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

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Chapter 4

Distinction or not?
Hierarchical versus egalitarian narratives

An important question that rises after chapter 3 is whether the recognised cultural hierarchy actually plays a role in people's lives, or, more particularly, in their narrative on their and others' cultural taste. To begin with, the words ‘high culture’ and ‘low culture’ as such are rarely mentioned. Only ten out of ninety respondents use such terms in the interview before the concepts are introduced by me in one of the last questions. They all but one have a high education, particularly university (six). Only one of them says ‘high culture’ literally; the others use the adjective ‘highly cultural’, the comparative or superlative degrees ‘higher culture’ or ‘highest culture’, or the English term ‘highbrow’. The term ‘low culture’ and derivatives are never brought up. Furthermore, the few people who indeed use these terms are not necessarily in favour of them.

Five of these ten respondents use the term in a neutral sense in relation to the taste of bank managers or writers, two of the occupations I asked specific questions about:

Well, the stereotype of course is that bank managers like higher culture and visit the theatre, and, er, like classical music, and er, films I don’t know, that’s not related. No. It’s rather the higher culture. Liking the right books, by the best writers. (Monique, HYF5)

This question on occupations was introduced by me in order to bring in (fractions of) social classes, so it is no wonder that this is a good opportunity to begin speaking in hierarchical terms. Others use comparable expressions in relation to the taste of these two occupations, such as ‘good taste’, ‘higher stuff’, or ‘high-flown’.

However, people more often use the term to describe culture they do not like than for things liked. Charles (HOM3), for instance, is a jazz lover, but:

Sometimes there are forms… someone like Thelonious Monk, who plays somewhat more experimental, complex music. Sometimes better, sometimes less, but it can be too experimental to me, or too highbrow, for the initiates, which I’m not. (...) When it gets too complicated, not that I don’t like it, but... apparently if it gets too a-melodic, I have more problems with it.

Charles places high culture above himself; apparently he perceives himself as inferior in this respect. However, using these terms does not inevitably imply approval of cultural hierarchy. The upwardly mobile Inge (UYF3) uses it to describe the culture she did not
grow up with, but she immediately places it ‘between large quotation marks’. She is ambivalent about it. Others mention ‘high culture’ in order to look down on and to cherish an anti-elitist view. Carmen (UYF6) accuses some acquaintances who regularly visit the theatre of ‘showing off: “look at me visiting the theatre (…), look at me visiting high culture”’. She thinks that students in theatre studies, who used to be in the same building as the film and TV studies she did herself, ‘feel more superior, because it’s a higher art or something’. She does not like ‘the difference between high and low’. Thus, it can also point at an egalitarian view: one can use the term ‘high culture’ in order to reject it.

The low frequency of these terms and the ambivalent usage seems to suggest that cultural hierarchy is not important to people, other than their recognition in a card ranking assignment. Indeed, many share more egalitarian views or are ambivalent about their distinctive practices. However, this chapter shows that Dutch people still culturally distinguish, next to more egalitarian views.

In this chapter, I will explore and discuss both the hierarchical practices that correspond with (or somewhat deviate from) the hierarchical rankings in the previous chapter, and the more egalitarian practices and opinions that oppose this view. In the first half of the chapter, several types of the hierarchical narrative will be discussed. It shows that cultural distinction has far from disappeared, despite the theories on the individualisation in society and the decreasing significance of social hierarchy. Furthermore, one can not only distinguish oneself from others below, but also look up to those who are higher. As we will see, these two phenomena often go together. This section wants to complement and nuance the findings of Bourdieu (1984), by unravelling the several ways in which the hierarchical narrative can come across. The second half of the chapter explores the opposite view, which is more in line with contemporary ideas on individualism: egalitarian narratives, expressed by people who oppose the high–low distinction and who reject the unjust behaviour of certain elites. I will show, however, that these anti-hierarchical expressions can be understood as an alternative way of distinctive practices. I will start both parts of the chapter with an elaborate description of an exemplary case – Ria and Nel respectively – that points at many issues to be discussed. In chapter 5 we will see how both contrasting narratives can also be combined or ignored.
Looking down and up: Hierarchical narratives

‘I’m not culturally literate’: The case of Ria

In our telephone conversation Ria (HOF1) warns me that she is not culturally literate, but that she would like to participate in my research anyway. During the interview, in a nice villa in a well-to-do neighbourhood in a provincial town, I increasingly wonder why she said that. The 69-year-old retired teacher in English and in textile arts appears to be a fond lover of jazz music, particularly Billie Holiday and Chet Baker, but also some more contemporary musicians. The card with John Coltrane appears at the top of her taste ranking. She is interested in fashion, which she explicitly describes as an art form, and in ballet; she used to dance herself. She likes art house movies and loves classic European films by directors such as Antonioni. In her garden there are several sculptures, both figurative and abstract. Some of them were made by her mother, who worked as an artist, as did her deceased first husband. During and after the interview, she shows some art books, for example from the recent Der Blaue Reiter exhibition in The Hague. On my way out, she recommends a novel to me by the Flemish writer Hugo Claus. I presume she would be perceived by many as a culturally literate woman.

So, why does Ria think she is not culturally literate? Or rather: why does she express this to me? The answer appears simple: she does not like classical music. She does not particularly dislike it either – apart from opera, which she finds too theatrical and even ‘disgusting’ – but she never listens to it: ‘When I hear it I like it, but there is something in me that prevents me from going further with it.’ And, apparently, she thinks she should. Responding to the card with Vivaldi, she says: ‘That is the first music that I sometimes listened to a little more, when I thought: I should really make an effort for classical music.’ She is ashamed that she does not know the items Glenn Gould and Pirakovich (not realising the latter is fictitious): ‘That’s too bad, isn’t it? I really don’t know anything about it.’ She explains:

I like to listen to music, but I am ab-so-lu-te-ly, er, how do you say it, undeveloped in the field of music. Of course that’s my own fault, but I always say it’s because I didn’t grow up with it. But of course that’s nonsense, because you can do many things after that. I can’t bring myself to listen to classical music.

Not just in classical music, also in her favourite music genre, jazz, she calls herself ‘undeveloped’ compared to her partner.

I completely trust my intuition (...), I don’t know if it’s a genre, I don’t know these names, but I don’t like this lively, experimental stuff. It should all be a little, er, yes, basic, and building on that. I am very intuitive, so with music as well, I am a bit simple, haha! (...) [My
When I ask her about her image of high culture, her immediate response is: ‘Classical music, and maybe opera. Would there be anything higher?’ With low culture she thinks of pop music, films for the masses, and, jokingly, the television show Boer zoekt vrouw*. Earlier in the interview she told with some embarrassment that she watched all episodes of all seasons of this highly popular dating show for farmers. She also likes Spoorloos*, ‘which is not really, er, high-minded or cultural’. She calls her TV taste ‘very opposite to my film taste’, but, when asked, she is not ashamed of it. In other words: she defines high culture as what she does not like and low culture as what she likes, although she wishes for it to be otherwise.

However, there is also some low culture that she does not like. She mentions in particular ‘those strange Dutch singers’ with these ‘funny Dutch tunes’. ‘Most of the times I find them annoying odd customers, this Jan Smit*, and there are some others.’ She looks down on people who are less cultured, despite her denial of being cultured herself. She accuses her friends of going to the cinema just to have fun rather than to be critical; she is surprised that her sister (a judge) has never heard of the painter Kandinsky; and she calls her son (a construction worker, and hence downwardly mobile) ‘very a-cultural’:

Although I took him with me to exhibitions when he was a child, you would never guess that his father was a sculptor. (...) He would never visit an exhibition by himself, let alone a stage play. And film is more, well... And books, he only reads thrillers, I believe, and not even often. So: a-cultural. I think he inherited it from my father [a doctor], who was really a-cultural too.

Ria not only perceives a clear distinction between high and low culture, but also recognises the things that are in-between: musicals are lower than operas, but could be a nice stepping stone; literary thrillers are higher than normal thrillers. Both in high and in low culture there are things that she likes and that she dislikes, although she never explicitly calls her preferences high. She feels embarrassed when she deviates from the ‘normal’ picture. This is an excellent example of a hierarchical narrative, both looking up to and down on other people and their tastes, and even down on herself. She positions herself somewhere in between – middlebrow, one might say, with ‘cultural goodwill’ (Bourdieu 1984).

In this section, I discuss these different types of hierarchical narratives, referring both to Ria and to other respondents. I will begin with distinction: looking down on other people and their tastes, and deriving status out of one’s own taste. Second, I discuss several ways of looking up, including looking down on oneself, or feeling embarrassed. Finally, I
discuss several specific utterances of hierarchical narratives, related to frequency, knowledge and attitude.

‘Everyone watches pulp’: Exploring cultural distinction

Although Bourdieu (1984: 56) describes cultural taste first and foremost as the strong dislike of others’ tastes – and, thus, dislikes as the ultimate class barrier – not every expressed dislike can easily be interpreted as an act of cultural distinction. Nor even can every divergence from others’ preferences, as Kuipers & Friedman (2013) showed too. Henny (UMF5), for instance, speaks in a very negative way about Dutch music because of the simple lyrics, but the distinctive character of her quote is less clear:

I always say: ‘even if I were given a free ticket, I wouldn’t go’, you know, haha! No, it doesn’t appeal to me. I mean, I really like having fun and crazy stuff, but I don’t see myself dancing the polonaise* at those performances, no.

Although she clearly distinguishes herself from this music and its cheerful dance routines, her social distinction from those who like it is less obvious. Moreover, she downplays this distinction after a follow-up question, by explicitly accepting these people as they are and by showing interest in their opinions. Perhaps Henny does indeed strongly distinguish herself from these Dutch music lovers and she indeed wants to present herself as someone with a ‘good taste’, but her strictly personal and downplaying narrative makes it difficult to interpret. The researcher cannot distinguish her account from a similar dislike by someone who is entirely neutral about it (see chapter 5 for these neutral narratives).

Hence, we must be careful with our interpretations of (sometimes harshly) expressed dislikes, even when it concerns items that are looked down on very often, such as Dutch language music and soap operas. Bourdieu (1984) describes distinction as a largely unconscious process. People whose parents possessed much cultural capital were brought up with the tools to appreciate certain cultural objects. They acquired a certain habitus, and hence a certain taste. They show their status by speaking about culture in a certain way and by visiting the ‘right’ events, but not necessarily with the intent of doing so or with the intent of excluding other people. Their cultural behaviour and taste are self-evident and embodied. This unconscious and implicit mentality is hard to observe in a sociological interview. It becomes even more difficult when subtle distinctions are at stake rather than the more obvious class differences. Bourdieu argued that the small distinctions from people just one step down the ladder are more salient than looking down on the working class (pp. 60-61). One has to worry more about the people with whom one immediately competes in the power struggle than about the ‘harmless’ people further
down the ladder. Due to this implicitness, the researcher must look for clues in people’s narratives that reveal distinctive motives. However, these clues are easier to find in interview phrases on lower-class tastes, such as the ones below.

Let us investigate another example of a harsh aversion towards Dutch language music. Ton (HMM4) is a 53-year-old lawyer who himself loves classical music and opera. On the question which music he dislikes, he answers:

Haha, most Dutch language music! That’s a bit like the joke: I make something that is really ugly, but you are so stupid that you buy it anyway. Then I don’t feel addressed. Jantje Smit*, Palingsound*, that kind of things, Shalalalie*, then I think: fuck off. I find it an insult. Yeah, I mean: I happen to possess two ears, I am not a complete retard, so you shouldn’t force it on me. It means nothing to me.

Although Ton does not explicitly mention people who like Dutch language music, he implicitly distinguishes himself from them by describing himself as ‘not a complete retard’ and as possessing two ears. Apparently, those who do buy this music are either stupid, retarded, or deaf.

The most common way for people to clearly express distinction is by more explicitly connecting certain dislikes to the people who do like them. The quotes below are just some random examples:

It doesn’t grip me, I find it gross, and er… yes, common too, often. You quickly associate it with the audience that attends these [concerts], at least I do. (Marsha, HYF2)

Jan Smit* back then, as a 12-year-old, yes it’s nice for grandma but not for me. (Alexander, HYM4)

These ‘other’ people can simply be ‘the masses’, or ‘the majority’. This more general way of ‘othering’ is often connected with a certain objectification of the bad quality of others’ preferences. Ton answered my question on good and bad taste with: ‘Whichever way you look at it, whether you like the genre or not, it is not quality. “De gustibus non est disputandum”, some say, but you can say something about it.’ Several respondents regret the ‘bad quality’ of present-day Dutch television by referring to its popularity among the majority of viewers:

These days there’s no good television anymore. Because they’re occupied with the ratings. And well, the common people don’t watch good stuff, it’s just the way it is. They cannot appreciate that, so it’s scheduled around midnight. (Marianne, LOF2)

140 There is no disputing about taste.
When you let people choose... let’s take television: when the ratings are ruling, everyone watches pulp. (...) When you’re used to only watching X Factor, how on earth can you watch something else? I cannot blame anyone, but there should be a few channels that do take on this education. Everything is being popularised! (Karin, UMF4)

Distinction was also triggered by a specific interview question on the tastes of three occupations, particularly the bricklayer’s. Although many people object stereotypes and others downplay their answers, many clearly distinguish themselves from this exemplar of the working class:

It sounds very elitist what I’m about to say, but I think that the average bricklayer, well, does not have the erudite knowledge to visit a concert building. Also due to a certain social inhibition. And he doesn’t attend good films and plays. No, that’s terrible generalising of course, but of course it’s the image that appears.

**And what does a bricklayer listen to?**

Yes, he goes to Hazes, well that’s not possible anymore [he died a few years before], he goes to André Rieu, I think. If he goes at all. It’s just the highest level. But it’s very elitist to say so, but I do think that’s the image. And a bricklayer attends football matches. (Helma, UOF3)

A bricklayer and music, again a bit exaggerated, well, you have to think more of the Jan Smits* and Frans Bauers in this world. And TV shows like *Daughter Swap* and *Mother-in-law Swap* (...), I mean the more commercial shows. (...) And films: James Bond I think. Yes, just adventure movies, lots of bang bang! (Michiel, UMM1)

The latter quote shows several particular ways of expressing distinction that occur more often: pluralisation, parody and onomatopoeia. First, disliked items can be pronounced in the plural sense (often followed by ‘in this world’) in order to make them into categories and thus to distance oneself from them.\(^{141}\) Second, names and titles are parodied to show contempt. *Wife Swap* is an existing TV show which resulted in many spin-offs and imitations, but these do not include *Daughter Swap* and *Mother-in-law Swap*.\(^{142}\) Another example is ‘André Riool’ (Brigitte, HMF5), a combination of André Rieu with the Dutch word for sewer. Third, the utterance ‘bang bang’ (Dutch: ‘pief paf poef’) in order to refer to movies with lots of gun fights is an example of onomatopoeia.

Another particular way to express social distinction is to put people into boxes. The same Michiel calls his wife ‘a typical Sky Radio* girl’. He connects her preference for ‘rather soft, quiet, melodic music’ with the radio station that plays such music and that she often listens to, and he subsequently derives a certain type from it. Similarly, Piet (HMM3) calls his girlfriend ‘really such an RTL watcher’ and Inge (UYF3) calls her sister

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\(^{141}\) This is not necessarily derogatory. Elly (UYF1) for instance speaks in a positive way about the ‘Hans van Manens in this world’, referring to a highly esteemed choreographer.

\(^{142}\) The Dutch title of *Wife Swap* is *Jouw vrouw, mijn vrouw*, literally: ‘Your wife, my wife’. Michiel’s parodies should literally be translated as ‘My daughter, your son’ and ‘My mother, your mother-in-law’, but for readability I changed them into parodies of the English title.
‘really type RTL4*’, both referring to the most successful commercial TV station. Although the latter immediately downplays the, possibly, derogatory connotation (see chapter 5), these presented ‘types’ are meant to sketch a clear picture of a certain person from whom they dissociate themselves towards the interviewer.

A related distinctive ‘technique’ is to present the tastes of acquaintances as logical packages, consisting of certain (bad) tastes that apparently belong together. Koos (UMM3), for instance, speaks derogatorily about his brother, who likes Andrés Hazes and watches films broadcast on commercial TV channel Veronica*, and he continues: ‘He also reads De Telegraaf*, it all fits perfectly.’ Jan (LOM3), who does not like ‘light movies’, says that his son probably does: ‘He doesn’t like jazz. He likes… he went to Andrés Hazes, that sort of thing. (...) And when he still lived here, he bought De Telegraaf on Sundays.’ Apparently, the music of Andrés Hazes, light and commercial films and the popular newspaper De Telegraaf all belong to the same category, which the respondents expect the interviewer to understand, similar to the ‘type RTL4’ and the ‘Sky Radio girl’. They recognise taste clusters as if they studied Bourdieu’s correspondence analyses.

Besides looking down on others’ tastes, cultural distinction also implies taking pride of one’s own tastes and activities, from which one can derive status. This is even harder to grasp in sociological research, as it happens in an even more implicit and unconscious way than negative utterances. If an interview respondent speaks elaborately about his taste, for instance by dropping a lot of less familiar names, at what point can this be interpreted as cultural distinction and as status attainment? It might often be the case, but the researcher cannot know for sure. It might lead to accusations of over-interpreting people’s motives, similar to critiques Bourdieu often faced. Hence, one must carefully unravel narratives in order to grasp how people ‘do status’.

The few respondents who are explicit about their status aims speak about their past. Marleen (HOF5), for instance, tells about her upbringing: she learned to play bridge and to play the piano, because it was important ‘to be able to take part in a conversation’. Annemarie (UOF2) says that she ‘found it important for a long time to love modern art’, but that this tendency has decreased in recent years. 36-year-old Don (UYM3) is the clearest about this change in his distinctive behaviour since high school:

I consider it somewhat as a kind of identity that I had at the time and that I don’t have any more. It was more like making a statement, it also felt that way. I wasn’t an inbred interest, it was an acquired interest.

**But what kind of statement? Or to whom did you want to make this statement?**

Well, to the people whom I then saw, and during the [name school]. These people had completely different interests, more like partying, and I didn’t feel involved. So I oriented myself towards poetry and alternative music and that kind of stuff, if you get what I mean. You oppose yourself somewhat to your environment, so to speak. That kind of feeling.

**And later this disappeared, this opposing, or...?**
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It is easier to speak in such terms about the past than about the present: one can look at
one's former self with more distance, and also distinguish oneself from this former self. In
the present, some respondents recognise their distinctive behaviour only in a self-mocking
way. Joris (UYM1) calls himself a ‘pretentious prick’ who regards his own opinion on
alternative pop music as better than professional reviewers’ opinions143, and he explains
his attendance every two years at the Venice Biennale rather than regular museum visits
with: ‘I have done my duty’. Speaking about modern and futurist architecture, Sander
(HYM2) asks me if I have ever heard of Zaha Hadid: ‘She is really top of the bill, if you
ever want to be hip in a bar… well, no one knows her.’ Hence, he jokingly offers me the
opportunity to attain status by mentioning her to others, and perhaps does so himself.
However, his bluffing abilities are limited, as he calls Hadid an Israeli (‘I believe’),
whereas she was born in Iraq.

Although mainly the higher educated look down on others, some lower educated
do too (cf. Lamont 2000). For example, many respondents who mention the daily soap
opera Goede tijden, slechte tijden*144 in a negative way are lower educated (university
educated people mention it less often, probably because it is not in their frame of reference
when thinking about TV series). Remco (LYM2), for instance, does not understand that
‘for half of the Dutch population, or three quarters of the population, it is the ultimate
favourite, each day again.’ He finds it ‘dramatic’ and adds that he ‘would never watch it’.
With respect to Dutch language singers, it is interesting to see that most older and higher
educated people dislike them all indiscriminately, whereas lower educated and younger
people discern clear differences within this genre. They distinguish Dutch language pop
music (such as Marco Borsato) from volks* music (Frans Bauer, André Hazes). Fans of
mainstream pop music often like Borsato too, such as Rik (LYM4): ‘When I hear Marco
Borsato passing by I don’t mind that much, but I really can’t stand this volks singing.’
Similarly, he looks down on ‘anti-social’ people in a nearby neighbourhood, whom he
later associates with the bricklayers I asked a question about (cf. Bennett et al. 2009: 211
on working-class opinions about the ‘non-respectable’ ‘Chavs’). It differs per person,
however, in which of the two categories popular contemporary singers such as Jan Smit*
and Nick & Simon* belong, but the definitions of both categories and the arguments with

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143 He says this in relation to a different cultural field, the theatre, in which he does not feel as this
pretentious prick, because he is less knowledgeable.

144 Although this is the most successful soap opera on Dutch television, with, at the time of my interviews,
average ratings of 1 to 1.5 million people (source: www.kijkonderzoek.nl; after 2010 the ratings began to
rise again), most people who mention this series speak about it in a negative way, including the lower
educated respondents.
which *volks* singers are denounced are similar to those used by the higher educated (see for more details Van den Haak 2011). Hence, the tastes of the working and lower-middle class are less homogeneous than Bourdieu suggested, but are perceived by those involved (i.e., lower educated respondents) in a hierarchical way too (cf. Lamont 2000).

More explicit distinctive behaviour than this I only observed in some more particular ways, described in the section ‘Frequency…’ below. Thus, although cultural likes and dislikes are often expressed in a harsh way, actual cultural distinction from other people mainly happens in more subtle ways, which are not easily extractable from people’s narratives. In the next section we will see that the other side of the hierarchical coin, looking up, is more customary and more explicit.

‘I feel like an inferior person’: Looking up to others and down on oneself

When one studies hierarchical practices and perceptions, one should not only examine distinctions from below, but also the ways in which people look up to or admire others (cf. Lamont 1992; 2000). When mainly the higher educated look down, one would logically expect the lower educated to be the ones who look up most, or who look down on themselves most. After all, they are positioned – and position themselves, as we saw in the previous chapter – on the lower half of the social ladder and hence might look up to everyone above them, including ‘high cultural’ tastes. They might express embarrassment for their own taste, which they could perceive as inferior (cf. Bourdieu 1984: 372-396). However, this is not completely true. In this section, I show that indeed some lower educated apologise for their ‘low’ taste, but that the people who look up to others are mainly the higher educated who also distinguish themselves from below.

The four respondents – all lower educated – who watch *Goede tijden, slechte tijden* speak about this series as negative as the non-watchers do. All four try to justify themselves by starting their answer with ‘it’s very strange’ (Greet, LMF3), ‘something ridiculous, I find myself’ (Peter, LMM1) or ‘now I must be very careful’ (Rik, LYM4), or by saying they only watch it every now and then (Cora, LMF5; Peter). Two of them are regular viewers, but, they stress, only for some relaxation after a busy day. They do not stay at home to watch it, nor do they record it when they are out. Rik: ‘Other than that, I don’t care at all, it’s the same every day. But it’s just a habit.’ Truus (LMF2) says something similar about American soap opera *The Bold and the Beautiful*: it is ‘nonsense’ and ‘always the same’. The people who watch these series presume that others do not like it and look down on it. Apparently, they are ashamed of their ‘low’ taste and want to justify themselves, at least towards the (higher educated) interviewer.

Lower educated respondents speak in a similar way about their preferences for such things as cowboy movies (‘simple entertainment’, Ruud, LOM2), country singer Jim
Reeves (‘others might call him corny’, Hans, LMM4), newspaper De Telegraaf* (‘that’s not the best, but it’s an easy read’, Johan, LOM1), or André Rieu (‘I hardly dare to mention his name’, Yvonne, LOF3). Furthermore, some of them call themselves ‘maybe a little stupid’ (Johan), ‘an inferior person’ with ‘a common taste’ (Yvonne), ‘in some respects a philistine’ (Robert, LOM4), ‘almost a philistine’ (Marc, LYM1), ‘simple’ (Gerard, LMM3) or ‘superficial’ (Marieke, LMF5) for not liking art, poetry or the theatre. Although this enumeration appears to reveal a tendency of self-deprecation among the lower educated, they do it as subtle and between the lines as the higher educated distinguish themselves. The few respondents who like Dutch language music – the main negative object for others’ distinction – do not apologise for their taste nor justify themselves.147

The large taste differences between higher and lower educated are apparently hardly expressed in an open and explicit way by either side. Perhaps the differences are too obvious to do so, or expressing these distinctions is perceived as a taboo in an allegedly egalitarian society. This slightly inferior yet not consistent attitude towards the higher value of other tastes also comes to the fore in Lamont (2000), Bennett et al. (2009: 204/5) and Friedman & Kuipers (2013). Before moving to more explicitly egalitarian narratives (part two of this chapter) and to ambivalent feelings (chapter 5), however, I will take a closer look at the remarkable perceptions of inferiority among the higher status groups.

The higher educated look up to others and down on themselves much more often and more explicitly than the lower educated do. This might seem odd, but can be explained with their greater awareness of cultural hierarchy. They position themselves somewhere on this ladder, which almost never means at the top, and thus look both down and up. Often they strive for more, but they feel they are not able to come up to the mark. They, for example, like classical music, but stress that it is only ‘light’ classical music: ‘I don’t get any further than Mozart and Beethoven and then it already ends’ (Anneke, UMF1). Many higher educated both look down on and up to others at the same time, taking what one might call a ‘middlebrow’ position. Ria, who dismissed her own position as being not culturally literate, was an excellent example. There are several others who also doubt their own position despite what others would probably call a ‘high’ cultural taste. Gabriël (UOM6), a classical music lover who regularly attends stage plays and who likes to paint, calls high culture ‘intangible’. He confirms my suggestion that he is somewhere in between high and low.

145 In Dutch: cultuurbarbaar, or cultural barbarian.
146 Quote from the telephone conversation before the interview.
147 Only one higher educated fan of this music did: Elly (UYF1) has liked this music since her childhood, but is aware that others look down on it. When she was young, her classmates laughed at her because she knew many of these songs by heart: ‘It was not popular if you could sing Alle duiven op de Dam*.’ Nowadays she does not reveal her taste to her colleagues at the town hall.
Some respondents can, when asked, indicate which parts of high and low culture they do and do not like. Ronald (UYM4) is an avid art lover and considers alternative rock bands such as Radiohead high culture, but he finds ‘high’ orchestral music in the Concertgebouw\* ‘boring’ and does not like ballet. At the same time he looks down on regional novels and most Dutch language music, with a few exceptions. And Monique (HYF5), who does not like classical music, says:

I don’t like stage plays, no. And that’s part of high culture, but I don’t like it. No. Most high culture, well, maybe literature, I would fit in that box, so to speak. But for the rest I don’t.

**No, no, OK, and within what is perceived as low culture, are there things that you do and do not like?**

Yes, maybe I am a bit at the borderline in that respect. I regularly visit museums, I regularly read complex books, literary books mainly. [And] I don’t like action movies. I think I do and don’t belong to both [high and low], so to say. I’m a borderline case.

Another example of such dual hierarchical thinking is Yme (UMF2). On my question on good and bad taste, she tells the story of an acquaintance, who inherited ‘a very beautiful Rosenthal plate with gold’, but who hung it on the wall between ‘the gypsy girl with the tear’ and an embroidered courtyard. ‘That is not right at all!’\, she says twice. But, on the other hand, she knows that a different acquaintance, who is from ‘a different social class, old money’, sometimes looks down on her taste. She cannot remember an example, but she points at a cage decorated with birds that *could* be the object of her acquaintance’s contempt. Apparently she can imagine that a certain object in her house that she likes herself might be the target of others’ disdain. She positions herself between her two acquaintances.

On a more subtle level, often within popular culture, ‘guilty pleasures’ and ‘youthful lapses’ can be interpreted as expressions of looking down on oneself. First, people can enjoy simple things they only like every now and then, although they are aware of its low status, such as romance novels, soap operas, James Bond movies, or, Deirdre’s (HYF6) example: sensational TV documentaries on Siamese twins. They use it only for the entertainment value, as a snack in between meals (cf. Ollivier 2008: 134-5). Sandra (HYF1) studied Dutch literature and works for a literary fund, but:

Sometimes I like to read the kind of book that’s an easy read, you know, such a novel for women. Actually I think that’s not done (...). Sometimes it’s amazing, then I think: ‘Why did I just read this book?’\, but it’s really for relaxation, I can forget it all immediately.

Often they talk about these guilty pleasures in a somewhat shameful manner, or as a reply to my question whether they like certain things that they do not tell others. By explaining such a taste with, for instance, escapism, one not only distinguishes from a particular side
of oneself (looking up), but implicitly also from those who enjoy the same thing more regularly (looking down). This is quite similar to the ironical use of ‘bad taste’, with which one can distinguish from people who like the same object more sincerely. However, I did not find many ironical utterances among my respondents.

A comparable dual response is given when people are asked about the culture they used to like but have left behind. Twelve respondents (among whom three lower educated people, three young upwardly mobile women, and three parents who watched with their children) used to watch the soap series *Goede tijden, slechte tijden*, but became bored and quit. Most of them stress it was a long time ago: ‘until I was 14 or something’ (Sander, HYM2; now 25), or even ‘100,000 years ago’ (Georgia, HYF4). Another object of these ‘youthful lapses’ is the commercial pop music from people’s teenage years, whether it is the Four Tops (1960s), The Sweet (1970s), Modern Talking (1980s), or Take That (1990s). An adjective that is sometimes used in this respect is *fout(e)*, which literally means ‘wrong’, but which in this sense has connotations with ‘bad taste’ and ‘not done’. Modern Talking were two *fout(e) figures* (Don, UYM3) and in the 1990s there was *fout(e) hardcore techno* (Carmen, UYF6). Joris (UYM1), who is a devoted music lover and who particularly likes experimental electronic music, makes the following confession:

> Haha, yes, because Phil Collins is, er...
> Well, yes, look, I try, I am not pretentious about my musical knowledge or something (...), but it’s always a bit like… people don’t take you very seriously when you’re still open about that. No. (...) But that’s a sin of my youth, let’s consider it that way.

Hence, people still want to distance themselves from the things they do not like anymore. Similar to the formerly distinctive persons described above, they distinguish themselves from their younger self; they were different people back then.

As said, especially the higher educated are concerned with these kinds of self-explanations, as they are also more aware of these subtle hierarchies. They aspire to like ‘high culture’ in the same way as the elite does, and at the same time distinguish themselves from below. This narrative is comparable to Bourdieu’s description of ‘cultural goodwill’ (1984: 318-371), although he attributes this to the less highly educated middle classes. My data indicate, however, that the phenomenon of ‘cultural goodwill’ is more widespread than Bourdieu describes (cf. Ollivier 2008a), perhaps because the middle class itself is nowadays, in the Netherlands, much larger than it was in the 1960s in France.

Most higher educated respondents who strongly distinguish themselves from below also
look up to others. Sole distinction without looking up, which one would expect people rich in cultural capital to do, is rare. On the higher rungs of the social ladder there is a continuous struggle for status, which makes positioning oneself and justifying oneself towards the interviewer a complex matter.

Frequency, knowledge and attitude: Specific hierarchical practices

In the last two sections we saw that people can distinguish themselves from and look up to people who like certain things, but there are several more ways in which hierarchical practices and perceptions can come to the fore. In this section I discuss hierarchical logics on the frequency of cultural visits, on the knowledge of cultural items, and on the attitude with which people enjoy culture. Although these narratives are interwoven in a high degree, I discuss them separately.

Frequency

Do you ever visit the theatre?
Er, not much, I think twice a year or so? Yes. Yes. That er, not much. I would... I guess that’s what nine out of ten people answer to that question: ‘Actually I would like to go more often’.
(Inge, UYF3)

As Inge predicts, indeed many people say they do not visit the theatre, concert hall, cinema or museum as often as they would like to. Nine out of ten is a little exaggerated, but more than twenty out of ninety respondents, of all educational levels and ages, literally say something along the lines of ‘not enough’ or ‘very little’ somewhere in the interview. However, frequency is a relative concept. Charles (HOM3) goes to the cinema once or twice a month, which is quite often compared to others, but he continues: ‘I don’t know whether that’s often or not, but not enough for me’. Marianne (LOF2) has a subscription to the Concertgebouw*, which she visits every Thursday, but she compares it to another activity: ‘In my opinion we don’t go the opera enough’.

People often give lack of time as a reason, due to work or children. Others do not know anyone to go with, for example because their partner does not want to go. Or they say they just forget to go: ‘Then it peters out, that’s of course stupid’ (Johan, LOM1), ‘we’re completely growing dull’ (Rudolf, UOM1). Many older people say they do not attend cultural events anymore because of their age, but they do not seem to regret it. Most of these reasons we already know from other researches on cultural participation (e.g., Ganzeboom 1989; De Haan & Knulst 2000; Van Steen & Lievens 2011), although some of my respondents doubt their own arguments:
I think that if we didn’t have children, we would have gone on discovery tours much more often in the weekends – the pre-eminent period of rest. Well, that made me think: what is this? Or is that a mere pretext, is it just some kind of an excuse? I don’t think so. (Paul, HMM1)

However, a more interesting question is whether people do not do as much as they think they should do. This implies the perception of a ‘frequency hierarchy’, in which people would like to have a higher position. The respondents quoted above belong to the group who visit cultural events relatively often, compared to many lower educated people. Recent research showed that the actual amount of cultural participation is the most important distinction between people, rather than the ‘brow-level’ or ‘legitimacy’ of the activities (Bennett et al. 2011; Coulangeon 2013a; Prieur & Savage 2013).

Some explicitly admire people who attend cultural activities more often, or express some embarrassment about their own low frequency. However, it is often hard for the researcher to distinguish between an intrinsic desire for more and social desirability. People who do visit cultural institutions often (or enough, to their mind), hardly ever brag about it. Only one person uses frequency to define high culture (‘visiting many museums and that sort of thing’, Trudy, LMF1), and only a few look down on others who are not as culturally active as they are, such as Ria (HOF1) with her ‘a-cultural’ son. Yme (UMF2) expresses her shock about the non-cultural attitude of her former colleagues. She grew up in an Amsterdam suburb, where ‘we went to the opera, we went to the theatre, we went to school concerts, we went to museums; I came into my own more than enough’. Later, she worked as a manager in health care and welfare institutions in different towns in the countryside. She tells:

The work in itself was nice, but my goodness, culturally... no one read a book, no one ever went to an exhibition or a movie. Yes, one of the members of the team sometimes went to the cinema, so when I went to the Rotterdam film festival, she wanted to know what I had seen. But for the rest: nothing, nothing, nothing. And then I thought: goodness, it is poor around here. I found that striking. I could share something with the woman from administration, but for the rest, all members of the team, nothing, completely nothing.

So sometimes you discovered someone like the secretary with whom you could share something, but with others you tried and it didn’t work?

Well, sometimes, during coffee, it comes up: ‘What did you do during the weekend?’; ‘I went to a museum’, ‘Why would you go there?’. Well, these kinds of remarks, so, at some point, you don’t bring it up anymore.

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148 These studies are based on multiple correspondence analysis, in which the participation dimension explains most of the variance. These studies can also be criticised because ‘high’ cultural activities are often overrepresented in the questionnaire (cf. Prieur & Savage 2013: 252).
Ria and Yme do not distinguish themselves from people with a low frequency, but with no frequency at all – that is, in their more narrow definition of culture as something worthy. They do not distinguish from people with the wrong taste, but from those who do not share their taste.

In one cultural field, the frequency narrative works out in a reverse way: television. The studies quoted above indeed show that low participation in several cultural activities corresponds with high amounts of TV watching (Bennett et al. 2011; Coulangeon 2013a; Prieur & Savage 2013). My higher educated respondents do not meet television with high esteem. Inge, who was quoted at the beginning of this section with her desire to visit the theatre more often, answers the question on her television behaviour with ‘more than I would like to’. She does not think she watches as much as ‘the average Dutchman’, but it is very easy to turn it on after work, ‘and then I don’t turn it off again’. Some call it an addiction: of the eight respondents who use the word ‘addicted’ in relation to culture, six refer to television.149 People distinguish themselves by not watching (‘For some time I even got rid of the TV because I got so tired of it’, Carmen, UYF6), or by only watching specific programmes (‘If I watch TV, I make choices, I do it very consciously, I would never just turn on the TV just to have something to do’, Anneke, UMF1). Robert (LOM4) and his wife clearly state that they do not watch television before 8 p.m. and that they did not allow their children either. I asked:

**Do you know people who do turn on the television a lot?**

He: Well, look around you! All the people around here, when you get up in the morning, you see these ‘blue eyes’ everywhere.
She: But people also use the TV as a radio, don’t they? That’s how it’s used. Because our children [who are in their thirties] do the same. (...)
He: And their kids are put in front of the TV early in the morning, with children’s shows, that er...
She: Yes, small children, TV is the nanny for the kids.

Thus, the frequency narrative is closely related to the more usual hierarchical narratives: people look down on doing the wrong things too often and the right things too little, and they look up to frequent cultural visits and to ignoring television.

**Knowledge**

Second, and related, people practise cultural hierarchy when speaking about the amount of knowledge of certain cultural fields. Some sociologists tested people’s degree of knowledge as one of the important aspects of taste (e.g., Bennett et al. 2009; Ollivier 2008a), but its distinctive value has only been hinted at by Bourdieu (1984: 25-28; 63-150).

149 The other two refer to the film series *Lord of the Rings* and to computer game *World of Warcraft*. When speaking about addiction, people more often refer to others than to themselves.
People sometimes look down, though, on others who do not know certain things, such as Ria did when her sister did not know Kandinsky. Another example is flight attendant Alexander (HYM4), who makes fun of the people he meets at flights to holiday resorts such as the Greek island Crete, but who have never heard of its beautiful caves.

Some others pride themselves on their large amount of knowledge. Maria (HMF3) is an avid ballet lover who is not pleased with the new ballet reviewer in NRC Handelsblad*. The reviewer made some – in Maria’s view – stupid remarks about certain dancers, which showed that ‘she does not understand what an artist is’. Consequently, she seriously considered applying for the job of reviewer herself. Other respondents brag about less concrete knowledge: the self-proclaimed ability to judge. ‘Because I saw so much in life, I can say something about whether something is beautiful or ugly’, Patrick (HYM3) says. Hanneke (HMF4) distinguishes herself from status-seeking art buyers among her friends: ‘They buy things that are in fashion, or that can yield money, whereas I buy things because they’re good, I have an eye for that’. When speaking about his ‘scanning’ eye on exhibitions, Ronald (UYM4) praises his own ability – which he as a social scientist thinks to share with the interviewer – to quickly understand things:

It’s also a technique you develop, you probably have that too: you just need less time than other people to fathom something, you can more easily position it in different frames. We are of course used to historicise and culturalise and socially interpret everything all the time, and to see how everything connects.

A more implicit, and hence hard to tackle, way of knowledge distinction is mentioning many names of less well-known composers, rock bands or musical subgenres in a natural way.

The reverse is more customary: people who look up to more knowledgeable people or who are embarrassed about their own lack of knowledge, particularly on classical music and the visual arts. They think they should know more about it, and they admire people who do. Many people who claim to like classical music immediately downplay their knowledge about it. Perhaps they do not want to brag about their ‘high cultural’ taste too much, or they just want to cover themselves in case I will ask more detailed questions. Some examples:

I listen to music rather often, in general classical music, requiems and such, by Fauré and Verdi. But it’s not that I go deep into that, not that I know much about it, it’s not like that. But well, it does fascinate me. (Hans, LMM4)

Furthermore, in subcultures it is important to be ‘in the know’ about the latest trends, whether (partially) adopting them or not (Thornton 1995; cf. Michael 2013).
Don’t ask me how many symphonies Bach or Mozart or whoever made, if they made these things at all, but, er, I do like to listen to it. (Michiel, UMM1)

I’m hardly able to, er, well, Mozart and Beethoven I can distinguish, but the Fourth of Brahms, you know, (...) and to tell which part, no, I can’t do that from hearing. (Hillie, HOF4)

I often visit museums, but yes, I don’t know that much about it, or something, but I do know what appeals to me, and what does not appeal to me. (Nori, UYF2)

Some respondents are acquainted with more knowledgeable people, to whom they look up. They respect the connoisseurs. Marianne (LOF2), for instance, claims that her late husband had the ability to recognise the conductor in a recording: ‘Most of the times he was right. Yes, that much did he know of it!’ Pauline’s partner (UMF3) ‘knows after three bars who plays what’ and Yme’s partner (UMF2), who is a music teacher, even hears where a concert is recorded:

My husband hears which concert hall it is: ‘Hey’, he says, ‘that’s the Concertgebouw*, and that must be De Doelen [in Rotterdam]’. So he can hear from the acoustics where it was recorded. Well, I don’t have that. (...) Sometimes, we sit in the car and then he says: ‘Oh, I think that’s The Met in New York’, that’s a certain sound. Well, we’ve been there once, but we never heard a concert there, so he cannot know that. But then he heard it several times on the radio, so he can recognise where it’s from: ‘Hey, that might be Vienna!’

Whether Yme exaggerates or not – maybe her partner often guesses wrong too – the point is that she admires her partner for his ability. She has learned to listen to music more carefully herself – so she can now recognise different instruments and themes – but she still feels inferior to her partner in this respect. Piet (HMM3) uses similar terms to define high culture:

These are the people who can evaluate a concert on its quality. Look, when I buy a Mozart DVD at the Kruidvat*, I already find it wonderful, but a real connoisseur immediately hears: ‘Folks, this is no good’. I think that’s very bright of these people. Also, that they can write a classical concert review in a newspaper, that’s very bright, I find that high culture, yes. I’m not able to do that, I miss the nuances, you must have attended a conservatory for that, you need an education for that.

He positions himself somewhere in between high and low culture: ‘I try to bridge it [the boundary between high and low], by just touching upon that high culture, haha.’ Sandra (HYF1) expresses a similar kind of ‘cultural goodwill’. She admires colleagues who judge books or the TV talk show Zomergasten* ‘much more intellectually’ than she does: ‘With me it’s more like: I lean towards it, I long for it or something, haha, but... I’m still
moderate.’ She herself finds it ‘very difficult to *really* say what I think of something, it’s more a feeling’.

These people have about the same taste as the people they admire, but they claim an inferior position on the amount of knowledge on these objects. They position the more knowledgeable people higher in a hierarchy. Some let their more knowledgeable acquaintances guide them. Stephan (HYM1), for example, only goes to the theatre with friends who know much about it and who recommend certain plays. ‘I find that the difficult aspect of the theatre, that I cannot... I’m not good at choosing myself’, he explains. Similarly, Marsha (HYF2) talks about her ex-partner, a theatre producer:

> She sensed *really* well what I liked. So she saw something new and took me with her. And er... but you need someone like that who can make that translation, so to speak, or who can make that connection.

Hence, Stephan and Marsha admire people who do not only have more knowledge on certain cultural fields, but who even know better than they do themselves what they like.

This ‘knowledge hierarchy’ can be observed within fields such as popular music too. 59-year-old Koos (UMM3) was unpleasantly surprised when he met a younger inhabitant of the Rotterdam neighbourhood Kralingen who had never heard of the famous (Woodstock-like) pop festival Kralingen that took place there in 1970: ‘When you live there, you should know that.’ Conversely, some older respondents sometimes admit in an embarrassed way that they do not know much about contemporary pop music. Some think they should know more about it, in order to keep up with their children, or, in case of teacher Pauline (UMF3), with their pupils.

*An open attitude*

A final way to distinguish oneself from others is by looking down on the *ways* people enjoy culture. They do not mind that others listen to a certain kind of music, but they do distinguish from their listening *attitude*. Particularly, one should be open to something new, pay attention, take an effort to like something, be critical; and not immediately give up when one does not like it and then turn to the easiest things one already knows (cf. Ollivier 2008a: 132-5; Michael 2013). This is, for instance, a commonly heard notion among the fans of contemporary classical music, who have made an effort to like this ‘complex’ music and who are always open to new compositions, however hard to understand. They look down on the regular concertgoers who listen to Mozart and Beethoven for the umpteenth time (Vermeulen & Van den Haak 2012).

This distinction practice can also be observed in other genres, such as jazz and pop/rock music. Peter (LMM1), for instance, stresses the need for a good sound system in order to really enjoy music. He distinguishes himself from most people around him, who
just listen to music in the background while doing something else. Nori (UYF2) talks about her sister, who ‘only looks at things that cross her path’ and who ‘is not very passionate about it’. It is mainly higher educated people who express such views, but some lower educated respondents, such as Geer (LYF1), make comparable distinctions. She likes the more alternative pop and rock music that is played on the public radio station 3FM* – often seen as less mainstream than some other popular stations – and that can be heard at the Lowlands Festival*. Her favourite bands include Muse, The Editors and Moke*.

My sister doesn’t like, er... she likes the, let’s say, well-known music, so what you hear on the radio. When I say ‘I like this’, she says ‘I don’t like it at all’ and she doesn’t listen to it anymore, so to speak. You know. She doesn’t make an effort, it should come easily. (...) If I would give her a CD, then she puts it on the cupboard and it stays there. That’s what I mean. **I wondered, do you also sometimes hear a CD that you don’t like at first, but that you listen to again because you perhaps will start to like it?**

Yes, you should listen to a CD two or three times before you really, er, that’s my opinion. Then you still don’t have to like everything of course.

Marieke (LMF5) even makes distinctions between ways of listening to Dutch language music:

Marco Borsato I think made many cheerful but also less cheerful songs, songs that deal with all kinds of things in life, and I listen to that. And maybe I can’t sing along that often, but I’m much more occupied with what the song is about, what it’s about in my perception. Sometimes, you can interpret it in various ways. And he [her husband] is not engaged with that at all. No, no.

Marieke’s husband wants music, and also other cultural objects, to be cheerful. She tells that he did not like the snapshot-like paintings that her sister-in-law made of their children. The children looked rather sad, whereas he thought they should have laughed, with their faces directed towards the viewer.

With this type of distinction there is also a counterpart: people who look up to others with a ‘better’ cultural attitude. Some stress they only listen to music in the background while doing other things, or for relaxation. They know that others listen much more ‘intellectually, (...) with one’s mind’ (Hillie, HOF4), and maybe even make a study of it. Anneke (UMF1) does not look for new music, because people she knows, such as her son, already do this for her.

I remain lazy this way. (...) I always feel a bit like a follower and a consumer. And then I wonder if I would search for things myself. Yes, I don’t know. I’m afraid that I will always recruit people around me to take care of this. And until now that went well, so...
Furthermore, some people admit that their taste in a certain field is rather limited, one-
sided or conservative. I deliberately use the word ‘admit’, because that is how they put it, as self-defence: ‘I’m not an avant-garde consumer, I’m afraid’ (Louis, UMM4). Toon (HOM5) compares himself to his wife and daughter, who like experimental films more than he does:

I don’t like it when I have watched a film and I am left with a lot of questions no one can answer, and that I am sent home with that. (...)

Yes, and your wife and youngest daughter are more into that.
Yes, they don’t mind, they are filling this in themselves, and then I think: maybe the director meant something completely different. [Then they say:] ‘Yes, but I think...’ Well, that’s a way of... they are completely right, and maybe this is all the purpose of it and such, but I myself don’t feel fine with this.

No, No. And what do they think of your taste, do you know that?
... Well, yes, they find me, er, I think, a little, a little limited, that I’m not open enough to new forms, all that stuff. Maybe that’s right, haha, I can’t dispute that.

Similar opinions are heard on contemporary classical music, experimental jazz and abstract or conceptual art. Some admire relatives or friends with a ‘distinct taste’ (Helma, UOF3), ‘a better eye for art’ (Coen, UOM2) or ‘a practised ear for music’ (Monique, HYF5). Many people know that it is an ‘acquired taste’ for which others have made great efforts, but they do not wish to invest time in order to acquire this taste themselves.¹⁵¹

Hence, the hierarchical narrative, which is rarely expressed in an explicit and conscious way, can come across in several different ways. Not only does it include distinguishing from and looking down on other people with less ‘legitimate’ tastes, it also comprises looking up to those with ‘better’ tastes and implicitly looking down on oneself. Furthermore, this dual hierarchical speech not only refers to people with a certain taste, but also to people who attend cultural activities more or less often, who know more or less about art, and who enjoy art with a better or worse attitude. These different dimensions of cultural taste have been researched more often (since Bourdieu most extensively by Bennett et al. (2009)), but rarely in terms of distinction and looking up. These narratives are interwoven in a high degree. People who speak in a hierarchical way, mostly but not only higher educated respondents, often use the complete range rather than limiting themselves to only one aspect. Many people who distinguish also look up to others; they visualise themselves in a certain position in the cultural hierarchy, above certain people and below others.

¹⁵¹ More on acquired tastes and the related perception of complexity in chapter 7.
Thus far, people’s narratives seem to be in line with Bourdieu’s findings in 1960’s France, despite some nuances and deviations about, for instance, the salience of cultural goodwill. Furthermore, it is in line with the findings in chapter 3 on the rankings of musical items. However, chapter 1 showed that, in recent decades, cultural hierarchy has often been debated, due to increased individualism, egalitarianism and openness. The second part of this chapter will show that such anti-hierarchical narratives, ignored by Bourdieu, are widespread too. I will discuss the egalitarian and individualist narratives that explicitly object cultural hierarchy, or that at least question the high position of certain people and cultural objects in this hierarchy. It shows that both ideas are clearly present among the contemporary Dutch. However, I will also argue that the anti-hierarchical opinions in fact result in alternative distinctions from those who do practise hierarchy. Whether one expresses oneself in a hierarchical way or explicitly opposes this, one speaks distinctively about others.

Egalitarianism, individualism and anti-elitism: Anti-hierarchical narratives

‘We’re all the same’: The case of Nel

Like many others, Nel (LYF4) does not have difficulties with defining high and low culture. High culture is ‘very classic, and very stiff’, which she associates with ‘stately people’, whereas with low culture ‘I think you should look at my kind, how I live my life’. She makes a distinction between people working with their head and those working with their hands. While ranking the cards, she clearly connects this social hierarchy with a cultural hierarchy, from classical music to Dutch language singers. She likes the latter herself. Hence, she seems to think hierarchically. However, these are just her responses to explicit interview questions. She does not agree. She continues her definition of high culture with a comment that puts it in perspective:

At least, that’s how the word comes across, but it’s not always true. (...) But the image is often quite different than the reality appears to be. Because I’ve seen it, I mean, a doctor, you may think ‘well, a doctor, a classical doctor’, but when you meet him in private at a birthday party or whatever, he can be completely different. (...) The impression you have is not always right: someone can be completely different at work than in reality. (...) People can have different sides.

Earlier in the interview, she had also put the bank manager I asked about in perspective:
Well, that can be very broad too, you can easily be mistaken. I have managers around me who do like Dutch language music and another one who likes classical. (...) When I see someone walking stiffly in a suit, then I [can] think ‘Oh God, a manager’, well, I don’t easily look up to someone anymore. Because: they’re all people, and one person earns more money than the other or has more responsibilities than the other, but (...) as a human being he just remains a human being. Then I think: we’re all the same, they have to sleep too, take a shower, eat, change clothes, so that won’t be different. No, I see through that, yes.

Nel does not want to look up to other people, who have higher functions, more money, more formal clothes. Nor to people who like classical music, although that is only a minor part of her statement. She is aware that other people do – otherwise she would not say this – but she wants to treat people equally. She expresses an egalitarian view.

Nel was born in 1978 in Amsterdam in a family of tradespeople. Her father used to be a butcher and now owns a wholesale business for restaurants. She studied to be a secretary (MBO level*), but became a receptionist instead. She worked for different companies and institutions, which is how she met people of all kinds, including the doctor and manager types. In her large, close family – whose members all live in or around Amsterdam – everyone loves Dutch language music, particularly by Amsterdam singers such as André Hazes and Peter Beense*. At birthday parties everyone listens to this music and sings along. Furthermore, she likes to visit bars that are devoted to this kind of music. Her HBO educated brother, who is eight years her junior, prefers mainstream pop music (‘Top 40 music’), but he likes the Dutch singers too. Besides her Amsterdam background, she gives her ‘good-humoured’ personality as an explanatory factor for her preference for this ‘cheerful’ music. She likes a cozy and enjoyable atmosphere, and these singers bring her in the right mood. At times she also likes more quiet music, but she prefers the cheerful and danceable.

She can imagine that colleagues sometimes become irritated when she is singing out loud, but she does not understand that people actually look down on her taste. Others mind the music she plays more than she minds theirs. Her taste is more varied, she says. However, she questions her friends’ and colleagues’ sincerity:

Yes, not everyone likes it, no. (...) My friends, yes, some like it very much, such as André Hazes, they can all live with that, but really, someone like Frans Bauer, it’s no use bringing him up, because that’s really, er, fout*. But when you turn your head, they can all sing along, so then I think to myself: hmm...

Furthermore, she criticises the social distinctions people make that are based on cultural taste:

I see people judging others for their musical preference, and then I think: what’s it all about? Is it about the person that you like at that moment, or like to be with, or is it in the end about
the music as well? I mean, he can listen to the music when I’m not around or vice versa, or...
you sometimes have to turn a blind eye to something, you know. I think, I’m not going to
select someone on that [basis], let’s put it that way, that wouldn’t be me.

Hence, Nel not only refuses to look up to others, she also hates others looking down on
her. One should not make social nor cultural distinctions, let alone if one is not sincere
about one’s (dis)likes. She dislikes items from both ‘low culture’ and ‘high culture’
without judging people who do like these. For example, many people she knows still
watch Goede tijden, slechte tijden* on a daily basis, but: ‘then I think “well, fine”, but I
just don’t follow it anymore’. And, conversely, she does not like classical music or the
visual arts either, but interprets her dislikes individually rather than distinctively: ‘There
must be something that people see in [art], but I don’t find it.’ About her likes, such as
musicals and Dutch drama films, she speaks in a rather neutral way too. She does not
believe one can decide what is good or bad taste, such as in clothing or food: ‘Stay
yourself, just do what you like and with which you feel fine, that’s important, keep close
to yourself.’

Explicit egalitarian and anti-hierarchical expressions such as the above will be the topic of
this section. First, I discuss the purely individualist views such as Nel’s: the idea that tastes
simply differ and that one cannot dispute about them. In particular, I analyse the answers
to the interview question on good and bad taste. Next, I discuss people’s opposition
against the concepts high and low culture, which are often considered disparaging. Third, I
examine a specific form of anti-hierarchical expressions: condemning elites who do
distinguish themselves or who act snobbishly. This leads me to a final section, in which I
argue that this antipathy towards distinction can in fact be interpreted as an alternative
version of distinction, based on a logic of authenticity and morality.

‘There is no disputing about taste’: Individualist views

In the section on distinction, we saw Ton disagreeing with the saying ‘De gustibus non est
disputandum’, better known in English as ‘There is no disputing about taste’ or ‘There is
no accounting for taste’. He suggests that the bad quality of certain Dutch language singers
can be determined objectively. Many respondents do not agree with Ton. Four of them
actually use this saying152 (though not in Latin), and many others say something similar,
such as ‘tastes differ’ or ‘to each his own’.153 Furthermore, several respondents state that

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152 Furthermore, at least two respondents used this saying before the interview, e.g., during the telephone
conversation. They were surprised they would be interviewed about something as undisputable as taste.
153 In Dutch respectively: ‘Over smaak valt niet te twijfen’, ‘smaaken verschillen’, and ‘ieder zijn smaak’ (or,
twice: ‘ieder zijn meug’).

150
taste is something subjective or personal, and others say that a particular dislike is their opinion, about which others may think differently.

About one third of all respondents make such egalitarian remarks already in the first, open, part of the interview, before specific questions on concepts such as high and low culture come up. They say it in reply to questions on the reasons for their dislikes and, particularly, on taste differences with significant others. ‘Of course we discuss it sometimes,’ Michiel (UMM1) replies to my question on the music differences between him and his partner, ‘but we both think it’s not relevant. Marit (LYF2) explains: ‘When I want to hear things that he doesn’t like, I just plug my MP3 player in my ears.’ Annemarie (UOF2) and a friend ‘agree to disagree’ about klezmer music, because ‘you cannot rationalise it, use convincing arguments why it is or is not [good music]’. Hence, they explicitly treat taste differences as something individual and non-hierarchical. They might perceive a social hierarchy in a more general way (although Nel above seems to oppose hierarchy as such), but they regard cultural taste as not relevant to this discussion.

Specific interview questions that also trigger such expressions are those on (1) reviews, (2) shame and particularly (3) good and bad taste. Newspaper reviews are sometimes perceived as the opinion ‘of one person’ that can be completely opposite to yours and should not be taken too seriously. The question on whether they hide parts of their taste from others (indicating shame) sometimes leads to defensive responses: ‘That is my taste, and if someone doesn’t like it, well, too bad!’ (Michiel, UMM1). Some of these respondents describe themselves as ‘too down-to-earth’ to worry about others’ opinions. Finally, the question on ‘good taste’ is often answered with adjectives such as ‘personal’, ‘individual’, ‘subjective’, ‘arbitrary’ and ‘neutral’, even by people who did not make such statements in the previous part of the interview. Warde (2007: 7-8) faced the same rejection against these concepts in British focus groups. More than with any other interview question, people make comparisons to cultural fields that are not a topic of the interview, such as clothing, food and interior design. It is in particular food that is brought up when claiming egalitarianism. Gabriëlle (UOF1) answers:

Well, that really does not exist. No, really. It’s just what you like yourself (...). With clothes and such, yeah, good taste: no. Because, it’s the same with food, good taste: if I like beet salad, and you say ‘huwl, how nasty!’, well, who’s got a good taste, you or me?

One person, art teacher Brigitte (HMF5), says that one can dispute about taste, but she means the opposite of Ton’s opinion. On the question on good and bad taste she replies:

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154 They are from all age and education groups, but strikingly more middle-aged people and women. In their study on humour in the UK and the Netherlands, Friedman & Kuipers (2013) found such expressions mainly among the lower educated.

155 She uses the English expression.

156 See chapter 5 on ‘neutral’ respondents for the irrelevance of cultural taste in judging others.
(...). One can dispute about taste. So we should keep doing that by all means. Yes. So, that is my answer. Dispute it, bring it under discussion! I think that’s the most important. Just take that challenge. Look, and that is exactly the essence of what’s lacking in the Dutch education system: philosophy. We don’t have philosophy in our lessons. Teach people to make choices. Teach people that tastes can differ.

Hence, one can use different arguments to defend the same opinion: that no taste can be treated as superior to another. Knowing this, it is no surprise that many people also oppose the term ‘high culture’, discussed below.

‘Hazes can be high culture too’: Opposing the high–low distinction

Even more than good and bad taste, it is the terms high and low culture that meet fierce resistance (cf. Vander Stichele 2007: 339-340). When asked, several people say they do not like these ‘strange’ concepts and that you ‘just cannot use’ them. Similar to Henricus (HOM1), who was quoted in chapter 2 with his etymological explanation of the word ‘culture’, five respondents simply say that ‘culture is culture’, without any further distinctions. Pauline (UMF3) for example says:

No, I don’t find that a pleasant concept. No. I mean, I also find it a bit of a pleonasm, I mean, culture for me is always high. I can’t make a classification of high and low culture, no. No, I have a nasty feeling about it.

Yes, OK. The next question would have been what image you have of the concept ‘low culture’, but that... If high culture is a pleonasm, then low culture is, er...

Haha, that’s right! Then low culture doesn’t exist, no. Culture is something you should cherish. That can’t be high or low to me.

High culture is called ‘a very arrogant label’ (Marsha, HYF2), a ‘nasty expression’ (Koos, UMM3), ‘sounding pretentious’ (Toon, HOM5), ‘hot air’ (Rodney, HMM2), ‘hoo-ha’ (Ton, HMM4) and with ‘an elitist flavour’ (Inge, UYF3). Similarly, using the term low culture is ‘mean to say’ (Georgia, HYF4), ‘disparaging’ (Aagje, LYF3) and ‘awfully discriminating’ (Helma (UOF3), who calls the term bad taste ‘derogatory’). ‘Why should something that I don’t like be low culture?’ Maria (HMF3) wonders.

Several respondents say they are not even familiar with the concept ‘high culture’, although their explanation proofs otherwise. Dick (UMM2) for example, who will eventually say that this view is ‘forced upon you’, answers the question on his image of high culture with:
If it exists at all.

Yes, that’s another matter.
So I don’t have an image. No I wouldn’t have an image, I wouldn’t know what low culture is either (...). Sometimes it’s thought that... well, let’s take ballet or very classical [music] or something, that that would be high culture, but I don’t see that at all, that’s just entertainment. I think that, maybe Mozart with his long hair, Strauss too, they were let’s say what The Beatles were in the 1970s [sic], and The Rolling Stones.

Hans (LMM4), the respondent who has been quoted before with his preference for the requiems of Fauré and Verdi, gives a similar response:

Oh, that er, I don’t know what that is. I er, have André Hazes on my MP3 player too, and I like that too, that can affect you too, what he sings. But also, what I said, classical music too, that can affect you too, but Hazes too, and that can be high culture too. I don’t think that’s a division, I mean for me, someone else may think something completely different.

Hence, Dick and Hans initially pretend not to know the concepts, but by using examples that most people associate with high culture (Mozart) and low culture (Hazes) respectively, they reveal that they do know the concepts and how they are used. They simply do not agree; their claimed ignorance is a cover-up for rejection.

Some people associate the high–low division with the past, which corresponds with present-day assumptions on the blurring of cultural hierarchies. 45-year-old Bart (HMM5) uses André Hazes – again – as an example:

Do you think the differences between high and low play an important role in the Netherlands?
For me they don’t. I mean, I like André Hazes and I like paintings, but classical music rather not, so I think it’s mixed a little. I think this distinction used to be much larger. You weren’t allowed to like André Hazes. Fortunately, that’s no longer the case.

No, OK. You weren’t allowed to like that by whom?
Yes, well. You weren’t allowed to like certain music, were you? That’s the 1970s [mumbles]. In my youth: if you liked André Hazes, you were mentally disturbed (...). Really, then you still had highly educated people who only listened to classical music, and the lower educated could like Hazes. Well, that’s all mixed up now, so I believe this distinction is much smaller.

62-year-old Vincent (UMM5) adds some concrete stories to this view on the changing status of high and low. He remembers how classmates at the gymnasium* called him to account when he wrote a piece for the school paper on pop radio station Veronica*. As a baker’s son, he had difficulties to adapt to this elite school, where pupils were seen as ‘morons’ if they did not like classical music. When he asked his English teacher what the
title of Elvis Presley’s song *Hound dog* meant, the teacher slowly replied: ‘I want to have nothing to do with that’. He is glad that this denunciation of popular culture has ended.

Several respondents wonder who decides what belongs to high culture and what does not. It is an ‘image that is forced upon you’, according to Dick (UMM2), and Carmen (UYF6) says: ‘It’s being put in boxes (…), it’s created by people themselves’. Some have an idea who is forcing this. Inge (UYF3) simply keeps it to ‘the bigwigs’, but Louis (UMM4) and Toon (HOM5) have more detailed explanations. Toon starts his account with the example of a book:

> The man who wrote it, well, he just wrote a book. And we all liked it, and suddenly there is someone who says: ‘Ah, that is culture!’ (...) So, often it seems to me an affair for people who are the experts to engage themselves with. And certainly, when you’re speaking about low culture: you don’t create that. Whatever you do, you don’t say: ‘Now I’m going to do something for low culture’, you just can’t. In other words: who’s going to decide whether something is high or low? Well, it’s the experts, they have a sort of final judgement about it.

This exposé resembles the sociological explanation of high culture as a social construction, rather than as an objective quality. Louis, an art journalist, deconstructs the concept even more. He calls high culture:

> …what the readers of *NRC Handelsblad* have marked with three stars. So it doesn’t say anything about the thing itself, about the cultural object itself, it says something about the audience. The audience decides what high culture is.

After this relatively neutral analysis, however, he becomes more sour:

> That’s why I have problems with *NRC Handelsblad*, that whole newspaper gives off an air of: we are ‘the grindstone of the mind’ [which was the paper’s slogan for a while], and if you belong with us, then you can say, too, that you belong to the elite who decides which are the right opinions, what’s the right taste.

He compares it to the ‘right’ political opinions on art subsidies, development aid and the Dutch military presence in Afghanistan, although he shares many of the opinions that the *NRC* stands for. Then he turns it into a generational issue, by accusing the baby

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157 Apart from the question on high and low culture, there are several other respondents who notice an upward mobility of Dutch language music, which ‘used to be not cool’ (Midas, LMMS5) or ‘absolutely forbidden’ (Piet, HMM3). The same is being said by some about pop music, in particular ABBA (one of the items in the card ranking question), which ‘used to be not done’ (Michiel, UMM1), but which has turned into ‘an item of cultural worth [cultuurgoed], (...) accepted by everyone’ (Marieke, LMF5). In other words, they perceive dynamics in the cultural hierarchy rather than increasing egalitarianism.

158 In Dutch: ‘hoge heren’. This literally means ‘high gentlemen’, which gives it both a hierarchical and a gendered touch.
boomerg of prescribing ‘the authoritative opinion’. Hence, the recognition of the role of ‘symbolic capital’ (Bourdieu 1986) in the attribution of cultural goods to high and low culture, good and bad taste, can easily turn into a somewhat resentful opinion about the people who decide: the ‘bigwigs’, the ‘experts’, the editors and readers of NRC Handelsblad. At first sight, this anti-elitism might turn into a reverse hierarchy, but, in the next section, I argue that it is rather a particular kind of the anti-hierarchical or egalitarian attitude.

**Resisting fakeness and snobbery: Anti-elitism as a form of egalitarianism**

This resistance against concepts such as ‘good taste’ and ‘high culture’ comes to the fore excellently in the resistance against people who do use such concepts and who do distinguish themselves culturally. These ‘elites’ should share an egalitarian attitude too, and they should not behave in a superior way, it is thought. This is an important aspect of anti-elitism, of which different elites can be the target. It has often been argued that anti-elitism has become more important, or at least more visible, in recent years. For example, voters of populist parties and (often anonymous) bloggers express severe opposition towards certain elites, or simply ‘the elite’. Sociologists have explained this attitude with the resentment of the ‘losers of meritocracy’: if positions are increasingly based on individual merits – or, even more so, if positions are said to be based on merits solely – those who lack these merits are blamed (and often blame themselves) for their low positions and experience a lack of respect (e.g. Kochuyt & Derks 2003; Tonkens & Swierstra 2008). In return, they resent the successful and express anti-elitist opinions.

However, I found few of these strong anti-elitist attitudes in my research. This is probably due to a bias in the sample, as anti-elitists are less eager to be interviewed by an individual from an elite institution, the university, about what they perceive as an elite subject, ‘culture’. When looking at the opinion on art subsidies, for example, one of the main targets of Dutch populists, only nine out of the 73 respondents that I asked this question respond negatively; and three out of these nine make exceptions for beginning artists or for art education at schools. These nine responses are not restricted to the lower educated, but are equally distributed over the education groups. The strongest reactions come from two lower educated respondents who think that artists should create art in their

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159 He situates their birth dates between 1945 and 1955. He himself was born in 1956.

160 However, unlike popular belief, populism as such, of which anti-elitism is an important aspect, did not increase in recent years in Western-European countries (Rooduijn 2013).

161 I did not ask this question to 17 of the respondents (particularly in the first stage of my research). Of the 73 people whom I did ask, 47 people are in favour, 14 have mixed feelings, and two have no opinion. The first associations people have with this subject vary too: some mainly think of grants for individual artists, others link it to lower entrance prices for cultural institutions (museums, concerts), or to art education for children. I did not specify this myself in the interview question.
Carmen, for instance, was quoted before with her contempt of people who ‘show off’ with artists, as long as they are – in his view – not real but fake, not artistic but artificial, not intellectual but quasi-intellectual. Patrick itself, whatever that is, but at those who unjustly behave as if they belong to it. They are about it’ should decide which work of art does and does not receive subsidies.163

that it isn’t art. For another one it

subsidised. Remco (LYM2), for instance, says: ‘When I don’t like a painting, I can’t say that it isn’t art. For another one it is art.’ He thinks that people ‘who hopefully know more about it’ should decide which work of art does and does not receive subsidies.163

More salient in my sample are critiques on certain specific characteristics of the ‘elite(s)’, i.e. the producers and consumers of ‘high culture’, from both the cultural and economic elite. First, some higher educated young respondents criticise (elements of) ‘high culture’ harshly. Joris (UYM1) associates the concept with the old-fashioned classic stage plays that attract an older and more conservative audience. He prefers small innovative plays instead. ‘A concept such as high culture doesn’t make me stand in awe for certain art’, he concludes euphemistically. Dutch theatre is the target of mockery and contempt by more respondents. Carmen (UYF6) calls Dutch actors ‘conceited’, Yvonne (LOF3) thinks that subsidised plays are ‘often monstrosities’, and Patrick (HYM3) even uses the interview to pour his heart out:

The Dutch theatre is really so bad. It radiates fakeness. It’s such a clique, it’s all ‘like knows like’, and it has all the same artificiality. I really find it terrible. Really, er, I get sick when I see it. Then I would even rather watch an old farce with André van Duin* (...), you know, I find that much much better than this artificial fake stuff by these quasi-intellectual actors that we now have. So. I said it.

He comes back to this when addressing high culture. According to Patrick, Dutch actors ‘can really act in such a superior way, but I think that’s just very low’. In other words, acting superior when you are not is inferior. His contempt is not directed at high culture itself, whatever that is, but at those who unjustly behave as if they belong to it. They are not real but fake, not artistic but artificial, not intellectual but quasi-intellectual. Patrick does express his admiration for many painters, jazz musicians, cult film directors and other artists, as long as they are – in his view – really good, rather than pretend to be. However, he admits that the discussion on ‘real’ quality is as ‘venturing on thin ice’.

In the cases above, the producers of culture – actors, painters – are criticised, but more often the allegedly ‘fake’ or ‘pretentious’ consumers of culture are condemned. Carmen, for instance, was quoted before with her contempt of people who ‘show off’ with

162 This corresponds with the relatively low position that artists have in research on the ranking of occupations (close to shopkeepers and craftsmen), particularly among people from lower status groups (Van Heek et al. 1958: 39; Sixma & Ultee 1983: 371; Elshout forthcoming).
163 Van Steen and Lievens (2011: 329-330) found similar results in Flanders: many people who do not like art do think it is important and they do not perceive it as elitist.
their theatre visits. Another example is Sander (HYM2), who cannot handle the way some of his acquaintances talk about cult films (which he does not particularly dislike, although he prefers action movies). He mocks their speaking style by exaggerating their opinion on a – probably – fictitious film:

They like this new film that no one knows, [continues with a pretentious voice:] ‘in which the life of a prostituted old nun is laid under the magnifying glass, and with a fish-eye camera’, whatever. That’s all fine with me, but it doesn’t say anything to me. And when it’s a very good film, I would gladly see it, but I’m not part of this cult scene.

Alexander (HYM4), who recently discovered cult or art house movies too, distinguishes himself from the visitors who attend these only to show off, or – to translate literally – to ‘act interestingly’. Sometimes he does not understand the plot of such a movie, but:

Fortunately, my mate has the same thing. Then we look at each other – we both went to university, so it’s not like we’re the only idiots in the cinema. And then again you hear people acting very interestingly, like ‘wuwu’ this and ‘wuwu’ that. Well, that’s not me, then I think: ahh, what’s it all about?

He observed the same behaviour at the opera, which he once visited as an experiment. Similarly, Joke (LOF5) suspects the lovers of contemporary classical music of being insincere. She once saw television interviews with the visitors of the premiere of a composition by contemporary composer Peter Schat*:

They were all wildly enthusiastic. And then I wondered: do they really like it, or do they just want to be included? Isn’t that often the case, that you don’t dare to say: ‘Well, sorry, I really hate it’. But well, maybe there are people who find it splendid, but I don’t.

She does not make clear whether she suspects people of showing off or of being polite, but the accusation of snobbery as such is pronounced by more respondents. Although the word ‘snob’ itself is almost never used – only by three respondents, one of them to apologise for her own remarks – many people think that others visit certain cultural events or talk about it in a certain way with the sole purpose of showing off. These are some of the associations people have with the concept ‘high culture’:

But of course there are also a lot of people who – how shall I say it – feel highly cultural although they aren’t, let’s formulate it that way, haha! I mean, there are people who think the

164 Unlike Peterson & Kern (1996), who equal all ‘univore’ lovers of high culture with snobs, I use the word in the more common meaning: people who visit cultural institutions in order to show off, to present their status. Later, Peterson (2005: note 5) reflected on this.
Chapter 4

world of themselves, (...) but that’s not really correct. They pretend to be very interested or to know much about something, but actually that’s not true. (Lydia, LOF1)

I think that these artists and these intellectuals who are on that level make it high themselves. Above the rabble and the riff-raff. That doesn’t need to be. I think they do it themselves. Yes, that’s my idea. (Henny, UMF5)

Whether they like it or not, such as classical music, whether you like it because you must like it, that’s another story of course. I suspect that, now and then, that they like abstract art because they’re supposed to. (...) Your friends must see that you’ve been there or that you have this kind of art in your home. (Ruuud, LOM2)

[on reading reviews:] I also have an acquaintance who wants to know everything but who never visits anything, but she does want to know. And in company she talks about it as if she’d been there. And, this fakeness, I never want to perform, haha! (Yvonne, LOF3)

The last example, Yvonne, sometimes responds to this perceived snobbery by ‘provoking a little’. She likes to exaggerate her dislike for her friends’ preferences (classical music, difficult literary books, intellectual TV documentaries), because ‘one is supposed to like it’. Gabriëlle (UOF1) does something similar, when she quarrels with her brother-in-law about his looking down on André Rieu. He calls Rieu ‘rubbish’ and ‘second-rate’, but ‘when I know [my brother-in-law is] coming, then I put on his CD anyway, just to tease him, you know.’ Sander (HYM2), who was quoted above with his mockery of cult film lovers, criticises his former classmates at a high-profile gymnasium*, who ‘know everything about classical music, play the violin and study Greek or Latin’ and who distinguish themselves from certain forms of popular culture. He uses children’s television in the 1990s as an example, comparing the commercial show Telekids* with the more alternative public television programme Villa Achterwerk*:

[I watched] Telekids on Saturdays, or, er, if you’re culturally correct you should say Villa Achterwerk, but I watched both. Well, that’s considered strange. It appears.

**It was strange to watch both?**

No, rather, what I mean, again in this classification. When you’re in this classical world and you’re talking about TV series you used to watch, then of course you must have watched Villa Achterwerk, because that was... And if you dig in your heels and say ‘well, I always watched Telekids, actually I liked it’, then of course you’re immediately not done.

Although most of the targets above can be associated with the cultural elite, snobbery is even more associated with members of the economic elite. No less than 33 out of 90 respondents spontaneously say that bank managers, about whom I asked a specific interview question, regularly visit events they do not like themselves. Fourteen of them say this with a certain compassion: bank managers sometimes just have to visit an event...
they do not like, because their bank sponsors it or because a business relation invited them. Some of the respondents personally know a (local) bank manager or someone similar and heard him complain about it. Eighteen respondents, all but one with a high educational level, approach the definition of snobbery more closely. They say bank managers visit the Concertgebouw* each Wednesday or Thursday night – the opinions differ on the exact day – with the aim to see their friends and relations rather than to listen to the music. They come there ‘to be seen’ (Helma, UOF3; Joris, UYM1; Koos, UMM3), ‘to do business’ (Yme, UMF2), or ‘to do some networking’ (Joris, UYM1). They want others to see ‘that he paid 500 euro for a seat in the front rank’ (Nori, UYF2). Furthermore, they buy art as an investment, rather than as an aesthetic pleasure (Stephan, HYM1; Yme, UMF2; Deirdre, HYF6). Only one respondent, Charles (HOM3), explicitly denies such claims. According to him, bank managers do not visit cultural events ‘within a strict framework of: this is what we must like, or this is what we have sponsored.’ Only two respondents associate the cultural elite occupation, (female) writers, with snobbery.

Although it is less relevant whether these negative stereotypes of bank managers are true, it is interesting to share that one of my respondents, Coen (UOM2), indeed visits the Concertgebouw several times a year with the aim of meeting his former colleagues. As a retired high executive in a multinational industrial firm, he is the highest manager that I interviewed. Although he enjoys these concerts as well as the atmosphere, he does not particularly like music. He showed me that he was able to carry his complete CD collection with only two hands, adding: ‘It’s from my whole life, so that’s not much, is it?’

Other qualitative researchers reported similar rejections against ‘claims to superiority’ (Warde 2007: 16), ‘cultural paternalism’ (Bennett et al. 2009: 204), ‘hypocrisy’ (Friedman & Kuipers 2013: 190) and the ‘snobbish’ proponents of incomprehensible art (Vander Stichele 2007: 332). The latter presumes ‘a certain sensitivity for the symbolic violence that is exercised upon them’ (ibid.; my translation), and Daloz (2007: 53) even calls this attitude ‘reverse symbolic violence’. Hence, it is mainly the suspected insincerity, the fakeness, of certain elites that is condemned, particularly when these elites are believed to force their opinions upon others. People from higher classes or with a higher educational level can be who they are and like what they want, but they should be true to themselves. They should not pretend to have a taste that they do not have, visit cultural events only to be seen, or talk about culture in a mystifying way, and they should certainly not unjustly distinguish themselves from others. They should act normal, ‘just like us’. Whether or not the suspicions on these insincerities are justified is not important for this rejection. Therefore, this anti-elitism is a particular kind of egalitarianism rather than a counter-hierarchy with the elite on the bottom. I did not find such radical views.

*I asked the question on writers to only 82 respondents: because eight people refused to think in stereotypes, I left it at the bank managers.
Chapter 4

Authentic tastes and moral boundaries: Egalitarianism as alternative distinction

Although the deliberate refusal to culturally distinguish and to use a hierarchical narrative can be seen as a form of egalitarianism rather than as an opposite hierarchy, it is in itself still a form of distinction making, yet on different grounds. It is a distinction with anti-distinction: people distinguish from those who distinguish. This phenomenon can be observed in three, interlinked, ways: as distinctions between fractions of the elite, i.e. between economic and cultural ‘capitalists’; as individual distinctions based on authenticity; and as moral distinctions. This alternative way of looking at anti-hierarchical narratives is the subject of this final section of chapter 4.

First, it is striking that the anti-elitist view sketched above is almost exclusively expressed by higher educated respondents, who, more or less, belong to an elite themselves, or who aspire to do so. They are in a competition struggle with other elites or elite fractions, and hence distinguish themselves more often from them. The competition between the cultural and economic fractions of the elite have been described by Bourdieu (1984: 260-283) as a form of distinction vis-à-vis each other. The above section showed that many higher educated respondents explicitly distinguish themselves from the economic elite (personified as bank managers), not only for this elite’s ‘conservative’ taste, but particularly for their alleged status attainment. They perceive a difference with writers, the third occupation in the interview schedule, who are more often associated – though not as frequent as the bank managers are linked to status distinction – with broad and refined tastes, aesthetic interests and individual choices. Monique (HYF5) compares the two:

Yes, the bank manager of course has an air of showing off, of acting because he has a lot of money and he can afford to sit in the front rank of the theatre, whereas a writer has an image of interest and of intellectual things rather than ‘I’m rich so I can buy a ticket’, haha!

In other words, the economic elite is accused of status distinction, whereas the cultural elite is perceived to be more sincere in relation to their cultural taste. However, this sincerity and this purely individual choice can lead to status distinction too, yet in a

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166 The perceived differences between bank managers and writers might partially be gendered, as I specifically (and regrettably) asked for a female writer (‘schrijfster’ in Dutch; see chapter 2). However, I did not find other perceived gender differences that are related to the presence or absence of individual choice (see chapter 6).

167 The lower educated do not distinguish between the two elite occupations as the higher educated do. They often associate the occupations with their intrinsic nature (e.g., writers like quietness to be able to concentrate), and they only distinguish the bricklayer (the third occupation) from the other two.
different way. Nori (UYF2) describes how writers, too, use their taste to distinguish, although she initially says they do not:

A writer, she is less occupied [than a bank manager] with proving herself to the outside world. So she prefers smaller productions and the things with which she attracts attention, at least within her own small group, like ‘What I discovered now!’ So, er, small exhibitions and small film productions, and er, an unknown singer in South-Africa who really no one knows, but she does!

This is a more individual type of distinction, which is the second way of perceiving egalitarian attitudes differently. Writers, according to Nori, distinguish themselves from other individuals who do not know this South-African singer. They proudly belong to a small group who attend the same little-known exhibition. Developing a personal, ‘authentic’, taste becomes an important asset as such, with which one can distinguish from those who follow others’ tastes.

In a previous section, I presented individualism as a form of egalitarianism: because tastes are purely individual, they are equal; one cannot and should not distinguish good taste from bad. Some respondents, however, clearly attach a distinctive feature to this individualism. ‘Sometimes you hear people echo each other, no opinion of their own’, says Piet (HMM3) disapprovingly. Michiel (UMM1) praises his daughter for ‘not following the crowd’ but rather being ‘a little more alternative in her choices, more self-willed also’. One has to search actively for new things and be able to explain one’s choice rather than only saying one likes it. Several respondents, including Nori, give this argument in their reply on the question on good taste:

Traditionally spoken, good taste is also the higher culture. It’s the theatre and the opera. But well, actually, I rather find good taste when you have thought about it, in which someone finds a, er, feeling. The intellectual satisfaction of a good book or an interesting play. And not like: because it is a stage play it is good. That would be my personal distinction.

(Monique, HYF5)

Good taste is what fits the person. So you shouldn’t put on – speaking about clothes – what’s fashionable, but what fits you, as a person. (Anneke, UMF1)

Good taste is taste that you can explain for yourself. But then it doesn’t matter so much what the object is that you like. But when you yourself have thought about it (...) and you have your reasons for [liking or disliking] it, then I already find it good taste. Or, ‘already’, then I find it good taste. And bad taste, then, is when people just accept everything indiscriminately, indeed like: ‘Oh, my group says that I must like that painting, so, yeah, indeed, (...), that appeals to me’. You know, so when you just don’t think about it yourself but accept things indiscriminately. (Nori, UYF2)
In other words, tastes are of equal value to them, provided that they are shaped individually and argued well. People who share this view still look down on other people, namely those who just follow the flock unthinking (cf. Michael 2013). Although this ‘flock’ is often associated with the ‘mainstream’, preferred by ‘the masses’, or with the latest trends, it can also refer to the ‘good’ tastes among certain ‘snobbish’ elites. Pauline (UMF3), a teacher in Dutch literature, says that people ‘imitate each other tremendously’ in liking literary books such as *Joe Speedboot* and *The Kite Runner*: ‘You must read it!’ She prefers less well-known books. Georgia (HYF4), an artist and VJ, used to hang out with a ‘highly purist’ group in rock music, who searched for original versions of classic records, but she eventually ‘liberated’ herself by attending a Justin Timberlake stadium concert. She wanted ‘to make a sort of statement to myself or something, because I liked the music; so then I completely let it go’. She thus dared to follow her individual taste in this music, which is often perceived as mainstream, without being bothered anymore about the possible pressure of her more ‘alternative’ peers.

This conditional egalitarian view is comparable to the hierarchical view based on the open attitude with which people learn to appreciate new cultural objects, described previously in this chapter. People distinguish themselves (and look up to others) with a personal taste that they searched for and found themselves, that they developed by persevering when it did not immediately appeal, and that they ideally can explain with their own individual arguments. They do not conform to the ‘insincere’ and ‘fake’ majority in either group (‘high culture’ or the ‘mainstream’), but they develop their own ‘authentic’ taste instead. This is similar to Van Eijck’s idea on distinctive cultural omnivores who look down on narrow-minded ‘univores’ (2000; cf. Bourdieu 1984: 365-371; Thornton 1995). This ‘quest for authenticity’ has often been analysed (e.g. Taylor 1989; Guignon 2004; Lindholm 2008), but rarely in terms of social distinction. 168 However, people perceive authenticity as a social virtue (Guignon 2004: 161), with which they can distinguish from those who do not display this virtue (cf. Van Eijk 2013: 534).

This authentic distinction can also be described as a moral one, which is a third alternative way of interpreting anti-hierarchical attitudes as distinctive. This moral turn comes to the fore best when respondents compare cultural hierarchy with social stratification in general. I began the section on anti-hierarchical narratives with the case of Nel, who immediately connected high culture with her opinion on doctors and managers: people who ‘sleep, take a shower, eat, change clothes’ like she does herself. Joke (LOF5) expresses herself in a similar way:

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168 To fill this hiatus, my MA student Nella van Gemert studied such moral distinctions by New Age practitioners, who strongly promote the ‘authentic self’. However, their distinctions from ‘less authentic’ individuals were much weaker than from institutions such as organised religions (Van Gemert 2013).
It’s also how you look at people, isn’t it? I mean, the bank manager and prince Alexander [the Dutch crown prince Willem-Alexander; now king] have to wipe their asses just like the garbage man has. So I see, you know, we are all people, and I think: when you do something and you contribute to society, you are of equal worth. And whatever you like, you like. And I just don’t want to make such a great fuss about it, no large distinction. Yes?

Similarly, Truus (LMF2) does not want to distinguish between her son, who has a low education and works in the steel industry, and her daughter, who has a slightly higher education and works in the administrative sector. ‘If you’re just friendly and nice, then it’s fine with me, and they don’t have to earn so much money and have a high education if they can’t’, she continues. She does not feel inferior to people who learned more. One might expect these utterances to be confined to lower educated people, such as the three respondents above, but these egalitarian views are shared by some higher-status respondents. They, for instance, do not want to look down on bricklayers, ‘who are marvellous people’ for whom ‘I have much, much respect’ (Marianne, LOF2). The most striking example is Maria (HMF3), who stems from a wealthy family in one of the most affluent towns in the Netherlands. In her youth, it was a big issue what her classmates’ parents did for a living, but:

It started to bother me. It really started to bother me. (...) It doesn’t interest me where somebody comes from. Who are you? What’s your attitude towards life? Are you decent?
Yes, how old-fashioned: are you decent? That’s the only thing that interests me, haha!

Decency and friendliness, a contribution to society: it are moral values with which people with an egalitarian attitude judge other people, rather than with class, education, wealth, or cultural taste. They are egalitarian with respect to socioeconomic and cultural hierarchy, but (unconsciously) replace these with a moral hierarchy. Such moral distinctions were neglected by Bourdieu (1984), but brought under the attention by Lamont (1992). In her study on the ‘symbolic boundaries’ that French and American members of the upper-middle class draw to distinguish worthy from less worthy people, she found that cultural boundaries such as described by Bourdieu are indeed important – particularly in France – but these boundaries should be analytically separated from economic and moral boundaries – applied more often (and in different ways) by Americans. The latter tend to appreciate assets such as honesty, friendliness and modesty (acting like ‘one of the guys’), which can also be recognised in the narratives above (Lamont 1992: 35-43). Conversely, they look down on ‘phonies’:

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169 Although Marianne was classified as a lower educated woman, this 85-year old lady has a respectable MMS diploma, married a university educated man and lives in an expensive flat in an affluent town.
170 Van Eijk (2011: 264-5) also describes anti-elitism in moral terms, when people perceive elites as unrespectable.
It was used again and again (...) to describe people who are not sincere, who pretend to know more than they do, or to be something they are not, who have no substance and judge a book by its cover. They “do things that are totally without basis”, they try to put on a show. (ibid.: 26)

More in particular, Americans more often ascribe such characteristics to intellectuals, who they consider as unfriendly, uppish and – again – phony (ibid.: 123). The American aversion to intellectual phoniness finds its broader equivalent (i.e. opposing both cultural and economic elites) in one of the alleged characteristics of Dutch national culture: the quest for normalcy and the antipathy towards superior behaviour. Although often criticised, the popular Dutch expressions ‘doe maar gewoon, dan doe je al gek genoeg’ (‘just act normally, that’s crazy enough as it is’) and ‘niet je hoofd boven het maaiveld uitsteken’ (‘don’t put your head above ground level’, often followed by the threat that it will be chopped off if you do) illustrate this idea.

Van Eijk (2013: 535) explains this substitution of socioeconomic and cultural egalitarianism with a moral hierarchy as an appeal to individual responsibility. One cannot help being born in a lower or higher class and possessing a different taste, and therefore one should not be judged by such qualities. However, one is assumed to be able to choose one’s own moral values and behaviour. Therefore, people more easily distinguish from others on such individual, ‘voluntary’, attributes.

However, my research shows a richer picture than this national stereotype and this absence of cultural and economic boundaries. Indeed, like the Americans and unlike the French, many Dutch people use moral boundaries to reject the phony, the superior, the inauthentic, and hence oppose the drawing of both cultural and economic boundaries, but the first part of this chapter showed that these cultural boundaries are prominent too. Two opposing narratives – the (culturally) hierarchical on the one hand and the (culturally) anti-hierarchical and thus morally distinctive on the other hand – are both widespread in the Netherlands.

**Conclusion: The coexistence of opposite narratives**

In the first part of this chapter, we saw that many of the phenomena that Bourdieu observed in 1960s France can be recognised today in the Netherlands, even though both this nation and the present time are often perceived as more egalitarian. Although rarely explicitly, many respondents distinguish themselves from others with different tastes, particularly from those with a lower educational level. Even more implicit is their status claim in regard to their ‘good taste’, but both phenomena occur nevertheless. This is in line with the findings of several scholars, who critically responded to the initial
omnivorousness thesis on increasing openness and tolerance. Cultural distinction is still widespread, but not necessarily between the traditional domains of high and low (or popular) culture (cf. Holt 1998; Lizardo 2008; Prieur & Savage 2013). This part of the chapter was intended to describe such distinctive practices in all its facets. It includes the other side of the hierarchical coin, which is often overlooked: looking up to people with ‘better’ tastes. People admire those with more knowledge on, for example, ‘more complex’ culture. They express embarrassment about their own taste, which they perceive as inadequate. They want to reach for more, but are not inclined to put much effort into it. Both sides of the hierarchical narrative are more often expressed by the higher educated, who thus perceive themselves on a particular position on the cultural ladder, above and below others. The lower educated participate less in these detailed discussions.

However, the second part of the chapter showed that many people oppose this hierarchical way of looking at cultural taste. They express an individualist view instead, and they reject concepts such as high and low culture for being ‘arrogant’, ‘elitist’, and ‘disparaging’. At first sight, these ideas are more in line with late twentieth century postmodern and late modernity theories and with the notion of the ‘open’ and ‘tolerant’ attitude of cultural omnivores. The Netherlands, in particular, is a relatively egalitarian country, in which (cultural) distinction is perceived to be taboo. However, many people who express egalitarian thoughts look down on those who do distinguish from others, who are perceived as fake and inauthentic snobs. They distinguish themselves from those who distinguish. As a consequence, they create a moral hierarchy instead, in which the expression of the purely personal taste, the authentic persona, is celebrated. The drawing of boundaries as such seems to be ubiquitous, but people are diverse in the kind of boundaries they draw.

How can we explain the coexistence of these hierarchical and anti-hierarchical narratives? Is it simply a matter of two different groups, with different attitudes? Although the higher educated appear to be more hierarchical and the lower educated more anti-hierarchical, there are many exceptions. In this chapter I presented the two opposite views as juxtaposed. However, many people use both narratives during one interview, often even within one sentence. In the next chapter, I will show how people combine both ‘cultural repertoires’, as I will call them, into an ambivalent amalgam, whereas others only use one of these repertoires, or do not use either. I will explore how both these ambivalences and the more neutral narratives come across.