

Painting Social Inequality:  
Social Class, Gender, and the Creation of Cultural Capital in the Visual Arts

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*This paper examines the relationships between the visual arts (film, painting, photography, and sculpture), social class and gender as they pertain to the attainment of cultural capital as defined by Pierre Bourdieu (1993). In a review of current sociological literature from the last five years, inequalities of access to and possession of cultural capital are noted. Since much of the research is of the Bourdieuan approach, most research analyzes the relationship between the visual arts and social class, more so than other demographic variables. Secondary to social class, gender differences are also assessed. In its conclusion, this paper argues for a thorough investigation of the relationship between the visual arts and race, claiming that many studies in this area are limited and biased.*

There is something innate about the presence of art within society. From the prehistoric paintings on the cave walls of Lascaux in southwest France to Plato's thoughts on art's ability to enlighten the mind (Harrington, 2004), art has consistently driven and inspired society. Throughout time, art has brought people and societies together, offering a sense of solidarity (Becker, 1982; Bourdieu, 1993). Whether to record the daily rituals of Paleolithic life or to further one's knowledge in a field, people have used art to improve, organize, and promote their societies. Members of society still benefit from awareness of and participation in the arts. Moreover, contemporary research has supported this influence of art on society, giving special attention to cultural production and *cultural capital* (knowledge which provides a higher social status).

Like economic capital, the possession or lack of cultural capital has a profound effect on individuals and societies. As Alexander (2003) defined the term, cultural capital is "a currency based on taste" (p.329). It can distinguish bourgeois elites from proletariats (Dumais, 2002; Nichols, 2003; DiMaggio & Mukhtar, 2004; Kaufman & Gabler, 2004; Peterson & Anand, 2004; Prior, 2005; Veenstra, 2005) and male from female gender roles (Dumais, 2002; Kaufman & Gabler, 2004; Upright, 2004; Lizardo, 2006), creating social boundaries which promote or limit access to social mobility.

Groups become separated according to their artistic knowledge and tastes. Highbrow tastes are legitimized tastes typically associated with members of dominant groups and higher social status. Conversely, lowbrow tastes, or mass and/or popular art tastes, are used collectively by the lower classes. Lowbrow tastes are viewed by members of the upper class as not legitimized or justifiable (Baumann, 2007). This hierarchy results in a constant struggle for cultural resources that provide symbolic power.

The influence of cultural capital within societies has grown so powerful that it merits sociological analysis. The following is a five year literature review that extends further back to identify classic studies, as is the case with the inclusion of Howard Becker (1982) and Pierre Bourdieu (1993). Further, it is important to note that the sociological approach to cultural

production and capital has been shaped by the classical works of Emile Durkheim, Karl Marx, Max Weber and George Simmel (Alexander, 2003; Tanner, 2003; Harrington, 2004).

Perhaps the most notable contribution to the study of cultural production has come from French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu. His coining and articulation of the term *cultural capital* in the 1970s provides a pivotal point in the development of this area of research as well a framework for more current studies. His work is critiqued for placing gender secondary to social class (Veenstra, 2005), for not attending to life course shifts in cultural capital (Upright, 2004), and for being dated and no longer applicable to the unpredictability of society (Harrington, 2004; Prior, 2005). Aside from such critiques, one must admit that his research is paramount to understanding cultural consumption as well as production.

### Method

The analysis of social inequalities in the arts that follows limits itself to the visual arts, comprised of film, painting, photography, and sculpture. While many studies have observed the arts extensively to include theatre, literature, and music (Becker, 1982; Bourdieu, 1993; DiMaggio & Mukhtar, 2004), the page-length and time limitations imposed for this literature review have narrowed the scope of the analysis. The following is the result of one year of exploratory research, in which the *sociology of the arts* was broadly investigated and later refined. It can be confirmed that nearly 300 journal articles, aside from those finally selected, were considered throughout this process. These articles were not selected due to topic irrelevance, non-sociological affiliation, and dated approaches that would not serve the purposes of this current assessment. Overwhelmingly, the most critical articles were obtained utilizing the *Sociological Abstracts* database and *Science Direct Journals*. The most successful search terms included *art, society, culture, gender, and social class*.

#### *Visual Arts and Social Class*

Unequal accesses to education and wealth have long been sources of social inequality. The struggle of the lower classes to obtain the economic and cultural capital of the higher classes is an ultimate struggle for power which is made more difficult by definitive class boundaries. In the case of the visual arts, there is a struggle between the heteronymous (dominant class; those in favor of bourgeois art) and the autonomous (dominated, subordinate class; those in favor of industrial or mass art) principles and power (Bourdieu, 1993). Dominant groups distribute cultural products, which are of interest to them, to subordinate groups who fail to question their authority. Such social control is known as “*hegemony*” (Alexander, 2003, p.44). While the attainment of cultural capital relies more heavily on education, income, and participation to obtain both economic and social capital, social inequalities become more prevalent.

Such struggles have been eased by more modern theories that bring the heteronymous and autonomous together. In recent years, researchers have noted the emergence of the “*cultural omnivore*”, one who obtains cultural capital through a consumption of both high and popular art forms (Alexander, 2003, p.232; Peterson & Anand, 2004, p.324). Since these participants are able to understand and appreciate both art forms, they are said to hold an even greater wealth of cultural capital. Moreover, cultural omnivores are able to use their broad scope of knowledge in a variety of social situations (Veenstra, 2005).

Still, it is important to note that definitive class boundaries exist in the visual arts, even with the emergence of cultural omnivorism. The visual arts are not only an economic business, but a cultural business which depends on the presence of art dealers and cultural distributors (Becker, 1982; Alexander, 2003), “as well as an organized system which creates the cultural symbols that are sold to consumers” (Peterson & Anand, 2004, p. 324). The demand for cultural

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capital, like any other commodity, stems from a belief that it will better the consumer in some way. Social class hierarchy is built upon such cultural capital. From an early age, the possession of cultural capital lends itself to increased social mobility (Dumais, 2002). “Throughout the life course, those who acquire greater economic, cultural, and social capital, surpass those who lack these attributes” (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 68).

For children, the attainment of cultural capital is heavily dependent upon one’s family and social class position (Dumais, 2002). The possession of cultural capital has been thought to benefit the youngest of cultural consumers, especially those of higher social classes. Dumais (2006) examined data from the 1998-1999 Early Childhood Longitudinal Study. The data, limited to public school students, is based on the responses of kindergarten and first grade parents and students. The data suggested that as socioeconomic status increases, the likelihood of arts participation for kindergarten students increases (Dumais, 2006).

Increased participation in the arts may benefit children’s academic performance. Children of higher social status acquire a cultural knowledge from their parents that seems to be advantageous within educational settings, increasing the children’s confidence in their academic success (Dumais, 2006). Such participation can instill a value and appreciation for the arts that influences arts participation later in life (Upright, 2004; Dumais, 2002).

While arts participation can be correlated with increased academic confidence and success, there is limited data to support that youths’ arts participation through extracurricular activities increases the likelihood of attending college (Kaufman & Gabler, 2004). However, arts participation may influence future matriculation of elite institutions. Although limited to a subsample of white non-Hispanics, Kaufman and Gabler’s (2004) study presented interesting findings. Museum attendance by both parents and children was a strong predictor of future elite college attendance. Interestingly, museum attendance by the parents alone was an even stronger predictor of future matriculation. This may be due to increased encouragement by the parents to apply to elite institutions, as well as a more constant engagement with the arts (Kaufman & Gabler 2004).

As children grow into adulthood, higher levels of education and income influence increased arts events attendance. Those with college or graduate school training have the highest rates of arts participation (Nichols, 2003). For those whose highest level of education is high school, arts attendance rates decline substantially (DiMaggio & Mukhta, 2004). Higher levels of income, frequently associated with advanced education, have been correlated with increased arts attendance, specifically in the case of art museum attendance. In an analysis of the 2002 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts, Nichols (2003) reported that 26.5% of all adults surveyed reported visiting an art museum in the last year; for those with annual incomes of \$75,000 or more, the attendance rate climbed to 44.6%. As higher levels of education and income influence increased arts participation and thereby increased cultural capital, definitive class boundaries continue to exist between social classes within the visual arts. However, the continued emergence of the cultural omnivore may have the potential to dissolve such boundaries.

### *Visual Arts and Gender*

Especially within the United States, gender is a vital demographic in the explanation of social inequality within the visual arts. Up until the 1970s, female artists were scarcely featured in art history textbooks. Their artistic abilities were historically undermined by the men who overshadowed them. For many female artists prior to the late nineteenth century, their talents and interests in the arts were minimized to the level of “hobby” (Alexander, 2003). As Harrington (2004) explained, “Women artists have been described as being only ‘in the school of’, ‘in the style of’ or ‘under the influence of’ some apparently more important male artist” (p.47).

However, women's historically-restricted participation in the visual arts is far removed from their attendance and participation in recent years. Research is conclusive that females' attendance at arts events is greater than that of their male counterparts. Further, females are more likely to be consumers of highbrow art and beholders of highbrow tastes (DiMaggio & Mukhtar, 2004).

Women's consumption of highbrow culture is often tied to the gendered roles women hold in the domestic sphere. As daughters, young females are often encouraged more to participate in arts-related extracurricular activities (Dumais, 2002). As mothers, they are expected to instill similar cultural values within their children. Parents who understand the value of cultural capital are more likely to impose artistic appreciation and knowledge on their children.

While cultural capital has been shown to influence educational expectations and outcomes, it seems to play a more limited role for males than for females. Using dated data from a 1988 National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS), Dumais (2002) posited that high socioeconomic status, for both males and females, was correlated with increased art museum attendance. However, the benefits of such cultural capital were more prevalent for females. For females, with increased cultural capital comes increased assertiveness in the classroom (Dumais, 2002). Young females may then associate cultural capital with upward social mobility; carrying it with them through their lives and instilling the same values in their children.

For the art genres assessed in the 2002 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts (SPPA), Nichols (2003) reported that female survey respondents displayed greater attendance rates than male respondents in all genres, with the exception of jazz. Even at the high-school level, females are more likely than their male peers to participate in extracurricular activities which allot them cultural capital and better their college experience. As these educated women enter the workforce, a defeminization of arts participation is anticipated but not substantiated (DiMaggio & Mukhtar, 2004). Rather, women continue to be active and vital consumers of cultural capital.

In a study utilizing data from the arts participation module of the 1998 and 2002 U.S. General Social Surveys (GSS), Lizardo (2006) argued that a gender gap in highbrow culture consumption emerges when individuals are active in the labor force. Lizardo measured the comparative highbrow culture consumption of males and females who were both active and inactive in the labor force. The results demonstrated a strong and statistically significant gender gap; women who were active in the labor force were 60% more likely than men to have consumed at least two highbrow culture genres in the last year (Lizardo, 2006). The strength of this study over others is its use of the GSS to assess the frequency of attendance.

Interestingly, prior to being active in the workforce, male college students consume more highbrow genres than female students (Lizardo, 2006). After college, this trend shifts back to women being more active in highbrow arts consumption. This may be attributed to gender inequalities within the workplace, where females must utilize more resources, such as cultural capital, to get ahead. Outside the workplace, married males' attendance, more so than their female counterparts, was strongly influenced by spousal characteristics. Data from the 1992 SPPA demonstrated that men were likelier to attend arts events if their wives did so and women were likelier to attend without their husbands (Upright, 2004). Again, the data supports women as the main consumers of the visual arts, particularly the highbrow arts.

### **Conclusion**

While the possession of social capital aids upward social mobility, especially for females, it supports definitive social boundaries which can lead to social class and gender inequalities. For those with higher social class, cultural capital offers a symbolic power through which the

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dominant class can control the subordinate class. Take for example, art museums which act as “shrines to high culture” (Prior, 2005 p.127), supporting the domination of the lower classes by the higher classes who display themselves as leaders of the so-called legitimized art world. For young females, cultural capital can lead to increased confidence in academic performance. In later years, it can become a factor that leads them to instill similar values in their children, allowing cultural capital to permeate through their families.

Much of the research on social inequality within the visual arts tends to focus on individuals of higher social status and females. There are many existing gaps in the research that need to be filled. First, taking into consideration the demonstrated benefits of cultural capital on higher social class children, what can be said for lower class children? Is a lack of cultural capital detrimental to their social development and the possibility of upward social mobility? Studies focusing on lower class children would supplement the current research and create a better understanding of the effects of cultural capital.

Second, little empirical research has been done to find what art audiences think and feel about art works. It would be very valuable and interesting to learn what attracts people to certain highbrow and/or lowbrow art forms. Third, data measuring the frequency of arts participation is limited to those studies which utilize the GSS (Lizardo, 2006) and the NELS (Dumais, 2002). Other commonly used surveys, such as the SPPA, do not measure such frequencies.

Finally, the literature that focuses on the relationship between the visual arts and race is sparse and often biased. Some studies discount the importance of race as a demographic and utilize entirely white samples (Dumais, 2002; Kaufman & Gabler, 2002). Within the scope of this paper, a relatively small account of the relationship between visual arts and race can be supported by evidence. The greatest wealth of research in regards to art and race seem to direct attention to music and race.

In her analysis of the 2002 SPPA, Nichols (2003) noted that non-Hispanic whites displayed the highest participation rates yet also accounted for nearly 80% of the population surveyed. Moreover, non-Hispanic African-Americans held just 11.5% of the population and Hispanics were underrepresented overall. She argued that race alone was not as successful as other variables in predicting arts attendance. To contend, for the purposes of developing a fuller understanding of social inequalities within the visual arts, utilizing race as a demographic variable is essential for the advancement of this area of research.

Nonetheless, the limited presence of race within current sociological research does not void noted social class and gender inequalities. The inequalities that have been widely noted within the visual arts continue to impact society. The access to and possession of cultural capital gives certain individuals symbolic power over others. Those who do not possess cultural capital become a subordinate class, blocked from accessing cultural capital by definitive social class and gender boundaries.

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