even stronger in Germany. The US, on the other hand, appears to be a relatively egalitarian country (despite a larger income inequality), with less cultural distinction, an omnipresence of popular culture, and hence a high percentage of cultural omnivores. Partly due to different operationalisations, however, there is no consensus on these differences. Lahire (2008) for instance contested Bourdieu with his finding that France contains many cultural omnivores too (cf. Peterson 2005; Coulangeon 2013a).

DiMaggio (1987) developed a theoretical framework to explain the strength of cultural hierarchies by means of structural characteristics of countries. He argues that cultural hierarchies are generally stronger in societies with relatively high social inequality, little interaction between social classes and a more stratified educational system. Furthermore, Lamont (1992) tries to explain geographical differences by looking at the ‘historical national repertoires’, which she tests with rich qualitative data. For example, she explains the French emphasis on cultural boundaries between people with the strong aristocratic tradition as well as the French Revolution (with a ‘cult of Reason’) (pp. 137-9), and the American preference for economic and moral boundaries with pragmatism, meritocratic egalitarianism and populism (pp. 136-7).

Several authors used the above theoretical frameworks to position the Netherlands vis-à-vis other countries (e.g. Janssen et al. 2011; Van Venrooij & Schmutz 2010). On the one hand, the Netherlands are more similar to large European countries than to the United States: income inequality is relatively low but the education system is highly stratified (from age 13), which would imply a preference of cultural over economic boundaries. Furthermore, the Netherlands share with other European countries a large state subsidised cultural sector and a significant public broadcasting system (Janssen et al. 2011), which might imply a high esteem for ‘high culture’. On the other hand, the Dutch egalitarian and pragmatist ideal is more similar to the US. The Netherlands has a weaker aristocratic and a stronger mercantile tradition than other European countries, and there has been more social mobility (ibid.). Recent studies have indicated that the Dutch do not like to speak in terms of class (Van Eijk 2013), even compared to Americans (Terwijn 2008: 252, n6), and

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19 See also the references below. For overviews and critical remarks, see Peterson (2005: 261) and Katz-Gerro (2011).
20 Both Bourdieu and the later omnivore studies focus on the Western world, with a few exceptions on Eastern Europe (e.g., Bukodi 2007; Zavisca 2005) and Latin America (e.g., Torche 2007). Non-Western countries have not been considered in this debate. See Daloz (2007; 2010) for a discussion on Bourdieu, with many examples of economic distinction from Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. Cf. Moro (2004) on the emergence of cultural hierarchy in three Asian countries.
21 The Gini index (an inequality measure, in which 0 represents the lowest inequality and 100 the highest) is estimated as 31, compared to 28 for Germany, 33 for France, 36 for the UK, and 41 for the US (source: World Bank, published on http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_incomeequality, visited 21 May 2012).
that they look down less on lower-class people than the British do, despite their equally strong opinions on lower-class tastes (Friedman & Kuipers 2013).

Some characteristics of the Netherlands are more specific, unlike large European countries and the US. The small size of the country and its strong trading tradition are said to have made the Dutch open to people with different worldviews and for foreign cultural products (such as American popular culture), whereas France, for instance, is more protective of its own culture. Dutch schools, public television and newspapers pay more attention to popular culture than their French and German counterparts (Janssen et al. 2011; Bevers 2005). This intermediate and ambiguous position makes the Netherlands a highly interesting case to study actual perceptions of and opinions on cultural hierarchy, related to people’s distinctive practices.

Organisation of the dissertation

In order to unravel the different definitions of ‘high’ and ‘low culture’ discussed earlier in this introduction, I will begin this dissertation with a critical discussion of the diverging historical and sociological accounts of the social construction and possible deconstruction of cultural hierarchy in the course of time. I argue that, since the nineteenth century, two different hierarchical logics – a classic one and a modern one, based on different criteria – are competing, which confuses our understanding of cultural hierarchy as a whole. I partly follow Lizardo in his thesis that the modern hierarchical logic eventually led to the partial downfall of this hierarchy. This understanding can end the confusion and reconcile the relativistic omnivore studies with Bourdieu’s distinction theory.

In the second chapter, I will present the methodology of my research in more details than I did above. I will argue that a combination of methods – qualitative open interviews and the quantitative ranking of items – is the best way to study cultural hierarchy. I will explain the logic of the questionnaire, the reasoning behind the ranking assignment and the sampling procedure. Also, I discuss the intricate interaction between respondent and interviewer that is often ignored: diverging presentations of self, the construction of opinions on the spot and diverging interpretations of concepts used by the interviewer (such as ‘culture’ and ‘art’).

The empirical part of the dissertation starts with a focus on the quantitative part of the research, which studies hierarchical perceptions and classifications: the results of the card ranking question. Chapter 3 shows that in music there is an almost unanimous

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22 Recently, this self-image of tolerance has come under attack due to increasing critique on migrants, whom many Dutch accuse of not sharing tolerant attitudes (towards women, homosexuals, etc.).
23 Other intermediary countries might be Belgium (cf. Vander Stichele 2007) and the Scandinavian countries (e.g. Hjelbrekke 2010).
consensus on the nature of high and low culture, regardless of people’s personal taste. I will show the logic behind this hierarchy and explain some of the deviations.

However, recognising specific cultural hierarchies is only one way of studying cultural hierarchy, as I argued above. Chapter 4 looks at hierarchical practices, i.e. the way people talk about their own and others’ tastes during the open interview, and opinions. Indeed, many aspects of hierarchical thinking can be recognised in people’s distinctive practices, which will be described in great detail. However, the opposite appears to be just as significant: many respondents express egalitarian, individualist and anti-elitist opinions. Chapter 4 analyses these two contrasting narratives.

This duality of narratives does not imply, however, that there are simply two opposing groups of people. Chapter 5 presents respondents who are often ambivalent about distinction and cultural hierarchies and who use both the hierarchical and the egalitarian ‘repertoire’ in the same interview. I will describe who these people are, how these ambivalences come across and what causes these mixed feelings. Also, this chapter zooms in on the people who neither use the hierarchical nor the egalitarian repertoire, but who only express themselves in a neutral way when speaking about taste.

Whereas chapters 4 and 5 deal with the ways people perceive and value their own and others’ tastes, chapter 6 discusses how they try to explain these tastes. Sociologists often explain taste differences with parental background, secondary socialisation (school) and other variables (age, gender). How people themselves interpret these differences, however, has never been researched. Chapter 6 fills this gap by exploring people’s narrated taste biographies as well as their classifications of people with similar and different tastes. It shows that people use both structural influences and individual agency as explanatory factors.

In the final chapter, 7, I will scrutinise which criteria people apply to explain their personal likes and dislikes, as compared to the way they define high and low culture. Characteristics such as craftsmanship, complexity and originality have often been discussed as a by-product of broader taste research, often in terms of the ‘pure’ versus the ‘popular’ aesthetic (Bourdieu), but have never been thoroughly analysed. I will show that the higher educated are not only more omnivorous than people with less education with regard to their taste, but also with regard to the criteria they apply. Furthermore, I demonstrate that people describe high culture more with classic criteria than with modern criteria such as originality, which brings me back to the discussion in chapter 1 on the genesis and nature of cultural hierarchy.

In the conclusion, I answer the research questions and discuss the theoretical implications, by focussing on the tensions between the practices and definitions of and opinions on cultural hierarchy. I conclude with suggestions for further research, for instance on practices and perceptions of social stratification in general.
Notes to the reader

This is an English language book about research that took place in the Netherlands. Although the subject of this research is intended to be relevant to readers all over the (Western) world, many of the examples are from Dutch society and culture. Excluding these examples without losing the richness of the data would have been impossible. Instead, I tried to make the text as comprehensible as possible for non-Dutch readers. Not only will I explain Dutch examples immediately when necessary, I also use asterisks (*), which refer to an alphabetic glossary in appendix 1. This glossary contains all Dutch examples that appear throughout this book: not only singers and TV shows, but also untranslatable concepts (volks, fout) as well as a section on the Dutch education system. Regarding the quotes, I try to stay as close to the original as possible. Sometimes I literally translate Dutch sayings, accompanied by an explanation.

The respondents in this dissertation were promised anonymity. Therefore, I use pseudonyms: all respondents are referred to by fictitious first names. For reasons of consistency, I refer to older people with first names too. Their names are followed by four-digit codes, which can be looked up in appendix 2: an overview of the main characteristics of the respondents. The codes are explained below.

The first letter refers to his/her status group:
- Higher educated (with higher educated parents)
- Upwardly mobile (higher educated with lower educated parents)
- Lower educated (with lower educated parents)

The second letter is age:
- Old (born before 1945)
- Middle-aged (born 1945-1965)
- Young (born 1965-1985)

The third letter is gender:
- Male
- Female

For example, UYF3 is the third upwardly mobile young female respondent.

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24 The Dutch names that appear on the cards that respondents ranked (André Hazes, Frans Bauer, etc.) and that are mentioned many times throughout the book will not be marked with an asterisk each time they appear in the text. Naturally, they do appear in the glossary.
As is customary in reports on qualitative research, quotes longer than two lines are printed in a smaller font and are set off as block quotations. The **bold lines** in these quotes indicate the words by the interviewer, myself.