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Introduction

Cultural sociology and new forms of distinction



A B S T R A C T

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In recent years growing sociological interest in new forms of cultural distinction has led some to argue that the advantages previously conveyed by the consumption of 'high' culture 'or 'omnivorousness' are being overwritten by the possession of what has been termed 'emerging cultural capital'. So far, though, this term has only been discussed in passing within empirical work and remains in need of further analytical specification. This special issue seeks to both critically interrogate and develop this concept by bringing together the work of leading cultural sociologists around four key themes: the role of age and generation in the formation of cultural capital; the power of visual display for distinction; the significance of new elite cultures; and the need for methodological pluralism to apprehend the expressions and mechanisms of distinction. This editorial introduction outlines the descriptive terrain on which the concept of emerging cultural capital has rested until now before exploring the common themes that sit across all five papers in the special issue.

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Introduction

Towards the end of his book, *Sincerity* (2013), the independent scholar and essayist R. Jay Magill, Jr. describes an advert for the Berlin-based newspaper, *Berlin Morgenpost*:

The ad shows a hipster wearing a horribly colored pleather jacket walking past an overweight working-class man watering the porch flowers outside his street-level apartment wearing the exact same jacket. A caption accompanies the photograph, reading 'Berlin is where no one really knows whether you are in or out'. This cheeky juxtaposition bespeaks a strange confluence: the proletariat – a word forbidden in America – and the bourgeois hipster are becoming increasingly indiscernible.

Three years on, it seems Magill was the foreteller of a trend – in 'Normcore' style – that has swept the global fashion world¹ (Cochrane, 2014; Farrell, 2014). Normcore describes clothes that are anonymous, cheap, utilitarian, mass-produced and unremarkable; think unbranded jeans, plain sportswear, chunky white socks. 'Normcore is a desire to be blank', argued the New York-based 'trend-forecasting' company K-HOLE, who coined the term in early 2014. 'It's about welcoming the possibility of being recognisable, of looking like other people and seeing that as an opportunity for connection, instead of as evidence that your identity has dissolved' (Duncan, 2014).

Thinking sociologically, it is tempting to see Normcore as representative of a wider democratising shift towards cultural 'omnivorousness'. This now well-worn thesis, originating in work on American music taste (Peterson & Kern, 1996) but subsequently supported by more wide-ranging studies throughout the world (Bennett et al., 2009; DiMaggio & Mukhtar, 2004; Emmison, 2003; Sintas & Alvarez, 2002; van Eijck & Knulst, 2005) argues that the contemporary privileged middle and upper classes no longer consume only legitimate culture but are better characterised as 'omnivores', happy to graze on both

¹ Normcore was the fashion world's most Googled term in 2014 (Tsjeng, 2014).

high and low culture. Attendant to this eclecticism is also, in some versions of the argument, a more general ethos of cultural 'openness' and 'tolerance' that is seen to invalidate, or at least threaten, Bourdieusian processes of cultural distinction and snobbery (Bennett et al., 2009; Erickson, 1996; Warde, 2011). In this way, Normcore appears to represent omnivorousness *par excellence*. By embracing the fashion choices of the German working classes, or America's suburbanites, are the tastemakers of the global fashion industry not providing a definitive rejection of the once-cherished logic of form over function?

Well, on closer inspection, perhaps not. One need not delve too far into the principles of Normcore to see that beneath the surface-level championing of 'connection' and 'the everyday', the movement seems a long way from embracing a true spirit of openness. Indeed, aesthetically, this is arguably form *masquerading* as function. There is a distinctly knowing and self-conscious aura surrounding Normcore, which does not sit easily with claims that the cultural omnivore is constitutive of a pluralist shift in cultural consumption (VICE, 2015). As Lizardo and Skiles (2012) have forcefully argued, such expressions of omnivorousness are actually entirely compatible with a Bourdieusian framework, and simply represent the transposability of the aesthetic disposition to cultural objects not originally produced with an aesthetic intention. So while the young, fashionable Berliner and his working-class neighbour may share the same objective 'Normcore' taste, their *modes of consumption* arguably remain separated by a powerful aesthetic boundary. To borrow a phrase from Coulangeon (2005), the hipster may be practising a distinctly 'enlightened' form of eclecticism.

We use the example of Normcore here simply to initiate the wider discussion that sits at the heart of this Special Issue. Normcore may prove a fleeting trend but nonetheless it strikes us as symptomatic of wider shifts in the expression of cultural distinction; shifts that, we believe, demand new conceptual repertoires if they are to be properly recognised and understood. The papers in this special issue explore the idea that there are new modes of distinction that, like Normcore, do not necessarily fit either the highbrow model or that of the untheorised omnivore. Instead, they reflect on, in different ways, the power and potency of new modes of cultural display which might generate distinctive stakes and oppositions which we need to understand in distinctive terms.

In assembling these contributions, we press further for the recognition of the role of the aesthetic in contemporary studies of cultural consumption (see Hanquinet & Savage, 2015). Bourdieu has been read as being sceptical about the aesthetic possibilities of popular cultural *production* and doubtful of any 'paradigm change' in relations between the sub fields of restricted and mass production. Indeed, some have accused him of espousing a peculiarly static and one-dimensional view of mass culture (Fowler, 1997; Shusterman, 2000).² Yet it is important to remember that, for Bourdieu, the pursuit of distinction was not just a matter of *what* objects are consumed, but also the way they are consumed (Coulangeon & Lemely, 2007; Holt, 1997). As he (1984: 40) famously outlined in *Distinction*:

Nothing more rigorously distinguishes the different classes than the disposition objectively demanded by the legitimate consumption of legitimate works. . . and the even rarer capacity to constitute, aesthetically, objects that are ordinary or even 'common'. . . or to apply the principles of a pure aesthetic in the most everyday choices of everyday life (emphasis added).

Bourdieu thus certainly saw the aesthetic disposition as potentially transferable to popular culture, suggesting that, for him, the core tension was not to be found so much in the opposition between highbrow and lowbrow culture *per se* but between the possession or otherwise of highbrow *aesthetics*, which constitute a very particular disposition towards the appreciation of different cultural forms (on this see Lizardo & Skiles, 2012). However, Bourdieu failed to provide much empirical evidence as to how this aesthetic was *practically* applied to popular realms³ (Prior, 2005). In recent years, though, a number of researchers have sought to explore aesthetic differentiation in previously unexplored fields – probing film, rock music, food, humour, reality television and fashion (Baumann, 2007; Entwistle & Rocamora, 2006; Johnston & Baumann, 2009; Kuipers, 2015; Regev, 1994; Skeggs, Thumim, & Helen, 2008) as well as more unlikely performances of distinction through 'bad' television watching (McCoy & Scarborough, 2014) and salsa music taste (Bachmayer, Wilterdink, & van Venrooij, 2014).

We have also extensively explored emerging conceptions of cultural distinction in our own work (Hanquinet, 2014; Prieur & Savage, 2013). Friedman (2014), for example, has demonstrated that in Britain the field of comedy has become an increasingly fertile ground for younger generations of the upper-middle class to express distinction. Here following the work of (Holt, 1998), he finds that the pursuit of distinction is less about consuming the 'right' comedians (although this is still important) and more about the currency of cultivating a 'good' sense of humour. In this distinct performance of embodied cultural capital, comedy should never be *just funny* or centre purely on the creation of laughter. Instead, for those from culturally privileged backgrounds, a good sense of humour pivots on the ability to employ rarefied readings of comedy – readings that, decisively, foreground aesthetic elements these respondents feel are missed by others. Moreover, armed with their distinctive style of appreciation, these consumers believe they can always 'get' more from almost *any* comedy, whether it be externally legitimate or not.

² Certainly, during his career he afforded 'low' culture strikingly little empirical attention and in later work even deriding it as alienating (Bourdieu, 1996). Theorists like Fowler (1997) and Shusterman (2000) have thus argued that while Bourdieu brilliantly exposes the 'veiled interests' of high-art, his hostility to popular art demonstrates he was partially 'captured' by dominant ideology himself.

³ One area of popular culture Bourdieu (1984: 26) did examine in this way, however, was cinema.

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