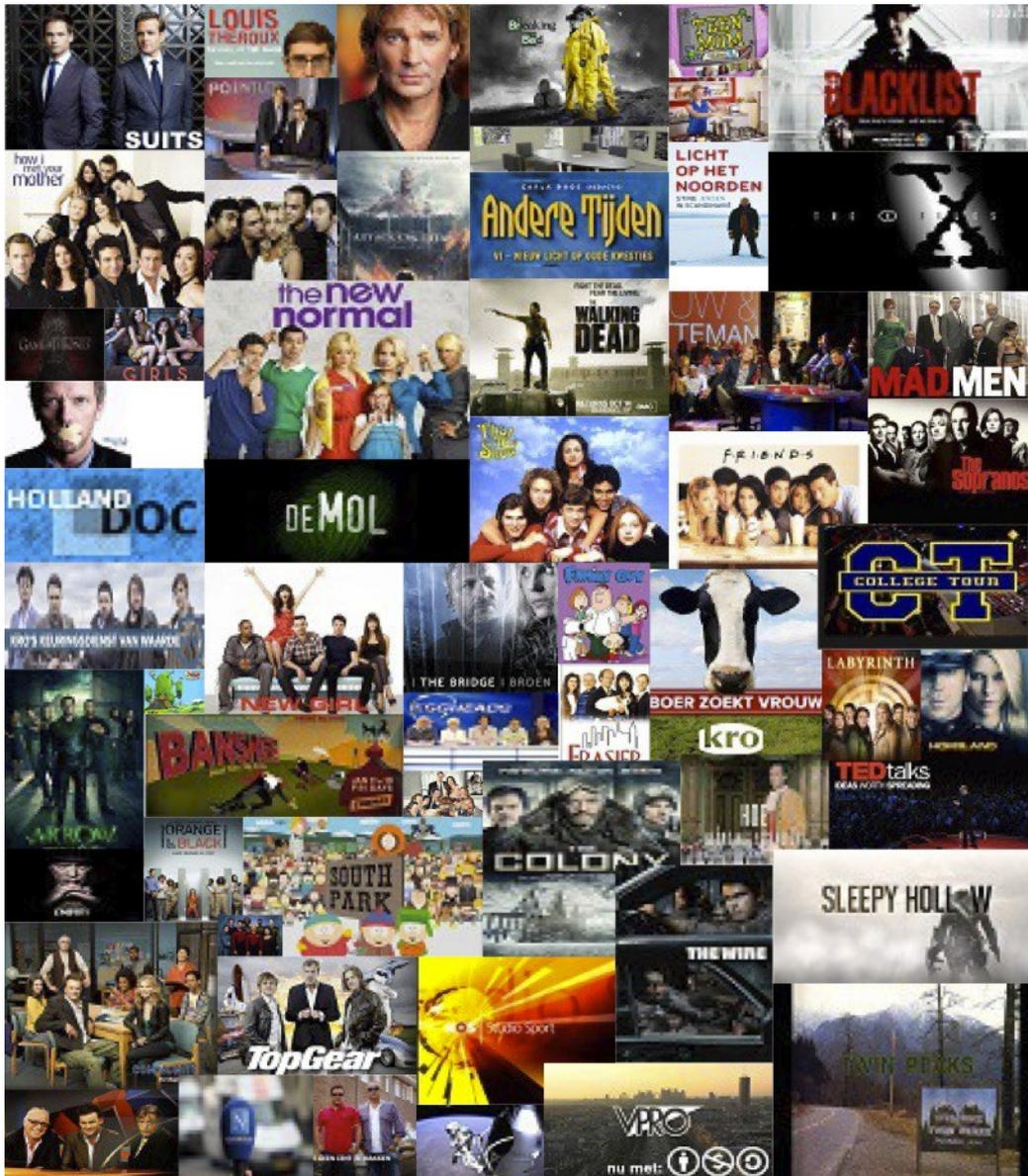


Watching Distinction.

A sociological study into omnivorism in television consumption.



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1. Introduction.

In cultural sociology there is a tradition of perceiving cultural products as either high culture or low culture. High culture is culture that is used by the higher classes (the rich or powerful) to distinguish themselves from the lower classes. Its consumption requires a habitus, or disposition, that can often only be acquired by high class individuals, for example by extensive education or by going to expensive venues. Low class cultural products are considered as mainstream and easily accessible. In the past there was little overlap between the high and low class in consumption.

Now there is a shift in cultural sociological theory that corresponds to a shift in society. A number of processes, such as the rise of a large middle class, informalisation, the breaking down of class boundaries, greater mobility and individualisation, mean that the saliency of concepts of high and low when applied to the consumption of cultural products must be re-evaluated. In doing this cultural sociologists have found that high class people no longer exclusively consume products that are traditionally considered as high class. They also consume mainstream cultural products. This phenomenon is called 'cultural omnivorism'. But this term is rather ambiguous and can be used in a number of ways. Some researchers use it to describe breadth of taste while others simply look at the number of products consumed. As Warde et al. say 'No longer is participation in and knowledge of culture the sole, nor even the predominant marker of distinction. However, beyond that important but limited degree of agreement about the contemporary cultural landscape, much else about omnivorism remains to be clarified.'. (2008: 149).

A new trend is to question whether the consumption of the higher class is really omnivorous. Some researchers believe that high class individuals look at low class products differently than low class individuals. Others think that taste in consumption is no longer linked to class, but has become completely individualistic. Another possibility is that peoples definition of what constitutes high culture and what low, has shifted considerably, and no longer corresponds to the way sociologists use the term. Yet little has been done to find out what people mean when they say something is high or low culture. And as said earlier it may even be that these concepts are no longer relevant to people's lives.

There is so much controversy it is difficult to see the wood through the trees. How do high culture consumers apply concepts of high and low culture to television

programmes they consume? Are the concepts of hc/lc salient to people's consumption? What do these concepts mean to them? Is this different from what is generally assumed in scientific literature? Is there still a hierarchical scale ranging from low to high culture that people use to evaluate products, or is a more horizontal structure emerging? Are we omnivores? What is the reason hc people give for watching high/low culture programs?

I want to look into these subjects to see if, and how, exciting theories correspond with an empirical study of consumption of high class people from my own environment. I will be looking at survey data from a survey made and conducted by me, and held in a university setting. I have included open questions in the survey so that I can do a qualitative analysis. I believe qualitative analysis will be best suited to gauging information about how people use concepts and create meaning.

I will present my findings in concert with existing theory so that I am able to show in detail where they deviate and where they conform. I will start with a discussion of distinction today, looking into saliency and meaning of concepts mentioned in my research questions. Then I will look into how people decide upon a certain category for a product, and how and why high class individuals consume low culture products. Finally I will interpret my conclusions in light of broader processes that have been identified in society, and consider possible directions for future studies.

2. Results en Conclusion.

2.1. Distinction today.

The difference between the cultural consumption of the high and low classes was first described in detail by Bourdieu in his work 'Distinction' (1990). Bourdieu described that people from different social classes rarely consume the same products. Each class has a specific consumption pattern. People invoke categories like high and low culture, or good and bad quality when describing specific products. Because the class specific consumption patterns are anchored in habitus, or disposition, it becomes hard for people to appreciate culture belonging to a different class. Bourdieu wrote this in 1990, but is it still true today? Do people still distinguish between high and low? Adorno argues that in the future only mass culture will remain because high culture will not be able to compete with the easy attractions of mass culture. He calls this cultural system the mass culture regime (Adorno in Lizardo, 2009:4). Likewise Heilbrun (in Peterson, 2005:274)

states that the welter of pop culture is so overwhelming and easy to acquire that it tends to crowd out art, meaning that 'the public's taste for pop culture is increasing at the expense of the traditional high arts.' Bennet found, however, that television (a quintessential mass culture medium) is 'not a distinction free zone but instead a fairly strong partition into genres of high, medium and low legitimacy categories [...] can be found.' (Bennet in Lizardo, 2009:5).

I asked my respondents (high class) to name the programs they were watching at the moment, and to give the label 'high culture', 'low culture' or 'neither high nor low culture'. If distinction is no longer relevant all the shows would receive the third label. This was not the case. According to self-description, 27 shows were low, 28 high and 26 neither. This means that the high/low categories still have meaning and are relevant in something as everyday as watching television. Adorno's grim mass cultural regime is not in place yet. But these results also mean that consumption patterns of the higher classes no longer consist of only high culture products, as my high class respondents watch about as many high as low culture shows. Something has changed since Bourdieu's time.

Consuming products from both classes is called omnivorism, and has received a lot of attention from sociologists. The term can be used to describe several distinct consumption patterns, and in most literature on the subject it remains unclear what kind of consumption pattern is meant exactly. Omnivorism can mean breadth of taste (Peterson, 2005: 264), but it can also mean a specific orientation that includes both high and low products (Peterson, 2005: 273). I found that my respondents choose from a wide range of programs. The total number of different shows was 64 programs, about equally divided between the three categories, watched by 14 people. Not only is this a lot, but most programs did not obviously resemble each other. They belonged to a lot of different genres as well. Though the programs were chosen from a large range this does not necessarily imply a broad taste. There was little overlap between what people watch and this is strange if they all have broad taste. Also relevant is that the same person often watched several shows that belonged to the same genre. These findings imply that omnivorism can better be described as a specific taste for several narrow market niches, as described by (Peterson, 2005: 273). I think it is likely that people feel free to choose from a broad range, and do, but that they acquire an individualistic taste pattern. Warde et al. (2008: 149) states that to be an omnivorist you must consume a large volume of products, they must be diverse, and you must have a specific orientation. You must also

be able to discriminate between all products available. Of the different meanings available, this definition of omnivorism comes closest to the consumption patterns I observed in my respondents. Warde states that 'omnivores have a disproportionate liking for legitimate culture.' (Warde et al., 2008: 156). By legitimate culture he means products that the highly educated are twice as likely to like as the not highly educated. He also identifies common items (highly educated like it 1-2 times more), and unauthorised items (which uneducated like more). Because he categorizes culture in this way, while I look at self-description for what is high/middle/low culture, comparing our results is difficult. According to self-description my respondents do not consume more high culture than middle or low culture. They are twice as likely to watch low or middle culture programs as high culture programs. But it might be that when looking at their preferences compared to those of uneducated instead of self-description, the numbers would more closely resemble those of Warde et al.. I think that a number of items his study reports as legitimate would not be classified as high by my respondents, for example Oasis, Eminem and heavy metal music. It may be the case that highly educated consume these products more often but I do not think they themselves see it as consuming high culture products. This suspected gap between preferences and categorisation would be an interesting subject to pursue in future studies.

2.2. Decisions, decisions.

How do people decide whether something is high or low culture? What criteria do they use? High culture was traditionally seen as good and low as bad quality. Is this still the case? Warde et al. (2005) suggests that 'they [his respondents]do not see the existence of any objective standards for determining whether an item is good or bad, but that some people, perhaps including themselves, have the ability to exercise good taste' (153). He has found that more experience with different kinds of cultural products causes relativistic attitudes towards objective standards. In my study I found that participants do use what they see as objective standards to determine high or low status, and that high culture still implies good quality, as low culture implies bad quality.

Low culture for example is describe as: 'volksport', 'dramatic', 'populaire cultuur', 'massaal', 'slappe/slechte humor'. Specific genres and TV stations are designated low culture like for examples musical shows, youth shows and MTV. Whereas high culture is described as: 'goed', 'op de highbrow zender', 'vooral hoogopgeleiden kijken ernaar', and 'diepgaand'. Specific genres like Scandinavian

crime, documentaries and other informative programs are seen as objective standards for high culture. I found no evidence of a relativistic attitude towards objective criteria, like Warde et al. (2005) suggested, even though my respondents certainly count as omnivores by his standards.

Standards for what is high/low, whether seen as objective or not, are certainly shared to a large extent by my respondents. They invoke the same norms when writing about why something is high/neither/low. They made distinctions on the basis of four qualities, namely: degree of depth, degree of difficulty, characteristics of the story and type of humour.

Degree of depth pertains to whether or not a program has a deeper meaning, in other words a meaning that is not directly apparent and that makes you think. Respondents described low culture as having no deeper meaning and as not being relevant to current societal problems. 'Neither high, nor low'/middle products can have depth but it is not necessary for a program to have depth to fall into this category. Some of the programs discuss social problems, take human interaction as its subject, give a good impression of atmosphere or are parodies of social phenomena, but others are described as 'weinig verheffend'. High culture products have most depth: they can have a difficult theme, are 'maatschappelijk', realistic, discuss cultural themes and problems, and look at interesting situations. This category is unambiguous. Respondents make it very clear that high culture products are considered by them as high because of these characteristics. The same goes for low culture. Respondents identify them as low because what you see is what you get. It is possible for low culture programs to engage 'deep' themes but when they do it is done 'op een behapbare manier', so the audience is not required to think through the dilemmas themselves. This brings me to the second criteria.

Degree of difficulty is about how easy/difficult a program is to watch, and how much thinking is required on the part of the audience. Products are seen as low culture when they can be understood by everyone, are easy to look at, do not require much thought or input and have an accessible story. In the fourth paragraph of this section I will discuss whether these characteristics are part of the attraction of low culture programs for highly educated people. The second category 'neither, nor' or middle can be informative, intelligent, interesting and eloquent but also 'lekker gedachteloos vermaak'. As with the former criteria there seems to be some confusion and ambiguity about what it means for a product to be 'neither, nor'. I will look at this more closely in

the third paragraph of the result section. High culture is the opposite of low culture in that it is considered educational, not easy, not for everyone, not just entertainment, informative and interesting. It does have two descriptors in common with low culture: 'kijkt makkelijk weg' and 'snel'. I think 'snel' pertains to the current fashion for television programs with a high pace. I have however trouble interpreting the label 'kijkt makkelijk weg' for high culture television.

When describing story elements, respondents used different labels for low/high culture products. According to them low programs had a good plot, good story-line, good action scenes, super hero scenes and they held the viewer in suspense. Respondents talked about story elements most often when describing 'neither, nor' programs. I will look at the 'neither, nor' category and these findings more closely in paragraph 3 of the result section. For now it is enough to know that the labels relating to story resemble labels given to low-culture products. High culture programs got labelled very differently. They have a slower pace, handle subjects and people with respect, are not flashy and are well-told and relaxed. The characters in them are deeper and more interesting than those from low-culture shows.

Lastly, shows were also classed by what kind of humor they had. If something was cheesy (slappe humor), entertaining, makes you laugh, or is funny, respondents would put it into the low category for this reason. If, on the other hand humour was 'hard', the program would be grouped with high culture. 'Neither, nor' was used as middle ground for this characteristic, in that it could not be 'plat' but it could be 'oppervlakig', and it had good jokes. These findings are in line with theories of humor developed by Giseline Kuijpers (2006). She has found that there is a class difference in humour, where the lower class enjoys jokes and geniality, while the higher class finds 'hard' humour and clever jokes funnier. Giseline Kuijpers looked at verbal interaction and cartoon humour. I have found that the class differences in humour preference she describes are used by my respondents in classifying TV-programs. I do not however have information about whether or not my respondents actually prefer and use 'hard' humour themselves, if they find it funnier than jokes and 'platte' humour. They must enjoy low class humour to a certain extent to want to watch so many low class programs, and to make references to the humour in them.

While the respondents from my case study are certainly omnivorous in their television consumption, they also make strong distinctions. Omnivorism in sociological literature is traditionally linked to inclusion, a tolerant attitude, a move away from the

snob regime, etcetera. While this tolerance can be seen in their mild language, the fact that they do not condemn low culture or its consumption, their own consumption of low culture and their extensive use of the 'neither, nor' category, there remains a whiff of snobbishness in the air. They are selectively tolerant towards the low/middle class programs they watch, they like them and see positive attributes in them, but they do not accept them as programs of good quality. Indeed they are quite vocal about the programs faults, and the ways in which they are outshone by high culture shows. Indeed the feeling I get from reading the data about low culture programs is one of 'guilty pleasure'. Respondents enjoy low culture shows, but are on some level ashamed of it. I think their degree of tolerance and distinction making can best be described as distinction at a covert level, a term invented by Warde et al. (2008). I posit that distinction is persistent in the cultural consumption of television by my respondents, because although they watch about as many high as low programs, they consider them in a very different light.

2.3. Classifying the unclassifiable.

According to DiMaggio (as quoted by Lizardo, 2009:2) boundaries between fine and popular arts have weakened. He calls this “a situation of declassification”. The large number of shows that were classified by respondents as 'neither high nor low' does indicate that there is an (incomplete) situation of declassification for television programs. Corroborating this is that a number of shows were classified as high culture that I think would be considered low culture according to more traditional standards. For example crime shows and comedies such as 'The New Normal', 'Black List', 'Game of Thrones', 'Homeland' and 'Orange is the new black'. This indicates a gentrification of popular culture as described by Peterson (2005: 273). It means that specific genres and products from popular culture are taken up by the higher classes and become legitimate cultural items because of it.

Though the 'neither, nor' category was often used as middle ground between high/low, it also has specific characteristics/labels of its own, indicating that maybe a whole new kind of cultural category has emerged in television consumption. Most striking was how often story elements came up in what respondents wrote about 'neither, nor' programs. Specifically they mentioned character characteristics (leuke personages, goed uitgewerkte personages, levensechte personages), plot development (meerdere verhaallijnen, grote verhaallijnen, verhaallijn per aflevering, onverwachte

plotwendingen) and suspense (cliffhangers, spanning, geschikt voor iedereen die van spanning houdt, willen weten hoe het afloopt). It seems to me these programs were not grouped with high culture because respondents were reluctant to identify fiction as high culture and not grouped with low culture because of the quality. More than half of the programs mentioned as high culture shows were non-fiction, like 'B&W', 'Theroux', 'Buitenhof', 'Nieuwsuur', 'DWDD' and 'Keuringsdienst van waren'. Low culture also had a lot of non-fiction, but these were mostly reality shows/soaps and sports. All this against a very small minority of non-fiction programs in 'neither, nor' culture.

Besides story development, respondents also mentioned that 'neither, nor' shows made them feel good, and made them feel empathy for the characters, or identify with the characters. This was never said about high culture shows. The labels here also differ subtly from labels given to low culture, that centre around how 'down to earth' or 'honest' a program is. Identifying and feeling empathy with characters are classic mechanics used to make fiction enjoyable.

Besides that, 'neither, nor' also stood out because it was seen as absurd. It had 'absurde humor', was 'absurditisch', 'vervreemdend', and there were 'wrange ontwikkelingen van personages'. It makes sense for these high class respondents to identify absurd things in programs. Giseline Kuijpers (2006) has shown that highly educated people prefer edgy humor, humor that breaches norms. It seems that this category of programs is absurd, and because of this is funny and thought provoking. I suspect that this is its counter-weight to discussing social problems and excesses as explicitly as high culture shows do.

An overwhelming majority of the 'neither, nor' shows that had labels that could not be placed in the high/low dichotomy or scale, originate from the United States. This is in stark contrast with the high culture shows where more than half was Dutch or European, and the low culture shows where a significant number of programs (noticeably Sports) was also Dutch. Perhaps it is more difficult to identify something as high/low when it does not come from nor portray your own society. On the other hand, we are nowadays so saturated by American culture that it is plausible we can distinguish between different types, quality and class of programs from there.

I think these findings taken together indicate the emergence of a new class of programs that can not be labelled as high/low, nor are they simply a combination of the two, nor can they be placed in the middle on a scale between high and low. This new class consists a high quality fiction from diverse genres, that take as their subject

unusual situations, people or places, and that originates from the United States. These results indicate that a form of distinction that is relevant today is discrimination between forms of mass culture, as suggested by Warde et al. (2008: 160). If more of these new classes emerge or are identified we must adapt our notion of a hierarchical cultural system to a horizontal structure, with several niches side by side that cannot easily be related to each other on the basis of quality. A new form of hierarchy might be one within cultural genres, as suggested by Warde et al. (2008).

2.4. Not what, but how (and why).

So far I have described what my respondents consume and how they classify. But Bourdieu himself always put the accent on how people consume and the differences, not on what they consume. (Peterson, 2005: 268). So what is the reason hc people give for watching and liking low culture programs? And how do high class people watch low culture shows? Is there a difference between how they watch hc shows and how they watch lc shows? I am also interested in how people make choices within low culture.

One explanation for how they watch lc shows: they might have an aesthetic disposition. A habitus that Peterson (2005: 159) describes as “the ability to constitute aesthetically objects that are ordinary or common.” If this were the case my respondents would watch low culture shows in the same way they watch high culture shows. They describe watching high culture shows as needing a lot of input, and high level of thinking, and they like these shows because they are informative, and give them new ideas. How they watch low culture shows is totally different. They like these shows because they are relaxing, require little thought, have easy humor and a 'homely' quality. What appeals to them in these shows is that they are not like high culture shows, and they show no inclination to view them in a high culture way. I think overall they do not constitute these programs aesthetically.

Another option is that they have appropriated the popular aesthetic, an aesthetic traditionally possessed by the lower classes. According to Warde et al. (2008: 163) Bourdieu contrasts the aesthetic disposition with the popular aesthetic, where an aesthetic disposition entails a distant and rather disinterested attitude, while a popular aesthetic means “interpretation of goods as valuable if they are authentic and meaningful”. The notion of authenticity was indeed brought up repeatedly by my respondents. However, earlier in his article Warde et al. identifies statements by his respondents as indicating

'persistent disquiet with aspects of popular culture' by interpreting their notions of authenticity. In other words he takes what omnivores say about *what* they find authentic as proof of their distinction making, not the fact that they see authentic as something good/valuable as proof of their popular aesthetic. I also do not think that simply the fact that my respondents talk about programs as authentic, is proof of their appropriating a popular aesthetic. Rather what they think is authentic, and how they use the term, is meaningful in this context. I am taking the view that authenticity is a social construction rather than an objective criterium, in line with Johnston and Bauman (2013).

Notions of authenticity have been found to be important in omnivores' consumption before. Johnston and Bauman (2012) have done a study into omnivorous choices regarding gourmet writing. They found that certain low culture foods such as the hamburger could be cooked, consumed and written about by high culture individuals. The hamburger, a low culture food par example, could be incorporated in the high culture repertoire of gourmet chefs and food critics. Johnston and Bauman identified several criteria, or discourses, that were invoked by participants as legitimation of their consumption choices. The first of these is valorisation of simplicity, or valuing simple products because they are supposedly unschooled and free of commercial interest. Something simple and direct is considered more 'real' and in consequence more valuable. Simplicity implies authenticity (Johnston and Bauman, 2013:181). I found traces of valorisation of the simple in my data. When writing about why they liked a particular low culture program participants used terms like: 'down to earth', 'eerlijke TV', 'ik zou het zelf kunnen zijn', 'huiselijk' en ' knullig'. Both Johnston and Bauman (2013) and Warde et al. (2008) discuss how notions of authenticity can be used to do symbolic boundary keeping. By describing a low culture product as authentic it is distinguished from the rest of low culture. It is (partly) legitimated.

Exoticism is also a factor in valorising omnivorous products (Johnston & Baumann, 2013). Exotic products are products that are unusual from the reference point of the viewer, and/or foreign to mainstream culture. Unusualness is experienced by consumers through a gap in knowledge on their part. This gap can be a gap between social classes or countries, or a gap caused by rarity. For my respondents the life-style, way of thinking, cultural traditions and many other cultural factors of the lower classes are at least in part unknown to them. This made me suspect that part of the enjoyment and valorisation of low culture for/by them would centre around their unusualness. Surprisingly, they only talked about enjoyment of exotic elements when writing about

'neither, nor' and high culture shows. Indeed they sometimes used the fact that a program presented something unusual as evidence of its high culture status. Examples of exoticisms in their utterances concerning high cultural programs are: 'beide kanten van de onderwereld', 'high culture bedrijfscultuur als onderwerp', 'gevangenis cultuur', 'nieuwe terreinen', 'tijdbeeld' and 'vervreemdend'. They mentioned these when talking about what they enjoyed about high class programs. Exoticism is indeed valorised, as Johnston and Bauman (2012) found, but against my expectations it is not a factor in the consumption of low culture products. At least not according to the self-description from my study. It may be that unusualness is now so important to omnivorous, and/or high class consumption that it is used as a criteria for legitimating shows and incorporating them in the category of high culture products. This accords with my findings, but needs to be researched more extensively to become a strong hypothesis. Another possibility is that the highly educated simply do not find low culture as unusual or foreign as I suspected.

The second dimension of exoticism is foreignness to mainstream culture. Johnston and Bauman (2013: 192-193) found that high class consumers think food that breaks norms is exciting. Gourmet food writing focuses on “exciting, outrageous, inappropriate, daring and generally not accepted” food. Combining low class and high class food, or presenting low class food in a high class way, is breaking the norms of the higher class community, and this is found to be exciting when done in the right way. As Johnston and Bauman write: “When food flagrantly violates social or culinary conventions, it creates a bold spectacle of desirably daring exoticism that confers distinction”. They state that norm breaking has been an aspect of high culture food for a long time. But formerly the norms that were being broken were those of the middle and lower classes. These classes would not consider eating frog legs, for example. What is new is the inclusion of low class foods in high culture as tools for breaking current high class and middle class norms for what is considered good food. If norm breaking in television works the same as in gourmet food writing, it would make sense for high culture shows to break societal norms, and/or norms held by low and middle culture. A new trend would also be high culture shows incorporating elements of low culture shows to shock or break high/middle class norms. It would not make sense for low culture shows themselves to break norms. Taking all this in consideration, I expected to find that my respondents would describe high class shows as norm breaking. They did. They enjoyed it when norms were breached by depicting parts of society that are

considered illegitimate, when 'nieuwe terreinen worden verkend' such as prison culture, criminal culture and both sides of drug culture (police and criminals). They also liked breaching of norms in everyday situations. One respondent described liking 'House' because 'House is keihard en dat zorgt voor interessante gebeurtenissen en verhaallijnen'. Another liked 'Mad Men' because 'In het laatste seizoen gebeuren de meest gekke dingen'. Another said 'Is erg grappig maar behandeld onderwerpen die veel problemen raken'.

As described before neither, nor culture was also labelled as absurd, 'vervreemdend', 'absurdistisch' and as having 'absurde humor'. Another theme was that the programs showed societal problems and combined them with humour (whether hard, or not). What was also appreciated was the killing of of main characters in the show 'Game of Thrones'. This killing of is rarely seen in serialised television. All this is consistent with what I expected to find by considering Johnston and Bauman (2013): the appreciation of the breaching of norms in high culture television. It is also in line with Giseline Kuijpers (2006) theory that highly educated Dutch people find norm breaking funny instead of offensive, and that they like intellectual thought exercises and humour.

To answer the question why highly educated watch low culture shows I think it is important to take the idea of 'comfort' into account. Johnston and Bauman mention the concept of 'comfort food' briefly (2013: 167). They state that "high end cuisine has witnessed the appropriation of comfort food of the North American working class". I think the use of low culture and middle culture television shows for comfort merits further study. In a study into consumption of fantasy literature by young women I found that these type of books make women feel good because they know the stories will end well, problems can be solved with magic, the writing is easy and engaging, and a number of other factors. Young women use fantasy books to escape everyday life and its serious aspects. Readers know what to expect and rely on there not being any unpleasant surprises. I was reminded of this use of 'comfort books/films' when reading the comments about low culture and neither, nor culture from my current study. Like a lot of fantasy books, low culture TV rarely asks a lot of its consumer. As mentioned by my respondents, you do not need to experience complex emotions, or expend energy or thought to be able to enjoy low culture programs. When they talked about why they liked to watch specific low culture shows, the common denominator was that watching it was easy. I think highly educated people use low culture shows as comfort television, and that this is an important reason they appropriate low culture shows.

3. Discussion.

I have discussed how concepts of high and low culture are used by highly educated people, what meanings these categories have for them and why people consume omnivorously. I will now integrate my findings into broader social processes. Almost all of my respondents can be classified as omnivorous. They talk about both the value of high and low taste. This open attitude towards differences and the reluctance to be very negative about culture from another class fits with the current social climate. Peterson and Warde et al. both discuss the social value of omnivorous taste. Informalisation processes have weakened class distinctions, and borders between the different classes, and consequently their cultural products, have become porous. Informalisation also meant that the higher classes had to get to know lower class culture to be able to interact with them in the workplace and the public realm. Because of increased social mobility lower class individuals can now become highly educated, taking their cultural products with them. The percentage of highly educated has been rising steadily the last few decades. All this means that snobbishness is now seen as a negative trade, nor is it acceptable to unambiguously classify all low culture as bad. It can on the other hand be advantageous in everyday interaction to know a lot about both high and low cultural products. This means that being an omnivore has social value. Though my respondents were open, they still made clear distinctions between high and low culture. The categories were relevant to them and influenced the way they consumed programs. Low culture was used to relax, high culture to provoke thought and interest. They also defended certain aspects of low culture but not others. Indeed what they saw as the bad quality of most low culture shows was part of the attraction, making it easy and funny. Clearly class boundaries in cultural consumption are still relevant today.

Another trend that I think has influenced omnivorous taste is individualism and modernity. Expressing your individuality and originality have become dominant ideals in today's society. People feel that they should develop an individualistic taste that is not dominated by class, age, sex, occupation, etcetera. According to Giddens we are now all working on our project of self, which means finding out who we 'really' are and what we really like. Following these ideals, people are now more open to experimenting in their consumption. They might see their television consumption as a way to distinguish themselves by having an eclectic but personal taste or with having specific expertise about (a certain type of) shows. This is certainly in line with what I found among my

respondents. The little overlap shows that people match what they watch to their personal and individual taste, and not (or less) to group preferences.

That this personal taste includes as much high culture as low culture interests me a lot. I myself actually prefer watching low culture and 'neither, nor' culture to watching high culture shows. I find my head cannot cope with both studying during the day and watching intellectually engaging television in the evenings. I suspect this is true for most highly educated people. My respondents liked low culture shows because they were easy and accessible, and needed little input. I think high pressure on academics and other highly educated people to perform intellectually in the workplace is an important cause of their high consumption of low culture shows. They need a break, a way to shut down their minds and give them time to recuperate. This need to do unchallenging things might also be found in other leisure activities. For instance, I found traces of it in the consumption of fantasy literature, and it could also be the reason behind recent popularity of mobile phone games like Candy Crush and Angry Birds, or puzzles like Sudoku. Many people also find Facebook and YouTube and Instagram relaxing because it is easy, short, needs no input and is distracting. The popularity of leisure activities that need no input is an interesting subject for a follow-up study.

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