

Betwixt and Between: Musical Taste Patterns and Audience Mobility

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Abstract

The inadequacy of the traditional highbrow-popular dichotomy as it has been applied to audiences is well emphasised by the subsidiary category of middlebrow. It provides a straightforward description for a zone between elite culture and entertainment that is in truth vastly more complex. In this article, three empirical research projects with connections to music are examined. Each classifies consumer taste patterns by utilising categories (such as middlebrow) and genres (such as classical) which are at best highly ambiguous. By way of a re-examination of the reception theories of Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser, I argue for a renewed emphasis upon the potential for diversity and mobility amongst audiences. It is recommended that future research should focus more upon the full range of an individual's tastes, and upon the various ways that audience members are able to operate in contradiction to the dominant cultural paradigm.

Key Words: Audience activity, cultural hierarchy, reception studies, reader-response theory, contemporary music, genres, empirical research.

Introduction: Middlebrow or Muddlebrow?

When, in the period leading up to World War II, the term 'middlebrow' was becoming prevalent in British cultural debate, Virginia Woolf penned a letter to *The New Statesman* that left little doubt as to her position on the subject:

But what, you may ask, is a middlebrow? And that, to tell the truth, is no easy question to answer. They are neither one thing nor the other. They are not highbrows, whose brows are high; nor lowbrows, whose brows are low. Their brows are betwixt and between ... the middlebrow is the man, or woman, of middlebred intelligence who ambles and saunters now on this side of the hedge, now on that, in pursuit of no single object, neither art itself nor life itself, but both mixed indistinguishably, and rather

nastily, with money, fame, power, or prestige ... I myself have known duchesses who were highbrows, also charwomen, and they have both told me with that vigour of language which so often united the aristocracy with the working classes, that they would rather sit in the coal cellar, together, than in the drawing room with middlebrows and pour out tea.¹ (1943, p. 115)

It is coincidental that in March of 1941, as Woolf struggled through the final days of a malaise that was to culminate in her drowning herself in the River Ouse in East Sussex, a lively polemic on the pros and cons of middlebrow culture was being played out in the pages of *The Times* of London. The debate – conducted, as *The Times* itself confirms, amidst frequent air raid sirens and mounting fear that a poison gas attack was imminent – commenced on the 25th of that month with an anonymous article titled ‘Eclipse of the Highbrow’. Having identified a ‘pedantic and deliberate obscurity’ quarantining the high art of the twenties and thirties from the ordinary citizen, the article concludes:

What changes of taste this war, and the reactions following it, may produce no one can foresee. But at least it can hardly give rise to arts unintelligible outside a Bloomsbury drawing-room, and completely at variance with those stoic virtues which the nation is now called upon to practise. (1941, p. 5)

Two days later, Kenneth Clark, then director of the National Gallery in London, replied (via a letter to the editor)² on behalf of a highbrow population outraged at the implication that the esoteric art, music and literature of high modernism flourished only by virtue of the void left by those ordinary souls dying on the battlefields of Continental Europe. The battle lines having been drawn – between the outnumbered yet omnipotent artistic geniuses on the one side and the massed, struggling proles too ignorant to appreciate them on the other – the skirmish continued over the following weeks, with Clark and fellow highbrow spokesperson Stephen Spender (co-editor of the journal *Horizon*) retaliating against the jibes of a number of readers (one correspondent referred to the ‘Emperor’s New Clothes’ of modern literature; another suggested the term highbrow be re-named ‘shambrow’).

Perhaps fittingly, on the very same day (3 April) that *The Times* published Woolf’s obituary, a letter by one Hartley Kemball Cook, radio presenter and self-confessed middlebrow, added a semblance of balance to the debate:

A middlebrow, I take it, is one who tries to understand and appreciate creative art whatever its period ... through anthologies broadcast by the BBC I have tried in a small way to bring a little of the work of the new poets to the notice of a wider public; I do not love the old poets less because I find things true and beautiful in the work of some of the moderns.

Jumping forward 70 years, the concept of middlebrow, or of an intermediate space separating conventional allusions to high and low culture, remains a largely unsophisticated one. James Gilbert (1992), in his review of Joan Shelly Rubin’s historical study *The Making of Middlebrow*

Culture (1992), goes so far as to say that mass culture has over time simply come to incorporate middlebrow culture within its considerable purview. Yet the incredibly durable distinction between elite art and the culture industries in effect guarantees the existence of a middle ground of some kind. What is the true nature of the audience member whose tastes supposedly reside there? Do those individuals represent, after Woolf, the undignified highbrow aspirations of certain of the lowbrow masses? Do they represent, after Lukács, traditionalists fed up with the 'Emperor's New Clothes' of high art since modernism? Or do they stand for something altogether outside of the usual definition of middlebrow, namely a core of neglected individuals who, like Hartley Kemball Cook, claim a disposition to appreciate quality art of every flavour and epoch?

In what follows, I intend to treat the notion of middlebrow (as applied to music) as symptomatic of how the cultural spectrum of high, low and middle remains entirely inadequate as a way of organising and explaining consumer taste patterns. For if middlebrow, as David Carter asserts, provides a name for the 'in-between space' that separates the cultivated from the banal (2004, p. 175), then in my contention it is that which the term *fails* to capture that constitutes a way forward for thinking about audiences that is not inhibited by outmoded classificatory practices.

Three Examples of Empirical Observations of Taste Patterns in Music

In his classic *Distinction* (1984), Pierre Bourdieu undertakes a lengthy empirical inquiry into the hierarchies of power that underpin both cultural production and consumption (as is foretold by the subtitle of his book: *A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*). His principal strategy is to show how the (minority) dominant culture is legitimised by way of ideological distinctions that simultaneously attribute minimal value to the ordinary, everyday cultural practices of the people. Bourdieu seeks to consider the prima facie arbitrary nature of aesthetic evaluations in light of the sociological circumstances that contribute to the divide between high and mass or popular culture.

However, Bourdieu's analysis of this divide centres around a tacit acceptance of the institutional processes through which that situation is maintained – at no time does he actually reject the dichotomy between art and entertainment or open the way to the possibility of appreciating works of supposed popular culture for their aesthetic qualities (Fowler 1997, pp. 154-155). Furthermore, his focus upon certain relationships – such as that between occupation, class status and audience – provides evidence of patterns of cultural consumption without actually going on to contemplate how individual consumers might perform outside of, or in variation to, the underpinning hierarchical paradigm.

Nowhere is this more obvious than in his discussion on music, the art form that Bourdieu elsewhere calls 'the opportunity *par excellence* for flaunting the range and universality of one's culture' (1993, p. 103). In *Distinction*, Bourdieu recognises 'three zones of taste which roughly correspond to educational levels and social classes', giving as musical examples Bach's *The Well-Tempered Clavier* (legitimate), Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* (middlebrow) and *The Blue Danube* by Johann Strauss (popular) (1984, p. 16). This is crucial as the author here is highlighting different class positions *within* a specific meta-genre (classical music) that itself typically stands as a marker for highbrow culture. In other words, he breaks up an ostensibly high culture form into high, middle and low levels of engagement, while all other styles of music are ignored. Though Bourdieu specifically exposes and deals with an economy of cultural goods in which the transcendental is opposed to the human, he never fully questions the legitimacy or otherwise of that opposition. Rather, popular culture is deemed 'a pleasure of the senses', intrinsically facile yet able to be celebrated as the culture of the people (p. 486).

The great drawback of this conclusion has been exposed by Richard Shusterman:

Intellectual apologists of popular art tend to be too apologetic about its aesthetic shortcomings. Uncritically subscribing to the aesthetic ideology of high art and its aesthetic critique of popular culture, they defend popular art by appeal to 'extenuating circumstances' of social needs and democratic principles, rather than making a case for its aesthetic validity ... such social apologies for popular art undermine its genuine defence, since they perpetuate the same myth of abject aesthetic poverty as the critiques they oppose, just as they foster the same sort of social and personal fragmentation. (2000, p. 171)

In effect, then, Bourdieu's thesis reiterates and reinforces the boundaries between high and low culture, even as he simultaneously attempts to validate the much-maligned latter by showing it to be a construct of unequal power relations. In the case of aesthetic appreciation, the privileged position (held by those few culturally competent to negotiate the institutional rules and attain the required competencies), though in essence arbitrary, becomes universally accepted. At the other end of the scale is engagement with the vulgar products of popular culture. For Bourdieu, there is a middlebrow culture ('the minor works of the major arts' and 'the major works of the minor arts' [1984, p. 16]), but this is no more than a characterisation of the space in which the middle classes try (he uses typical instances like light opera) to gain access to official culture.

We move on now to two important projects that use *Distinction* as a stepping-off point for a socio-cultural critique of audience practices as they relate to music. Based on survey data collected in the United States and Australia respectively, both build upon Bourdieu's original study, the results of which, according to some critics, have been difficult to extrapolate outside

of their specific 1960s French cultural situation (Fowler 1997, pp. 9-10; Peterson 1997, p. 76). In examining these projects, the goal is not to pull apart their empirical conclusions so much as to look at the landscape of classifications and genres around which they have been constructed, with a view to further understanding how audiences – the subject of their inquiries – continue to be conceptualised by way of the conventional tripartite ordering system.

Richard Peterson and Roger Kern (1996) argue that class-based distinctions have altered in recent decades, at least at the higher level of engagement. They identify a move from highbrow snob (one who rejects all lesser forms of culture) to highbrow omnivore (one who, whilst still favouring the fine arts, is becoming more and more interested in lowbrow culture). This historical shift in highbrow behaviour, Peterson and Kern claim, can be explained by a number of linked factors: the increasing ubiquity of mass culture; a trend towards greater tolerance of those with different value systems; altered aesthetic criteria in the world of art; the impact of generational and status-group politics. For all of these reasons, highbrows are said to be becoming more eclectic in their cultural choices.

Using musical taste as the basis for their survey, Peterson and Kern come up with the following generic categories for identifying an individual's basic level of cultural commitment: classical and opera (highbrow); mood/easy listening, Broadway musicals and big band (middlebrow); and country, bluegrass, gospel, rock and blues (lowbrow). For instance, if a person is identified as favouring classical music out of a list of possible genres to select, then that person is automatically rated highbrow in the authors' overall estimations. Peterson has previously explained how these three levels of commitment are in received theory linked with the fine arts, derivative works and sensationalist, mass-mediated entertainments respectively (1992, p. 246). The findings of Peterson and Kern lead to speculation that a 'discriminating omnivorousness' might be associated with a new form of cultural relativism in which the traditional high-low boundaries are questioned. Yet be that as it may, their methodology arguably contains a significant flaw in that it supports the maintenance of questionable genre distinctions in music, in turn placing doubt upon the validity of the conclusions reached.

There are several aspects to this. First, genres themselves are linked to particular 'levels of brow' in often dubious ways. For example, the assertion by the authors that jazz music has lowbrow roots, is taught as highbrow, yet nowadays consumed as middlebrow seems totally at odds with what they elsewhere describe as the music's 'unusually diffuse evaluation' (1996, p. 901). Considering the undeniable flexibility of such a term in contemporary music – are Peter Brötzmann, Herbie Hancock, John Zorn and Norah Jones all simply 'jazz'? – one wonders how it can so easily evolve from a way of loosely connecting musicians and scenes to a secure marker of social stratification. Peterson and Kern's understanding of classical

music is just as problematic, considering that Bourdieu himself shows how the genre can be split into further sub-sections which reinforce cultural stereotypes. In this light, the organisation of Peterson and Kern's own meta-categories – 'highbrow is operationalised as liking both classical music and opera' (p. 900) – must be considered suspect. Just as significantly, their inquiry makes no allowance for the possible sectioning of lowbrow genres along the same lines as Bourdieu does with classical music. Two supposedly lowbrow respondents classified as such on the basis of their preference for rock music, for instance, might have completely divergent understandings of what constitutes rock, let alone good and bad (or authentic and inauthentic) rock.³

Furthermore, genre fluidity is downplayed, if not totally ignored, in a survey where respondents are asked to make distinct choices about genres that survive only at the most basic level of inquiry. The results of the survey might therefore be seen as part of a self-perpetuating operation whereby genre distinctions (and related social stratifications) are maintained, rather than questioned or re-considered, because participants have no other choice but to respond within those (too restrictive) distinctions. For example, a person steeped in the classical music tradition might be said to exhibit an omnivorousness on the basis of an investment in progressive rock, when such an investment could easily be identified as a form of snobbishness when the respondent rejects other rock-related styles with no obvious connection to high art (such as punk rock).

The problem of musical taste cultures and related social distinctions is examined in an Australian context in chapter seven of the *Accounting for Tastes* project of Tony Bennett, Michael Emmison and John Frow (1999). Reiterating the belief that music remains 'one of the most sensitive measures of cultural capital and of its relationship to class', the authors assess patterns of musical taste by documenting the 'favourite and least favourite musical genres, performers and composers' of various respondents (p. 5). Following Bourdieu, they attempt to establish associations between listening habits and class factors, such as education and occupation; following Peterson and Kern, they consider how their results might support the idea of cultural omnivorousness amongst certain categories of consumers. In conclusion, the authors identify an omnivorousness which should be 'understood in terms of a knowledge base rather than any deep affinity for a range of music genres' (1999, p. 199). Otherwise, their findings generally reflect those of Bourdieu concerning the relationship between cultural competencies and cultural capital, although it is further posited that when determining musical taste cultures, age and gender are just as relevant as class and education.

Here it is once again possible to discern methodological procedures that call into question the applicability of the study to the current state of music. The authors themselves identify how

permeable genres, especially rock, are, through the results of a specific questionnaire item which asks respondents to name their favourite musician (pp. 174-175). This certainly tallies with notions that the rock grand narrative has collapsed and dissipated over the past three decades (Reynolds 2004). More generally, however, the difficulty in understanding how specific respondents come to categorise favourite or least favourite genres is highlighted by the difficulty one would have in characterising many modern-day artists using the range of options provided to them. For instance, by the time of the survey (1994-1995), options such as rock, alternative rock, classical, country and western and techno might well have been considered to no longer define a field of musical endeavour specific enough to be used as evidence of a distinct preference in an individual listener.

It is also evident that the respondents in Bennett, Emmison and Frow were largely restricted – in a similar way to those in Peterson and Kern – to genre-specific replies that themselves go towards defining and limiting the very field the authors are attempting to understand. It is startling, for instance, to note that this survey allows no option for a respondent to choose rap/hip-hop as their favourite genre.⁴ Furthermore, the suspected omnivorous nature of some of the respondents in the survey must again be considered doubtful. The authors, for example, refer to the ‘catholic tastes’ of an interviewee when on the face of it his preferences are grounded wholly in the art music tradition (p. 192). Finally, the very requirement to select (without elaboration) favourites from a list rules out the possibility of respondents declaring an engagement with music based not upon firm genre distinctions but rather upon a complex understanding of a wide range of compositional practices and historical interconnections.⁵

It can be seen, then, that the three studies discussed here each fail to adequately question the ethical and aesthetic basis of the fixed categories of highbrow, lowbrow and middlebrow. Nor, I argue, have Petersen and Kern and Bennett, Emmison and Frow shown due regard for the even more complex global landscape of symbolic goods and artefacts which has developed in the intervening decades since *Distinction*.⁶ Surprisingly, these authors seem insufficiently alert to a concurrently developing postmodern fragmentation that ensures modern music no longer conforms to genre categories previously taken as inevitable (Mitchell 1996, pp. 12-13; Shuker 2001, pp. 149-151). In the end, the eclectic highbrow, the highbrow or lowbrow omnivore, the ‘ideal type omnivore’ who has knowledge of both highbrow and lowbrow forms (Bennett, Emmison and Frow 1999, p. 199) and the facile middlebrow are all defined through their relationship to a tripartite ordering system that oversimplifies interpretive practices in a remarkably complicated and fragmentary musical environment. Especially disappointing is the fact that these authors are barely concerned with the crucial between-space of the highbrow-lowbrow dichotomy, beyond clichéd references to middlebrow texts and consumers. As Antoine Hennion asserts, it is now necessary to look for ways to open up

discourse in order release emotional engagements with music 'from the weight under which the sociology of taste has crushed them' (2001, p. 6).

Audience Taste Patterns and the Problem of Genre

It is almost fifty years since Theodor Adorno delivered his now infamous lecture at a conference in Tübingen, Germany, in which he attacked the entire basis of sociological research. Adorno's antipathy to what he terms positivism has its roots in his pre-war observations of Nazi propaganda and subsequent (brief) involvement with Paul Lazarsfeld's surveys of American radio audiences (Leppert: in Adorno 2002, pp. 213-216). In the lecture (subsequently published as the essay 'Sociology and Empirical Research'), Adorno laments the absence in the sociological method of any inquiry into the underlying logic of the system out of which its subjects, and thus its empirical data, emerge – the absence of any desire to 'raise the stone under which the monster lies brooding' (2000, p. 176). He goes on to reason, if a questionnaire inquires into musical taste, and, in doing so, offers a choice between the categories 'classical' and 'popular,' then it rightly believes that it has ascertained that the audience in question listens in accordance with these categories. Similarly, one automatically recognises, without reflection, when one turns on the radio, whether one has found a popular music programme, or what is considered serious music, or the background music to a religious act. But as long as the societal conditions for such forms of reaction are not met, the correct finding is also misleading. It suggests that the division of musical experience into 'classical' and 'popular' is final and even natural. (p. 181)

It can be argued that empirical studies of the type discussed here continue to be undermined by the propensity to uncritically and in a circular fashion ascribe strict categories to specific texts, genres and audience members. In response to Adorno, Bennett, Emmison and Frow suggest that the cultural studies project to which they align themselves gives rise to a necessary suspicion as to the 'distinctive rhetorical properties' (1999, p. 15) of empirical data. There is in their view an uncharted space between cultural policy and actual cultural practices that only quantitative surveys are able to explore (pp. 14-15). The multidisciplinary (or anti-disciplinary) nature of cultural studies can, they say, be relied upon to deflect accusations that such surveys are intertwined in a 'technology of control' (Hartley: quoted in Bennett, Emmison and Frow 1999, p. 14) or otherwise implicated in positivist attempts to 'abolish the subjective' (Jameson 1990, p. 248). Nevertheless, unable to deny the major limitation of their empirical method – essentially that the questions asked structure the answers received – Bennett, Emmison and Frow in the end can only agree that projects such as their own shape opinions and tastes, and thus perpetuate genre distinctions, even as they reflect them (1999, pp. 16-17). Though each of the sociological inquiries discussed here reveals worthwhile facts about patterns of individual taste (facts Adorno would no doubt dismiss as epiphenomenal), they at the same time provide evidence of a mostly unreflective reproduction of the restrictive

systems of categorisation through which those tastes are defined. A more critical approach to 'the division of musical experience' (Adorno 2000, p. 181) is required if the complex nature of interpretative practices is to be more fully understood.

Inquiring into what he considers to be the 'law of genre', Jacques Derrida tells us that 'every text participates in one or several genres, there is no genreless text, there is always a genre and genres, yet such participation never amounts to belonging' (1992, p. 230). Genres act to help us organise a vast and complex world, in the case of music a world that would be impossible to speak of or write about coherently without recourse to some form of classificatory system. Yet one can take the utility of genre only so far: a text can be said to participate in a genre or several genres, yet as soon as one tries to turn that participation into a belonging, the notion of genre has been taken too far. For as sure as a text will feature certain characteristics linking it to a specific genre, a closer examination, in all but the most rudimentary of examples, is likely to uncover some other characteristic turning it away from that genre and toward another. This circumstance is a prominent feature of what has come to be known as postmodernism, where in all art forms there is a melding and blurring of genre boundaries resulting in multi-faceted texts that often appear to disturb highbrow-lowbrow distinctions. In music, any understanding of genres like classical and rock as 'fixed and traditional orthodoxies' (Mitchell 1996, p. 10) has, especially over the past two decades, been completely eroded by the appearance of new and amalgamated genres and sub-genres amidst the concurrent fragmentation of older ones.⁷

In light of this, it is inevitable that some of the most interesting and inventive music of the 21st century thus far tends to disrupt routine notions of musical genre. The *prima facie* rock-oriented Electrelane, given to augmenting songs with a male choir, manage at once to sound like the four horsewomen of the apocalypse and the gentlest folk group imaginable. Japan's Koji Asano, a classical musician only in the loosest sense, incorporates a vast range of experimental computer and electronic music into his modern compositions. Australian piano-bass-drums triumvirate the Necks are usually deemed jazz but have no real parallel in that category, their hour-long concert excursions being equally evocative of rock, electronica and minimalism. Chuck Cleaver leads two bands (Ass Ponys and Wussy) steeped in country and alt-pop whose sounds and lyrics nonetheless obfuscate received notions of both styles. The Thirsty Ear label's *Blue Series* of recordings – curated by pianist Matthew Shipp – take jazz and drum and bass, amongst others, into hitherto uncharted territory. Montreal's Constellation Records houses collectives – such as Godspeed You! Black Emperor and Do Make Say Think – plying a uniquely orchestral form of post-rock, while fellow Canadian Buck 65 (a.k.a. Richard Terfry) embellishes his hip-hop substructure with country, blues, folk and other unexpected trimmings.

In addition to their distinctive styles, the relative anonymity of these artists means that it is difficult to situate them within the overarching dichotomy of academic musical discourse, where classical or art music continues to be set apart from so-called popular forms. Yet there are also widely appreciated modern musicians whose propensity for innovation and disruption of genre rules makes just as questionable their place in the latter category. For example, the hugely fashionable Radiohead polarised its audience with the (minor) avant-garde turn of the albums *Kid A* (2000) and *Amnesiac* (2001), while higher-profile rap musicians like OutKast and the astonishingly-eclectic British-Sri Lankan Mathangi Arulpragasam (MIA) experiment in and expand a category that remains as hybrid as it is widespread.

Such cases lead us to question why the categories and genres relied upon by much of the learned discourse perpetuate a singular and simplistic model of a musical culture dominated by marketing concerns. It is equally apparent that the divisions of highbrow, lowbrow and middlebrow, based around the organisation of vague genre-types and, thus, of doubtful utility in terms of categorising texts and artists, fail abjectly when it comes to understanding everyday interpretations and the potential for mobility amongst audience members. My argument is not with the use of genre distinctions, which are, as both Ralph Cohen (1989, p. 25) and Jason Toynbee (2000, p. 115) agree, inescapable, but with how far they are taken: how the fluidity and instability of genres in the postmodern period has nonetheless failed to rein in assumptions as to how audiences individually and collectively interact with contemporary music.

As we are, as Andreas Huyssen confirms, stuck for now with what has proven to be an incredibly durable opposition between high art and the culture industries (2002, p. 29),⁸ it is that space between a hopelessly isolated elite culture on the one side and an uselessly congested popular culture on the other that most urgently needs to be re-thought. Up until now, this between-space has been used to classify derivative texts and consumers with ill-conceived hopes as to their own upward-mobility – the middlebrows. There is virtually nothing in the work of Bourdieu, Petersen and Kern or Bennett, Emmison and Frow, for instance, to challenge this stable and overarching hierarchy, one that is insufficiently nuanced to cope with the myriad interwoven sound worlds and listening possibilities of the 21st century.⁹

How have these classic assumptions of cultural classification remained so strong, and why do audience members continue to be characterised in such simplistic ways? To investigate further, it will be useful now to turn to two classic examples of audience-focused research, Hans Robert Jauss' aesthetics of reception and Wolfgang Iser's reader-response. Though based in literary theory, their work has much relevance to a general discussion of consumptive practices.

Reception Theory, Reader-Response and the Full Breadth of a Person's Taste

Jauss' aesthetics of reception responds to what he sees as a Marxist-formalist dichotomy wherein literary theory tends to be either too dependent upon the social, economic and historical circumstances of its creation (Marxism) or too far removed from them (formalism). In the former case, the reader is considered on the same terms as the author, but those terms are essentially the struggle between the dominant and dominated classes; in the latter, the reader is more or less effaced in that he or she is considered to be wholly directed by the structure and content of the text itself (Jauss 1982a, pp. 18-19). The answer to this problem is, for Jauss, the implementation of a practice of investigating production and reception in literature dialectically (Holub 1984, p. 57).

According to Jauss,

in the triangle of author, work, and public the last is no passive part, no chain of mere reactions, but rather itself an energy formative of history. The historical life of a literary work is unthinkable without the active participation of its addressees ... the perspective of the aesthetics of reception mediates between passive reception and active understanding, experience formative of norms, and new production. If the history of literature is viewed in this way within the horizon of a dialogue between work and audience that forms a continuity, the opposition between its aesthetic and its historical aspects is also continually mediated. Thus the thread from the past appearance to the present experience of literature, which historicism has cut, is tied back together. (1982a, p. 19)

Reception is here determined to be an ongoing process, one which emerges out of a continuous dialectic between text and reader. What an author has written in the past and all the texts a reader has previously interpreted, as well as any relevant critical interpretations, go together, in the context of the present reading experience, to form what Jauss terms the horizon of expectations around a text – circumstances that go to make up the 'reciprocal interaction of work and mankind' (p. 15).¹⁰ As might be expected, this horizon is both amorphous and unstable, supposing as it does a 'dialectic of understanding as a complex interplay between knowing and not knowing' (de Man; in Jauss 1982a, p. xii). Jauss acknowledges that before undergoing classification (being incorporated into a canon, for example) a text goes through a complex array of mediations during which the process of reception is integral. Moreover, because the history of a text's reception is inclusive of myriad interpretive events past, present and future, its formal classification can alter over time as the horizon of expectations itself alters.

Jauss' model is also keyed to understanding the potential for positive aesthetic experiences across all strata of society. Responding to the foundations of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*

(1997), Jauss seeks to deny the universality of the negative aesthetic. He does this by conceiving (or re-conceiving) of the horizon of expectations as capable of incorporating an aesthetics of pleasure (Holub 1984, pp. 70-75), such as has been reinvigorated (after modernism) by, amongst others, Roland Barthes. According to Jauss, experimental works – such as the art of Jackson Pollock and Barnett Newman and the prose of Samuel Beckett – ‘acquire the lonely pathos of their legitimation through their opposition to the consumer art of the modern mass media’ (1982b, p. 28). He thus sees the tendency, since modernism, of isolating art from the general public and renouncing aesthetic pleasure as the last recourse of the (middlebrow) philistine, as having tipped the balance too far in favour of the ascetic, a circumstance he attempts to redress by reviving the communicative function of literature for which enjoyment is the primary reaction (pp. 22-36). Jauss, however, certainly does not go so far as to dismantle the dichotomy between the highbrow and popular culture. Instead, he only suggests that by absencing the pleasurable from his aesthetic theory Adorno incorrectly dismisses the practical value of certain fine artefacts (pp. 18-19).

In contrast to Jauss’ aesthetics of reception, Wolfgang Iser is the originator of what has come to be termed reader-response theory. His is a more intimate view of the relationship between text and interpreter in which

the text itself simply offers ‘schematised aspects’ through which the subject matter of the work can be produced, while the actual production takes place through an act of concretisation. From this we may conclude that the literary work has two poles, which we might call the artistic and the aesthetic: the artistic pole is the author’s text and the aesthetic is the realisation accomplished by the reader. In view of this polarity, it is clear that the work itself cannot be identical with the text or with the concretisation, but must be situated somewhere between the two. (1978, p. 21)

In Iser, the critical relationship is that between the reader and the text and how meaning is subsequently derived from this. By focusing upon this ‘virtual’ interaction he seeks to understand the experience of the reader without on the one hand affording absolute primacy to the text itself, or on the other allowing for readings that are not anchored in some way to the textual material. This places Iser’s theory into a middle ground between text and reader, where the reading event is activated by the meeting of the two (the text activates the reader and the reader activates the text). It also confirms his goal of overcoming any debate between subjectivism and objectivism by denying both the unshakable authority of the author’s intended meaning and the untrammelled relativism of arbitrary readings (pp. 20-27).

Like Jauss, Iser engages with the concept of the negative aesthetic as prioritised in Adorno. He too is expressly concerned with responses to canonical literature over what he terms ‘light reading’ (p. 46). Negation is a vital concept for Iser, but while Jauss later made space for an aesthetics of enjoyment to coexist with an aesthetics of negativity in the field of responses to

serious literature, Iser rather exhorts the function of negations (both primary and secondary) as a communicative force that alerts the reader to other possibilities in the process of interpretation. Iser's strategy for distancing himself from Adorno and allowing for the practical function of literature is, in essence, to resolve the traditionalism versus modernism dilemma by arguing that the reader should approach the text from an ideologically neutral standpoint (Holub 1984, pp. 94-98).

In summary, Jauss is concerned with the history of a text's reception and the reader's interaction with that text within a perpetually altering horizon of expectations; Iser is interested in the reading process itself as determinant of a meaning that is not inherent in the text in question. Both Iser and Jauss have justly been credited with directing the general focus away from the author and toward the hitherto undervalued role of the reader in constructing meaning. However, I would contend that there is one important aspect of both Jauss' aesthetics of reception and Iser's reader-response theory that has not been satisfactorily explored in literary criticism or in the wider field of reception theory as it has been embraced by various postmodern and post-structuralist critics.

Both Jauss and Iser have as their basis the interaction of the subject (the reader) with an object (the text), although it is true, Holub argues, that both theories have to some extent been unable to escape the ideological status of the text as a 'stable and determinate structure' (1984, p. 149).¹¹ Yet both exhibit a further limitation in that their consideration of the reader is in relation to a specific literary text and not *multiple texts* – neither theory focuses closely upon the idea of the reader's interaction being but one in an ongoing series of interactions with all manner of cultural productions, not just literary texts. Moreover, with Jauss and Iser each working within the conventional dichotomy of highbrow versus popular texts, the privileging of the former presumably helps account for the lack of interest in exploring or incorporating the reader's full range of cultural engagements. On that note, and notwithstanding the similar methodological problems (following Bourdieu) that his sociological, genre-based inquiry may exhibit, I agree with Koen van Eijck when he says that research into taste preferences or consumption patterns 'is probably increasingly less informative if one does not assess the full breadth of a person's taste' (2001, p. 1181).¹² In fact, I would go so far as to suggest that this is the only method through which one can unequivocally evade the 'stable and determinate structure' that is the text and begin truly to understand interpretive practices amongst audiences.

Conclusion: The Drifting Audience

Often it seems that in discourses about music, audiences are somehow partitioned off as a discrete (amateur) segment of the musical world. It is conveniently forgotten that the supposed professionals who make music (both the star performers and the unknowns), those

who criticise or otherwise conduct research into music (both scholars and journalists), and the sundry other 'industry' people who make a living from music are each and every one of them first and foremost part of the music audience.¹³

Theories about music audiences are almost always rooted firmly within the established cultural hierarchy. Even the most valuable and distinctive recent studies of musicologists, popular music analysts or aestheticians are essentially bound up within the hierarchy (Gracyk 1999; Shusterman 2000, pp. 201-235),¹⁴ or are otherwise limited in applicability to everyday audiences by tending to be only peripherally concerned with audience interpretations (McClary 2000, pp. 139-169; Mitchell 1996) or by reflecting the experiences of 'expert' musicians and critics, not those of everyday listeners (Toop 1995; Frith 1996). Yet it is with respect to the ordinary, non-specialist audience member that new ways of examining the uninspected spaces between high and popular culture are required.

In an important paper on Adorno and the culture industries, Robert Witkin suggests that somewhere between the extraordinary and the mundane there is a significant cultural landscape yet to be fully articulated. According to Witkin, rather than falling into the trap of debating Adorno on his own terms (as seeing 'serious art and the products of the culture industry as two torn halves that *don't add up*' [2000, p. 168; original italics]), it is possible to allow that 'the greater the degree of commodification, the greater is the degree of opportunity for genuine aesthetic creation to occur in the margins of that process' (p. 166). That is, subsequent to the almost total denudation of high art's ritual status under advanced capitalism, it might be better to focus on individual moments and improvisations that escape Adorno's notion of the passive consumer of popular culture. Witkin proposes a need for 'genuine empirical research concerning actual aesthetic practices in everyday life and their relationship to the culture industry as a counterweight to an almost ideological level of assertion from critical theorists' (p. 166).

With this in mind, I want to posit an alternate way of thinking about music audiences that I believe should underpin all types of research in the field, empirical or otherwise.¹⁵ It is to emphasise ways that individuals can and often do operate so as to render the traditional tripartite cultural hierarchy more or less irrelevant. In this conception the notion of everyday life remains central, but it is predicated upon an attitude to the everyday that is always just beyond the reach of the 'wider administrative structures' (Witkin 2000, p. 166) that frame it. The focus is on consumptive practices that position the audience in a kind of perpetual drift, disrupting analyses based upon the strictly defined meta-categories of highbrow, lowbrow and middlebrow. It is a notion close to Bernard Lahire's idea of 'cultural dissonances' (2008): a concentration upon the unpredictable nature of each individual's multiple cultural engagements across a variety of meta-categories (music, film, television, literature, and so

forth).¹⁶ In addition, such a focus upon individual interpretations might also be seen as an antidote for the many socio-cultural studies of popular music which – as Simon Frith suggests in his major study on how people use and evaluate popular music – are often ‘limited by the assumption that the sounds somehow reflect or represent “a people”’ (1996, p. 269).

In his 1976 essay ‘Generating and Organising Variety in the Arts’, Brian Eno (2004) sets out the circumstances by which experimental music encourages diversity in compositional practices by loosening the controlling fabric of traditional musics (especially classical) based upon reliability and predictability of performance. According to Eno, ‘the variety of a system is the total range of its outputs, its total range of behaviour’ (2004, p. 227). Certainly, Eno’s work as a (non) musician and producer – involved in such projects as Roxy Music, Talking Heads, David Bowie’s Berlin trilogy, the ‘Obscure’ and ‘Ambient’ series of recordings, collaborations with Robert Fripp, Cluster, Jon Hassell, Harold Budd, John Cale and many others – encapsulates perfectly the kind of diversified, nomadic activity within music that I am endorsing here.

Once again, however, the nub of Eno’s thought is production, not reception. It remains for critics and researchers to properly articulate variety and diversity amongst audiences by shifting the focus away from specific texts, genres and meta-categories and toward the entire range, musical and otherwise, of an individual’s cultural activities. The potential ‘in-between-ness’ of the everyday audience member – until now so inadequately incorporated under the term middlebrow – provides ample opportunity for taste patterns to be conceptualised outside of the dominant cultural hierarchy.

Biographical Note

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¹ Woolf's letter (in the event not published until after her death) was written sometime in the mid-1930s. The *Oxford English Dictionary* dates the first appearance of the term middlebrow to 1925, when in *Punch* magazine it was claimed that the type 'consists of those people who are hoping that some day they will get used to the stuff they ought to like'.

² This and subsequent letters referred to from the series appeared in *The Times* between 25 March and 9 April 1941.

³³ Bethany Bryson identifies similar incongruities in her investigation into the link between musical dislikes and cultural intolerance (1997, pp. 895-896).

⁴ As long ago as 1992 Richard Shusterman identified rap as 'today's fastest growing genre of popular music' (2000, p. 201).

⁵ This circumstance is, I would argue, only slightly mitigated by the questionnaire providing the respondent with the option of 'other (please specify)' at question D3: 'Which are your three favourites from the following types of music' (p. 278)?

⁶ The empirical data used by Bourdieu was collected in the 1960s.

⁷ The great paradox of genre distinctions – they possess great rhetorical power *yet* are at the same time endlessly fluid and unstable – is emphasised by the 'death of' polemics that tend to appear at epochal moments in the evolution (or decay) of widely recognised styles. Mitchell (9) refers to three of the most-commonly cited musical examples of 'genre-desertion,' each bound up in some way to wider narratives of genre demise, from the careers of Bob Dylan, Miles Davis and Philip Glass respectively. Dylan's case in particular (his supposed abandonment of a folk movement with which he only ever had a tenuous relationship) highlights the absurdity of associating specific individuals too closely with a specific category or style of music.

⁸ Huysen makes the very important point that, in contrast to Adorno's too-often underemphasised goal of '[exploring] the dialectic between high and low in a new historical constellation', attempts by cultural studies-influenced criticism to destabilise the high-popular hierarchy have tended to result in little more than a strategic reversal of that hierarchy (2002, p. 52).

⁹ This inclination continues on in empirical studies concerned with the consumption of music and culture generally. For example, van Eijck refers to a transcendent art discourse, a 'fun' pop discourse and an integrative folk discourse as 'underlying principles structuring patterns of musical taste' (2001, p. 1168), while Holbrook, Weiss and Habich consider the discussions of cultural preferences in Bourdieu and Petersen and Kern before deciding only that future researchers need to ask 'what measurable features or definable meanings make a cultural activity more "highbrow" or "lowbrow"' (2002, p. 355). (It is most significant, as Adorno would surely agree, that the work of Holbrook Weiss and Habich was published in the journal *Marketing Letters*.)

¹⁰ In a discussion which is specific to music, DeNora (2000, p. 40) evokes the similar notion of 'affordance structures' with respect to those locations or spaces where meanings are constructed.

¹¹ See Holub (pp. 128-134) for a discussion on how Jauss and Iser have also been criticised for failing to concretise their notion of the idealised reader by way of sociologically-grounded empirical evidence.

¹² Van Eijck's paper explores similar ground to that previously covered by Petersen (1992; 1997), equating cultural omnivorousness with the so-called 'new middle class'.

¹³ Antoine Hennion is one scholar who has recognised this; he makes specific reference to the amateur music lover as one who 'each time, to a certain extent, composes her music, as others do their menu, by all available means, paying little attention to academic divisions and orthodoxies of taste' (2001, p. 18).

¹⁴ Shusterman does make it clear that he uses the binary terms high and popular only because they are so universal, hoping instead that by standing up for popular art he will help begin to dismantle the dichotomy (pp. 169-170). In my view, however, any defence of popular culture as popular culture cannot hope to achieve this.

¹⁵ Subsequent to the work of Bourdieu and others discussed here, David Hesmondhalgh (2007) has, notwithstanding once again the general absence of any Adornian critique of the underlying dominant hierarchy, provided perhaps the best empirical study of musical taste patterns in everyday audiences.

¹⁶ Key to this notion of audience drift is a focus upon the *potential* unpredictability of consumptive practices, upon the idea that any audience member (not just a select few 'omnivores') may at any time act in ways that do not conform to the standard cultural hierarchy. This is not to suggest that consumption practices are always unpredictable; rather, it is a call for researchers to acknowledge the importance of what Lahire terms 'intra-individual variations': 'considering the internal differences found within the range of behaviours and tastes of each audience member' (2008, p. 167).