Disputing about taste: Practices and perceptions of cultural hierarchy in the Netherlands
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Chapter 1

The rise and fall of cultural hierarchy?
A historical analysis

For centuries there has been a cultural hierarchy, for centuries there was an elite that had the will and the power to maintain it. At the end of the last century, due to new media, commerce and the power of mass audience it has ended. (…) The novel is, partially due to this equalisation of high and low culture, losing its place at the centre of culture. (Oek de Jong, NRC Handelsblad 22-3-2013, my translation).

Both people who defend cultural hierarchy and those who criticise this high–low distinction, or claim that it has faded, often fail to realise that this hierarchy has not always existed in this form. Although ‘high culture’ is often perceived as a rich tradition that has recently come under attack by iconoclastic proponents of popular and mass culture and by egalitarian omnivores, this ‘tradition’ is not as old as many, such as novelist Oek de Jong above, think it is. Furthermore, the introduction showed there are conflicting definitions of cultural hierarchy: is high culture morally better, more complex or more innovative than low culture; or does it simply consist of the preferences of high status people? In order to better understand both these diverging interpretations of cultural hierarchy and its alleged fading in recent decades, this chapter will analyse its emergence in the course of time.

Authors who analysed the sociogenesis of cultural hierarchy do not agree on the exact nature of this process, nor on the period when it started. Many scholars date this cultural shift in the late nineteenth century, but others trace it back to the fifteenth century. This huge gap is partly due to the geographic scope of analysis. A classic book on the matter, Highbrow / lowbrow: the emergence of cultural hierarchy in America by historian Lawrence W. Levine (1988), deals with – as the title indicates –the history of hierarchical distinctions in the United States. The institutionalisation of ‘legitimate culture’ in this country around 1880 was partly a deliberate imitation of the European example, which apparently already existed at the time. Another possible cause of conflicting timings is the focus on different cultural domains: Levine mainly discusses the theatre and classical music, whereas others speak about the visual arts (e.g., Kempers 1987) or emphasise literature (e.g., Bourdieu 1996).

Finally, and most importantly, the different interpretations of the process are connected with diverging definitions of cultural hierarchy. When one defines it as the

25 However, Kempers does not speak in terms of cultural hierarchy, and he downplays the social significance of early cultural distinction, as we will see later.
cultural stratification between elites and common people with regard to the sheer possession of artistic objects, one may date its beginnings in Antiquity, or even before. Levine (1988) and Peterson (1997) on the other hand describe the rise of the explicit division between an institutionalised ‘high culture’ and mass-produced ‘popular culture’, starting in the nineteenth century. However, this was the culmination of distinctive practices by ‘civilised’ and ‘refined’ elites, which started some centuries before (Abbing 2009; cf. Burke 1978; Kempers 1987; Smithuijsen 2001). This civilisation narrative is ignored by Bourdieu himself (1984; 1996), as well as by Lizardo (2008), who both focus on the autonomisation of art by artistic bohemians in the Romantic era and the nineteenth century. This narrative in its turn is overlooked by the former authors. Confusion is the result.

Surprisingly, no one seems to integrate these different processes into one coherent analysis of the emergence of cultural hierarchy in a long-term perspective. This chapter tries to fill this gap, in order to unravel the relation between cultural distinction and cultural hierarchy, and to better understand the alleged waning of cultural hierarchy since the second half of the twentieth century. I define cultural hierarchy as the outcome of specific cultural distinction practices by certain groups in society. This definition is both inclusive, in the sense that it involves different elites and their respective distinctive practices, and exclusive, because it does not involve the stratification of the sheer possession of art. The analysis takes into account the subsequent emergence of (sometimes mutually exclusive) criteria for arts appreciation and cultural distinction, such as grandeur, craftsmanship, civilisation, complexity and innovativeness.

I argue that the Romantic ideal of innovative and authentic art led to a second hierarchical logic in the nineteenth century, which juxtaposed the previously germinated – and at the time still developing – hierarchy based on civilisation and complexity. Elaborating on Lizardo (2008), I contend that this novel distinctive practice and perhaps alternative hierarchy eventually undermined the hierarchy based on the first logic. This analysis can clear up the present-day confusion on either the existence or the waning of cultural hierarchy and, hence, of cultural distinction.

This chapter is based on secondary literature solely, as historical-sociological analysis is not the main focus of the dissertation. This analysis is presented largely in a chronological order, starting in the late Middle Ages, but will also go back and forth in time when describing different processes that took place simultaneously (e.g., in the nineteenth century). Furthermore, it does not give a complete account of art history, but

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26 After writing this chapter, I did find two authors who discuss both processes. Boëthius (1995a) interprets it as primary and secondary cultural differentiation, but he describes the latter as distinct within the bourgeoisie solely and he concludes that both differentiations have faded. Storey (2003: 32-42) does not integrate both – briefly discussed – processes either.

27 The present use of these criteria by my respondents is the subject of chapter 7.
rather highlights certain periods that mark important changes with regard to distinctive processes and hierarchy formations.

The social construction of cultural hierarchies

The unimportance of cultural distinction in the late Middle Ages

If one argues that distinctive and hierarchical practices started to emerge in a certain time, it is necessary to begin with showing why these practices did not exist before. However, it is very difficult to prove this non-existence. The further one goes back in history, the lesser is known about people’s actual tastes and opinions. Therefore, I have to rely on other’s interpretations of original sources and I have to weigh their plausibility.

Until the fifteenth century, art was not regarded as having a function in itself. Besides sheer decorative, entertaining and political functions, most art had a religious meaning. Painters produced frescos and icons, depicting Jesus, the Virgin Mary, Biblical representations and Saints. Churches, convents, and mendicant orders commissioned artists specific tasks, which they executed to the best of their ability (Kempers 1987: 104-7). One aim of these artworks was to educate the illiterate, who could better understand the Bible through images, and another to improve memorisation of Biblical stories among the literate (Baxandall 1972: 40-45). Consequently, art had to be comprehensible; symbols that are nowadays only understood by art historians and religious people were then equally interpreted by clergymen and illiterates (ibid.). They were ‘drawn from a “cultural repertoire” (...) that was widely shared across social groups’ (Lizardo 2008: 7; italics in orig.). Therefore, Lizardo (2008) claims that there was no distinction yet based on divergent ‘cultural competence’ to ‘understand’ art (cf. Hauser 1982: 551-5).

Furthermore, in most parts of Europe, until the sixteenth century there was no significant spatial and cultural stratification between elites and the common people. Although European societies were socially highly stratified, different strata shared their cultural participation to a large extent. British historian Peter Burke (1978: 23-29) describes how in different (rural) parts of Europe the upper classes and the educated enjoyed the same folksongs, how ‘rich and poor, nobles and commoners attended the same sermons’ (p. 25), and how clowns performed ‘at courts as well as taverns’ (ibid.). Still in

28 In response to Lizardo, Trentmann (2008) argues that this logic does not apply to references to Antiquity, which could only be understood by classically trained people. Furthermore, Baxandall (1972: 86-102) claims that geometrical forms and ratios were only understood by people with secondary education (including most tradesmen), but there is no particular reason to believe that this knowledge was the basis for cultural distinction.

29 There are also exceptions, such as the poetry by medieval troubadours in the eleventh to thirteenth century that was restricted to the court (e.g., Maso 2010).
the late sixteenth century, William Shakespeare – nowadays consecrated as the pinnacle of high culture – presented his plays in public theatres. Both common Londoners and Queen Elizabeth and her household shared their enjoyment for the fights and vulgar jokes as well as the royal intrigues and moral messages (Schama 2012; cf. Burke 1978: 277).\(^{30}\) Burke (pp. 27-29) claims that elites, despite their contempt for the common people, did not associate this culture \textit{with} these common people, but instead perceived it as the common culture of the region or country where they all lived (cf. De Meyer 2004: 134). Furthermore, many (rural) aristocrats and priests were illiterate themselves. A small number of literate noblemen and clergymen studied the ‘great tradition’, but according to Burke they perceived it as a field \textit{different} from common culture in which they also participated, not necessarily a \textit{superior} field. Although ‘the great tradition was serious, the little tradition was play’ (Burke 1978: 28), at the time these traditions were probably simply juxtaposed or in a minor degree asymmetrical, rather than implying distinction (De Meyer 2004: 134).\(^{31}\)

\textit{Size, grandeur and craftsmanship: Early signs of cultural distinction}

Thus, until early sixteenth century Europe, elites and common people often enjoyed culture together and also interpreted it in the same way, which implies a lack of cultural distinction, and of cultural hierarchy based on distinction. However, elites did derive status from the possession and display of art since long before the fifteenth century. This was mostly based, though, on possession as such, representing wealth differences. The size and grandeur of paintings and murals were the basic attributes for distinction. Reflecting on Bourdieu, Kempers (1987: 356/7, note 42) claims that ‘large, colourful, and expensive [art] counted as beautiful, impressive and thus representing status’ (my translation\(^{32}\)).

However, Lizardo (2008: 4-8) argues that distinctions based on the \textit{possession} of art (‘objectified cultural capital’) do not form the basis for an actual cultural hierarchy, as people probably made no other distinctions within art other than by size and grandeur. Furthermore, Kempers (1987) states that most artistic status display in early fourteenth century Italian city-states was purely dedicated to the collective: the Church (frescoes in

\(^{30}\)This is shown excellently in the motion picture – though fictitious – \textit{Shakespeare in love} (John Madden, 1998). In the United States the mixing of social classes at cultural venues still occurred in the nineteenth century. Levine (1988: 13-45) describes vividly how Shakespeare’s plays were rarely performed as a whole, but rather as a potpourri of scenes, combined with acts from other cultural disciplines, such as arias from famous operas, vaudeville acts, jugglers, magic shows – in short: with lots of spectacle. Not only did various people enjoy cultural shows together, they also behaved in about the same way.

\(^{31}\)Later, Burke downplayed these statements somewhat, as we do not know whether elites ‘participated in the same way as people for whom popular culture was all the culture they had’ (Burke 1997: 130).

\(^{32}\)The book was translated into English (see Kempers 1992), but it was hard to retrieve the exact quotes. Therefore, I translated quotes from the original Dutch version myself.
cathedrals) and the city (secular art in city halls). Ostentatious display by individuals or families was taboo (Kempers 1987: 184-7). In Italy, the ‘stylisation of social inequality’ (p. 207, my translation) began only in fourteenth and fifteenth century Florence, where rich merchant families started to build large villas and family chapels, decorated with the most beautiful paintings and murals (p. 189-207). Kempers describes this development as an increasing privatisation, secularisation, and aristocratisation of art. This process was continued in the sixteenth century in other parts of Italy, such as Rome.

Elites could not only derive status from the size and grandeur of the art they possessed, but also from the craftsmanship being displayed. This was also a product of money: the richest patrons could pay the highest salary for the best artists. For ages, painters and sculptors have only been admired for their craftsmanship. Artists were hired by the church, the state and rich patrons to produce a certain piece of art. The profession of artist was similar to that of a carpenter or a smith. They were not supposed to deviate from the assignment, to be ‘original’, but to just make what they were asked for, to the best of their abilities. Of course they innovated over time – one of the most important attributes to evaluate artists today – but these innovations were solely meant to improve the ‘objective’ quality of the work. In the case of painting, for instance, the degree of realism rose during the centuries due to better use of colours and light, and due to new mathematical insights, such as on perspective (Baxandall 1972; Kempers 1987). Great artists were able to ‘reproduce observations in a true to nature, elegant and well-proportioned way’ (Kempers 1987: 357, n. 46, my translation) and to paint the smallest details (Baxandall 1972: 17-23).

Because of their superior craftsmanship, the greatest artists of the Renaissance, such as Raphael and Michelangelo, acquired a lot of status at the royal and papal courts. Several master painters were identified by their specific styles, but these too were described in terms of craftsmanship and of impact on the viewer (ibid.: 23-27). The increasing ‘consciousness of the development of and diversity in style’ was only ‘an aside within a generally accepted frame of thought on professional expertise’ (Kempers 1987: 357, n. 46).

Hence, originality and authenticity, present-day norms for art appreciation, were not valued yet; Bourdieu’s ‘aesthetic disposition’ could not yet function as a tool for distinction. Nowadays, Michelangelo is admired as a genius innovator who followed his inspiration, but this is a nineteenth century romanticisation (ibid.: 277-284; 309-12; cf. Bourdieu 1996: 315-9; Baxandall 1972). In the seventeenth century Netherlands – the Golden Age of Rembrandt and others – originality and authenticity were increasingly appreciated by art buyers, yet still in a narrow sense. Increasing price distinctions between originals and copies show that patrons preferred one-of-a-kind paintings (or the first version of a series) to which the ‘master painter’ contributed significantly compared to his

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33 Michelangelo and others were surely admired, and the great art historian Vasari contributed to this in the sixteenth century, but not for being innovative.
assistants. This signifies originality in the sense of uniqueness and authorship rather than actual innovativeness (De Marchi & Van Miegroet 1996). Rembrandt’s innovations in his later career were only valued since the Romantic era (Schama 2006: 178).

**Aesthetic refinement and professionalisation: The first logic of cultural hierarchy**

Between 1500 and 1900 an actual cultural hierarchy gradually emerged and institutionalised, based on elite distinctions that went further than the price of art, as manifested in size, grandeur and displayed craftsmanship. A complex interplay of civilisation and professionalisation processes resulted in a specific domain of ‘the fine arts’ and later ‘high culture’, which was perceived as morally better, more civilised and refined, and more complex than common culture.

As we have seen, until about 1500 the elites and the common people in Europe often enjoyed culture together. In the course of the sixteenth century, however, the elites distinguished themselves more and more from the common people. An important factor was the church, which between 1500 and 1650 increasingly expressed moral objections towards common culture. All kinds of practices and activities were condemned for being pagan or immoral: ‘Festivals were denounced as occasions of sin, more especially of drunkenness, gluttony and lechery, and as encouraging servitude to the world, the flesh, and the Devil’ (Burke 1978: 212). Both Catholics and Protestants condemned these practices, either by adapting common culture or by abolishing it. The reformers aimed to reach the common people with their higher moral values and their more purified culture, but the unintentional effect was a growing distinction between the educated and the illiterate (pp. 207-243). The former group was growing, due to the expansion of education in Europe over the centuries (pp. 250-9). Both processes went hand in hand with a civilising process in more general terms, which paved the way for a more significant cultural distinction.

During the sixteenth and seventeenth century, the increasing spatial separation between religious, and later secular, elites on the one hand, and the common people on the other, gradually spread over Europe, culminating in French king Louis XIV’s move to Versailles in 1682 (Burke 1978: 276). This separation also led to more cultural distinctions between classes. Artists no longer appeared in courts and taverns; the English upper classes built private theatres to enjoy Shakespeare’s plays amongst themselves. Furthermore, people from different classes increasingly spoke different languages: elites for example favoured ‘national’ language over regional ‘dialects’ (pp. 270-281). These processes went together with an increasing ‘civilisation’ of behaviour, a self-control of impulses, and a cultivation of style (p. 271; Elias 1994 [1939]). ‘Civilised’ nobles started to distinguish from the common, ‘uncivilised’, people, with whom they used to share
manner and customs only a few generations ago. In the sixteenth century, everyone still celebrated Carnival together, but in the late eighteenth century, the diversions of this feast were described by a French writer as ‘a coarseness which makes the taste for them resemble that of pigs’ (Mercier 1782, quoted by Burke 1978: 273).

This civilising process was the effect of continuous power struggles and distinctive practices between different members of the elite. When the lower aristocracy imitated the refined behaviour of the higher aristocracy, the latter had to distinguish further with even more refined behaviour, and so on (Elias 1994 [1939]). The same counts for the status display by means of large villas with impressive paintings and murals, complemented in the eighteenth century with ever larger private orchestras. During the sixteenth century the distinction based solely on size and impression made space for more sophisticated distinctions. Italian merchant families, for instance, increasingly displayed their intellect. Private libraries and studies became status symbols, both in real life and on painted portraits (Kempers 1987: 267-9). In ‘academies’, aristocrats, men of learning, as well as artists (who had gained status themselves), gathered to discuss (classical) art and literature, with which they elevated themselves above others (pp. 327-332). In the course of the eighteenth century, both learning and establishing a pronounced taste became more important among elites, who in their salons wished to converse with ‘men of letters’ (Kale 2004: 35, on France).

Civilisation and intellectualisation went together with an increasing professionalisation, autonomisation and formalisation of art. In 1568 for instance, Giorgio Vasari completed a seminal work on the history of art, which he described as a progressive process of increasing control of techniques, and which was based on theoretical insights from classical and contemporary writers. This resulted in a high professional ideal – both practical and theoretical – that artists should apply (Kempers 1987: 333-9). The process of autonomisation and formalisation can also be recognised in the field of music. In early seventeenth century Italy, Monteverdi was the first composer to develop a music genre that was not rooted in religion: his secular music appealed more to the mind and the heart. Furthermore, composers increasingly described in minute detail how their pieces should be performed. Musicians were taught the rules of conduct during a concert, particularly concerning body language (Smithuijsen 2001: 36-46).

The civilisation of listeners emerged in a later stage. For a long time aristocrats attended concerts not so much for listening to music, but rather as entertainment during

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34 In the Netherlands, this distinction between higher and lower elites was less strong. The Calvinist and non-aristocratic Dutch elites of the seventeenth century ‘were proud of not being idle, overdressed nobility’ (Schama 2006: 140, italics in orig.). Furnée (2007) does describe in detail the elite stratification in a later period – the nineteenth century – in The Hague: the aristocracy, patricians, high civil servants, officers, free and (semi-)intellectual professions, bourgeoisie, and others all distinguished from each other and hardly ever mingled socially. The 1856 initiative for a zoo in which the elites would mingle caused high uproar. Within the Netherlands, however, The Hague was an extreme case, as elites in other Dutch towns were still more bourgeois.
social gatherings. There was no urge to remain silent yet, but people chatted, walked around, ate and drank. No one paid much attention to the compositions or to the way these were performed. During a European tour, Mozart complained in his letters about the rooms with the set tables and about the indifferent audiences with their loud noises in several of the cities where he performed (Smithuij sen 2001: 58-67, 88-91). Only in the late eighteenth century, a number of groups in society started to take music more seriously and began to distinguish themselves from those who listened to music in a less formalised way (Smithuij sen 2001). DeNora (1991) situates this early practice in Vienna, between 1790 and 1800, where certain aristocrats developed an ‘ideology of serious music’, as Dowd (2008) called it. When one could no longer distinguish oneself by the size of the house orchestra (Hauskapelle), one had to find a qualitative attribute of distinction: funding ‘great men’ such as Beethoven, who composed more ‘complex’ music. This counted as ‘good taste’ in these circles (DeNora 1991). Furthermore, the bourgeoisie increasingly distinguished itself from the aristocracy, particularly in Northern Europe and in Paris. Bourgeois circles established collegia musica, in which amateurs played music together in a highly formalised way, with high quality standards. The small groups of listeners were bound by strict rules of behaviour, such as arriving on time, not leaving early, keeping silent, and listening with full concentration. This was a response to the chatting and eating practices of both aristocrats and the ‘commercial’ opera scene (Smithuij sen 2001).

During the nineteenth century, these more civilised rules of conduct and formal criteria to judge art were gradually established all over the cultural domain. Even the behaviour of lower class spectators during vaudeville acts became regulated (Smithuij sen 2001: 93-95). Specific actors, mainly conductors, played a pivotal role in this development. In the United States, for example, conductor Theodore Thomas and critic J.S. Dwight actively taught the audience both the ‘pure’ value of music and the serious concert etiquette, because they became more and more irritated by their audience’s loud and gross manners. ‘Silence is to music what light is to painting’, composer Edward Baxter Perry said in 1892 (quoted in Levine 1988: 190). This emphasis on civilised behaviour contains a strong moral undertone. The fine arts were presented as morally better than popular entertainment, and if ‘the fine arts were civilizing, fine arts appreciation came to be seen as a sign of virtuous character’ (Peterson 1997: 82, italics in orig.).

Besides the high moral value, also the supposed refinement and complexity of the high arts (a result of increased formalisation) caused social distinction. One had to put considerable efforts into understanding high cultural objects, and it therefore took a long time before one was able to appreciate them. ‘Culture required training’ (Levine 1988:

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35 Smithuij sen argues that this eventually led to an all-encompassing duty to remain silent in concert halls that still rules today and that prevents many (upwardly mobile and younger) music lovers from attending (cf. Abbing 2009, who wishes to challenge these strict rules).
213), and those who did train – and who had the time and money to train – could distinguish from those who did not, or less. Hence, the elite could use the ability to appreciate complex art with a high moral value to recognise each other and to exclude the increasing number of social climbers from their circles (Peterson 1997).36

**High vs. low culture: The institutionalisation of cultural hierarchy**

In the nineteenth century these processes culminated in an institutionalisation of ‘high(brow) culture’, as opposed to ‘low(brow) culture’. Cultural objects were increasingly classified, categorised, and canonised, in order to maintain status positions (Abbing 2009: 53). The new ‘canon’ of high culture also became part of (national) school curricula, which resulted in the continuous reproduction of its status (Bourdieu 1984). Several still existing prestigious institutions were established or built in the same time period. In Vienna, although the Wiener Philharmoniker was founded in 1840, it only performed continuously from 1860 on, and the concert hall Musikverein was built in 1870. Paris got its Opéra (Palais Garnier) in 1875; Berlin its Philharmonic Orchestra in 1882; Amsterdam both its Concertgebouw (concert building) and its Concertgebouw Orchestra in 1888 – just a few dates to illustrate this same development in several European countries.37

Levine (1988: 109-132) describes in more detail why and how this process took place in the US, which happened at a much faster pace than in their great example, Europe. The actors who ‘taught’ the audience how to behave at a concert, such as conductor Theodore Thomas (see above), eventually founded their own orchestras, funded by rich patrons.38 Out of discontent with the behaviour of the audience of touring orchestras, they initiated orchestras for their ‘own kind of people’. The effect was a further ‘sacralisation’ of high culture. Similar developments took place in the theatre. Furnée (2007) shows how noblemen and patricians in The Hague from the 1850s to 1870s strived to lift the standards of the theatre, which in their view had been debased and which only attracted lower classes.39 One of the initiators, the lawyer A.W. Jacobson, called them:

[those] of the Hague audience who go out to entertain themselves, rather than to enjoy, to learn, to taste intellectual pleasure after exacting labour. (Jacobson 1873, quoted in Furnée 2007: 294, my translation, italics in Furnée).

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36 This process started in late eighteenth century Vienna too, but was initially only short-lived (DeNora 1991).
37 Based on several internet sources.
38 Thomas founded the Chicago Symphony Orchestra in 1891, ten years after the first permanent symphony orchestra in the US was founded in Boston.
39 Furnée shows that the perceptions at the time did not correspond with reality. The actual theatre visitors were mainly from the middle class and partly the bourgeoisie (2007: 251-272).
They succeeded in winning back the upper classes by ameliorating the level of acting and the degree of realism (both aspects of craftsmanship). Other examples of this elevation and sacralisation of art can be found in museums (the places with a bric-a-brac of objects made room for ‘temples’ with authentic artworks; Levine 1988: 70-78; 146-155) and in ballet (from an exhibitionist and vulgar kind of acrobatics to high art; Di Maggio 1992: 38-43).40

This institutionalisation and sacralisation of the fine arts, as compared to more popular art forms, also became visible in language. In English language books, the term ‘high culture’ emerged around 1830 and reached a temporary peak in 1880, as figure 1.1 shows.41 There are some search results in the late eighteenth century too, but these only refer to civilisations or to agriculture, as did the word ‘culture’ itself at the time. ‘High art’ (not included in the figure) follows around the same line as ‘high culture’, though its first peak was somewhat sooner and higher; and since 1960 it does not reach as high as ‘high culture’ anymore.42 Its antonym ‘low culture’ is nearly non-existent, until a slight increase after 1970. The steep rise of the use of ‘high culture’ after 1980 is probably due to the emergence of its new antonym ‘popular culture’ (not included in the figure), which rises since the 1970s until a peak of about 4.8 times higher than ‘high culture’ in the year 2000. This concept rarely occurred before 1940.43

Figure 1.1 Percentage of the terms ‘high culture’, ‘low culture’, ‘highbrow’, and ‘lowbrow’ in English language books, between 1750 and 2000 (source: Ngram)

40 In the US, the tour of the famous Russian company Ballets Russes in the 1910s was a first step to status, but it took until the 1930s before ballet was recognized by elites as high art (DiMaggio 1992: 38-43).
41 Ngram is a Google search tool which counts words and phrases in a large sample (of 6,000 books per year) of English language books, both British and American. The numbers on the y-axis mean the percentage of all words that the particular words occur (in the case of ‘high culture’ and ‘low culture’ the percentage of all combinations of two words). See http://books.google.com/ngrams.
42 The term ‘fine arts’, however, has been much more common during the entire period, though its antonym ‘popular arts’ has not.
43 Ngram is available for several languages, but unfortunately Dutch is not one of them. In French, ‘haute culture’ initially follows around the same line as ‘high culture’, but it reaches its peak only around 1920, after which it falls back. Unlike ‘high culture’, it does not rise again after 1960.
The graph also shows the striking popularity of the word ‘highbrow’ in the first half of the twentieth century. It was coined around 1880 (the opposite ‘lowbrow’ stems from circa 1900), in the wake of phrenological practices. In the nineteenth century, skulls were measured in order to trace personalities (such as the criminal mind) and to categorise races. It refers to the height of the brow or forehead. Intelligent and Caucasian highbrows were positioned on top; dumb and black lowbrows at the bottom of the human ladder (Levine 1988: 221-3). Most present-day users of these words will not be aware of this quasi-biological and even racist etymology.

Thus, the increasing cultural distinction by the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie, from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, both amongst each other and in contrast to the common people, eventually resulted in the institutionalisation of ‘high(brow) culture’. The ever more refined distinctions were based on civilised rules of conduct, formal and rational principles, and the allegedly required intellect to understand ‘complex’ cultural objects. Civilisation (linked to morality), aesthetic refinement, and formality (complexity) formed the first logic of a cultural hierarchy, which I call the ‘classic logic’.

**Authenticity and innovation: An alternative logic of cultural hierarchy**

Originality, authenticity and aversion to commercialism do not play a role in the above narrative, but constitute the rise of a second logic of cultural hierarchy, starting in the late eighteenth and developing in the nineteenth century, which I call – by lack of a better term – the ‘modern logic’. Therefore, in this section we will begin by moving back the clock about one hundred years.

In the second half of the eighteenth century, the upcoming middle classes and bourgeoisie increasingly criticised the aristocracy for being insincere. The nobility liked classical art, which represented nature in an idealistic way, without deriving pleasure from it. Campbell argues that even hedonistic excesses such as drinking were not meant for pleasure but rather for (masculine) status competition (Campbell 1987: 154-172). The same counts for the non-aristocratic dandies, who cultivated a refined taste and who equally controlled their emotions (ibid.: 167-172). The upcoming bourgeoisie, on the contrary, developed a cult of sentimentalism, in which the feeling and expression of emotions was highly valued. Sensibility became an important religious virtue for middle classes, due to a new, emotional, interpretation of the puritan ethic (ibid.: 107-142). This found its way in their art preferences: picturesque rather than idealistic images, for instance of animals and children (ibid.: 148-154). Some of them objected to the universal classical aesthetics by the nobility and proposed an individualist and intuitive taste instead (ibid.: 154-6). They were, in other words, searching for more sincere, or ‘authentic’, personal tastes (ibid.: 173-9) and for art that represented more ‘authentic’ emotions.
In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century this new ethic, critical of civilisation, developed into Romanticism. One of its pillars was the upcoming progressive movement that desired a better society, based on the same Enlightenment principles that guided more conservative artists. Progressive painters such as Delacroix rejected the idealistic ‘academic’ painting and promoted a ‘cult of ugliness’ instead.\(^{44}\) Conservatives accused them of subversion and hence immorality (Witcombe 1995). Furthermore, the Romantics rediscovered the common people in the countryside, comparable to Rousseau’s ‘noble savages’. Folk art represented the ‘authentic’ and ‘pure’ culture of the ‘nation’, untouched by the rationality and artificiality of high art, nor by commercial values and urban industrialisation (see below). People such as the Grimm brothers allegedly wandered around the countryside of Germany, in search for old folk tales: the basis of their still known, yet highly adapted, fairytales (Burke 1978: 3-22; 281-6; Storey 2003: 1-15).

Romanticism also influenced the image of the artist. Creativity, imagination and individual inspiration were preferred over artificiality and civilisation (Campbell 1987: 181-7; Guignon 2004: 70-77). Painters and writers emerged who struggled, without being constrained by the market nor by patronage, to give their own personal vision of the world. More and more artists perceived themselves as a ‘heroic figure (...), a rebel whose originality is measured by how far he is the victim of incomprehension and how much scandal he arouses’ (Bourdieu 1996: 133). The ‘bohemian lifestyle’ emerged: living in poverty, working at purely individual art, while opposing the ‘artificial’ bourgeoisie (ibid.: 48-57; 357 n1; Campbell 1987: 195-200). This movement progressed significantly in the course of the nineteenth century. The autonomisation of art that emerged in the seventeenth and eighteenth century further developed into a situation in which artists and writers increasingly defined their own rules and criteria for good art, rather than following their patron’s or the market’s rules. They chose their own subjects, without moral objections. French writer Gustave Flaubert, one of the main proponents of this movement, wrote in a letter in 1852:

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\text{[T]here are no noble subjects or ignoble subjects; from the standpoint of pure Art one might almost establish the axiom that there is no such thing as subject – style in itself being an absolute manner of seeing things. (Flaubert 1852, quoted by Bourdieu 1996: 106)}
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Style, or form, became of more importance than the contents or external function of art, let alone economic gain. New styles of painting, composing and writing were invented. What Flaubert and Baudelaire meant for literature, Impressionist painters meant for the visual

\(^{44}\) These painters were influenced by Dutch painters such as Rembrandt, who already left classical idealism behind him in the seventeenth century in order to produce down-to-earth depictions of both Biblical scenes and Amsterdam dignitaries and merchants – yet still with widely admired craftsmanship. This might be caused by the bourgeois rather than aristocratic elite in the seventeenth century Netherlands (Schama 2006).
The rise and fall of cultural hierarchy? A historical analysis

arts – both fields influenced each other (Bourdieu 1996). The first non-traditional paintings that Manet wanted to exhibit, in 1863, were refused by the bourgeois oriented Salon, which *did* include the more gradual innovations of Romanticism.45 This led him and colleagues to organise an annual ‘Salon des Refusés’ (Salon of the Refused). Originality and innovativeness in subject and style as well as the artist’s authenticity became of growing importance. In the early twentieth century, this resulted in a “permanent revolution” of stylistic innovation’ (Lizardo 2008: 13), for example by a decreasing degree of naturalness and increasing abstraction. The producers of these ever new art styles came to be known as ‘the avant-garde’. Furthermore, the fast increasing number of artists oriented themselves more and more towards their colleagues and other members of the emerging art world rather than to the rest of society. They became each other’s sources of inspiration and each other’s critics; the idea of *l’art pour l’art*, art for art’s sake, gained importance (Bourdieu 1996).46 Formal aspects, which Bourdieu calls the ‘pure aesthetic’, appeared as new criteria to judge art. Campbell (1987: 195-200) argues that this ‘aestheticism’ bares similarities to both bohemian Romanticism and the aristocratic self-control of emotions: one has to respond in a detached way to abstract art that does not immediately stimulate one’s senses or invoke emotions. Furthermore, it now became more difficult and contested to separate good art from bad than in the time when craftsmanship was the main criterion. Cultural specialists such as critics and dealers emerged who possessed a large knowledge of art history and hence the skills to determine good (innovative, and so on) art. That is, they claimed to have these skills, and these skills were ascribed to them by others in the art world (cf. Bourdieu 1986: ‘symbolic capital’).

People in and around this emerging art world distinguished themselves from those who still appreciated art for what it represents, for its moral value, or for a specific purpose outside art. They protested against both the ‘official’ cultural hierarchy and the logic of commercial success among the new bourgeoisie (cf. Adang & Van Steenderen 1999). Bourdieu (1996: 71-77) describes how Flaubert both opposed ‘bourgeois’ art (which he perceived as conservative and as commercially oriented) and ‘social art’ (the anti-bourgeois, progressive movement which was not oriented towards art itself either).47 People from the bourgeoisie in their turn loathed experimental and ‘immoral’ innovations which were propagated by the new Modernist artists and critics. This was the beginning of the ‘dualist structure’, the continuous struggle between two competing ideologies of cultural value (pp. 113-125): ‘between the Bohemian avant-garde and the Bourgeois philistines’, as Ollivier (2008b: 2) puts it. Adang & Van Steenderen (1999: 140) argue that

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45 This initial rejection had more to do with the depiction of a nude woman in a non-classical environment, but rejections of later works were related to the non-realist style.

46 This early nineteenth century expression was promoted more explicitly by the French novelist and critic Théophile Gautier in the 1850s (Witcombe 1995).

47 However, Flaubert was ambivalent about his goals: on the one hand he wanted to be taken seriously by the bourgeois ‘Académie’, whose values he on the other hand rejected (pp. 87-94; cf. Campbell 1987: 200).
avant-garde artists placed traditional and bourgeois art outside of the cultural field: distinctions from former avant-gardes became more important than from academism and commercialism. In the Netherlands, the anti-bourgeois movement, both in society as a whole (e.g., the labour movement) and in art, only started in the 1880s, when, due to economic growth, artists were no longer solely dependent on their upper-class patrons (Van Uitert 2002; Aerts 2002).

This process led Bourdieu (1984) to distinguish between the economic and cultural elite, according to the amount of economic and cultural capital one possesses (see introduction). Despite his analysis of the emergence of this dual structure in the nineteenth century (Bourdieu 1996) and its continuation in the twentieth century (Bourdieu 1984), he did not describe the situation as two rival – classic versus modern – logics of distinction, and thus as two opposing cultural hierarchies. However, since the nineteenth century high culture can be interpreted both as consecrated and ‘conservative’ art and as innovative avant-garde art. Both logics lead to cultural distinction: on the basis of civilisation and refinement on the one hand, and on the basis of originality and authenticity on the other. What complicates this contrast is that both logics also share one principle: the alleged complexity of (high) art. The bourgeois (and initially aristocratic) distinction by means of the ability to ‘train’ for understanding complex art and for restraining the initial emotional response is comparable to the bohemian distinction by the ability to learn to appreciate ever new forms of art that do not appeal to the senses immediately, such as abstract art and a-tonal music (cf. Campbell 1987: 195-200). Furthermore, the contrast is made more complex due to the continuous recycling of art forms: when the new avant-garde has replaced the previous one, the latter is often (though not always) consecrated, canonised and embraced by the bourgeoisie after all.

The neglect of this contrast, the shared importance of complexity and the circular process between avant-gardes contribute to the confusion when discussing cultural hierarchy and its waning today. Before moving to this recent discussion, however, I will present developments towards more refined hierarchies than simple high–low distinctions.

**Kitsch, middlebrow, popular and mass culture: Distinctions from lower and middle classes**

Above, I sketched the emergence of ‘high(brow) culture’, which more or less split into two different forms in the nineteenth century. We saw that it is the result of cultural distinctions among different elites, both within aristocratic and bourgeois circles and between bourgeoisie and bohemians. People mainly distinguish from those who are close

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48 Nor did Schulze (1992: 142-150), who did discuss both ‘harmonious’ classic art and innovative modern art as two elements of high culture, but who blends it into one style of enjoying art.
and aspiring and who therefore form a threat to their own status, rather than from people
further down the ladder (Bourdieu 1984: 479; cf. Elias 1998). The ever more refined
distinctions between good and bad taste are comparable to Freud’s ‘narcissism of minor

In the seventeenth and particularly the eighteenth century, however, more and
more people distinguished themselves from middle and lower classes, due to the
emergence of commercial capitalism and the commercialisation of culture. Population
growth, urbanisation, increasing wealth, and technical innovations affected the production
of (standardised) items enormously. This included cultural items such as books. Increasing
literacy laid the foundation for a growing market for books, starting in North-western
Europe (Burke 1978: 244-259). Artists and writers were no longer dependent on patrons,
but they more and more produced for the market (following Dutch painters from the
seventeenth century). Popular books, such as novels, were published for a potentially
unlimited audience, in particular the upcoming middle class – the precursor of what we
now call ‘popular culture’ (Lowenthal 1961).

Critics of this commercialisation of culture argued that popular books were less
rooted in regional or local settings than traditional folk culture described in the previous
section. Furthermore, market orientation led to more standardisation and homogenisation,
in order to reach the ‘average’ reader. This phenomenon was criticised by those who
wanted to defend ‘true’ art with a high aesthetic value (ibid.). Following this Romantic
critique, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century new terms were coined to label
these different kinds of commercial culture: kitsch, the middlebrow, mass culture, and
popular culture respectively.

In the late nineteenth century, the term ‘kitsch’ was introduced, initially referring
to mass-produced cultural items sold at tourist art markets (cf. Elias 1998 [1935]). Not
only folk culture was eclipsed, many critics said that ‘high culture’, too, became more and
more popularised by means of mass production. They criticised the imitators of ‘real’ art
for producing ‘kitsch’, a derogatory term referring to ‘pseudoart, art in a cheap, sugary,
sentimental form, a falsified mendacious representation of reality’, as Hauser (1982
[1974]: 590) would later put it. Kitsch was allegedly consumed by members of urban
(lower) middle classes, who aspired to consume art that they could not afford (Greenberg
1956 [1946]). Due to the popularity of these imitations of ‘good taste’, the originals often
lost their exclusive, and therefore distinctive, character (cf. Ward 1991: 11).

Somewhat related is the concept ‘middlebrow’ (cf. Macdonald 1956 [1953];
Peterson 1997), which was coined in the early twentieth century as an intermediate
addition to ‘highbrow’ (ca. 1880) and ‘lowbrow’ (ca. 1900). Around 1930 a ‘battle of the

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ideas: certain emotions such as longing and pleasure became important puritan virtues. He argues that both
consumerism and its antithesis, Romanticism, unintentionally sprung from the same neo-puritan ethic.
brows’ burst out in British periodicals. Self-acclaimed middlebrow writers criticised highbrows for being too ‘intellectual’ and estranged from ordinary readers (Collini 2006: 110-9). One of the addressed, Virginia Woolf, hit back in a letter that was posthumously published in 1942. She wore the epithet ‘highbrow’ with pride and distinguished herself from middlebrow people, who, in her view, only like canonised dead art, and who do not have the capacity to decide for themselves what is good or bad within contemporary culture (Woolf 1942: 115-9). In the Netherlands, a similar debate was going on in 1939 between Christian and middle-class writers on the one hand, who attacked intellectuals and defended ‘decent’ literature, and intellectuals, such as Menno ter Braak, on the other (Van Boven 2012). Both Woolf and the American journalist Russell Lynes (1949), who elaborated on the distinction between high-, middle-, and lowbrow, stated that highbrows look down on middlebrows, but embrace the ‘simple’ and ‘authentic’ lowbrows:

The highbrows would apparently like to eliminate the middlebrows and devise a society that would approximate an intellectual feudal system in which the lowbrows do the work and create folk arts, and the highbrows do the thinking and create fine arts. (Lynes 1949: 333)

This embrace of ‘authentic’ ‘folk arts’ went hand in hand with critique on the enormous expansion of mass cultural production in the twentieth century, largely due to technological innovations. The invention of sound recording and filming paved the way for the mass production of music records and films respectively. More and more cultural products – both high and low – could now be distributed widely against low costs. Although this also implied the larger accessibility of ‘high culture’, many working- and middle-class people still did not participate in this part of the cultural realm. They started to flock together to see the latest Hollywood movie and, somewhat later, to buy the newest popular music record, rather than to see vaudeville acts and plays in the theatre (cf. Levine 1988: 70-78; Lizardo 2008: 15-16). ‘Popular culture’ was born, a term that – according to Ngram figures – only started to increase in English language books in the 1940s. The adjective ‘popular’ does not so much refer to the degree of popularity, although popular culture as a whole appeals to more people than ‘high culture’ does, but to the common, the ordinary: it is the culture ‘of the people’.

This emergence of mass produced popular culture, or ‘mass culture’,52 led to strong distinction practices by several elites. The main critique was aimed at the commercial...

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50 In these views we can recognise both the avant-garde critique on bourgeois culture and the highbrow critique on what Bourdieu (1984: 318-371) would later call the class of ‘cultural goodwill’: middle-class people who vainly aspire to move up the ladder and to connect to the upper classes.

51 The title of Peter Burke’s book, Popular culture in early modern Europe (1978), to which I often referred in previous sections, is therefore anachronistic.

52 Ngram shows that the terms ‘mass culture’ and ‘popular culture’ rose to prominence from the 1940s to the 1960s evenly, but after 1970 ‘popular culture’ increased its lead enormously.
goals and homogenising effects of the popular culture industry, rather than at its consumers. It was believed that:

... in order for this industry to be profitable, it must create a homogeneous and standardized product that appeals to a mass audience; and that this requires a process in which the industry transforms the creator into a worker on a mass production assembly line, requiring him or her to give up the individual expression of his own skill and values (Gans 1999 [1974]: 30).

In other words: high culture (but also the older forms of folk culture\(^53\)) is seen as better than popular culture because it is more heterogeneous and because it is created by ‘creative’ and ‘authentic’ artists, who put their hearts and souls into it. Mass culture has ‘such a leveling effect that the special norms and values of individual attitudes and products often fall victim to equalization’, as Marxist sociologist Hauser (1982 [1974]: 597) puts it. This emphasis on individualism and authenticity and this distinction from commercialism and homogeneity existed before (see above; cf. Tocqueville 1956 [1840]), but the rise of mass culture strongly enlarged the importance of this alleged contradiction. This critique was expressed by Marxist thinkers such as Horkheimer and Adorno (2002 [1944]; cf. Adorno 1956 [1954]). Adorno despised the capitalist ‘culture industry’, which aimed – in his view – to control ‘the masses’, the ‘suppressed’ and ‘passive’ working-class people, by infusing them with authoritarian and conservative messages and keeping them from resistance (cf. Gans 1999 [1974]: 29-88; Hauser 1982 [1974]: 583). A nice example is this Disney critique by the American socialist critic Irving Howe:

On the surface the Donald Duck and Mickey Mouse cartoons seem merely pleasant little fictions, but they are actually overlaid with the most competitive, aggressive and sadistic themes. Often on the verge of hysteria, Donald Duck is a frustrated little monster who has something of the SS man in him and whom we, also having something of the SS man in us, naturally find quite charming... (Howe 1956 [1948]: 499)

Because folk culture was not eclipsed completely by mass or popular culture, some present-day scholars reject the high–low or high–popular dichotomy and replace it with a triangle of high, popular, and folk culture (Schulze 1992; cf. Frith 1996: 36-42; Van Eijck & Lievens 2008). This triangle is complicated too, however, because the word ‘folk’ nowadays has different meanings. Besides the original meaning of ‘authentic’, non-commercial, and local culture, it often refers to a particular genre in popular culture, especially in music. In this sense, folk music is based on and popularises this ‘authentic’ local music (such as Pete Seeger); for instance by promoting acoustic instruments (e.g.,

\(^53\) Hauser (1982 [1974]: 562-597) explains the popular–folk distinction in a less plausible way, with increasing urbanisation. City dwellers fall victim to boredom and therefore seek entertainment and sensation in popular culture. In the folk oriented countryside, however, ‘[t]he peasant does not get bored; when he has nothing to do, he sleeps.’ (p. 580).
Mumford & Sons), or by commercialising local music genres (e.g., Clannad, for Irish music).  

Mass culture critique also came from the other end of the ideological spectrum. Conservative thinkers, such as Ortega y Gasset (1932: 7-13), attacked popular culture because they resented and feared the rising power of the masses. They believed that high culture, and society as a whole, was in danger due to the growing masses, supported by the culture industries (Gans 1999 [1974]: 29-88). These mass culture critiques, as well as the embrace of folk culture, follow the second, modern, logic of cultural hierarchy, which hails authenticity and originality. However, conservatives who mainly used religion in their opinion followed the first, classic, logic of cultural hierarchy. They used strong moral arguments to oppose popular culture, similar to their opposition to avant-garde art. They protested against the obscenities of ‘vulgar’ or ‘brutal culture’. Jazz music, frivolous dances, Hollywood films and comic books were held responsible for corrupting the youth, who therefore should be protected. The targets of these moral thinkers were later extended to, among others, rock ‘n roll, commercial television, hip hop, and video games (e.g. Bennett 2001; Ter Bogt 1997; cf. Boëthius 1995b for a discussion on ‘moral panic’).

Although we saw in this section that cultural hierarchy is the result of several distinction processes over a long period of time, one might expect that, at a certain point, the process is ‘finished’. Classical music, the opera, certain stage plays, ‘real’ literature, museums, and ballet have become part of the high cultural domain, whether or not the division between conservative and innovative art is taken into account. Popular music, film, and – later – television count as popular culture, or perhaps as low culture. Finally, this dichotomy is sometimes extended to a triangle, including more ‘authentic’ folk culture.

It is, in this view, the same situation that Bourdieu faced during his research in the 1960s, which he presents in a rather universal way. Indeed, in the introduction we saw that many scholars still use this rigid classification in order to measure high and popular culture practices and tastes. In a certain way, they have a point, as the correlations between these practices and status indicators such as level of education remain strong until today. However, this view ignores ongoing processes during the twentieth and early twenty-first century. These processes have often been described as the decline of cultural hierarchy, and hence of cultural distinction, although many still speak of high and low culture. The next section will give an overview of these changes and will both present and criticise common explanations. The eventual aim is to give an alternative explanation, based on the insights gained in the previous sub-section on the two different hierarchical logics, based

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54 The Dutch version of the word, volks, is even different from the former two: it refers to ‘lowbrow’ and often mass-produced Dutch language songs (comparable to German Schlagers).

55 Paradoxically, Marxists also criticise consumers’ desire for ever new innovations, which in their view is fuelled by the industry (cf. Campbell 1987: 207-210).
on different sets of criteria. This will shed light on the puzzle on the existence or waning of cultural hierarchy according to divergent definitions.

**The end of distinction? The alleged fading of cultural hierarchies**

In the second half of the twentieth century, many say, the boundaries between high and low culture have become blurred, cultural hierarchy has weakened, and—consequently—cultural distinction has diminished. Due to the increased following of popular culture, the desacralisation of high culture, the mixing of both in ‘postmodern’ art forms such as pop art, and increasing individualisation in society, the clear boundaries that had emerged in the few centuries before—and which were perceived as ‘traditional’—disappeared.

This view has been put forward by postmodernists and thinkers of ‘high’ or ‘late modernity’, who stressed the increasing individualism in the choices of lifestyle and cultural taste. In cultural sociology, the idea has been linked to the rise of ‘cultural omnivores’: literally people who like or consume *everything*, but mostly defined as those (often high status people) who like *many* things—particularly combining items from high and low culture. Although omnivorosity is often presented as a negation of Bourdieu’s distinction theory, many scholars have downplayed this rigid contradiction. In this section, I sketch these presumed changes in society. I will interrupt the section by a discussion of the thesis of cultural omnivores, as positioned between the Bourdieuian view and postmodern thoughts: how can people with broad and allegedly individual tastes still be distinctive? Next, I continue the historical thread of this chapter by showing ongoing dynamics in cultural hierarchy as well as distinctions made within popular culture. Finally, this historical analysis helps me to develop a new perspective, which will be tested in subsequent chapters.

**An individualist and non-hierarchical era?**

The notion of the waning of cultural hierarchy has often been associated with postmodernism. Starting in architecture, art became more and more eclectic, mixing many styles into new hybrid forms. Pop art is an excellent example of a deliberate mix of high and low, by creating art out of advertisements or comic books (cf. Wilterdink 2002a: 196; Jameson 1991). Not only art itself, also its consumers became more eclectic. It is assumed that ‘postmodern’ consumers choose whatever they like. This idea corresponds with certain notions of the individualisation of society: people do not follow the prescriptions of their class, their families or their religion anymore, but find their own way. They form, so
to speak, their own lifestyle (cf. Featherstone 1991: 86; Putnam 2000). Furthermore, in several Western countries strong and rigid hierarchies have been replaced by more egalitarian social relations, partly due to protests among younger generations in the 1960s and '70s. Relations between classes, between parents and children and between teachers and pupils became less unequal and also less authoritarian and more informal (cf. Wouters 2007).

This waning of social hierarchy had its impact on cultural hierarchy. The participation in ‘high culture’ declined (e.g., Van Eijck et al. 2002), and hence its symbolic value (Prieur & Savage 2013). This is partly explained by changes in the educational system. After World War II, the increasing wealth and the expansion of higher education caused a tremendous upward mobility. More than ever, children from working and lower-middle class families were able to attend higher levels of secondary education and, subsequently, university. Also, due to technological change the working class shrank in size; the transition to a ‘post-industrial’ society in which class boundaries have become less clear. The growing group of upwardly mobile young people were probably partially responsible for the status rise of low and popular culture from their parental milieu (Van Eijck 1998). Furthermore, since the 1960s the status of traditional high culture decreased, also at schools. In cultural education, the old Bildung ideal – one should get acquainted with high culture in order to become a better person – was replaced by a more democratic ideal of self-expression (Henrichs 1997).

A more specific cause of the waning of a sharp cultural hierarchy is the expansion of popular culture. Pop music, which emerged in the 1950s with rock ‘n roll, was specifically aimed for (and also made by) young people. This resulted in a specific ‘youth culture’, in which age played a more important role than class (despite class differences within youth culture). Due to increasing wealth and leisure time after World War II, young people had more money to buy records and transistor radios as well as more time to visit concerts and festivals (Bennett 2001: 7-23; cf. Janssen 2005). At the time, this music was seen as a youth phenomenon: when people grew older, they would leave it behind them (cf. SCP 1998: 728-9). Still in 1983, Simon Frith claimed that ‘the sociology of rock is inseparable from the sociology of youth’ (1983, quoted by Bennett 2013: 2). However, these predictions did not come true. People who were young in these decades continued to like pop music when they got older (Bennett 2001: 152-161; 2013). Furthermore, pop music has increasingly been taken seriously by consecrating institutions, such as ‘quality’ newspapers and universities, and as such rose on the cultural ladder (e.g. Janssen et al. 2011; Van Venrooij & Schmutz 2010).

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56 In the Netherlands, this was symbolised by the 1968 Mammoetwet (Mammoth Law). However, unlike popular belief, this huge reform in secondary education did not cause a sudden change in upward mobility, as this was already a long term trend (Dronkers & De Graaf 1995).

57 A third stage in art education that Henrichs describes is emancipatory goals for suppressed groups in society.
Hence, new generations became more and more acquainted with popular culture in their leisure time, whereas ‘high culture’ became less and less part of the curriculum, while at the same time social hierarchies were broken down. Some increasingly perceived high culture as just another subculture, equal to many popular subcultures (e.g., Seabrook 2000). Cultural literacy came to mean knowledge of both King Lear and King Kong, Levine (1988: 243-9) concluded in the epilogue of his historical work on the nineteenth century hierarchy construction. Already in 1956, Rosenberg wrote in a pessimistic way that ‘[n]ever before have the sacred and the profane, the genuine and the specious, the exalted and the debased, been so thoroughly mixed that they are all but indistinguishable’ (Rosenberg 1956: 5).

The omnivore debate: Tolerant or distinctive?

The main sociological discussion on cultural taste in the last two decades has been around the concept of the ‘cultural omnivore’. In 1992, this term was coined by American sociologist Richard A. Peterson, in a paper written with Albert Simkus, to indicate the high number of people who like many musical genres, both from high and low/popular culture. They based their findings on the 1982 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts (SPPA). Four years later, Peterson and Kern (1996) observed that the percentage of omnivores had increased between 1982 and 1992, when a new SPPA had been conducted. Both papers instigated a wide array of omnivore studies, in many different countries (see Peterson 2005 for an overview; cf. Katz-Gerro 2011).

However, the notion of omnivorosity does not imply that tastes are developed completely individually, and hence most omnivore scholars keep their distance from postmodern views discussed above. Traditional institutions, such as family, class, and religion, have indeed lost much of their significance, but that does not automatically imply people’s choices have become an unpredictable chaos. Omnivore studies showed that tastes remain socially stratified, yet in a different way. It are mainly high status people who like many musical genres (both classical and popular), whereas low status people remain relatively ‘univore’. Peterson has called this an inverted pyramid (Peterson & Simkus 1992). In 1992, high status people liked even more ‘lowbrow’ genres than a decade before, even more than low status people did (Peterson & Kern 1996). Many other scholars from numerous countries have found similar findings (e.g. Katz-Gerro 2002; López Sintas & García Álvarez 2004). In the Netherlands, omnivorousness was linked to a specific generation: De Haan & Knulst (2000) and Van Eijck et al. (2002) found that Dutch people born in the 1950s are most likely to have an omnivorous taste, whereas later

generations were more and more inclined to solely like popular culture. Hence, these scholars argue, the hierarchy of cultural tastes has changed rather than disappeared, with more diversity in the top and among young (and middle-aged) generations. Some of the omnivore scholars therefore attacked Bourdieu, either because they considered his theory to be outdated, uniquely French, or plain wrong. Several scholars who found a more diverse distribution of taste therefore claimed that they ‘falsified’ Bourdieu (e.g., Stokmans 2003).

Since the cultural omnivores were first described, there have been debates on two issues: (1) whether they actually exist, and if so, who they are and with how many; and (2) what meanings they attach to their broad tastes, whether they are ‘still’ distinctive towards others’ tastes or not. I will remain brief on the first question, as it appears to be a matter of definition, operationalisation and statistical technique. Many scholars defined omnivores as those who combine (a high number of) high and low cultural activities or musical genres (Peterson & Kern 1996; Van Eijck 1998; De Haan & Knulst 2000; Van Eijck et al. 2002; Emmison 2003; Lópe...
high status people, while living in a more open society, increasingly learn how to deal with many different kinds of people. This attitude gained importance and thus became part of people’s habitus: they have ‘multicultural capital’ (Bryson 1996). However, omnivores are not necessarily open and tolerant towards others’ tastes. When one ‘tolerates’ something, one does not like it, but accepts that someone else does. Hence, it is not the basis for a broad taste. Besides, many ‘omnivores’ still dislike certain cultural objects or genres, specifically the ones liked most by lower classes (Bryson 1996). The question is whether they ‘tolerate’ others’ likes or look down on them.

It has been suggested that omnivorosity is a new distinction marker in itself: omnivores might gain prestige out of their broad taste and their alleged openness and tolerance, and distinguish themselves from the ‘narrow-minded’ univores, whether these univores like high or low culture (Van Eijck 2000). Also the total amount of cultural participation, whether in ‘high’ or popular forms (which Sullivan & Katz-Gerro (2007) call ‘voraciousness’), might form a distinction marker (cf. Coulanjeon 2013a). Finally, people might feel they replace class distinction with a more individual distinction, based on their own ‘unique’ and ‘authentic’ taste.

Hence, omnivorosity and distinction do not exclude each other (cf. Vander Stichele 2007: 353-360), but we do not yet understand completely in what respect they are still related and what this means for practices and perceptions of cultural hierarchy (Wilterdink 2005). In the next sub-section I continue this chapter’s historical thread by taking a closer look at the criteria with which people value cultural items and distinguish between high and low.

**Auteur films and authentic hip hop: Continuous dynamics within cultural domains**

One problem with the *a priori* labels ‘high’ and ‘low culture’ is that they fail to recognise further dynamics in cultural hierarchy. The first part of this chapter showed how hierarchies are socially constructed in the course of time, but this process has never finished. During the twentieth century, more and more disciplines and genres followed about the same route. This section presents two illustrative cases: the discipline of film and the music genre jazz.

Shortly after the first public screening in 1895, film was a travelling fairground attraction, in which people could gape in admiration at this amazing technical innovation. The production of fiction films and the founding of sedentary cinemas in the years following could not confer status to this new discipline yet, as it was still regarded as a cheap imitation of older genres such as photography (at the time not perceived as high culture in itself) and the theatre (Van Beusekom 1998). It was not until the 1920s that small groups of intellectuals began to take certain films seriously because of their aesthetic
innovations. With the foundation of film societies in several countries\textsuperscript{59}, they screened artistic – often very abstract – films for a limited audience, discussed them, and wrote about them. They distinguished themselves from the masses, who flocked together in cheap cinemas for the latest Hollywood production. Opposite these mass produced films they placed the so-called auteur films, made by ‘real’ artists (Heise & Tudor 2007, Linssen et al. 1999). In the 1950s, a group of French film directors revalued, in their journal Cahiers du cinéma, certain popular American directors as innovative authors too. From the 1960s on, the institutionalisation of film as an art form broke through to mainstream media in the US: film critics increasingly used a ‘highbrow’ discourse\textsuperscript{60} and an interpretative narrative in their reviews (Baumann 2001).\textsuperscript{61} Not the genre as a whole was being elevated however; a hierarchy within film appeared instead. It was the ‘idea that film can be art’ that became accepted (ibid.: 405).

In the rise of jazz on the status ladder, analysed extensively by Paul Lopes (2002), we can recognise both hierarchical logics discussed in the first part of this chapter.\textsuperscript{62} The initial low status of jazz, which originated in the early twentieth century in and around New Orleans, was mainly caused by racial and moral denunciations. Jazz was a black genre, and therefore ‘louighbrow’ by definition, and the rhythms and dance moves were considered as primitive and decadent (ibid.: 11-27). In the 1920s, however, more and more white orchestras started to play jazz music in a symphonic way. They recognised some value in this black, lowbrow, art, which they tried to upgrade and legitimise by cultivation and formalisation (comparable to the increasing civilisation of classical music and the theatre in earlier centuries\textsuperscript{63}). Soon, the black middle class imitated these practices (ibid.: 32-93). In the 1930s and ’40s, however, several opposition movements rose against this ‘whitening’ of jazz. First, ‘swing’ artists started to promote improvisation (compare Romantic painters), which in its turn was not taken seriously by ‘professional’ jazz musicians. Second, white urban youngsters rediscovered the oldest jazz records, which they perceived as more ‘authentic’ than both the ‘cultivated’ and ‘commercial’ symphonic jazz and swing (ibid.: 96-198) (compare the Romantic folk revival). Third, black professional musicians developed bebop, a modernist style with complex improvisations (compare the avant-garde). Beboppers shared the objections against symphonic jazz, but they also wanted to move beyond the ‘primitive’ jazz that the white youngsters found

\textsuperscript{59} Examples are the Club des Amis de Septième Art in France (1920), The Film Society in Britain (1925) and De Nederlandsche Filmliga in the Netherlands (1927).

\textsuperscript{60} Strikingly, Baumann does not count originality and innovativeness among the high art criteria.

\textsuperscript{61} An art form can rise on the ladder due to increasing evaluation by means of typical high art criteria in for instance reviews, but there is also a second possibility: popular criteria in itself can be taken more seriously (Van Venrooij & Schmutz 2010).

\textsuperscript{62} Lopes himself interpreted the process as the blurring of high–low boundaries rather than as a rise (pp. 269-271).

\textsuperscript{63} In this paragraph, the comparisons between brackets with other art forms in earlier centuries are on my behalf.
authentic. Others in their turn rejected bebop, partly because of deviant behaviour such as drug use (ibid.: 204-214). In the second half of the twentieth century, jazz became more and more professionalised and institutionalised, comparable to film (ibid.: 225-250). The strong distinctions vis-à-vis each other, with different rationales, are somewhat comparable to the distinctions between the bourgeoisie and the cultural elite in the art world as a whole, as I showed above in the comparisons between brackets. Jazz developed both into a cultivated and civilised high art and into innovative and original high art.64

These two examples not only show that genres or cultural disciplines can gain status and hence rise in the cultural hierarchy, but also that many distinctions are perceived within them. Film is now being divided in (among others) auteur films and Hollywood blockbusters – comparable to high and popular culture – and jazz can be valued for its cultivation and for its innovations – comparable to the two competitive logics of high culture.

Within what is generally called popular culture one can just as easily distinguish oneself from others as within ‘high culture’, and with the same arguments and criteria. Thornton (1995), for instance, describes the quest for authenticity and the distinction from ‘the mainstream’ by people within the club scene, who possess what she calls ‘subcultural capital’.65 Wermuth (2002) finds similar distinctions in hip hop: both fans and specialised magazines use a vocabulary of originality and craftsmanship to distinguish good from bad hip hop (p. 204). Bachmayer & Wilterdink (2009: 360) found clear educational differences in the appreciation of various styles of salsa: educated fans judge salsa by its lyrics and complexity, whereas people with less education prefer melodic and danceable salsa. Also within an applied art form such as fashion (which is not perceived as ‘real’ art or ‘high culture’ by Dutch museum curators; Van Steenbergen & Van Steenbergen 2009: 130), distinctions between high and low fashion are continuously made: photographers, bookers and stylists perceive high fashion as original and edgy and low fashion as commercial and appealing to everybody (Mears 2010; cf. Van der Laan & Kuipers 2012). Finally, US gourmet food magazines nowadays favour ‘authentic’ and ‘exotic’ food over French haute cuisine: food should be non-industrial, non-commercial, local and unusual (Johnston & Baumann 2007).

People who like the same object can even distinguish themselves vis-à-vis each other, based on the diverging ways of enjoying. One of my students, Sami Ghilazghi (2012), shows how educated hip hop fans carefully listen to the lyrics during a concert, while looking down on lower educated boys at the same concert, who, with their bandanas, ‘pretend to be Crips’ (an LA gang) (p. 21) and who ‘just jump around’ (p. 22).

64 I must note that my summary is a highly simplified version of all intricate developments, distinctions, and counter-distinctions, and that I largely ignore racial issues, which played an important role in this process throughout the century.

65 See Jensen (2006) for a critique on the concept ‘subcultural capital’, which is not entirely compatible with Bourdieu’s ideas.
Conversely, the latter do not understand why the former are acting ‘like a statue’ (p. 22) or like ‘wallflowers’ (p. 20), thereby spoiling the atmosphere (cf. Holt 1998: 19; Rimmer 2011: 14; Friedman 2012; Prieur & Savage 2013). One can also enjoy ‘bad taste’ with irony, which distances one from those who like the same thing in a more serious way, like Van der Jagt et al. (2013) showed with karaoke.

These examples show that cultural distinction is not exclusively practised between the domains of high and low culture. Within both domains, and even within seemingly homogeneous genres, many status distinctions are being made. Although cultural hierarchy is the logical result of cultural distinction, distinction does not necessarily lead to (the continuation of) such a rigid hierarchy. But how should we understand why many think cultural hierarchy has declined, and why others state that it remains strongly present?

### A hierarchy-breaking hierarchy? Lines for inquiry

The historical analysis that I presented in this chapter forms the key to understand how the waning of a clear and rigid cultural hierarchy does not necessarily imply the decline of hierarchical practices (distinction) and the disappearance of the concepts high and low culture. The American scholars Douglas B. Holt and Omar Lizardo give the first clues in this explanation, but they fail to draw the complete picture.

Holt (1998) argues, in line with omnivore scholars, that an overlap exists between the tastes and activities of people with high and low amounts of cultural capital. However, it is not these ‘objectified’ tastes that should be studied, but the ‘embodied’ tastes: the ways of enjoying and speaking about taste; the criteria people apply; the vocabulary they use. People with a large amount of cultural capital have an aesthetic disposition, as Bourdieu called it, in every aspect of their (broad) cultural taste, whereas those low on cultural capital use a more popular aesthetic (Holt 1997: 103; cf. Lahire 2003; Rimmer 2011; Friedman 2012; Prieur & Savage 2013).

Lizardo (2008) elaborated on this argument by proposing that the cultural hierarchy (i.e., of high and low cultural items) has been replaced by a hierarchy of these embodied tastes. The rigid boundaries between high and low have faded, but there is still a hierarchy of aesthetic standards with which people of different status groups (often levels of education) judge cultural objects, from whichever domain. Lizardo expands his argument further by claiming that the emergence of high culture as a domain in the nineteenth century eventually caused its fading in the course of the twentieth century. Due to the rise

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66 Ghilazghi interviewed a random sample of visitors of two hip hop concerts in Amsterdam, by Method Man and Nipsey Hussle. Both higher and lower educated respondents were of diverse ethnicities.

67 DeMeyer (2004: 108-110) makes this into a triangular argument: each point of the triangle of high, popular and folk culture (cf. Schulze 1992) can be sub-divided into three triangles, each based on tradition, new-elitist (avant-garde) and ‘consumptive’ (commercial) respectively.
of an autonomous artistic field with its own criteria of originality, innovativeness, authenticity and anti-commercialism, these novel criteria were increasingly used to judge all cultural forms, both within high and popular culture – thereby decreasing the homogeneity of these domains. The same process that established the hierarchy caused the breaching of the boundaries only a few decades later, Lizardo argues.

Although this is a highly interesting thought, Lizardo is incorrect in his claim that high culture emerged in the nineteenth century. As I showed in the first half of this chapter, he and others ignore the classic logic of cultural hierarchy, whose emergence preceded and coincided with the rise of the modern logic described above: the aristocratic and later bourgeois aim for civilised and high moral art, which also shows great craftsmanship (cf. Ollivier 2008b). It was not high culture as such that emerged in the nineteenth century, but a competing logic of defining good art.

I contend that this new, nineteenth century, modern logic was initially applied only within the existing domain of high culture, resulting in the dual structure that Bourdieu (1984; 1996) describes. This led to the misunderstanding among many that we can still speak of one high culture, existing of classical music, the visual arts, and so on. This confusion is enlarged because complexity and self-control of emotions form a basis of both logics within high culture, and because innovative art is often canonised after some time, thus changing positions within this high cultural domain. It is this classic domain of civilised high culture that later has been combined with popular culture by omnivores, and left behind by others. This is the high culture that some scholars a priori define as such; the high culture that excludes fields such as film and jazz, which have more recently risen on the status ladder.68

The question rises whether this rigid hierarchy that is based on the classic logic of civilisation and morality still holds strong in people’s perceptions and definitions of cultural hierarchy, whereas at the same time – as Lizardo suggested – the modern originality and authenticity logic shaped new hierarchical practices within these rigid domains. These new practices might in their turn lead to new perceptions and definitions of hierarchy, which then either eclipse or coexist with the older and more rigid perceptions and definitions.

These questions will be answered in the empirical chapters of this dissertation. I will scrutinise what exact hierarchical practices people of different backgrounds and birth cohorts perform and on which criteria – classic or modern – these practices are based. Furthermore, I will research whether and how people define the concepts ‘high culture’ and ‘low culture’, ‘good taste’ and ‘bad taste’, and how they rank items hierarchically. Do they use the same logic in their definitions and rankings as in their distinctive practices?

68 This high culture does not necessarily correspond with the ‘legitimate culture’ that Bourdieu was speaking of, i.e. ‘culture that has been endorsed or consecrated by institutions or individuals with cultural authority’ (Johnston & Baumann 2007: 197), and that therefore can be broader.
and their (perhaps more ‘neutrally’ formulated) descriptions of their cultural likes and dislikes? Or do they use different logics simultaneously? But first, in the next chapter I will show which methodological choices I made in this research.