Disputing about taste: Practices and perceptions of cultural hierarchy in the Netherlands
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Chapter 7

How to value art?
On the criteria for good art and high culture

What image I have of high culture? Err, artists, generally with HBO* education or academic, so highly skilled in their profession, who reach for excellence, whether in reproducing a work of art, often in music, or in the creation of a work of art, in which the search for new horizons, finding new perspectives, is an incentive of ambition. And then it can be traditional (...), like beautiful 18th century refined paintings (...), or more contemporary directions. Like Jeff Poons [sic], you can say: ‘Jesus, do we have to give money to that?’, but it does open up really new artistic dimensions, whatever you think of it. Although low culture does not exclude excelling at all, because in there people excel too. (...) (Rudolf, UOM1)

Thinking out loud, Rudolf tries to give a well verbalised definition of high culture, but he becomes entrapped in the different criteria he tries to apply. He must downplay his emphasis on excellent craftsmanship, because low cultural artists might be great craftsmen too. Furthermore, he applies both the classic logic of traditional and well-made art and the modern, ‘pure aesthetic’ logic of innovation, which emerged in the nineteenth century. When subsequently ranking thirty cards with musical items, he forgets both logics immediately, but applies a logic of popularity instead. After a probing question, he changes this into a link with social hierarchy: he now perceives high culture as what high status people prefer. When speaking about his own taste earlier in the interview, he also uses other criteria: he prefers films with ‘psychological depth’ over ‘ordinary’ American stuff, although he adds that the latter sometimes makes you laugh; and he dislikes theatre because of the unrealistic way of acting. Hence, he speaks of content, complexity, the mainstream, humour and realism.

This chapter will scrutinise the differences and similarities between the criteria people – often implicitly – use to explain why they like or dislike certain items on the one hand, and to describe high and low culture on the other. Bourdieu (1984: 28-41) distinguished the ‘pure aesthetic’ from the ‘popular aesthetic’. High status people have inherited the habitus that uses the former: the inclination to perceive works of art purely for its aesthetic qualities, which means preferring form over function, relating the object to other works of art, and favouring complexity. With this ‘aesthetic disposition’ they can justify the superiority of legitimate (high) culture and make distinctions within this domain. Lower status people, on the other hand, do not know or understand this pure aesthetic and use a popular aesthetic instead: art should have a function related to daily life, such as a recognisable relation to reality, a moral message, or an appeal to the
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immediate senses. These criteria are more suitable for popular (and ‘low’) culture (cf. Bennett et al. 2009).

Later scholars used such criteria to determine the changing degree of pure and popular discourse in, for instance, reviews (Baumann 2001; Van Venrooij & Schmutz 2010). These showed that professionals also apply (aspects of) the pure aesthetic within domains of popular culture, implying that these domains are rising within the cultural hierarchy. Several qualitative researchers showed how higher educated people use such ‘pure’ criteria to make distinctions within a seemingly omnivorous taste (Vander Stichele 2007; Bellavance 2008) or to distinguish within specific popular music genres (Thornton 1995; Wermuth 2002; Bachmayer & Wilteidink 2009). However, most of these sources do not focus on such criteria, but only mention some of them shortly, as an aside to their main argument.

In comparison, this chapter does scrutinise the application of many of these criteria, both ‘popular’ and ‘pure’, in detail. How do people actually use these criteria when describing their likes and dislikes; is there indeed a clear distinction between higher and lower educated people; and when do criteria collide within people’s narratives? The analysis is based on the detailed coding of all ninety interview transcripts, which enables me to analyse them quantitatively and to describe them code by code. This pioneering activity is the first aim of this chapter.

The second aim, which relates back to the questions posed in the introduction and chapter 1, is to analyse which criteria people use to describe high and low culture and to rank musical items hierarchically. In previous chapters, we saw that many people object using such terms or claim not even to know them, but many others (and also many of those who first objected) do give detailed definitions or examples, in which they often use artistic criteria. A first question is whether people use the same criteria to explain their personal taste and to define high culture, or whether they apply different or even conflicting logics. Second, do they use the ‘classic’ or the ‘modern’ logic in their perception of hierarchy? In chapter 1, we saw how, in the course of centuries, several criteria emerged for cultural distinction and cultural hierarchy. Until the nineteenth century, the criteria craftsmanship (to a minor degree), civilisation, morality and complexity played a role in defining and institutionalising ‘high culture’. During the nineteenth century, originality, authenticity and the rejection of commercial values emerged as important criteria, as well as the preference of form over function. This is defined by Bourdieu as the ‘pure aesthetic’. Lizardo (2008) focused only on the latter, arguing that the hierarchy of rigid high and low cultural domains has been replaced by a hierarchy of embodied cultural capital – i.e. a hierarchy of ways to enjoy and discuss cultural objects, and hence a hierarchy of art criteria. At the end of chapter 1, I hypothesised that these hierarchies did not succeed each other, but now coexist: on the one hand (higher educated) people use the ‘modern criteria’ to justify their likes and dislikes
within any cultural field (in line with Lizardo), whereas, on the other hand, they still recognise the domains of high and low culture based on ‘classic criteria’ (ignored by Lizardo). In this chapter, I will find out whether this hypothesis of two diverging logics is true.

With two different aims and two partly overlapping sets of criteria – the exact use of ‘pure’ and ‘popular’ aesthetics in personal taste, and the ‘classic’ and ‘modern’ definitions people attach to high and low culture – this ambitious chapter runs the risk of leaving the reader in confusion. For reasons of clarity, I will, therefore, first discuss the separate criteria one by one, before returning to the big picture. Within each section, I will show in which ways this specific criterion is used; what, if any, the differences are between higher and lower educated people and perhaps between age groups or between men and women; whether and how this criterion collides with competing criteria; and whether and how it is used to define high and low culture. The focus will vary per section, depending on the most salient findings.

After briefly presenting a large table with the different uses of all criteria at hand, I start with some criteria that Bourdieu categorised as the popular aesthetic: the emotions it evokes and the content of works of art. These are followed by criteria that I described in chapter 1 as the classic attributes for good art and high culture, which partially overlap with the popular aesthetic: the moral aspects of art, the degree of realism, and demonstrated craftsmanship. An intermezzo on the colliding views on a specific art form, abstract art, functions as a bridge between popular and pure aesthetics. The part on the ‘pure aesthetic’ starts with a discussion of complexity, which is used both within the classic and the modern logic of high culture (see chapter 1). This will be followed by the modern (i.e. nineteenth century) criteria, which Bourdieu attributes to the pure aesthetic: the preference of form over function, the emphasis on original and innovative art, and perceived authenticity. I close with several ‘social’ criteria, that link the judgement of art and the definition of high culture to the number and/or status of people that like this art. At the end of the chapter, I will bring all criteria back together in order to coherently answer the two main questions posed above, with the help of both the qualitative and the quantitative analysis.

A quantitative account of criteria

I start the discussion on criteria with a brief presentation of quantified data. In Atlas.ti I defined 35 codes on art criteria, both a priori and emerging from the data, which I attributed to quotes in the interview transcripts. The transcripts were coded and re-coded
### Table 7.1. Distribution of mentioned criteria (Atlas codes) over respondent groups and over specific interview questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Atlas code</th>
<th>n for educational levels</th>
<th>n for birth cohorts</th>
<th>n for specific interview questions</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>total (n = 90)</td>
<td>low (n = 30)</td>
<td>HBO (n = 30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>popular aesthetic</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>emotion (total)</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>28</td>
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<tr>
<td>grief / touching</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>humour</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>17</td>
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<td>cheerful</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>excitement</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>emotion: other</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>content</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>29</td>
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<tr>
<td>personal motives</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>interpretation</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>function</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>informative / to learn</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>serious</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>form: tempo/speed</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>19</td>
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<tr>
<td>form: heavy vs. light</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>form: colour</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>form: melody</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>classic criteria</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>realism</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>23</td>
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<tr>
<td>craftsmanship</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>morality</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>age / seniority</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>HBO '65-'85</td>
<td>HBO '85-'95</td>
<td>HBO '95-'05</td>
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<td>-------------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(n = 90)</td>
<td>(n = 30)</td>
<td>(n = 30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>emotion</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>total</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>other</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>20</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>content</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>total</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>persona</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>total</td>
<td>18</td>
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<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>interpretation</strong></td>
<td>40</td>
<td>14</td>
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<tr>
<td>function</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>informative / to learn</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>form: tempo/speed</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>form: melody</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>realism</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>craftsmanship</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>age / seniority</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>complexity (vs. simplicity)</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>depth (vs. shallowness)</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>intellect (vs. stupidity)</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>refined / subtle</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>social criteria</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>popularity / size audience</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>commercial</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>14</td>
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<tr>
<td>well-known</td>
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<td>mainstream</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>social status</td>
<td>N.A.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For educational groups and birth cohorts: *p < .05; **p < .01 (Chi square; differences between three columns; asterisks in right column)
carefully, in order to apply strict interpretations.\textsuperscript{240} Appendix 3 gives the operationalisations of all criteria. In SPSS, I recorded the use of criteria per respondent as binary variables: either present or absent.\textsuperscript{241} I must note that the presence of a criterion does not necessarily imply that a respondent finds this an important aspect: it also includes those who explicitly say that they do not find it important or who speak about the suspected opinions of other persons (friends, relatives, the three occupations). However, this simple count does give us some interesting insights into the actual use of, and thus familiarity with, different logics, which will be analysed more thoroughly in a qualitative way.

Respondents use on average 15.6 criteria in an interview, ranging from 4 (Jacobus, UOM4) to 26 (Inge, UYF3). The higher educated use significantly more criteria (17.0) than the lower educated (12.8).\textsuperscript{242} The number of criteria correlates negatively with age (Pearson’s $r$ is -.39; $p < .01$), which is mainly caused by the high number used by the youngest birth cohort. There is no significant relation with gender.

Table 7.1 shows for each of the 35 criteria first the total number of respondents who use it, followed by the distribution over education and age groups. Significant differences (Chi square) are marked in the respective right columns: seven criteria correlate with education and eight with age, none of which with both. Not included in the table are gender differences, because these were only slightly significant ($p < .05$) with regard to two criteria: women use ‘personal motives’ and ‘craftsmanship’ more than men do. The four columns on the right indicate the number of respondents who mention a criterion in reply to some specific interview questions: on high and low culture, on good and bad taste, and during the ranking of cards according to taste and hierarchical perception. Note that the criteria ‘emotion’ and ‘originality’ are umbrella terms, which comprise the indented codes underneath.

The table is structured according to the logic of this chapter. The sections below discuss the different criteria one by one and will refer to table 7.1 whenever necessary. In the conclusion of this chapter, I will come back to some general trends that appear from both the quantitative and the qualitative analysis.

\textsuperscript{240} A small number of other criteria which I coded less carefully or which I included along the way are thus excluded from this quantitative analysis. Furthermore, the criterion ‘initial attraction’, which almost all respondents use, is also excluded.\textsuperscript{241} Thus, the actual number of a certain code during an interview is not counted, because the lengths of quotes differs: if an answer is split up into three quotes which all get the same code, the number is higher than if the same answer is treated as one quote with one code.\textsuperscript{242} Among the higher educated, there is no difference with regard to parents’ education or between university and HBO.
Popular aesthetics

According to Bourdieu’s maxim ‘form over function’, which stands central in his definition of ‘aesthetic disposition’, people with a high level of cultural capital judge, for instance, a film for its stylistic characteristics and its position in cinematic history and are not bothered much with the actual subject, the storyline or the evoked emotions. Feelings are more controlled (Bourdieu 1984). Those with a low degree of cultural capital only see a film for what it brings them: in terms of content (they recognise situations, like the storyline, can learn something) and of emotions (they are moved, thrilled or cheered up). This is the core of the ‘popular aesthetic’ (Bourdieu 1984: 28-41; cf. Schulze 1992). However, this distinction appears to be highly simplistic. The next two sub-sections show that the lower educated indeed often use this popular aesthetic, but that respondents with a higher educational level do not refrain from it.

From sentiment to enthralment: Valuations of emotions

One of the most important aspects of popular aesthetic is the emotional appeal of art. On the one hand, my research shows that people with a low educational level indeed often value cultural items for their emotional impact: they wish particular films and TV shows to be either moving, funny, exciting or cheerful, making them cry, laugh, shiver or cheer up. Among this group, there are sometimes distinctions, mainly between men and women, between which emotions should come first. Aagje (LYF3), for example, does not understand why many of her friends like ‘very sad’ films such as Titanic:

You don’t go watch a movie in order to cry, you know, that’s what I think. I do want to relax, but not in that way. No, preferably not. I just like to laugh, or something like ‘whooo scary, what will happen now?’ That’s what I prefer. No, crying is not my thing.

I don’t like heavy stuff. Problems you can read in the newspaper, you know. It must be relaxing, you have to leave the theatre with a good feeling. (Gerard, LMM3)

Higher educated people often look down on TV shows, music and films that are obviously produced with the aim to evoke emotions and which they regard too ‘sentimental’, ‘melodramatic’ or ‘sugary’.243 Others distinguish themselves from bad comedies (‘I am funny enough myself!’, Hanneke, HMF4) or from music that is nothing more than cheerful.

243 Sometimes items that are usually perceived as high culture are valued in a similar way, such as opera (‘It’s always so sad, and they die so slowly’, Marleen, HOF5) and composer Händel (‘too much melody and a bit too sugary’, Henricus, HOM1).
On the other hand, however, emotional attachment to art is not limited to lower educated people. Table 7.1 shows that the higher and lower educated use this and related criteria equally. Many higher educated respondents say they want to be ‘touched’, ‘moved’ or ‘gripped’ by art, whether it is music, film, or painting. They talk about the books that ‘do something to you’ (Toon, HOM5), the Mozart Requiem that leaves one ‘enthralled’ (Frank, UOM5), or the film or stage play that makes the entire audience sit in silence after it has ended (Helma, UOF3; Koos, UMM3). Some cannot tell exactly when something moves them, or what it is that moves them:

I like opera, it can move me, I find that special. I always say: it comforts you while you didn’t even know you were sad. It does something to you, even when you didn’t even know you needed it. (Deirdre, HYF6)

I’ve been to Rome a few years back. I also visited the Vatican, a huge museum, halls full of stuff. But what touched me most was, at the end of one of these halls, a modern piece of art with a really vague image, in certain colours; it touched me more than the masters and the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. With some things you just immediately have a feeling. It evokes something, rather than just being an image. Yes, it’s very unpredictable, it can be anything. (Monique, HYF5)

Similarly, higher educated people can perceive culture as exciting (Rudolf (UOM1) calls medieval woodcarving ‘exciting in its simplicity’) or cheerful (Ronald (UYM4) became very happy and ‘bursting with energy’ when he had visited a Shakespeare play).

The heart and the mind do not contradict but complement each other. This becomes clear when looking at the research that BA student Laura Vermeulen did among lovers of contemporary classical music (Vermeulen & Van den Haak 2012). Although they focus their narrative on the complexity and novelty of this music and on the efforts they have paid to learn to appreciate it, in the end it is about – different, unknown – emotions: ‘Music can confront you, evoke new emotions, and preferably emotions I don’t know. Art makes it possible to become acquainted with new emotions’ (sound engineer, male, 40 y.o.). Roose (2008) and Rössel (2011) also showed that emotion plays a role among most audiences of concerts and operas, whereas ‘pure’ aesthetic criteria, such as innovativeness and analytic ways of listening, complement this factor among the group with the highest cultural capital. Reflecting on Bourdie, Roose (2008: 247) concludes:

Yet, it is perfectly in line with Kant’s disinterested view on art and with the classical ideal of ‘Bildung’. For the inner circle [of concertgoers] it is exactly the intellectual effort and distanced approach that enables a thorough emotional appreciation of a concert.

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244 See below for more on complexity and the effort to reach an ‘acquired taste’.
245 They studied Belgian concertgoers and German opera visitors respectively, both by means of surveys. They both compared visitors with different degrees of attendance frequency rather than educational levels to determine the amount of this specific form of cultural capital.

240
Furthermore, DeNora (2000: 48-58) states that people of whichever background deliberately use music in order to evoke, strengthen or counter a certain emotion. Although emotions as such appear to be ubiquitous, my research suggests that higher educated people might distinguish high (‘new’, touching, and so on) from low emotions (sentimental, merely funny\footnote{Cf. Kuipers (2006: 248), who concludes her work on high and low tastes in humour with the thesis that ‘even the highest humor will always be a bit low’.
\footnotemark[246]}, although no one makes this difference explicit.

This distinction also comes to the fore when studying the few respondents who perceive emotion to be the basis for cultural hierarchy. Upwardly mobile Don (UYM3) finds that many colleagues and friends from higher backgrounds value films and music with their minds rather than their hearts, which implies a low value for the expression of emotions as such. Carla (UOF4) makes this more explicit:

> The most important difference is that, with lower culture, people are warmer towards each other, they can dance with each other and link arms and swing, and sing lustily, and cry and laugh, so emotions are rather clear. That’s what I find interesting of this volks\footnote{However, in Paul’s actual hierarchical ranking, Hazes is ranked as low culture.} attitude; people are really direct. And with high culture, people keep it more hidden, they don’t let it come to the surface that easily. Yes, people struggle with their emotions, everything is more abstract.

On the other hand, the emotional response makes some people value certain ‘low cultural’ items higher. Paul (HMM1) prefers André Hazes over other Dutch singers, because ‘this man always manages to touch some kind of chord’. He defines low culture with what ‘doesn’t move you’ and high culture with ‘what kind of feeling you have when you leave’.\footnote{\footnotemark[246]} Hence, because people of all backgrounds find emotion an important aspect of art, even though they implicitly distinguish between high and low emotions, it only plays a small and even ambiguous role in defining high and low culture.

\textit{From substance to interpretation: Valuations of content}

The second evaluation criterion for art that, according to Bourdieu, does not have priority among the higher educated is its actual content. As with emotion, this is only partly true. Many respondents with a lower educational level indeed stress the storyline and the message of – in particular – films.\footnote{In music, contents play a role when discussing a song’s lyrics, which shows a striking gender difference. Of the 23 respondents who say something about lyrics, women are predominantly positive about certain lyrics or explicitly say to pay attention to the contents of a song, whereas men are overrepresented among those who prefer music (form) over lyrics. This gender division is regardless of age or educational level.}\footnote{\footnotemark[247]} ‘It should have some sort of story(line)’ is a literal
quote of Jeroen, Gerard, Greet and Didi (LYM3, LMM3, LMF3, LMF4). The latter downplays this statement by adding that ‘every film has a story’, but that ‘certain stories just don’t appeal’ to her. ‘It should be a story with which I can identify’, she clarifies. This identification is often related to a personal interest, which is, of all criteria, the only (sub)criterion that is mentioned more often, though not significantly, by the lower educated (see table 7.1) (cf. Newman et al. 2013). Rik (LYM4) likes sports films such as Any given Sunday, because he played football (soccer) himself and he recognises the intense team spirit: ‘When I see such a film, it reminds me of back then.’ People say they like a certain film because they know the location, they experienced the time period, or they have a professional interest. Artworks are cherished because of a personal memory or because an acquaintance or family member painted it especially for them. Truus (LMF2), for instance, likes two paintings in her living room: one depicting a house where she once lived, and one that reminds her of her father.

For these respondents, the presence of content stands in contrast to a lack of content, or to a lack of substance (another translation of the Dutch word inhoud). This is perceived as valueless. They dislike films about ‘strange animals coming out of wells, with tentacles’ (Karin, UMF4), which is only one of the few evocative descriptions of ‘empty’ action and horror movies respondents give. Several people, particularly upwardly mobile and lower educated respondents, say they want to learn something when they see a film or visit a museum, rather than to ‘just watch TV stupidly’ (Aagje, LYF3). They like to watch documentaries, such as on Discovery Channel. For some, learning is even the only reason to read books: Brecht (LOF4), one of the ‘neutral’ respondents in chapter 5, reads spiritual self-help books that teach her ‘to improve myself’ and ‘to deal with myself better’.

Therefore, some respondents, particularly lower educated, associate high culture with content and low culture with a lack of content. This comes to the fore in reply to the question on the taste of writers: they watch films ‘with substance’ (Geer, LYF1), ‘with a real storyline’ (Jeroen, LYM3), ‘in which something sensible is told’ (Joke, LOF5); they listen to music ‘in which something is expressed by means of language’ (Berend, LOM5); and they like ‘more serious’ culture (several respondents). Subsequently, high culture is culture ‘with a deeper meaning’ (Nori, UYF2), ‘in which you can see things’ (Remco, LYM2) and in which the artist ‘tries to say something’ (Rik, LYM4; who contrasts this with DJ Tiësto, who ‘doesn’t say anything’). Apparently, in this way they try to touch upon high culture and distance themselves from low culture, without realising that most higher educated people do not define high culture in such terms.

249 Some lower educated respondents who do like these kinds of films explicitly add that they do not care about the storyline. Avatar for example is liked because of the 3D imagery, but ‘the story behind it I don’t care’ (Rik, LYM4). Another respondent however, Aagje (LYF3), likes Avatar because of its message.

250 Some of them therefore do not value abstract art as high culture, because they perceive this as lacking content (see the section on abstract art below).
This does not mean, however, that people with a higher educational level do not speak about contents when describing their personal taste. They do so often, but in a more abstract way and with more details about their interpretations of the film’s content or about the director’s intention. They like ‘a beautiful, wound up, well-constructed story’ (Toon, HOM5) with ‘beautiful dialogues’ (Vincent, UMM5) about ‘relations between people’ (Hillie, HOF4), ‘communication between people’ (Yme, UMF2), ‘people who develop themselves’ (Ton, HMM4), ‘changes in society’ (Marleen, HOF5), and above all ‘psychological’ matters (several respondents). When discussing specific films or TV series, they often describe its contents more abstractly than lower educated respondents do:

The best film I saw in ages, coincidentally three weeks ago, was called Nothing personal. It’s a Dutch-Irish coproduction, do you know it? I found it an extraordinary film, I’m still thinking of it. It’s about minimalism: what are the essential affairs in life, what’s the bottom line? That’s exactly what occupies me. But so delicate and so beautifully done and so splendidly acted. But I found the message really special. I appreciated that film a lot. (Charles, HOM3)

A film like Temps du Loup [English title: Time of the Wolf] is really one of the films that stayed with me for a long time, so to speak, exactly because of the abstract and dystopian aspect of it. Dystopia I find interesting anyhow. Recently, I saw The Book of Eli, also such a film, and it’s post-apocalyptic. A bit like these dark and heavy auteur films, that’s what I like. (Joris, UYM1)

I mainly watch films that contain gay themes. It’s because... a friend of mine once described it as: always in search for yourself. I think that is typically a kind of gay theme, that you try to interpret your own homosexuality in a broader context of films. (...) [He continues about stereotypes in Hollywood films]. What I like about those Korean and Japanese films, but also Scandinavian, German and French films, is that they contain gays with whom I can identify more, whose lives I get, in whose choices I can put myself. And there is some intelligence in these films that I miss in American films. (Ronald, UYM4)

The interpretation of an artwork can also be made too obvious. Georgia (HYF4), who is an artist herself, criticises other artists who explain exactly what they mean by their works:

They tell very long stories about it, and then you think: what nonsense this is! (...) It’s exactly what a real artist would never do, so to speak, because he will give you the opportunity to decide it for yourself. But they almost hang a user’s manual next to it. (...) Sometimes I begin hating art, because, actually, the wrong people say the wrong things.

Similarly, Joke (LOF5) says that she dislikes arts about which ‘the artist had this and that thought’. Hence, interpreting is something the viewer must do, not the artist.
In other words, lower and higher educated people have different hierarchical perceptions of contents. The lower educated look down on lack of contents, which they implicitly perceive as low culture. They prefer content that one can personally relate to, and they specifically value content that can teach one something. Lower educated and also upwardly mobile respondents perceive this information aspect as high culture.\textsuperscript{251} Many higher educated people, on the other hand, look somewhat down on this aspect, but apply more abstract speech to describe contents, including interpretations on its meaning. Implicitly, they value this higher. However, the pure aesthetic maxim ‘form over function’ remains important among some higher educated, which would still mean that the emphasis on contents as such is still hold in low regard. Conversely, the lower educated’s implicit maxim ‘function over form’ plays a significant role in their dislike of abstract art, which is considered as high culture by many others. Hence, the criterion ‘content’ is a complex one, with contradicting logics. In the sections on abstract art and on ‘form over function’, I will delve deeper into this issue.

\textbf{Classic criteria for high culture}

Several art criteria form a basis of both popular aesthetics and of the classic characteristics of good art and high culture. The first two are related to the contents of a work of art described above: good art should be morally just (the opposite is more common: bad art and low culture are considered immoral) and should portray a realistic image of life. In order to reach the latter, particularly in painting and acting, artists should be accomplished craftsmen; craft being the third criterion in this section.

\textit{‘I don’t want to be shocked’: Valuations of morality}

Moral issues have long been neglected in the sociology of cultural taste and distinction, including by Bourdieu. However, in chapter 1, I showed that moral aspects were an important aspect of the classic logic of cultural hierarchy, as high culture was presented as more civilised and (more implicitly) morally better. Conversely, in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth century, popular culture has often been denounced because of the immoral values that might damage society. Whether it is the ‘decadent’ jazz rhythms in the 1920s, Elvis Presley’s sensuous hip movements in the 1950s or Miley Cyrus’s ‘twerking’ dance at the 2013 MTV Awards, they have been criticised for corrupting the

\textsuperscript{251} Lamont (1992: 91-98) showed that American upper-middle class men also emphasise this aspect of art, whereas the French look down on this.
How to value art? On the criteria for good art and high culture

youth (cf. Ter Bogt 1997; Bennett 2000: 14-17; Lopes 2002). Besides sex, also violence, gross language and bad jokes about, for instance, minorities have been the subject of moral panic (Cohen 1972). Lamont (1992) brought morality back under sociological attention, by distinguishing moral boundaries as a third way of drawing symbolic boundaries between people, next to economic and cultural ones. She found that Americans attach a higher value to moral issues than the French do (cf. Kuipers 2006, who found similar differences between the Americans and the Dutch).\(^{252}\)

Only a few respondents associate high culture or good art with high morals and civilisation. Some expect positive consequences of good art, and therefore of art subsidies: it can take away ‘the vulgarisation and disinterest in society’ (Alexander, HYM4), it is ‘important for the ethics in society’ (Paulan, HOF3), or it is simply ‘civilised’ (Greet, LMF3). More often, moral judgements are used when discussing good and bad taste. It is the most frequently mentioned criterion in reply to the specific interview question on this distinction (see table 7.1). People often drift away from culture in the narrow sense, when they speak about etiquette, decent clothing and respectful behaviour. They sometimes regret that these more strict morals have decreased (cf. Woodward & Emmison 2001). Paulan (HOF3), for example, defines good taste as:

Refinement. Harmony, er, harmonic confrontation, is also good taste. (…) And compassion. Yes, it’s quite abstract what I say, but good taste is to take the other into consideration. I think that that’s important. Being considerate to the other person, to other movements. Like you can say: it can be tasteless when someone makes a remark that hurts someone’s feelings. Well, good taste is when it’s not hurting someone, it may be confrontational, but with consideration. (…) There’s so much slating going on, it irritates me. Bad taste is slating, negativism, not giving space to the other. (…)

Besides such general remarks, some respondents (see table 7.1) use moral criteria to criticise both the contents and form of cultural items and artists, although it does not have the character of a moral panic. They (used to) prefer The Beatles over The Rolling Stones because of their more ‘civilised’ behaviour, they dislike films in which the characters behave badly\(^{253}\), or they try to morally raise their children while watching television together:

The kids like to watch America’s Next Top Model, with all these girls who want to become a model. They speak so mean about each other – I do understand that they [her kids] like to see which assignment the girls get – but I say something about it every time. Or I emphasise the nicest girls, like ‘She’s acting nicely, isn’t she? How kind that she helped the other one.’ I try

\(^{252}\) Conversely, Friedman & Kuipers (2013) found that lower educated people also criticise the humour of higher educated people for moral reasons.

\(^{253}\) Gabriëlle (UOF1) and Greet (LMF3) more or less dislike the Dutch film Komt een vrouw bij de dokter*, which is about a man who cheats on his wife while she is dying of cancer, for this reason.
to teach them that. Because I find this competitive thing difficult, that people demolish each other like that on TV. (Deirdre, HYF6)

The main target of these respondents is certain comedians and TV show hosts who use gross humour and vulgar language and who make fun of others. Helma (UOF3) prefers comedian Herman Finkers*, who ‘did not insult anybody, did not hurt anyone, did not use gross language’, over Theo Maassen*, who is ‘often too coarse’ and who speaks about ‘all those obscenities’. She recognises his craftsmanship (‘I can see that he’s good’), but she tries to avoid his shows. Others, however, say they can handle coarse comedians because of their ‘fluctuations with more subtle moments’ (Anneke, UMF1), or because their humour is ‘good for a laugh, but always somewhat nasty too’ (Monique, HYF5).

Although many respondents personally dislike extremely violent and bloody films, naked people on stage, and ‘aggressive’ or ‘anti-woman’ music (metal, hip hop), there are only a few who actually disapprove of such cultural items because of the potential negative consequences in society. More often, respondents speak about other people they know or knew who reject these things. Liesbeth’s (HMF2) parents thought that The Beatles were ‘not good for the development’ of their children, Hanneke’s (HMF4) sister argued that playing with Barbie dolls ‘leads to anorexia’, and Richard’s (LYM5) more religious brother does not listen to pop music, which is ‘used by the devil’. Similarly, Sonja (HYF3) ranks 50 Cent and Metallica at the bottom of her hierarchy, because ‘some people despise it, because it’s bad for society, and they incite people’, but this is not her own opinion. When I confront Sander (HYM2), who likes ‘coarse comedians with good jokes’, with the negative opinion of older respondents on these comedians, he clarifies his opinion: ‘It’s not that I walk on the street and swear the shit out of people or beat them up, let that be clear, but when jokes are made about it, I like that of course.’ Thus, he downplays the impact on society by separating the valuation of the content of a cultural item, in this case a comedy show, with behaviour in real life.

The rare negative accounts on moral issues in avant-garde art forms, as described by Heinich (2000) in the US and France, are also mostly either attributed to others or downplayed. Carmen (UYF6), for instance, likes artists who try to ‘push back the boundaries’ that others do not want to be crossed. Karin (UMF4) personally dislikes a ‘dismal’ and ‘troll-like’ Kenyan sculpture her husband once bought, ‘The suffering African’, but she puts her dislike in perspective: ‘In a museum, an art work does not have to be beautiful, it may shock, but in my house I want things that give me an aesthetic pleasure, I don’t want to be shocked day in day out.’

What some people do object to themselves is the immoral personality of certain artists. Four people say to dislike André Hazes’s music because they hate the man Hazes, particularly due to his violent and drunken behaviour towards his first wife (Joke, LOF5; Trudy, LMF1). Similarly, Ton (HMM4) despises the ‘overrated’ pop artist Andy Warhol
for ‘ruining people in his Factory’ and for ‘not giving a shit about anyone, including those whom he expected to buy his art’.

Thus, although many respondents make moral statements about culture and about people, for instance when discussing the concept of good taste or when disliking coarse humour or dismal sculptures, there is only limited proof in my sample of strong moral judgements on (the societal effects of) violence and sex in art. When moral issues are at stake, my respondents tend to downplay their opinions, in order to respect those of others, comparable to the downplaying of distinctive remarks in chapter 5. People do not want to be known as overly moralistic: ‘I’m not shocked, absolutely not, I can handle it,’ Hans (LMM4) hastily adds after saying that he dislikes coarse comedians, ‘I’m not a Calvinist!’

On nonsense and naturalness: Valuations of realism

Besides containing some substance, for many people – of whichever educational level – the contents of narrative disciplines (films, TV series, stage plays) should be close to life: realistic, or at least plausible. This is recognisable in Bourdieu’s ‘popular aesthetic’, although it is almost never discussed in literature on cultural taste.

When story lines or characters deviate too much from reality, many respondents give up. They criticise divergent films and series, from Rocky (‘he pulls at a knuckle-duster, boxes a few times, and then wins everything; it’s just not reality’, Rik, LYM4), to Sex and the City (‘it’s dramatised too much’, Kirsten, UYF5), to Amadeus (‘a falsification of history’, Frank, UOM5). The main target of people’s discontent in this respect is the genre science fiction, which is called ‘furthest from reality’ (Joachiem, UYM2), ‘not real’ (Elly, UYF1), ‘nonsense’ (Cora, LYF5), and ‘ridiculous’ (Gabriëlle, UOF1).

Some people do prefer a certain lack of realism in films, such as the ‘unreal’ and ‘weird’ series Lost (Hanneke, HMF4) and the ‘bizarre scenes’ in Jim Jarmusch’s films (Patrick, HYM3). Others say to like certain films despite the lack of reality:

I like to watch the sort of detective-like films, but also CSI [Crime Scene Investigation], those slightly exaggerated investigative films in which they always solve everything – contrary to reality, but OK, they solve everything: they use one hair to find a complete army of criminals – but I find it interesting to watch, I like to watch it. (Gerard, LMM3)

I can tell you something about action movies. At first, it never interested me because I found it rather unrealistic. But after a while I discovered a way to watch it. I’m talking about those action movies from the 1970s and ’80s, early ’90s. (…) You should see the humour of it, you shouldn’t approach it like something realist, but with some humour. And, yes, then I actually started to like it.

Yeah exactly, the makers don’t mean it seriously themselves.

Exactly, you should take it with a grain of salt. (Joachiem, UYM2)
However, Joachiem draws a certain line to indicate which degree of realism he does and does not appreciate. He does not like science fiction, fantasy and horror, but cannot explain why: it surprises him during the interview. Similarly, Michiel (UMM1) likes the series *The West Wing* because of its ‘realistic image of how such an American president must feel and behave’ and he equally likes 24 despite its lack of realism, but he hates the ‘incomprehensible nonsense’ of horror movies such as *Nightmare on Elm Street* and supernatural series such as *Charmed*. A hierarchical order in this respect is not easily recognisable, and realism does not play a role in people’s perception of high and low culture (table 7.1).

In non-narrative disciplines, such as the visual arts, realism is an issue too, yet in a different way. People can admire the realist style of painters such as Rembrandt and Vermeer:

I don’t know why, but I find sixteenth and seventeenth century art, particularly the portraits, just really beautiful. It’s almost photographic, is my idea, it seems like those people are looking at you, also kind of scary that they’re so true to life. But I also like that people are so recognisable and human. (Carmen, UYF6)

Turning back to the narrative cultural fields, it is important to add that people also want things to *look* real, for instance by means of special effects in films. An important aspect of this desire for plausibility is the often expressed wish for good acting and natural dialogues. Some explicitly criticise Dutch films and TV series and praise the British for their acting:

Dutch series I don’t watch. In general I find them of very bad quality. Very stiff, really clumsy dialogues. Then I think: in real life people don’t speak like that. (Monique, HYF5)

*Inspector Morse* was great too! And it was acted well! They can act, which is unbearable in the Netherlands, I just can’t bear it. I would never watch those detective series they make here in Holland, you just can’t watch it, you can’t watch it! There’s no tension, and the acting, well... In England you have real actors and they are so great! (Marianne, LOF2)

The English are very solid in that respect. (...) They’re *always* acting, that’s why they’re such good actors: because their entire life is a stage play. Those kids who are sent to boarding school at age six, then you must play a role in order to remain standing. So they’re forced to act from a young age on. (Brigitte, HMF5)

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254 On less realistic art, though, the opinions differ strongly. This will be discussed in a specific section on abstract art.
This wish for realism and for convincing acting is also a reason for many to dislike the (Dutch) theatre. In order to reach the entire audience, stage actors must speak with a loud and articulate voice, which is dismissed by some as ‘unnatural’ (Annemarie, UOF2), ‘artificial’ (Ria, HOF1; Marileen, HOF5), ‘exaggerated’ (Ria), ‘affected’ (Marileen; Kirsten, UYF5), ‘different from real life’ (Berend, LOM5) and ‘like reciting a lesson’ (Vincent, UMM5). One could wonder, though, how accurate people’s image of present-day theatre is. As an example of Dutch actors who ‘scream tender things’ and ‘overact’, Midas (LMM5) mentions Ko van Dijk* – who died in 1978. 85-year-old Marianne (LOF2) on the other hand regrets the disappearance of actors such as Ko van Dijk, because ‘nowadays they don’t learn to articulate anymore at drama school; they speak to the walls rather than to the audience’. Dutch theatre has changed, but whichever view people have of it, many dislike it for the way of acting, or for the lack of craftsmanship: the next criterion.

**On skills and virtuosity: Valuations of craftsmanship**

In order to reach a certain level of realism, particularly in acting and painting, a high degree of craftsmanship is required. Painters, sculptors, and actors are often admired more for their outstanding skills than for their imagination or their innovativeness. Other cultural professions are also judged by their craftsmanship, such as musicians, singers, dancers and comedians. Until the nineteenth century, it was the main criterion by which people judged art, as we saw in the first chapter, but it has not disappeared.\(^{255}\) However, I will show that the higher educated tend to use it in a different manner than the lower educated do.

The Dutch frequently use the adjective and adverb *knap*, which refers to the admiration of a specific craft, comparable but not equal to skilful, deft, dexterous.\(^{256}\) In this chapter, I leave this word untranslated:

One of our neighbours has an exhibition at the moment in the local library, we were invited to the opening. I find it immensely *knap* how she paints all these flowers. I look at it in a down-to-earth way: how did she do it? (...) Last Sunday I saw [Rembrandt’s] *The Night Watch* again, and it’s nice to see it again, but that’s it. I’m more interested in the technique, like the tip of the shoe and that kind of things, how he can do that. (Coen, UOM2)

I found it so *knap* acted, because, as I see it: these actors must delve really deep inside themselves to evoke certain emotions. Well, I find that very beautiful, when you see this

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\(^{255}\) A 2013 exhibition on craftsmanship in the Rotterdam Museum Boijmans van Beuningen displayed many ingeniously made works of art, stating that craftsmanship is back in fashion.

\(^{256}\) The word *knap* also has different meanings, such as smart and handsome.
process happening, that you really see it building up. At a certain point, there is indeed an explosion (...), fantastic, very nice to witness that process. That’s what I like about the theatre. (...) And also the courage, I think you need a lot of guts to display that. (Kirsten, UYF5)

Although craftsmanship retains its significance, many do not perceive it as the most important aspect of good art. Several higher educated respondents state that craftsmanship is a precondition for reaching other goals and thus for making beautiful art. Ton (HMM4) recalls a disappointing performance of one of his favourite Mahler symphonies:

Mahler is very beautiful, but certainly not simple. If you don’t choose the right tempo and the way in which you... – it consists of different pieces that succeed each other – then it becomes brassy, then it’s difficult to keep track of the theme. Let’s put it that way. They didn’t succeed in that movement; it became disjointed. One motive here, a melody there, a firm kettledrum in the middle. But in order to keep the tension, phew! (...) Mahler’s First Symphony begins with a very long, very high bowed note, which creates a tension – yes, you have to hold that. If they succeed in that, it leads to goose bumps, that’s just the way it is.

For the larger part, music is emotion. You just need tools to express that emotion, and often it’s playing an instrument. Or your voice, but it just needs a lot of work. You know, it’s a nice expression: ‘Kunst ist schön aber macht viele Arbeit’ [German for: art is beautiful but requires a lot of work]. During my first drumming lesson, I thought ‘man, what’s this?’ you know. Doing different things with four limbs. Same with the piano, violin: it’s just not that easy. And what I find poor is that nowadays everything just hangs together from a few samples, you know, it’s all ready-made and cut-and-paste and we have another hit. (Patrick, HYM3)

For many higher educated respondents, craftsmanship is a necessary though not sufficient condition for good art: they dislike certain things despite good technical skills. During the card ranking session, people often praise musicians such as André Rieu and Wibi Soerjadi, singers such as Marco Borsato, and bands such as ABBA for their craft in playing music, singing or composing, but they criticise them for not being original or authentic, which they apparently perceive as more important criteria. Similarly, realist painters are sometimes praised but not appreciated:

In Florence, I saw Michelangelo, and well, you discover why it’s so special and extraordinary, the imitation of the natural human body into perfection, knap knap knap. But someone else becomes enormously lyrical about it, whereas I’m looking at it emotionless. (Rudolf, UOM1)

Maria (HMF3) summarises this view most eloquently. Reflecting on piano players she does and does not like, she quotes her former piano teacher: ‘Virtuosity follows from and serves to the benefit of musicality.’ She continues:
Actually, it counts for all the arts: it’s not about the technique, but the technique benefits you. Without technique, you can’t do anything. Sometimes you see musicians who put technique first, then everyone shouts ‘Aah how wonderful, how knap, how knap!’ Yes, but I want to hear music!

Only some (upwardly mobile and lower educated) people associate high and low culture with craftsmanship, but they do this in conflicting ways: they either associate skills with either high or low culture. On the one hand, some say that high culture implies great skills which require long training, such as Rudolf above. \(^{257}\) On the other hand, some higher educated respondents think that bricklayers (and in one case a bank manager) only like art that is skilfully made, implicitly saying that valuing craft is an aspect of low culture. This latter idea is also recognised by some lower educated respondents who associate high culture with abstract art, that they do not see as skilful and that they therefore dislike. In the next section, on the different aspects of abstract art, we will see that many lower educated people do not like art that – in their view – does not show any craftsmanship.

### When contrasting criteria collide: An intermezzo on abstract art

It can be the idea. Sometimes it’s very naïve and easy, but then I think: yes, but you were the trendsetter! Some people say about Picasso: ‘We can do that too.’ Or about Karel Appel*: ‘My child can do that.’ Or about Matisse: ‘That’s not like reality.’ But you know… look at those colours and those things mixed up, how beautiful that is! (Monique, HYF5)

Monique disputes the claims that people who do not like abstract art make about the lack of craftsmanship and realism. Instead, she focuses on formal aspects (colours and composition) and innovativeness. She values abstract art with a more pure aesthetic: form over function, the relation to previous art. Different criteria to value cultural objects collide when respondents discuss abstract art, or ‘modern art’, as many call it. I include in this discussion non-realist but figurative art such as Picasso’s cubist paintings and conceptual art such as Damien Hirst’s installations. Many people dislike these art forms because, in their view, they lack the classic criteria discussed above: content, realism and craftsmanship. Some say that is why they do not understand it, implying high complexity. This corresponds with Halle’s findings on American dislikes for abstract art (1993: 122-8). However, Halle showed that those who do like abstract art do not apply ‘pure aesthetic’ criteria, but rather focus on the decorative function and the role of imagination (ibid.: 128-245).
My research shows that Dutch abstract art lovers do often use the pure aesthetic: they appreciate abstract art for its formal aspects and for its originality and complexity. In this section, I discuss the relations between these criteria and people’s likes and dislikes in more detail.

Although I never explicitly asked questions about specific terms such as ‘abstract’, ‘modern’ or ‘realist’ art, in the interview section on the visual arts 69 out of 90 respondents discuss this in one way or another. Among them, a clear gap appears between those who do and do not appreciate it. Of the 21 respondents who do not bring it up, seven dislike visual art in general, or are indifferent. Table 7.2 shows that those who like abstract art or who have mixed feelings have a higher educational level than the people who dislike it, though with many exceptions (cf. Bourdieu 1984; Halle 1993; Bennett et al. 2009; Berghman & Van Eijck 2009). There are no clear correlations with age and gender, in contrast to previous research (Berghman & Van Eijck 2009: 358). Note that liking abstract art does not imply that one likes all abstract artworks; there is only a gradual distinction between liking it and having mixed feelings.

Table 7.2. Opinions on abstract, non-realist, or conceptual art by educational level

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Among those who dislike abstract art, we recognise the popular aesthetic discussed above. Their main objection is the lack of content: it is just ‘a bunch of lines’, some ‘scratches’ or ‘some circles on top of each other’. One cannot see or recognise what the artefact represents: ‘I have to see what it is. As soon as it is abstract or I have to make something out of it myself, I don’t like it’ (Marieke, LMF5). Some of them presume that those who do like it do recognise some particular object (which is not true, as we will see below). They state that they do not want to feel obliged to read on a plate what the artefact represents; they give nicknames to artworks in public space (Dick (UMM2) calls two iron

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258 This table also shows a small difference in likes within the group of higher educated people, namely between HBO and university educated people. Not included in the table is another difference within this group: upwardly mobile people are less enthusiastic (fewer likes, more dislikes) about abstract art than higher educated people with higher educated parents. Hence, parental background plays a role too.
plates ‘that are supposed to represent something’: ‘the child delivery of the chief inspector’); or they start guessing what the artist’s intention might have been. This can lead to awkward situations. Sheila (HMF1) commented on a painting that her sister had bought:

I asked her really cautiously: ‘Is it an animal?’ Haha, I really saw two eyes and ears, but you have to be very careful! Then she e-mailed me back (...): ‘You might see that in it,’ haha, ‘but you should follow the artist’ (...). And then I think: let’s not talk about it anymore, I don’t want to insult her of course. And well, she probably finds the things we buy idiotic, I think they [her sister and brother-in-law] find that too figurative. But that’s fine, we just accept each other as we are.

In case an artwork does represent something, some people would prefer it to be realistic. Art should be ‘close to reality, the way it really is’, says Gabriëlle (UOF1), who dismisses both Picasso and Dalí. Trudy (LMF1) recalls a museum visit when she laughed out loud over a painting depicting a mountain with a hook for towels, called ‘Mountain with hook’. 259 She continues: ‘I could have thought it up too, I just didn’t realise that this could also be art.’

Because of the lack of content and the non-realist character, many respondents say they do not understand abstract art. ‘There is a philosophy behind really modern art that I don’t understand’, says Lydia (LOF1). Toon (HOM5) states:

When it’s not figurative, I find it difficult to determine what the artist intended. When some things are – in my view that is – put together: what do you mean? I don’t have the faintest idea. And I find, speaking about myself: such an image must appeal to me, like: it does something with you. It shouldn’t be like... if they would order me to put it in the right corner or something, or to turn it around, I wouldn’t know what to do. No. No, maybe I’m old-fashioned, but so-called conceptual art is not for me.

Some of them say they might understand it when it is explained by an expert, for instance by means of an audio tour in a museum (Alexander, HYM4). This understanding does not necessarily last long, though: Yvonne (LOF3) once understood Mondrian after she had seen a chronologically ordered exhibition (making visible the increasing degree of abstraction in his work), ‘but now it [her understanding] has completely disappeared, and now I don’t think much of it again.’

A final important objection people have against abstract art is the perceived lack of craftsmanship. Abstract paintings look much easier to produce than highly realist paintings. Respondents use several verbs for ‘making a mess’ and ‘fiddling around’ (in Dutch: kliederen, klodderen, klooien, rommelen) to describe the way such painters work.

259 I was not able to identify this painting. She might have meant Dalí’s ‘Mountain lake’, also known as ‘Beach with telephone’, which depicts a mountain, a lake, and a telephone horn on a hook.
Several respondents assume these paintings could have been made by themselves, by their grandchild, or by a baby – a well-known cliché. Gerard (LMM3) can appreciate non-realist painter Dali for his craftsmanship, but contradicts this with abstract art:

A mess, when everyone goes wild over a load of black lines on an image with coloured squares because that’s it, then I think: I could do it myself. I think, I just never did it. Maybe I should have done it. It doesn’t appeal to me. That’s art for art’s sake. I mean: there are too many artworks along the road that you think: did it fall from the air by accident or did someone put it here? It means nothing.260

Helma (UOF3) has learned to appreciate Picasso, but she restricts herself to his older work: ‘Picasso actually was quite able to paint. I’ve always only seen him as a cubist, but of course that’s nonsense, he could make wonderful things.’ In other words: most of the time he did not make wonderful things, but he was able to if he wanted. Some respondents who do like abstract or conceptual art draw a line when they presume a lack of craftsmanship, for example when Damian Hirst hires employees to execute his ideas (Ronald, UYM4). Modern art lover Carla (UOF4):

Well, modern art is very broad, yes. But I must confess: there was a trend when people made a painting with a white canvas and one paintbrush, and I don’t like that at all. Sometimes this modern stuff is rather cheap. They should really work on it, they should really do something.

Some of the objections above, which are similar to the findings of Halle (1993), are explicitly countered by the advocates of abstract art. Alfred (UOM3) for instance, who collected many large and colourful abstract paintings that visitors sometimes do not understand, disagrees with their desire for contents: ‘It does not have to mean anything, it’s about the combination of the colours and the forms. I have to explain that to them.’261 Patrick (HYM3) does not understand people’s wish for realism, because one can as easily make a photograph. Finally, Henny (UMF5) quotes others on Mondrian’s alleged lack of craftsmanship: ‘People find that very simple, like “My brother can paint that too”. Well, I don’t think so, I’m pretty sure he can’t!’ This section’s opening quote by Monique shows similar counter-arguments.

Contrary to what some opponents of abstract art presume, most proponents in my sample do not search for a meaning, nor do they try to interpret the contents or to recognise something. David Halle’s informants in the US often used their imagination and recognised landscapes in the abstract paintings they possessed, which still implies the application of ‘popular aesthetic’ (Halle 1993: 132-4), but my respondents did not. Some

260 This is very similar to one of Halle’s respondents, who said: ‘The paint fell off the truck and they cut the asphalt off and hung it on the wall.’ (Halle 1993: 125).
261 This is his reaction to my leading question about people who might find his collection too complex because they cannot recognise anything.
of them do attach an emotional value to their preference – abstract art touches them or gives them a certain peace – but other than that they apply a ‘pure aesthetic’.

The first aspect of the pure aesthetic they use is the preference of form over function. This can be recognised in the quotes by Alfred and Monique above on colours and forms. Halle also found this motive, but he downplays its degree of sophistication by simply calling it ‘decorative’: the colours and lines look good above the sofa (Halle 1993: 128-132). Although it is hard to unravel the exact meaning in people’s quotes, in my view Halle emphasises his critique on Bourdieu too much.

The second aspect is the ability and inclination to relate artworks to other artworks, such as the following two quotes:

Firstly, I find contemporary art more interesting. (…) [Artists] used to be in a guild, they painted in a certain way, they sculpted in a certain way, following certain norms (…), they had to work within a certain framework. This was broken through by someone like Picasso, or even Egon Schiele; both are rather figurative, you can still recognise what it’s about, but they’re trailblazers. (Charles, HOM3)

[on visiting an exhibition on Der Blaue Reiter:] This period really appeals to me. (…) The interesting thing about Kandinsky is to see his development. He is one of the forerunners of the real abstract stuff, a bit towards cubism. And you can see that very well, it’s a very good exhibition. (Ria, HOF1)

This aspect requires some knowledge on the position of certain artists in art history, although the accurateness can differ.

Finally, some refer to the perceived complexity of abstract art. Appreciating it is something to be learned: because children only learn to like it when they grow up (Ria, HOF1); because one has to know more about it in order to understand it (Helma, UOF3; an opinion shared by some who do not like it); or because one first has to get used to it (Marianne, LOF2; Louis, UMM4). 85-year-old Marianne (LOF2) speaks about how she ‘grew’ into the 1950s movement Cobra: ‘Initially, it was so modern, you actually didn’t like that. But those are the things that you learn to like by visiting it.’ Art journalist Louis (UMM4) feels that he is gradually moving forward through art history:

Rather modern movements like Picasso and everything associated didn’t land, but now they do. (…) I think the entire post-war art I didn’t understand twenty years ago, but now I’m a huge admirer of Rothko, for instance (…), and the minimalists I also started to appreciate partially. Actually, I really shifted, very slowly: one could say I lag behind thirty to forty years; I just reached the 1970s. (…) So it shows that it’s partly an adjustment process. I think that when you see things back in museums, in galleries, at art fairs, in magazines, that some things will remain a closed book to you, like ‘how can people classify this as art at all?’; but with other things the penny begins to drop – not that I understand it, but that I start to sense the aesthetic.
Although the interviews did not clarify perceived positions of abstract art in a cultural hierarchy – either the highest position within the visual arts because of the (once) innovative nature, or a somewhat lower position as it is less canonised than classical art – this section does show that many criteria of art appreciation (the popular versus the pure aesthetic) meet. I will now move on to these more ‘sophisticated’ criteria.

**An overarching criterion: Valuations of complexity**

Table 7.1 shows that an important criterion that people apply to explain their likes and dislikes, and one of the most frequently used factors of the high–low distinction, is complexity. Chapter 1 argued that this is both a criterion in the classic logic of understanding more formal art and in the modern logic of making effort to comprehend formal innovations.

Complexity can be expressed in multiple ways. Respondents speak about ‘complex’, ‘complicated’ and ‘difficult’ art versus ‘simple’ and ‘easy’ art. Cultural items also are distinguished by the amount of thinking it requires: ‘intelligent’, ‘intellectual’, ‘sophisticated’ or ‘challenging’ versus ‘stupid’, ‘comprehensible’, ‘accessible’ or ‘no rocket science’. Others refer to a certain depth of art: ‘deep’, ‘profound’ and ‘layered’ versus ‘thin’. The Dutch words *oppervlakkig* and *plat*, which in English would be translated as ‘shallow’ and ‘crude’ respectively, also refer to a lack of depth: they literally mean ‘on the surface’ and ‘flat’. Finally, the terms ‘refined’ and ‘subtle’ can be linked to complexity. Note that the connotations of these words vary: ‘comprehensible’ is a more positive term to refer to lack of complexity than ‘stupid’ is. Table 7.1 shows that higher educated respondents speak about complexity significantly more often than the lower educated.

On the one hand, many people prefer things to be easy. This is relatively more often the case among lower educated respondents, such as Yvonne (LOF3) on TV series *The Mentalist*:

> It doesn’t have to be complicated to me. It always has a happy ending, and for me that’s a condition to like something. (…) It’s ‘on the surface’ [*oppervlakkig*: see above], it’s very simple, but it entertains me, I like that.

Some higher educated respondents agree to this idea, yet they turn to easy entertainment more occasionally, as an easy escape, ‘to turn off your brain’ (Monique, HYF5), or ‘to be entertained, because thinking I do all day’ (Michiel, UMM1). Some of them explicitly define simplicity (or plainness, unpretentiousness) as something positive. Paul (HMM1)
even explains his appreciation of André Hazes by contrasting the ‘simplicity of his message’ (positive) to the ‘crudity’ (platheid, literally: flatness) of many other Dutch-language singers (negative).

Many higher educated respondents, however, look down on things that are ‘too simple’, and on the people who like these. Targets can be Dutch-language songs, soap series and Hollywood films, but also classical music that stays ‘on the surface’ (Maria (HMF3) on Wibi Soerjadi) or jazz that is too accessible:

Dixieland, you know, [sings:] Oh when the saints go marching in. You know, that kind of shit. In popular speech that’s called jazz, but of course it’s terrible. Yes, haha!

And can you explain what’s so terrible about it?
Well, the first word that comes to mind is a kind of plebs. Just beaten flat. There’s hardly any content. You see that often with music, that with an accessible beat it’s being negated completely. This Dixieland is like tapadee tapadee tapadee ting ting, you know, which those dentists and their wives like, you know.262 With free jazz you have to think along, and I don’t do that with Dixieland. You can keep it at a distance and you don’t have to think about it. It comes your way and you think ‘hey’, and that’s it. (Patrick, HYM3)

Patrick likes music to be complex rather than simple. This opinion is almost solely expressed by higher educated respondents. They prefer complicated plot lines or psychological depth in television series and films (Monique, HYF5), they want to discover different layers every time they listen to Bach (Liesbeth, HMF2), they want to see TV documentaries that ‘stimulate your mind, that make you think’ (Henny, UMF5), and they prefer ‘subtle’ films ‘that leaves something to the imagination’ (Ria, HOF1). Monique (HYF5) suddenly realises the connecting thread in her narrative near the end of the interview, when discussing the ‘heavy literature’ she reads: ‘It has to be difficult again, just like with music, (...) just like in films, and you have to think about it’. She continues: ‘That’s relaxation.’ Hence, Monique enjoys to exert herself in order to understand complex cultural items (cf. Schulze 1992: 145; Vermeulen & Van den Haak 2012).

Eleven respondents literally say that certain music or art must be ‘learned’ in order to be appreciated, and nine more people say something similar in different words. The higher educated and the oldest age group are overrepresented in regard to this view.263 You have to ‘practise’ (Kirsten, UYF5), ‘exert yourself’ (Marleen, HOF5; Don, UYM3), and ‘do your best’ (Liesbeth, HMF2) in order to like operas, Wagner symphonies, Bach’s St Matthew Passion or abstract art. You have to ‘force yourself’ (Annemarie, UOF2) to listen to music you do not like immediately, and when you ‘expose yourself’ to it (Louis, UMM4) ‘two or three times’ (Emiel, HOM2), or maybe even ‘six times’ (Annemarie), you

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262 In this quote, Patrick does not look down on lower educated people, but on a particular occupation, which he perhaps associates with economic rather than cultural capital (cf. chapter 6).

263 Sixteen higher educated (27% of the sixty higher educated respondents) versus five lower educated (17% of this group); twelve older people (40%), five middle-aged (17%) and four younger people (13%).
'grow into it' (Sjef, HOM4; Brigitte, HMF5; Marianne, LOF2) and it becomes ‘familiar’ to you (Hillie, HOF4). It becomes an ‘acquired taste’ (Annemarie), comparable to food (Louis) such as ‘olives and French cheese’ (Kirsten) or ‘tomatoes and bitter chocolate’ (Jan, LOM3). Karin (UMF4) expresses this logic of learning best:

At a certain point, this opera [by Janáček] touched me tremendously (...). And that was difficult music, it was not that accessible. I started with Verdi, some time ago, yes, that’s very accessible. Because you have a subscription [to the opera], you are confronted with operas that you think ‘ew’. But when you hear it again, and again, when you visit the opera for years, of course some things pass along, and then it might be possible that you are touched enormously and that it becomes accessible to you. It’s like literature of course. Sometimes you have to do your best for a minute. And then you get into it. (...) I find: art is difficult, you have to do your best to get access to it.

Karin has learned to appreciate Janáček’s operas as well as Morandi’s still lifes (see next section), but in other fields she is still learning, or expects to learn in the future. ‘Modern art’ such as installations she does not understand, but she is following a course about it: ‘I didn’t understand it at all, I disliked it, I skipped those installations. Not anymore, now I adore it. Again: exert yourself, learn!’ Earlier in the interview, she said about ‘modern music’ (i.e., 20th and 21st century classical music): ‘I still have to learn to appreciate that, this ping ping and plok, and tang tang. So er, I’m not ready for it yet.’ After probing on the word ‘yet’, she adds – again – that she still has to ‘learn to listen to it’.

Hence, Karin perceives herself to be on a path of learning. Similarly, many people implicitly position themselves at a certain point on a complexity continuum (cf. Ganzbeboom 1982): they perceive some cultural items as too complex and others as too simple, but they vary in the exact positions (cf. Vermeulen & Van den Haak 2012). Particularly experimental jazz and ‘modern music’ (‘with these difficult notes’, Marianne, LOF2) are perceived as still too complex by many higher educated respondents. Even Emiel (HOM2), one of the few frequent visitors of ‘modern music’ concerts in my sample, makes an exception: Schönberg’s twelve-tone music ‘remains difficult now and then, (...) so it doesn’t appeal to me.’ Paulan (HOF3) and Carmen (UYF6) also illustrate this intermediate position:

[Paulan on music she does not like:]
Bartók’s quartets I still find difficult. (...) This very modern music is of course interesting, but you have to study it in order to understand it. It doesn’t appeal to you at once, you have to dive into that. (...)
[on music she does not like anymore:]

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264 Some others say similar things about pop music (either about learning their children’s taste or – for younger respondents – developing their own taste), but in different words.
You might say the symphonic music that is easily accessible, Haydn. Well, I still like it, but I listen… I don’t go to the large concert halls anymore.

[Carmen likes art house films, but not everything:]
Well, when you read a description such as, I don’t know, ‘poetic adaptation of…’, then you already know that it will be dry as dust, difficult, without text, black-and-white, 3½ hours. That’s perhaps too arty. (…)
[on her friends’ film preferences and dislikes:]
They find the storyline less important, or maybe they understand the storyline of art house films less well, or they think it is too long, they just want… I just can’t stand it that blockbuster stories [which her friends like] are so predictable, that you can draw it out. When I go to a film with friends, I guess I’m very annoying, like ‘I’m sure this one will fall in love with that one’.

As in most literature on cultural hierarchy (see introduction and chapter 1), complexity is perceived by many respondents as one of the most important attributes of high culture, and simplicity or accessibility of low culture (see table 7.1). One third of my respondents mention one or more terms that refer to this concept in reply to my specific question on high and low culture. Although relatively few lower educated respondents do this (6 out of 30), the criterion is brought up both by people who personally like culture that they perceive as complex and by those who do not. An example of the latter is Don (UYM3), who defines high culture as ‘intangible’ and ‘further from me, for a select group of people’, and low culture as ‘more accessible’. Similarly, Rodney (HMM2) perceives high culture as ‘difficult to understand’, ‘a challenge’, and something ‘you have to think about’; and low culture as ‘straightforward entertainment’. However, he earns a living as a juggler at festivals and perceives his own act as ‘straightforward entertainment’. Therefore, he ‘developed an aversion against high art’, which he sometimes sees as ‘incomprehensible’ and ‘hot air’.

Although complexity plays a large role in both describing one’s taste, distinguishing from others and defining high and low culture, it is rarely mentioned explicitly during the card ranking assignment. Most people produce a rather traditional hierarchy in which most classical composers are on top, despite the potentially perceived differences in complexity between them. Louis (UMM4) is one of the few exceptions. He gives composer Vivaldi an intermediate position: ‘Vivaldi is great, but he is too accessible, so… Yes, that’s how it works! So he’s near ABBA I think, is he? Yes, in the middle category.’ Jazz and popular items might have been ranked by many with this logic in mind, but no one makes this explicit.
Chapter 7

Pure aesthetics and modern criteria for high culture

This section is about the ‘pure aesthetic’ that appeared in the course of the nineteenth century as a new, ‘modern’, logic of cultural hierarchy and that is – as we will see – mainly applied by the higher educated: form over function; originality; and authenticity. Furthermore, in line with scholars such as Lizardo (2008), I show that this logic is also applied to make distinctions within popular culture.

‘There’s a tension between the pots’: Valuations of form over function

Many film reviewers are unconcerned – I find – with the editing, mise en scène, framing, the music. They mainly look at the storyline. Whereas for many films the storyline does not have to be important. I find that they always only look at the storyline, the plot, and how it is constructed, but I don’t think that’s the most important aspect of a film. You would rather say that about a book, I think. But a film has much more aspects than a book, but they don’t look at that. So I don’t attach much value to reviews. (Joachiem, UYM2)

Joachiem is one of the few respondents who explicitly express a ‘pure aesthetic’ disposition, the idea that, according to Bourdieu, formal aspects are more important in art appreciation than functional aspects such as the contents and emotion. We saw it before with some defenders of abstract art, but this disposition is also applied in relation to figurative art (Karin (UMF4) on Morandi’s still lifes: ‘There’s a tension between the pots: if this pot were placed a little more to that side, it would be a dead picture’) or to items from popular culture:

_Ugly Betty_ is a comedy based on the fashion industry. And it’s filmed and edited in a unique way, the editing, the plot, it’s a parody on the old-fashioned soap opera. All those fades and cuts and the music… the way it is made, how it’s produced, is of extraordinary high quality (...). For example: they have a face, zoom in and then zoom out to the same face in a different setting [uses hands to explain]. (...) And all these subplots that are mixed up, it’s really well-made, rather artistic, it’s like art. The styling is what matters. And styling is art. (Rodney, HMM2)

From an explanation why he likes a certain TV series, Rodney turns to an explicit statement about the relation between form and art. Many higher educated people, however, simply ‘do’ aesthetic disposition without explanation, as they regard it as self-evident to use formal aspects to judge works of art. They appreciate paintings and photographs for the composition and (lack of) colours; they like films with beautiful and original

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265 It is striking that Joachiem looks down on professional film reviewers, despite their high degree of cultural (and symbolic) capital, and he does not speak of the possible stylistic elements in books.
photography; and they try to discover patterns and themes in music. Some respondents who do make it explicit are upwardly mobile and say to have learned it – as a part of their ‘acquired taste’:

You just said you learned how to listen. What did you mean by that exactly?
Well, like ‘Hey, hey, that comes back, or this hobo, it’s very beautiful this way’. So, like, extracting fragments from it. So that was different. I used to only listen to the piece in its entirety. And later I learned to make that distinction. And then you listen differently: whether the motive comes back. (Yme, UMF2)

[on the theatre:] By now I’m used to minimalist settings. I had to get used to it. Sometimes I take someone with me (…) to the theatre, who says ‘Oh God, it’s an ugly setting!’ . I got over it a long time ago. You grow each time you visit a play. When it’s minimalist, you can use your imagination. (Helma, UOF3)

Similar to complexity, some respondents explicitly express their enjoyment of looking at formal aspects. Paul (HMM1) explains:

I’m always looking at how they shot things [films], what kind of tricks they used, how they constructed the story (…). I analyse films rather than enjoying them.

Does that imply that you enjoy it less?
No. No, it’s just my way of enjoying.

OK, because you said ‘rather than’.
No, but I mean: normally, when I visit a ballet or an opera, I’m also looking at, not just the opera, but indeed, how it’s constructed (…), I find that interesting.

Several respondents who do not use formal aspects to judge works of art, do recognise an aesthetic disposition in people they know. Some of them wonder why these acquaintances do not enjoy art ‘more emotionally’ (Don, UYM3), whereas others tend to admire these ‘more technical’ or ‘more intellectual’ friends and relatives. Strikingly, both the people who themselves judge art on formal items and those who only recognise this in others have a high educational level. This implies that lower educated people, who speak about form much less, probably do not recognise this way of judging art.

Formal aspects do not play an important role in defining cultural hierarchy. Only the supposed ‘heaviness’ of certain classical music and ‘lightness’ of low/popular culture could be attributed to formal aspects. However, several formal aspects that I coded were excluded from this section, as they are used by many in an undistinguishable way.266

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266 In table 7.1, several formal aspects (heaviness, tempo/speed, colour, melody) are headed under the popular aesthetic. These were used by all education groups alike, contrary to the code ‘form over content’.
Chapter 7

**Seniority versus experiments: Valuations of originality**

Appreciation of form and complexity often goes hand in hand with appreciation of originality. People can easily understand what they already know, but they have more difficulty – whether valuing this positively or negatively – with something unfamiliar or new. Although the word ‘original’ as such is used by only four respondents (see table 7.1), many people like cultural items to be new, innovative, different, surprising or alternative, and they praise artists for their imagination, inventiveness and uniqueness. Apart from the term ‘alternative’, which often simply refers to a particular music genre or to art house cinema, these labels are used significantly more by higher educated respondents. However, it is not a prominent criterion in previous qualitative studies (Bennett et al. 2009; Vander Stichele 2007).267

The logic of originality comes to the fore best when looking at the opposite: many people (of all educational levels) dislike something for being cliché, predictable or always the same, or for being old-fashioned, conservative or dated. Some examples:

> I don’t really like, what’s it called, er, er, rap. I find it a bit cliché. It’s nice the first couple of times, and sometimes you hear something nice, but it’s a form in which I find that one is not much better than the other. (Charles, HOM3)

> [Often films are] a bit too predictable or something, that you don’t really feel you see something new, that by seeing the trailer you already know the entire film. (Stephan, HYM1)

> I’ve also been to all these ice landscapes [by painter Hendrick Avercamp], I believe in the Rijksmuseum*. Well, very knap [skilful], but when I’ve seen three of them, then the fourth is the same. I find they’re all the same. (Yvonne, LOF3)

Instead, many people want to experience something new. Emiel (HOM2), the contemporary classical music lover quoted before, enjoys to exert himself with music he does not know yet, comparable to many respondents in Vermeulen’s study on this specific genre (Vermeulen & Van den Haak 2012). Conversely, he dislikes Mozart because he considers his music not original anymore:

> If I would hear Mozart for the first time without ever having heard anything from that period or by him before, I would probably like it very much. But it’s just grown so ordinary in the course of time, there’s no chord in it of which you say ‘Gosh, this is something original, I wouldn’t have expected that’. You can easily whistle it, and well, that doesn’t interest me very much.

267 In a survey on classical music, Roose (2008) found that only the ‘inner circle’ of visitors likes music to be innovative.
Furthermore, people think that artists should innovate *themselves*. An often heard complaint about television series, ranging from soap operas to *Desperate Housewives*, is that it is always the same: ‘They’re recycling their storylines’ (Ronald, UYM4). Four respondents mention comedian Youp van ’t Hek* in this respect: ‘He’s been the same for years’ (Carmen, UYF6), ‘he always brings the same story’ (Alexander, HYM4) and ‘he is not innovative anymore’ (Marleen, HOF5).\textsuperscript{268}

However, it is striking that most respondents mainly appreciate things that are new to them personally rather than innovative within art history or within an oeuvre. They wish to be surprised, to see or hear something they did not experience before, to visit films that deviate from the mainstream. The avant-garde criterion of inventing art that is truly original, which is one of the most important criteria used by art professionals, is valued much less. My respondents call this art ‘experimental’, a term that is often – more than ‘innovative’ or ‘alternative’ – preceded by the adverb ‘too’. When art is ‘too experimental’ (or ‘too modern’), it means that ‘it doesn’t make sense’ (Louis, UMM4), that ‘I cannot follow it’ (Ronald, UYM4), that it is ‘too absurd’ (Inge, UYF3) or ‘too highbrow’ (Charles, HOM3). It is linked to such diverse things as conceptual art, free jazz, contemporary classical music and Asian cinema. Some stress they do appreciate experiments and innovations, as long as it does not go too far (comparable to self-positionings in a complexity continuum, described above) and it is not a goal in itself:

[on ballet:] Of course the idea reigns – and that’s on more levels within the arts, we also saw it *really* strongly in the theatre, in the opera a bit too – that if it’s not innovative, it’s not good. [She pauses.] It is fantastic when it’s innovative in a spontaneous way, but innovation for the sake of innovation, *that* is not art! (…) Of course, you shouldn’t stay forever stuck in the old either, but it should be inspiration, and not like ‘it should be innovative’. (Maria, HMF3)

[on installation art:] I *do* appreciate it when you can see in art – however experimental – the hand of a craftsman. (Ronald, UYM4; see also the section on craftsmanship)

People can even perfectly understand the position of a cultural item in art history, without appreciating it:

*Citizen Kane* [from 1941] is a very important film for film history, and I’m probably one of the few who… I found it a nice film, but by far not as spectacular as many people think it is. Maybe I should just see it once more. But when I saw it, yes, what’s it about?

**And did your opinion differ from your fellow [film] students?**

\textsuperscript{268} Carla (UOF4), however, says the opposite: ‘I find it interesting how he delivers his shows and how he constructs them, the composition of his stories, that’s what I also look at. And, well, he is imaginative and he brings many new things.’
Yeah I guess so. Because it’s a really innovative film with regard to the editing and certain angles they choose and I don’t know what, I guess the storyline too, so I should see it in its time. And I wasn’t able to at that moment. (Carmen, UYF6)

[on ballet:] What was very experimental in the 1970s I don’t like. I can situate it in the time, like: oh, they must have been shocked! Then I see it in a historical perspective. But that shouldn’t mean that I still like it. But I do understand that it led to commotion or that it broke something open, but it shouldn’t necessarily be performed again. That’s what I find. It’s my opinion. (Deirdre, HYF6)

These dislikes of experiments and innovations that go too far or that can be placed in a certain time period are expressed exclusively by respondents with a high educational level. Lower educated people probably do not like this kind of experiments either, but they do not speak about it – either because they do not know of its existence, or because they do not recognise its innovative nature.

An important question that remains is whether originality and innovativeness are perceived as aspects of high culture. On the one hand, high culture is often perceived as traditional, canonised art. The avant-garde is continuously attacking the canon, and might become canonised itself, but only at a later stage. On the other hand, one would expect the ‘pure aesthetic’ criterion of innovativeness, which is used by higher educated people and by art professionals to distinguish from the non-original and cliché, to be an important building block for cultural hierarchy. However, this criterion is often used within popular culture too. Lizardo (2008) argued, quoted in chapter 1, that the modern logic of the pure aesthetic has eventually eclipsed the old cultural hierarchy. The question is what the status of innovative art is in the present. How do my respondents deal with this puzzle?

It appears that the classic logic is most common: people see high culture as old and traditional; it is ‘developed and went through some layers’ (Liesbeth, HMF2). Sjef (HOM4) would ‘not look for it [high culture] within modern art’. An important concept in this respect is the alleged eternal value of art: high culture is made by ‘immortal figures’ such as Bach and Van Gogh (Paulan, HOF3), it is ‘shaped by history (...) and passed on to next generations’ (Hillie, HOF4), and therefore it has ‘survived the ages’ (Yvonne, LOF3). Natasha (HOF2) argues:

Classic is classic: it lives and will live on for years. What’s new, or in fashion, what people now find very good (...) will perhaps not be good anymore in ten years. The classics have been checked by the ages, by the time. That’s why it’s classic, it’s the best.

269 Van Gogh can be seen as a modern, innovative painter, but, more than a century after his death, Paulan (HOF3) perceives him as classic.
Many people also follow this logic when ranking the cards with musical items, as we saw in chapter 3: the average ranking has classical music on top. Some explain this with the enduring element of this music. Karin (UMF4) showed this in chapter 3 with her low positioning of Ramses Shaffy, who she predicts not to have ‘eternal value’. Sandra (HYF1) adds:

You know that this [classical music] has stood the test of time, and then you know that The Beatles are also doing well, and the Stones too. But here are some artists or genres that you think: yes, it can disappear. They succeed each other, and then you forget about it. But these [classical composers] stand for something, and they stay.

Strikingly, even most fans of contemporary classical music presented in Vermeulen & Van den Haak (2012), who, with their innovative yet marginal taste, explicitly distinguish themselves from the ‘regular’ classical music lovers, perceive the old canon of composers as ‘higher’ culture than their own twentieth century preferences.

Only a few respondents apply a modern logic to cultural hierarchy, by explicitly linking high culture to innovativeness and originality. They say that high culture is ‘in any case very experimental, and hence interesting for a small audience’ (Paul, HMM1), that it ‘searches for new horizons and finds new perspectives’ (Rudolf, UOM1) and that it ‘in particular avoids repetitions’ (Charles, HOM3). Juggler Rodney (HMM2), quoted before on the complexity of high culture, adds that being ‘unique, creative, pioneering’ is better than ‘people who do the same old routines as 20 or 25 years ago’.

Furthermore, several people express doubts on the logic of seniority, or combine different logics in one ranking. Inge (UYF3) thinks that Vivaldi’s music is high culture, because it is ‘more traditional, with a longer history’, but eventually she ranks him much lower because present-day intellectuals find him ‘not culturally sound’. Some others consider the innovativeness of artists as a second attribute after seniority, for instance by placing the ‘innovative’ items from jazz and pop music directly underneath the classics (e.g., Marleen, HOF5). In chapter 3, we saw that Ronald (UYM4) even positions Radiohead above Bach because of their ‘experimental and artistic character’ and their ‘pioneering’ role in ‘innovating and changing music’. Yet, besides these exceptions, among most people seniority and age outweigh originality and innovation when defining cultural hierarchy. The modern logic did not eclipse the classic one as a basis for cultural hierarchy. Closely related to originality is the concept ‘authenticity’, the subject of the next sub-section.
‘It feels plastic to me’: Valuations of authenticity

The logic of authenticity, which emerged in late eighteenth century Romanticism (see chapter 1), has various meanings. On the one hand, it refers to a certain uniqueness: the valuation of the ‘true’ emotions and intentions of the individual artist. This aspect can also come to the fore when speaking about uniquely produced works of art, as opposed to (cheap) copies. In other words, this refers to something new; something that did not exist before. On the other hand, authenticity relates to the supposed ‘origin’ of art: the traditional, ‘authentic’, way of making a certain art, preferably rooted in local communities of common people (cf. Johnston & Baumann 2007). This refers to something old, which may have existed for a long time already. This contradiction can be illustrated with the various meanings of ‘authentic music’: is an authentic musician someone who expresses his or her own personality in the interpretation of a classic work, or is he or she someone who stays as close as possible to the original intentions of the composer, played on ‘authentic’ instruments? Both meanings do share the same antagonist: homogeneity. Authentic culture is contrasted with national elite cultures and with (supra-national) mass-produced products. These various meanings can be recognised in the narratives of my respondents.

Only nine respondents, all with a high educational level (of whom only one is upwardly mobile), explicitly use the word ‘authentic’, mostly related to music. They mainly refer to the first meaning of the concept, the true intention of the artist, for example when distinguishing between Dutch language singers:

[on the difference between André Hazes, whom he had praised for the ‘simplicity in his message’, and Marco Borsato:]

Marco Borsato doesn’t have that. He doesn’t touch me at all, although maybe he is a far better singer than André Hazes has ever been, but… I have the idea, it feels plastic to me, he sings lyrics that don't show any hardship, and with an intonation that is not authentic or something. (Paul, HMM1)

You said you don’t like certain Dutch language singers, Frans Duijts* and Thomas Berge*. Why don’t you like them and why do you like other Dutch language singers?

Er, don’t know, the difference between this Frans Duijts and… Of course they call him the second André Hazes, well, there is only one André Hazes, I found him funny, nice, camp, but I also liked his music in a way. He’s not just anybody. He indeed went through so much shit, and that is more authentic, it’s authentic, it’s authenticity. And all those wannabes with their 15 minutes of fame – Andy Warhol was right: you are already a hero when you help someone cross the street. (Alexander, HYM4)

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270 Excluded are remarks on the authenticity of artworks, as opposed to reproductions.
Apparantly, authenticity is related to a closeness to real life, preferably with hardships. Artists should be faithful to themselves, rather than sing (or paint) about an emotion that they did not experience. The same logic appears among a larger group of people who use comparable terms\footnote{These do include some lower educated respondents, though they are still a minority (see table 7.1).}, such as the ‘real’ or ‘pure’ self (Marsha (HYF2) and Yme (UMF2) on Frans Bauer), the ‘unique personality’ (Ria (HOF1), who states that Norah Jones does not have this), and the perception of art as a ‘vocation’ (Midas, LMM5). The opposite of this realness is the ‘fake’ (Marit (LYF2) on the comedy film \textit{Ace Ventura}), the ‘artificial’ and ‘plastic’ (Patrick (HYM3) on ABBA), the ‘overly produced’ (Carmen (UYF6) on Justin Timberlake), or even the ‘dehumanised’ (Koos (UMM3) on Britney Spears, although he says to like her music nevertheless).\footnote{Furthermore, some respondents dislike the theatre and the opera because of its fakeness and artificiality (see the section on realism).} When artists create something only to generate an effect for the beholder rather than to follow an inner drive, it is often less appreciated (cf. Thornton 1995; Wermuth 2002; Vander Stichele 2007).

As said, this interpretation of authenticity also refers to the original nature of art, as opposed to imitations and ‘clones’. Sandra (HYF1), for example, does not understand why many people buy ‘design-like stuff’ (…) which is copied for cheap chains’. Similarly, Brigitte (HMF5) rejects the design with which her son decorated his home: ‘It’s no real design, (…) it is the umpteenth copy’s copy, and even then it’s a near miss.’ She also detests ‘entirely synthetically fabricated music’ with ‘a fake flute that is just hardly a flute’. She compares this music with a candy floss, which ‘seems quite a lot, but in essence it’s absolutely nothing’.

The second meaning of authenticity is less common among my respondents. Some people speak about artists who stay close to the roots of their art, whether it is the ‘\textit{real}, natural folk music from different countries’ (Natasha (HOF2); as opposed to ‘modern folk music’) or the original way of playing Bach and Monteverdi with ‘old instruments’ (Paulan, HOF3; Maria, HMF3). The romantic ideal of the small, the local and the traditional is expressed best by Brigitte (HMF5), who dislikes cheap Dutch versions of international successful musicals:

I’d rather see one of those family circuses in France, you know, that travels around from village to village. I can really enjoy that. You know, on a warm evening, with a dog and a horse and a camel, a lopsided camel. You can see the intention much more in that, I don’t know. Yes, with primitive means still doing everything. Yes, like that.
Although many people perceive authentic art and real artists as better than ‘fake’ and ‘artificial’ art, this criterion does not play a large role in their perception of cultural hierarchy (see table 7.1). Only one respondent explicitly links authenticity to high culture:

Culture that contains the heart of the artist, that’s high culture to me. And of course there are many artists who are commercial, and then I think it’s kind of selling your soul, that’s how it appears to me. So you have to really go for it. The most beautiful thing is – unfortunately not realistic, but I do see it in my sister – the only reason she makes art is because she finds it beautiful. [Sometimes] she gets an assignment, and she says ‘I can’t work with that, I don’t feel anything with it’, even though she can’t buy any food that month while she could get 6,000 euro for this assignment. Then I think: ‘Woman, don’t be so stupid!’ But on the other hand I deeply respect it. (…) And that’s what I call high culture, that I think: you are so true to yourself. I admire that. (Anneke, UMF1)

This quote also shows an antonym of authenticity that I did not mention yet: real art should not only stay away from the fake, the artificial and homogeneity, but also from commercial ends. When one makes art with commercial values in mind, one becomes distracted from one’s own feeling and from one’s roots. This is one of the subjects of the next section.

Social criteria

The final two criteria discussed are not linked to characteristics of the cultural objects themselves or of the producers, but more to characteristics of the consumers of these items: their number (popularity and commercial value, although the latter is also linked to the commercial aim of the producers of the objects) and their status. The latter is only discussed in relation to the definition of high and low culture.

Mainstream versus underground: Perceived relations between popularity and quality

Many people, particularly the higher educated, express negative feelings about art that is produced for commercial ends. They accuse certain artists of ‘selling’ themselves (Henricus (HOM1) on André Rieu), condemn film companies for ‘finding cheap ways to sell a movie’ (Charles, HOM3), and blame TV channels for broadcasting too many commercials breaks (Koos, UMM3; Jan, LOM3; Robert, LOM4). Others accuse certain people of buying art as an investment only. They contrast the commercial with the ‘alternative’, the ‘idealist’ (both Patrick, HYM3) and the ‘progressive’ (Hanneke, HMF4),
in other words, with the original and perhaps authentic. Some downplay their negative statements by saying that ‘commercial can also be great’ (Richard, LYM5) or that ‘André Rieu, although being very commercial, does bring certain music to the people’ (Mariëlle, LMF5). Marsha (HYF2) tells that she sometimes regrets liking a song after it has turned into a huge hit: ‘Oh God, what a commercial taste I have!’ (cf. Thornton 1995; Wermuth 2002; Vander Stichele 2007).

In these quotes, a distinction appears between commercial success as a goal and as a result. Many people reject cultural items that are made with commercial success as a goal, because of the compromises that must be made, such as simplicity (in order to attract a large audience) or low production costs (to make more profits). However, something can also unintentionally become commercially successful, which is valued in a more diverse way. A large majority of respondents speaks in terms of popularity or audience size, either negatively, positively or neutrally.273

Most of these respondents perceive a large audience or a wide popularity as something negative, comparable to commercial value. They dislike ‘music for the masses’ (Henny, UMF5), ‘where everyone goes to’ (Jan, LOM3), ‘what you find in each living room’ (Berend, LOM5) or ‘what’s a favourite among three quarters of the Dutch population’ (Remco, LYM2). Within classical music, both the words ‘popular’ and ‘well-known’ are often used as a pejorative, whether one is speaking about a ‘popularising’ musician such as André Rieu or – less often – about well-known composers such as Verdi. Something good can also become ‘too popular’. Marsha (HYF2) highly enjoyed the first theatre show of comedy duo Plien & Bianca*, but:

Afterwards they got larger and more well-known, but I find the quality of their work has decreased. Because they started to serve a larger audience, I think they became easier, and they’re less intelligent in their inventions. They’ve become strangers to themselves in my view. Or they developed into different directions, that’s possible too of course.

Hence, in Marsha’s view, because Plien & Bianca reached a larger audience (with or without explicit intention), the complexity, intelligence and authenticity of their shows decreased. Conversely, a small audience is often valued as positive. Liesbeth (HMF2), for instance, strongly looks down on ‘the majority’ and ‘the masses’, while happily belonging to ‘a strong minority’ herself.

This analysis is comparable to the distinctions from specific groups in society as discussed in chapter 6. However, in this section, I do not discuss quotes that show explicit distinction from lower-class or lower educated people, but rather distinction from the more

273 The more general terms ‘popular culture’ and ‘popular music’ are excluded from this analysis.
amorphous ‘majority’, or the ‘masses’. The reason I discuss this subject here rather than in chapter 6, is that respondents often use terms to value cultural items that draw a large number of people, rather than terms that value people. The adjective ‘popular’ (and earlier in this section ‘commercial’) is the most visible one, but there are many more. Music and films are called ‘mainstream’ (8 respondents) or, the opposite, ‘underground’ (one respondent). Films are divided between, on the one hand, ‘blockbusters’ (4) and ‘box office hits’ (5) from ‘Hollywood’ (7), and, on the other hand, ‘cult movies’ (4) or ‘art house’ films (29). Others simply speak of ‘large’ (9) and ‘small’ (3) films, referring to audience size (and perhaps budgets) rather than to the length of the film. The terms that refer to large audiences are mostly used in a negative way; references to small audiences in a positive way. An exception is ‘Top 40’ as a metaphor for mainstream music (used 20 times), which is both used in a derogatory way and by people who like it. Most of the mentioned terms (except ‘Top 40’ and ‘filmhuis’) are almost exclusively used by higher educated respondents, particularly from the youngest age group. Lower educated respondents do often watch Hollywood blockbusters, but they do not call them that way.

This logic also comes to the fore when discussing the use of cultural subsidies, about which I asked a specific interview question. The proponents of this Dutch system want the government to support cultural forms that do not attract many people:

Mass culture doesn’t have to be subsidised, but what I call important culture, that’s something that will always attract only a relatively small fraction of the population (…), who cannot pay for that as a group. Because it’s worth the effort that this culture remains. (Emiel, HOM2)

Without subsidy, it will of course be smashed by the masses. Whereas democracy entails that there’s not only a majority, but that there can also be minorities. (Paul, HMM1)

It’s very difficult to rate it at its true value. You cannot say: there are too few people so I don’t subsidise it anymore, because it is bad or something. Because these kinds of arguments aren’t valid. So you need kinds of experts, a committee of experts who know what’s good and what’s bad. (Stephan, HYM1)

274 The word ‘mass’ as such is used by 19 respondents, from all education and age groups, in a negative way (‘mass audience’, ‘mass production’, ‘mass culture’). Higher educated, young and middle-aged, and male respondents are overrepresented.

275 The English words ‘mainstream’, ‘underground’, ‘blockbuster’ and ‘cult’ are used literally. ‘Box office hit’ is my translation of ‘kaskraker’ (literally: cash cracker). Eight people literally say ‘art house’; 24 say the Dutch version ‘filmhuis’ (as three of them say both, the total is 29).

276 They more often speak – whether positively or negatively – in terms of genres, such as thrillers, comedies, horror, science fiction or war movies. The higher educated use these genre denominators too, but they complement them with derogatory terms such as ‘blockbuster’ in order to indicate what they think most people like.
Hence, they say that large audiences and quality do not necessarily go together, or even that they are negatively correlated. Therefore, ‘good’ art should be protected.

However, a strong minority of respondents (particularly upwardly mobile and lower educated people) value the popular and the commercial as more positive. Some, for instance, admire André Rieu for his ‘businesslike’ activities (Koos, UMM3): ‘People look down on him so much (…), but thousands of people enjoy it, and it’s a colourful spectacle, and I find this man smart [knap] because of that’ (Joke, LOF5). Michiel (UMM1) rejects slating reviews of films that ‘turn out to become top-notch box office hits’, suggesting that the reviewers were wrong. Alfred (UOM3) explicitly connects audience size with quality during the ranking of cards: ‘ABBA, they are good, they’re commercially successful, so they must be good.’ Conversely, small audiences count as negative: ‘Sometimes only two rows in the theatre are filled. Well, then it appears I have chosen the wrong play, and that it is best to leave’ (Sjef, HOM4). It is no surprise that these people also think differently about cultural subsidies:

There are tremendously many artists (…). If you don’t subsidise them, the good ones will rise to the surface. I think. They sell. Just like with writers: so many books appear on the market, but the top writers reach hundreds of thousands of copies. And they get a decent fee for it. (Jan, LOM3)

Maybe I would also enjoy to paint all day or to work for a month on a sculpture or something, but on the other hand I think: there is also an economic supply and demand, also in that field. (…) And some artists grow really large after a while, and then they earn a gigantic sum of money. (Elly, UYF1)

[Theatres] were obliged to also programme plays that attracted fewer people. And the consequence was that people walked away. Whereas, if they had a good play with substance, they had a full house. (Sjef, HOM4)

Hence, for these people the quality of art can be equalised with popularity and commercial success.277

The latter group does not link popularity and commercial aims to cultural hierarchy (except for some of the ‘outliers’ discussed in chapter 3, who produce an inverted hierarchy in their card ranking). Only people who connect small audiences with quality apply this logic to hierarchy. They perceive high culture as ‘what interests a select group of people’ (Don, UYM3; Nori, UYF2), ‘a small audience’ (Paul, HMM1), and which is ‘certainly not based on the market’ (Charles, HOM3). Low culture in its turn refers to ‘the popular’ (Piet, HMM3), the ‘massive’ (Joachiem, UY2) and ‘commercial stations and Top 40 music’ (Inge, UYF3). This logic leads Rodney (HMM2) even to rank the card with

277 Several others are more ambivalent about art subsidies. They call it a ‘catch 22’ situation (Rodney, HMM2) or discuss the excesses of the system without rejecting it as such.
non-existent composer Pirakovich, of whom he admits he had never heard, at the top of the hierarchy, because he is ‘less known among the public’. He consequently positions Arnold Schönberg on number two. More often, high culture is not explicitly connected to a small audience, but to an elite audience. This link to social stratification is discussed in the next section.

*High culture for elites: Valuations of social status*

This chapter showed that several criteria to judge art are also used as a distinction marker between high and low culture. However, the introduction showed that cultural hierarchy is often not explained with specific characteristics of the cultural products or with the size of the audience, but linked to social hierarchy. High culture is what high status people prefer; low culture is intended for the ‘common people’.

This logic is applied by more respondents (32) than any artistic criterion discussed earlier in this chapter, as table 7.1 shows. People of all educational levels make this connection; older respondents are underrepresented. It is also the most apparent connection, as respondents who never even heard of high culture can come up with this logic themselves: ‘I don’t know this expression, high culture, but I interpret it as elitist culture’, Paul (HMM1) says in a questioning tone. This interpretation may be partly triggered by the adjectives ‘high’ and ‘low’ and/or by the previous interview question on the tastes of three occupations. Several respondents only begin to talk about social stratification after a probing question on the importance of the high–low division in the Netherlands, sometimes because they first pretend not to know the concepts (see chapter 4). Trudy (LMF1) initially merely links high and low culture to specific domains (classical music and reading books, versus renting films), but continues after the follow-up question:

Yes, I find that a difficult question, whether that, er… I think so, I think so. Yes, I think that a bank manager will sooner get an invitation for the opening of a nice exhibition or a gallery than a bricklayer, as a matter of speaking. I think that there’s a large difference. It’s the same as, just an example: the hospital [where she works as a nurse] gives a new year’s concert every year, and only the managers get invited, the bigwigs so to speak. Whereas we would also like to attend, but apparently the tickets are only allotted to… [She continues that not *all* managers want to attend these concerts, so they sometimes pass their tickets on to others, like her]. When you eventually attend such a concert, you indeed see more professors and that kind of people, haha, so such a difference is really being made between higher and lower culture.

Trudy (LMF1) refers to different ranks within the hospital where she works. Others connect it to class, level of education or income:
That’s a classic image, high culture is what I know from my childhood: it’s opera, classical music, er, yes, it’s really what was the top for me, so to speak, those with a lot of money, a tremendously good education, academically trained, you know. (…) So that’s my old association, and yes, it’s still like that. (Vincent, UMM5)

Then you think about the highly trained and such, who can give a good judgement on something? High culture… that it’s difficult to understand? (…) And low culture is of course accessible, like Frans Bauer fans and such, I think. Yes, because you can really see it: at an antique fair or whatever you won’t see a bricklayer walking around to see if he can buy something nice. (Gabriëlle, UOF1)

Similar things are said – though less often – in relation to good and bad taste and when ranking the cards in hierarchical order. Paul (HMM1) shares his doubts on the ranking: on the one hand he associates high culture with the preferences of ‘the elite’ and low culture with ‘the masses’, but on the other hand he wants to take into account the ‘societal impact’ or the ‘surprise value’ of acts like ABBA and Tiësto. These two items therefore end up high in his ranking.

Finally, several people say that the definition of high culture is ‘created’ or even ‘forced upon us’ by certain elites (see also chapter 4), and some others that high culture is first and foremost a product of status distinction. According to Sander (HYM2), ‘there are people who clearly want to distinguish’. Sheila (HMF1) answers a question I rarely asked:

**What is, according to you, the difference that other people see between high and low, what’s the distinction exactly?**

I think that people who like what others would call inferior culture don’t have such an image about that, but rather just watch or buy what they like. And exactly the people who have an image of higher culture look down on the others. And that’s why I can’t do anything with these concepts, because I think: to everyone his own taste, and yes, I don’t see that in [terms of] higher and lower.

I think that the artists and intellectuals who are on that level make it high themselves: above the rabble and the riff-raff. They don’t have to do that. (Henny, UMF5)

Thus, this almost ‘sociological’ explanation of cultural hierarchy as a social construction is given particularly by people who do not agree with high–low distinctions and who say not to distinguish themselves.
Chapter 7

Conclusion

This chapter gave an extensive overview of the logics behind several criteria of art appreciation. Because of the pioneering and explorative nature of this study, I chose to present the criteria one by one, in order to thoroughly scrutinise the role of each single criterion in the narratives of respondents from different backgrounds. At the end of this long chapter, though, it is time to wrap up the parts in order to answer the two main questions posed at the beginning: (1) can we recognise a ‘popular’ and ‘pure aesthetic’, as described by Bourdieu, and are these logics indeed mainly applied by the lower and higher educated respectively; and (2) which criteria play the most important role in defining high and low culture? In order to answer these questions, I will also take another look at table 7.1.

The application of criteria in general

When we look at the pure aesthetics in the lower half of table 7.1, we see that many criteria are indeed applied more by the higher educated.\textsuperscript{278} These differences are significant with seven out of twelve criteria in this category (excluding the umbrella term ‘originality’), the strongest being ‘form over content’ (i.e., explicit remarks on this aesthetic disposition), depth and innovativeness.\textsuperscript{279} In the qualitative account of these criteria, we clearly saw that the higher educated of whichever age often distinguish from people who like ‘too simple’ cultural products and say to prefer culture that requires more efforts. The ‘acquired taste’ is advocated in many different ways. Furthermore, formal aspects of art are appreciated, particularly when in a new, original or innovative way. Finally, authenticity is highly valued, both in relation to the artist’s ‘real’ intentions (which may not be ‘commercial’) and – to a lesser degree – to the ‘true origin’ of the art or to the origin in a specific region. However, many higher educated people do not want things to go too far: when culture is getting ‘too complex’ or ‘too experimental’ – in their view incomprehensible – they withdraw. They implicitly locate themselves on a certain spot on a complexity continuum (cf. Ganzeboom 1982). The lower educated would probably position themselves somewhere on such a continuum too, but they do not often speak in such terms.

This account indeed leads to the expectation that the ‘popular aesthetic’ is mainly applied by lower educated people and shunned by higher educated people. This is stated

\textsuperscript{278} This section is about the application of criteria in the entire interview, whether describing likes and dislikes or replying to specific interview questions. The next section deals specifically with the latter.

\textsuperscript{279} Note that differences are always measured between three groups. Sometimes the level of significance can be higher when only two groups are compared.
by Bourdieu (1984), who explicitly links this aesthetic with ‘the taste of necessity’ of the working class. They value a cultural object for its contents (including the right morals), for the diverse emotions it invokes and for the skills of the artist, for instance his/her ability to paint highly realist portraits. However, my research, in addition to some previous studies (e.g., Roose 2008; Rössel 2011), shows that this logic is used by people of whichever educational background. The popular aesthetic criteria in the upper half of table 7.1 do not show any significant differences between education groups, and only sometimes between birth cohorts. Most of these criteria are even used slightly more by the higher educated, except for ‘personal motives’. The lower educated limit themselves more to popular criteria, whereas the higher educated apply both aesthetic logics. Hence, the latter are not only more omnivorous in what they like, as many scholars since Peterson & Simkus (1992) have shown, but also in how they like this.

This interesting finding must be specified somewhat, though, as the qualitative analysis showed that the higher educated use this popular aesthetic in a more complex or abstract way. There appears to be a hierarchy within this aesthetic, whether it is within the criterion of emotion, contents or craftsmanship. The lower educated want to laugh, cry or become scared when they see a film, whereas the higher educated more often wish to be ‘moved’ or ‘touched’ and sometimes even search for ‘new’ emotions. They look down on the ‘sentimental’: too strong, deliberately invoked emotions. Similarly, lower educated people wish cultural objects to possess content as such (as opposed to ‘empty’ art such as – in their view – abstract paintings) and to contain story lines that they can personally relate to; medium educated people prefer art that can teach them something, such as documentaries on Discovery Channel; and academics value more complex storylines that can be interpreted in different ways. Finally, craftsmanship is highly valued by lower educated people, whereas the higher educated perceive it as a necessary but not sufficient condition to make good art.

The higher educated apply both the pure aesthetic and more abstract forms of the popular aesthetic not only within the traditional domain of high culture, but also within many popular culture genres, as several other studies showed before. These conclusions give ammunition to Holt’s (1998) and Lizardo’s (2008) proposition that the ‘embodied’ taste nowadays is more important than the ‘objective’ taste, meaning that a hierarchy of artistic criteria has eclipsed the hierarchy of cultural objects. ‘It ain’t what you do, it’s the way that you do it’, as Van Eijck (2013) paraphrased Ella Fitzgerald in his inaugural lecture. The question remains whether this use of pure aesthetics across domains has broken down cultural hierarchy, or whether high culture is still mainly founded in what I, in chapter 1, called the classic logics of cultural hierarchy. This is the subject of the next section.
The perceived characteristics of high culture

The second question that this chapter wants to answer is which criteria people apply in their definitions and descriptions of high and low culture. What is the logic behind cultural hierarchy in people’s perceptions? Is it the classic logic of classical, civilised and formalised art, or is it the modern logic of formal innovation and authenticity? First, I must repeat the finding from chapter 4 that many respondents (26, to be exact) object to such ‘elitist’ and ‘derogatory’ terms, and 27 more are ambivalent about it. Furthermore, 25 people do not know the concepts, of whom 19 guessed what they might mean. However, many respondents, including those who object or speculate, try to define and interpret the concepts ‘high’ and ‘low culture’ anyway, which can hence be the object of analysis.

Table 7.1 showed that the most important logic behind cultural hierarchy, mentioned by 32 respondents, is simply the link to social hierarchy: high culture consists of the cultural objects preferred by higher classes or by higher educated people. Although this logic does not take into account the increasing number of high status cultural omnivores, which undermines the hierarchy, it is the most common, sociological, definition. It is often applied by the respondents who speculate about the meaning of the concepts, as the adjectives ‘high’ and ‘low’ as such often refer to social stratification. It is closely related to another frequently used social criterion: popularity and audience size. In this view, high culture is not only characterised by its elite audience, but more generally by its small and therefore exclusive audience, whereas the most popular is perceived as lower on the ladder (the three statistical ‘outliers’ gave a reverse logic, implying that classical music is low culture). This logic is applied most during the ranking of cards within the field of music (the right column in table 7.1), although I must note that many respondents ranked in silence and I did not always ask for people’s explanations.

The most frequently used artistic criterion, though applied less during the card ranking, is complexity, whether people personally prefer this ‘difficult’ high culture or not. Chapter 1 described complexity as the only criterion that forms a basis for both logics of cultural hierarchy, which obscures the differences between the two. Let us therefore take a look at the differences between the classic and modern criteria. Table 7.1 in itself is somewhat vague in this respect, because both positive and negative utterances are counted, and because it does not become clear how many people use several criteria simultaneously. A more thorough look at people’s individual replies to the question on high and low culture reveals that the classic criteria are more frequently used than the modern ones. About 26 people associate high culture with classical art that has survived

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280 Not included in these 25 are the nine people who only say not to know the concepts, but whose objections reveal otherwise (e.g. ‘André Hazes can be high culture too’, LMM4).
the ages, with highly moral or civilised art and/or with artists with great skills. In the card ranking, this logic also prevails (cf. Vermeulen & Van den Haak 2012). Morality is even by far the most frequently applied criterion when the distinction between good and bad taste is at stake. Only twelve respondents apply one or more of the modern criteria such as innovativeness and authenticity on their definition of high culture. Some of them explicitly state that modern or abstract art belongs to this domain more than classical art does, but there are more people who explicitly state the reverse.

Summarised, apart from the expressed objections and many people’s ignorance, people often associate high culture with complex, classical and civilised art, that draws a small elite audience; and low culture with simple or vulgar cultural objects that draw a mass audience of common people. An important reason why many object these descriptions is that both these social distinctions and these objective criteria are not that clear anymore in a time of cultural omnivores and egalitarian ideals. Therefore, the perceptions that people have of cultural hierarchy do, in their view, not (or: no longer) correspond with the perceived social hierarchy. This is partly caused by the emergence of alternative criteria of arts appreciation in the course of the nineteenth century, which many (particularly higher educated) people now apply to all cultural domains, whether categorised as high or as low. However, only a minority of respondents perceive this modern logic as a basis for cultural hierarchy in itself.

My research does not confirm Lizardo’s (2008) assumption that the emergence of cultural hierarchy in the nineteenth century eventually led to its own collapse in the twentieth century. First, as I showed in chapter 1, what emerged in the nineteenth century was not cultural hierarchy as such, but a competing, ‘modern’, logic of an already existing, ‘classic’, cultural hierarchy. Second, both logics are still competing. The modern logic nowadays shapes the taste distinctions of higher educated people, which consequently leads to a cultural hierarchy of ‘embodied tastes’, that breaches the classic domains of high and low culture. However, such a new hierarchy is only recognised by a few people (and often mixed with the classic logic), whereas more people still perceive a classic cultural hierarchy. Although many of them object to this classic hierarchy, as we saw in chapter 4, they do not realise that the result of new distinctive practices could be interpreted as the emergence of a new kind of hierarchy.

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281 There are no clear differences between education groups. Older respondents are overrepresented.
282 Among the youngest birth cohort, the classic and modern logic are balanced, but the other cohorts, as well as the three education groups, favour the classic logic.
Discussion: Possible opinions on a ‘new’ hierarchy

Many people reject the ‘classic’ cultural hierarchy, that apparently does not play an important role in society anyhow, whereas most of them do not recognise a possible new cultural hierarchy that has emerged. The question rises what they would think of such a new hierarchy, if they were aware of it. I did not ask such a question in the interviews, as I only arrived at this conclusion during the data analysis, but we could speculate about such (virtual) opinions.

For the higher educated (particularly the younger generations), I formulate two opposing expectations. On the one hand, they could embrace this new hierarchy, as it is based on their own distinctive practices. When they prefer original and authentic art and distinguish from those who like – in their view – cliché and commercial cultural objects, they most likely would like their preferences to belong to this new ‘high culture’. Furthermore, they might perceive it as less class-based and more individualist and meritocratic than the classic hierarchy. As we saw before, it is easier to distinguish from those who either individually ‘chose’ the ‘wrong’ taste or who did not receive proper education than from those who ‘cannot help’ being born in a lower class and therefore possessing bad taste. On the other hand, they might reject any hierarchical idea, whether it is based on classic criteria or on the modern criteria that they apply themselves when describing their taste. Upwardly mobile people might be more prone to share such an unconditional (or perhaps ambivalent) egalitarian view, because of their background. They are a product of meritocracy, but also see its disadvantages and limitations, namely that class background is still a more important predictor of people’s achievements (and tastes) than many higher educated people expect. Therefore, they are not eager to look down on the tastes of those from a similar background who did not achieve the same (educational) success as they did.

The lower educated would probably not recognise a new cultural hierarchy, as they are hardly aware of the artistic criteria that the higher educated apply in their distinctive practices. Both in the classic and in the modern version of cultural hierarchy they are positioned in the lower half themselves. They are the ones that are looked down on, whether it is by old elites who like ‘classic’ high culture, or by younger generations who prefer original and innovative art. Some lower educated also like items from this classic high culture, such as André Rieu, but are not aware of the low status of these items according to other (including modern) criteria. Therefore, they might understand the new hierarchy even less than they understood the classic one. A rejection of such an incomprehensible cultural hierarchy would be the most logical reaction.

Hence, although a modern cultural hierarchy has partially broken down the classic one, to the delight (if they would recognise it) of many (young) higher educated people
who perceive such a hierarchy as more in line with their own tastes and distinctive practices, the lower educated are still looked down on in this new line of thinking.