# Culture in a Liquid Modern World

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in association with the
National Audiovisual Institute

First published in 2011 by Polity Press

Polity Press
65 Bridge Street
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Polity Press
350 Main Street
Malden, MA 02148, USA



ISBN-13: 978-0-7456-5354-9 (hb)
ISBN-13: 978-0-7456-5355-6 (pb)

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Typeset in 11 on 14 pt Sabon
by Servis Filmsetting Ltd, Stockport, Cheshire
Printed and bound by MPG Books Group, UK



For further information on Polity, visit our website: www.politybooks.com

This book was commissioned by the National Audiovisual Institute for the European Culture Congress, 8–11 September 2011, Wrocław, Poland.

NATIONAL
AUDIOVISUAL
INSTITUTE

www.nina.gov.pl

EUROPEAN
CULTURE
CONGRESS

8-11.09.2011 | EUROPEJSKI
WROCŁAW / POLAND | KONGRES KULTURY

www.culturecongress.eu

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# 1

# *Some notes on the historical peregrinations of the concept of 'Culture'*

On the basis of findings made in Great Britain, Chile, Hungary, Israel and Holland, a thirteen-strong team led by the highly respected Oxford sociologist John Goldthorpe concluded that a cultural elite can no longer be readily distinguished from those lower in the cultural hierarchy by the old signs: regular attendance at the opera and concerts, an enthusiasm for everything regarded as 'high art' at any given moment, and a habit of turning up its nose at 'all that is common, like a pop song, or mainstream television'. Which is not at all to say that one does not still come across those who are regarded, not least by themselves, as the cultural elite, true art lovers, people better informed than their not quite so cultured peers as to what culture is about, what it consists of and what is deemed *Comme il faut* or *comme il ne faut pas* – what is suitable or not suitable – for a man or woman of culture. Except that, unlike those latter-day cultural elites, they are not 'connoisseurs' in

the strict sense of the word, looking down on the taste of the common man, or the tastelessness of the philistine. Rather, it is more appropriate today to describe them – using the term coined by Richard A Petersen, of Vanderbilt University – as 'omnivorous': there is room in their repertory of cultural consumption for both opera and heavy metal or punk, for 'high art' and mainstream television, for Samuel Beckett and Terry Pratchett. A bite of this, a morsel of that, this today, tomorrow something else. A mixture . . . according to Stephen Fry, authority on modish trends and shining light of the most exclusive London society (as well as star of some of the most popular TV shows). He publicly admits:

> Well, people can be dippy about all things digital and still read books, they can go to the opera and watch a cricket match and apply for Led Zeppelin tickets without splitting themselves asunder. . . You like Thai food? But what is wrong with Italian? Woah, there. . . calm down. I like both. Yes. It can be done. I can like rugby football and the musicals of Stephen Sondheim. High Victorian Gothic and the installations of Damien Hirst. Herb Alpert's Tijuana Brass and piano works of Hindemith. English hymns and Richard Dawkins. First editions of Norman Douglas and iPods, snooker, darts, and ballet. . .

Or, as Petersen put it in 2005, summing up twenty years of inquiry: 'We see a shift in elite status group politics from those highbrows who snobbishly disdain all base, vulgar, or mass popular culture. . . to those highbrows who omnivorously consume a wide range of popular as well as highbrow art forms. . .'[1] In other words no works of culture are alien to me: I don't identify with any of them a hundred per cent, totally

and absolutely, and certainly not at the price of denying myself other pleasures. I feel at home everywhere, despite the fact (or perhaps because of it) that there is no place I can call home. It isn't so much a confrontation of one (refined) taste against another (vulgar) one, but of omnivorousness against univorousness, a readiness to consume everything against finicky selectiveness. The cultural elite is alive and kicking; it is today more active and eager than ever before – but it is too preoccupied with tracking hits and other celebrated culture-related events to find time for formulating canons of faith, or converting others to them.

Apart from the principle of 'don't be fussy, don't be choosy' and 'consume more', it has nothing to say to the univorous throng at the bottom of the cultural hierarchy.

And yet, as Pierre Bourdieu maintained only a few decades ago, every artistic offering used to be addressed to a specific social class, and to that class alone – and was accepted only, or primarily by that class. The triple effect of those artistic offerings – class definition, class segregation and manifestation of class membership – was, according to Bourdieu, their essential raison d-être, the most important of their social functions, perhaps even their hidden, if not their professed aim.

According to Bourdieu, works of art intended for aesthetic consumption pointed out, signalled and protected class divisions, legibly marking and fortifying interclass boundaries. In order to unequivocally mark boundaries and to protect them effectively, all *objets d'art*, or at least a significant majority, had to be assigned to mutually exclusive sets; sets whose contents were not to be mixed, or approved of or possessed simultaneously.

What counted were not so much their contents or innate qualities as their differences, their mutual intolerance and a ban on their conciliation, erroneously presented as a manifestation of their innate, immanent resistance to morganatic relationships. There were elite tastes, 'high culture' by nature, average or 'philistine' tastes typical of the middle class, and 'vulgar' tastes, worshipped by the lower class – and it was no easier to mix them with than fire and water. It may be that nature abhors a vacuum, but culture definitely does not tolerate a mélange. In Bourdieu's *Distinction*, culture manifested itself above all as a useful appliance, consciously intended to mark out class differences and to safeguard them: as a technology invented for the creation and protection of class divisions and social hierarchies.[2]

Culture, in short, manifested itself in a form similar to that described a century earlier by Oscar Wilde: 'Those who find beautiful meanings in beautiful things are the cultivated. . . They are the elect to whom beautiful things mean only Beauty.'[3] 'The elect', chosen ones, that is to say those who sing the glory of those values they themselves uphold, at one and the same time ensuring their own victory in the song contest. Inevitably they will find beautiful meanings in beauty, since it is they who decide what beauty is; even before the search for beauty began, who was it, if not the chosen ones, who decided where to look for that beauty (at the opera, not at the music hall or on the market stall; in galleries, not on city walls or in cheap prints gracing working-class or peasant homes; in leather-bound volumes, not in newsprint or cheap penny-publications). The chosen ones are chosen not by virtue of their insight into what is beautiful, but rather by the fact that the statement 'this

is beautiful' is binding precisely because it was uttered by them and confirmed by their actions. . .

Sigmund Freud believed that aesthetic knowledge searches in vain for the essence, nature and sources of beauty, its so to speak immanent qualities – and tends to hide its ignorance in a stream of pompous and self-important, and ultimately empty pronouncements. 'Beauty has no obvious use', decrees Freud, 'nor is there any cultural necessity for it. Yet civilization could not do without it'.[4]

But, on the other hand, as Bourdieu implies, there are benefits from beauty and a need for it. Although the benefits are not 'disinterested', as Kant suggested, they are benefits nevertheless, and while the need is not necessarily cultural, it is social; and it is very likely that both the benefits from and the need for telling beauty from ugliness, or subtlety from vulgarity, will last as long as there exists a need and a desire to tell high society from low society, and the connoisseur of refined tastes from the tasteless, vulgar masses, plebs and riff-raff . . .

Upon careful consideration of these descriptions and interpretations, it becomes clear that 'culture' (a set of preferences suggested, recommended and imposed on account of their correctness, goodness or beauty) was regarded by its authors as first and foremost and in the final resort to be a 'socially conservative' force. In order to prove itself in this function, culture had to perform, with equal commitment, two apparently contradictory acts of subterfuge. It had to be as emphatic, severe and uncompromising in its endorsements as in its disapprovals, in its granting of entry tickets as its withholding of them, in its authorizing of identity papers as in its denial of citizens' rights. As well as identifying what was