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Making tastes for everything: Omnivorousness and cultural abundance

Abstract

This paper offers some speculative discussion about the current state of the 'omnivore' debate, instigated by Richard A. Peterson. It argues that debates about the social patterning of tastes need to take greater account of changed practices of cultural *production* as well as consumption through the identification of two 'stories of abundance' in the cultural realm. The first relates to accounts of the changing and expanding cultural industries, whilst the second considers the rich variety of widely available culture enabled by various technologies of distribution. Taking these stories into account, the paper argues that sociological analyses of cultural hierarchy might lag behind those that are mundane and everyday to both cultural producers and consumers and that an orientation to culture that ranges across established hierarchies is increasingly unremarkable. Such a change is related to the structural and discursive means through which culture is circulated. The paper concludes that cultural analysts need to modify their theoretical models and their methodological approaches to better reflect a variegated field of culture and a more fluid cultural hierarchy. In the tradition of both Peterson and Bourdieu, contemporary analyses of patterns of cultural consumption and taste need to take fuller account of the ways in which culture is produced, circulated and valued if they are to maintain their explanatory power.

Introduction

As accounts of 'omnivorousness', a variously defined relationship between taste and social class, thrive in a variety of national contextsⁱ there is a need to reflect, both on the intellectual roots of the concept itself but also on its place within a broader project of a sociology of culture which seeks to critically interrogate the role of cultural production, participation and consumption in social life. This paper attempts to re-connect the omnivore debate, based as it is around changing patterns of cultural consumption, especially in relation to questions of cultural hierarchy, with accounts of cultural production, as a means of reflecting on the continued explanatory salience of the concept.

There have been significant changes in cultural production, and how it is theorised, towards the end of the twentieth century in Europe and the US. Despite these changes being coterminous with the emergence of the omnivore in time and space, they have been relatively marginal to its interpretation. Such changes are important in both the original formulation of the omnivore figure and also crucial in the determination of the position of the items in the hierarchies which omnivores are assumed to traverse. Notable recent examples of studies which reflect this inter-relationship between technologies of production and circulation and cultural hierarchy include Bennett et. al 2009 who imply, in the study of contemporary reading practices, a role for forms of popular and commercial mediation in shaping and re-working hierarchies of taste, which allows a classical English novel such as *Pride and Prejudice*, regularly adapted for film and television, to stand as a kind of

popular cultural equivalent to the songs of Britney Spears or the films of Steven Spielberg in the taste formations of modern Britain. Some further evidence of the contemporary relationship between forms of production or circulation and tastes is provided by Lizardo and Skiles (2009) who lay out the different models of television production in a range of countries and reveal the links between different public or commercial models of production of omnivorous tastes for television. How cultural goods are produced and circulated in these accounts –and in particular the use of commercial media channels to those ends - are important in facilitating the take-up of cultural goods by their consumers across social classes, and in revealing the ways in which cultural hierarchies are challenged or transformed by such practices. Studies of omnivorousness might, then, pay greater attention to these processes of production and circulation, as well as to the patterns of consumption of cultural forms which have become their focus.

The terms of the re-connection that this paper proposes follows a pattern inherent in the figure of the omnivore itself, and is characterised by three concerns. Firstly with *volume* i.e. how much culture is produced and how widespread is involvement in its production and circulation. Secondly, with *composition* in relation to the hierarchy of high and low culture, which is necessarily empirically settled or constant in the identification of omnivores but is arguably more fluid in the field of cultural production itself. The third strand is that of *orientation*, meaning what meanings are ascribed to the status of omnivorousness and what this emergent figure has come to exemplify. Ollivier (2008), for example, emphasises the extent to which

contemporary narratives of what she terms cultural eclecticism are embedded in and coterminous with other narratives of 'individualisation' which are part of a narrative of change in class hierarchies given theoretical succour by such thinkers as Giddens (1991) and Beck (1992). The figure of the omnivore is sociologically significant here not simply because of the patterns of taste and consumption that it reveals, but for what these patterns might indicate about contemporary societies. In particular the omnivore offers a strong corrective for what has been interpreted, arguably erroneously, as a determinist relationship between taste and social class as it is revealed by Bourdieu (1984). The admission of popular culture to the taste portfolios of elite groups is interpreted as a decisive challenge to Bourdieu's homology thesis and, as such, implies a more nuanced relationship between class and cultural taste, at least in Western societies. For this significance to hold water, this paper suggests omnivore studies need to take greater accounts of the roots of the variety of cultural consumption which they reveal.

The concept of the omnivore has a contribution to make to a number of current empirical and theoretical debates, as writers from business and the academy ascribe a range of new forms of subjectivity to emerging relationships between production and consumption, work and lifestyles. This is evident in the valorised new 'creative class' of the influential, though much critiqued, vision of Richard Florida. One characteristic of this class is an orientation to a wide range of culture and leisure activities. This range is elided with the open and tolerant world view amongst creative professionals which is considered essential to the competitive advantage of

companies, cities and regions (Florida, 2002). More theoretically nuanced writers on the new, or symbolic or knowledge economy, such as Lash, Urry and Lury (Lash and Urry, 1994; Lash and Lury, 2007) also privilege an aestheticisation of everyday life – an aesthetic rationality -which entails a disavowal of the traditional universal meaning of forms of cultural judgment in favour of tacit forms of knowledge of what is ‘cool’, from across hierarchies of culture in the context of globally organised and focussed cultural production. Empirical work on what Bourdieu termed the ‘cultural intermediary’ further suggests the presence of distinct orientations to culture amongst specific professional and entrepreneurial strata, which mediate not only between production and consumption but between established and emerging forms of culture, in a growing number of workers in an expanding sector of the economies of Western societies (McRobbie, 1996). Finally, and most recently, new orientations to culture are evident in the rise of the small-scale niche, specialist consumption practices enabled by digital forms of the circulation of cultural goods as revealed by the business analyst Chris Anderson’s (2006) thesis of the *Long Tail* of demand for previously obscure or restricted forms of connoisseurship. All of these strands of work might find some empirical sustenance in the omnivore thesis, characterised as it is by identifying the social location of ideas of openness, curiosity and flexibility in relation to cultural consumption. And at the same time the omnivore thesis, emerging as it does from the tradition of US quantitative sociology, might benefit from some reflection on the theoretical insights about both new forms of cultural production and circulation and about the cultural or symbolic economy more generally. This paper, then suggests the terms of a reconnection between production

and consumption in interpreting data on omnivorousness, implying that the emergence of omnivores might be reflective of the shifts in the meanings of cultural hierarchies as they are embedded in the values and structures of an expanded realm of cultural production.

Richard Peterson's own recent interventions on both the global spread of the concept of the omnivore and its methodological and conceptual variations (Peterson, 2005) and on the continued centrality of production of culture perspectives to sociological accounts of the cultural industries (Peterson and Anand, 2004) are helpful in marking the terrain of this re-connection. As Santoro (2008) points out in his account of the place of Peterson's work in the intellectual currents of the developing cultural sociology/sociology of culture of the US academy in the late 60s and 70s, there are significant connections between these two substantive contributions, particularly through the notion of 'auto-production', i.e. the ways in which the choices and motivations of cultural producers are shaped by their knowledge of and experience of cultural consumers as a circuit of cultural production is navigated. Although forming part of Peterson's original vision of the omnivore, these inter-relationships between production and consumption have been less central to more recent studies of omnivorousness, which focus exclusively on the patterns of consumption as they are observable through the analysis of various large scale national data sets. The notion of production and consumption as linked is now more likely find a home in accounts of participatory culture focussed upon emerging forms of creative and critical engagement with media cultures (Fiske 1989, Jenkins 2006). This kind of work

reveals the extent to which cultural producers depend upon the creative uptake of their work by consumers of various degrees of sub-cultural commitment who bring a critical and creative orientation to bear on the products of commercial cultures and eschew or actively attempt to subvert the diminished position of popular literature, film, music or television in cultural hierarchy. Such insights emerge from a tradition of cultural research inspired by British Cultural Studies and the possibilities that it opened up for the re-appropriation of popular and commercial forms of culture as valuable and complex and therefore troubling of hierarchies of legitimate or popular. The patterns of cultural participation which recent omnivore studies reveal take less account of the ways in which cultural products are produced, made valuable or not and distributed.

As part of a recent study of the dimensions of omnivorousness in the UK, Warde et al. (2007) discovered several types of omnivores. These included an arts and humanities academic, a worker in the heritage industry and a teacher – all positions of pivotal importance in the circulation of cultural value. They also found omnivores who were more reflective of the increased and variegated field of cultural production provided by broadcast media as a means of circulating diverse cultural texts. Both types of omnivore had high volumes of participation and ranged across ‘high’ and ‘low’ in the imagined hierarchy of cultural participation. Only one type – the former – could really be interpreted as having a distinctive omnivorous *orientation* in relation to ‘openness’ as regards their attitudes towards cultural hierarchies, but both these types are significant. The ready identification of people from occupations involved

with various forms of mediation of culture through this kind of survey work might reflect the increased numbers in and significance of these types of occupation in late-capitalism. For the other type, omnivorousness might be more mundane and ordinary than some studies suggest and that the increased volume and altered composition of cultural consumption in Western societies, might simply reflect the increased range and availability of things to consume. These kinds of omnivores appear to range across cultural hierarchies because such hierarchies are simply not sophisticated enough in their empirical construction to account for the lived cultural experience of the mediated cultural consumer.

This paper reflects on these possibilities as two ‘stories of abundance’ that circulate in the contemporary cultural realm. The first concerns the processes of *production* evident in the considerable changes to the cultural or creative industries in the last thirty years and in particular the rise in the volume and scale of the cultural/creative industries as sites of employment in Western societies. The second concerns developing practices of *consumption* in what we might term media-saturated or culture saturated societies. These two stories of abundance are linked through what they imply about how the ways in which culture is produced and circulated affect its value. The contention of this paper is that these links need to be more fully explored if new orientations to culture, of which omnivorousness seems likely to be one, are to be fully understood.

Abundance of people: creative class, creative industries

One of the most significant *orientations* to emerge from the omnivore literature has been the relationship between openness and tolerance in the realm of culture and the openness and tolerance of people, especially with regard to the new relationships of the workplace (Erickson, 1996). This has been especially significant in identifying the place of culture in new strategies of management. In a recent contribution, Peterson and Rossman (2008:312) point out the apparent ‘elective affinity between today’s cosmopolitan business-administrative class and omnivorousness’. It is an association also remarked upon by a recent study by Prieur et. al. (2008), for whom the rise of reflexive accounts of taste, and the accompanying rise in the notion of the ‘creative class’, represents a neat coalescing of the views that highly educated and privileged people like to have of themselves. Omnivorousness in this light becomes, like globalisation or cosmopolitanismⁱⁱ, an empirical interpretation of contemporary experience that readily resonates with the academic mind. Whilst recognising the validity of this criticism, for the purposes of this argument the real or imagined rise of the creative class is an instructive starting point for a consideration of the role of an expanded sphere of cultural production on the empirical reality of cultural hierarchy.

Identified by Florida as a growing sector of the contemporary workforce, it is a class for which an altered orientation to culture – particularly around the assumed stability of historical hierarchical structures – seems to be a pre-requisite entry qualification.

As Florida describes it,

‘whereas the lifestyle of the previous organisational age emphasized conformity, the new lifestyle favours individuality, self-statement, acceptance of difference and the desire for rich multi-dimensional experiences...One person may be simultaneously a writer, researcher, consultant, cyclist, rock climber, electronic/world music/acid jazz lover, amateur gourmet cook, wine enthusiast or micro-brewer’ (Florida 2002:13)

A particular orientation to cultural consumption is evoked here, combining ‘legitimate’ cultural pursuits (writing, wine enthusiasm) with commercial ones – albeit commercial pursuits with a patina of sophistication or ‘cool’ (electronic or acid jazz music) as well as a particular, instrumental orientation to the self and to leisure time. Whether they are omnivores or not is a moot point, given that the identification of these tastes is somewhat impressionistic, revealed, no doubt through observation of the waterfront galleries and cafes of the ‘creative cities’ that are the focus of Florida’s project. Of more importance for this paper is that the significant numbers of people identified as members of this class, which includes, but is by no means limited to, workers who might have been identified as ‘cultural intermediaries’ by Bourdieu suggests that these orientations are increasingly widespread. An important coda to this starting point for the story of abundant people is that this increase in the size of the creative class does not necessarily entail the flattening of social and economic hierarchies alongside cultural ones. Indeed, the internship/free work placement of young graduates in the creative industries and the

heuristic figure of the 'trust-fund boho' suggests the presence of existing structures of economic capital, for example through parental support or access to substantive credit, is required to enable the re-working of cultural value that such workers might achieve.

The expanded market for cultural workers of various kinds in the contemporary context has an older antecedence, as revealed by White and White's (1965) study of the art field of nineteenth century France. Here, the over-supply of aspiring painters to the Royal Academy is interpreted as contributing to the re-working of criteria of value outside of previously accredited institutes, allowing for the emergence of the genre of impressionism as a radical break from earlier forms of formal representation. This example is cited by Peterson and Kern (1996) as exemplifying how changes to art worlds opened up the possibility of challenges to institutionally legitimated tastes. Put in its starkest terms the logic of this argument is that the broadening out of the volume and orientations of people with stakes in the cultural conversation – players in the game of culture in Bourdieu's terms – alter the terms of that conversation. We can see this in a number of examples which whilst having distinct histories follow some similar patterns. Peterson himself recognises it as part of his own production-focussed works, for example on the shifting value of 'jazz' (1972). Here the changed status of people of colour plays a role in the processes of recognition, consecration and popularisation of jazz as a musical genre in the US. Similarly, in terms of literature Guillory (1993) and Corse and Westerveldt (2002) describes the effect of the hard-won access of people of colour and women to the higher echelons of literary criticism on the means by which books get canonised and consecrated in the mid-to-

late twentieth century America, altering the terms through which the hierarchy of literary culture is constructed and who gets to determine it the position of works within it.

Although this ‘production side’ of the equation of tastes has been less central to subsequent attempts to explore cultural hierarchyⁱⁱⁱ or omnivorousness, Bourdieu’s own account of the field of cultural production provides a theoretical model to think through the logic of these processes. In the *Rules of Art* (1996: 169), Bourdieu describes the ‘autonomy’ of avant-garde or disinterested artistic producers who are able to operate and survive in the economic field due to a surrounding army of ‘celebrants and believers’ who invest in the value of their work. It is from this army of celebrants and believers (made up of critics and academics etc.) that notions of cultural value emerge – with, to take the economic metaphor further, the rarity of particular kinds of works and the specific and specialised forms of interest in them raising their value in terms of institutionalised cultural capital. Accompanying these works in the field of cultural production is the heteronomous influence of the market place and the promotional activities of the cultural industries where publishers, art dealers and other producers exist in a Janus-faced position, mediating between art and commerce. Here success is measured by such indicators as sales or length of print run and the job of cultural producers is to generate alternative forms of value or capital, or to translate cultural into economic capital. The rise in volume of people engaged in cultural production necessarily affects the ways in which cultural products are made, received and circulated. Bourdieu (1996: 55), for example,

describes the 'proletaroid intelligentsia' of over-educated aspiring writers in 19th century France populating a kind of *Grub Street* vision of a diminished, commercialised, heteronomous literary field.

The models of Peterson and Bourdieu have both been influential in continuing analysis of cultural production but the emphasis on the *volume* of people involved has been, arguably, less central. In the contemporary field of cultural production the growth, expansion and re-orientation of cultural producers continues. In particular this kind of account of cultural production has been less readily present in subsequent work on culture and stratification, and specifically from work on the omnivore, as if new taste formations emerge from broader societal changes rather than endogenous/exogenous factors specifically relating to processes of cultural production. This is despite the fact that a sociological concern with the symbolic or cultural economy accompanies the emergence of the omnivore thesis in time (in the late twentieth century but intensifying in recent years) and space (the US and Europe). Work on the cultural intermediary (see Negus, 2002; Nixon and Du Gay, 2002) has provided some empirical means of exploring the relationships between these new workplaces and cultural orientations, but even here there is a tendency for a focus on how specific industries or sectors (fashion, music, club cultures) perform their construction of alternative variants of cultural capital rather than on how these forms of production feed back into the social formation of tastes more generally.

The rise of the cultural or 'creative industries' as sites of employment in Western countries is revealing here, and might provide the discursive framework through which to further understand the role of cultural production in transforming cultural hierarchies. Figures for this kind of expansion are contentious, in a way which perhaps reflects both the relative novelty of collecting data of this kind and the desire on behalf of states to claim a broader base of work as 'cultural' or creative to fit with established policy and industry rhetorics about the similarities between artistic creativity and business practices. Eurostat, for example, defines cultural occupations as including architects, town and traffic planners, librarians, sculptors, decorators, designers and clowns, amongst others. Even with this variegated definition, though, these kinds of jobs account for only 2.7% of employment in the EU states. In the US, 'cultural occupations', in a more variegated and broader definition encapsulating all workers in cultural industries (and collapsing, for example architects and engineers), took up some 10.5% of total employment in 2006 (Anheier and Isar 2008: 399).

In the UK, where the creation and support of the 'creative' industries has been a central economic policy focus since 1997, government estimates suggest these account for 1.8 million occupations in 2008 (the largest single areas here are the software industry, accounting for some 300,000 jobs and the music industry accounting for nearly quarter of a million). The key story here, though is one of *growth*, with an increase of almost 40% in the number of businesses operating in the creative sector as it is defined in the UK, and growth in the number of jobs in this sector which is almost double the rate of growth in jobs in the economy as a whole in

the last 10 years^{iv}. If we add in the broadened vision of the creative class as it emerges from Florida, then the new orientations to culture in the workplace which are assumed to accompany it account for a far greater proportion of workers. In Denmark, for example, where Eurostat identifies 3% of workers in cultural occupations, according to Florida, the broader 'creative class', account for 21.29% of jobs or 41.29% if technicians working in creative class enterprises are included. This same, expanded creative class accounts for some 30% of the labour force in the US according to Florida, and is more recently identified as 37.3% in the UK) (Clifton, 2008). The growth in employment in this sector is likely to continue if we consider the kinds of figure that Tepper (2002) reveals, i.e., that in 1994 one university or college applicant in sixty-two in the UK was considering a career in art or design. Only five years later it was one in nineteen. Add to this the rise and popularity of the humanities, media studies and Cultural Studies as disciplines which embed fluid cultural hierarchies into their knowledge production and an open, tolerant vision of the relationships between legitimate and commercial culture is increasingly mundane to a growing section of the educated professional classes. Peterson has identified the cohort effect in relation to age and the growth of omnivorousness – but it is a cohort effect that is intimately linked with the changing architecture of cultural hierarchies embedded in both the training and education of cultural workers and the fact that the value or specialness of creative work as a source for cultural value can no longer be linked to its rarity.

Alongside this increase in volume of cultural workers, there is an identifiable shift in orientation, in relation to the role of cultural producers. Contemporary creative industries celebrate a breakdown of cultural hierarchy as emblematic of a new way of, on the one hand, doing business and, on the other, producing art and culture which, rhetorically at least, eschew what are imagined as the stuffy, snobby approaches of the recent past. There is an important separation between ‘legitimate’ and ‘commercial culture’ embedded into discourses of cultural hierarchy, even as their social origins are revealed by Bourdieu’s field of cultural production (1996). In the contemporary cultural or creative industries this kind of distinction may be being marginalised. Hartley (2005), for example, points out that stable notions of high and low culture were connected to the civic-humanism of European elites in the nineteenth century as part of narratives of self-government which imagined the co-existence of a community of taste and a broader ‘cultured’ public sphere. In the mid-to-late twentieth centuries the distinction between high and low is re-cast, via Adorno (1991), as one where the *industrial* production of culture generates anxieties about homogenisation of things and of consciousness in the service of the state and in the interests of capital. Commercial culture here is a synonym for inauthentic culture, and its producers are not given – and nor might they seek – the status of artist. The more recent shifts towards the notion of ‘creative industry’ as the discursive framework of cultural production, though, is based on a different vision of the relationship between culture, commerce and citizenship where the provision of *variety*, within the parameters of a more ‘democratic’, consumerist republic of taste is a central organising principle. The omnivore might be a surprising discovery to

those engaged in the sociology of culture, then, but it may be more an accepted vision of a consumer emerging from a growing set of cultural producers who work precisely with a vision of cultural hierarchy as fluid and open. This notion can be explored further with through consideration of a second story of abundance.

Abundance of things

The increasing variety, range and form of culture has long been a source of academic and intellectual curiosity, even anxiety. One might argue, as Jonathan Rose (2001) intimates, that the very identification of a 'canon' of legitimate literary works, for example, is itself a response to the perception of an exponentially increasing volume of works which inevitably escapes the stewardship of cultured elites. Canons and hierarchies, in other words, provide a means of managing cultural abundance and the negotiation of the relationships between high and low have historical antecedence bound up with these struggles. We might hear echoes of the omnivore, for example, in JB Priestley's contribution to an early twentieth century 'battle of the brows' where he valorises 'the broad brow', as someone able to bring a critical sensibility to bear on 'Russian dramas, variety shows, football matches, epic poems, grand opera, race meetings...dance halls, detective stories and to enjoy to the full what there is worth enjoying, giving even the Devil his due' (Priestley, 1926, quoted by Bazendale, 2009).

In the contemporary context, this intellectual concern with the effects of an increased volume of culture develops a particular urgency as the provision of a broad range of choices becomes an industry and policy goal in the cultural sector. In the realm of culture the 'value' of choice generates contrasting responses. The volume and availability of a range of artefacts across a range of fields is proposed as a social good, facilitating the access to 'high' culture to a wider range of people (see, for example Cowen, 1998). At the same time, this industrial production generates anxiety that too much culture, diminishes, trivialises, swamps or drowns culture's assumed authentic or transcendent character (see Schwartz, 2008; Miller, 2004). According to UNESCO estimates, at the dawn of the 21st century one million titles were published annually around the world, for example. In his recent interrogation of the range of cultural material available to consumers, Schwartz estimates this at one fiction title published in the US every thirty seconds – and the volume is still increasing. He also notes the increasing number of annual film production, citing, alongside the increasing annual output of Hollywood, the 300 films exhibited at the Toronto film festival in 2004 – 30 a day, far more than even the most dedicated enthusiast might see and clearly far more than the average viewer might reasonably encounter. Not all of this abundant culture will find an audience. The high failure rate of commercial cultures is a central plank of John Fiske's (1989) theory about popular culture and its creative take-up by the audience despite, not because of, the high priests of cultural tastes and their assumptions of value. The management of this abundance through the structured rarity of release and promotion schedules has been a strategy of the cultural industries since the second half of the twentieth century.

Contemporary developments in cultural production and circulation might suggest this ‘artificial scarcity’ (Hesmondhalgh, 2008: 554) is becoming harder to maintain.

In his recent influential account of cultural economics of the digital age, the business analyst Chris Anderson jarringly suggests that, ‘many of our assumptions about popular taste are actually artefacts of poor supply-and-demand matching – a market response to inefficient distribution.’ (Anderson 2006: 16) Based upon the revelation that 98% of Amazon’s top 100,000 books sell at least one copy once a quarter, the thrust of this thesis is that the contemporary cultural industries work precisely with a vision of a consumer who *ordinarily* ranges across a wide variety of forms of culture and that catering to niche forms of specialist connoisseurship, rather than generating best-sellers, is increasingly the source of competitive advantage in cultural production. This is a process enabled by the increased access to the vast digital catalogues of *iTunes* or *Amazon* etc. but is arguably a continuation of a longer process whereby technology alters the means by which culture is distributed.

Mass forms of communication, such as television, enable a broadened access to culture in a range of forms that compromises the rarity of high or legitimated forms upon which cultural hierarchies rest. Whilst some studies of taste recognise this, television is still culture’s ‘other’, understandably perhaps in Bourdieu’s homology account but also within the more contemporary omnivore debate. Empirically, survey questions on ‘television’ often fail to complicate either the range of ways of watching and engaging critically or passively or – more significantly – fail to take

account of the possibility of a 'canon', or hierarchy of television texts. The rise of television studies as an arm of critical Cultural Studies, and the 'consecration' of texts such as HBO's *The Wire*, or *The Sopranos*, as the acceptable TV of the educated middle-classes of the US and Europe indicates this. The emergence of cable, satellite and digital means of circulation allow a wide range of types of television to be viewed without much effort. On the evening of the day I write this (a pretty typical Tuesday in the UK, the 22nd July 2009), for example, my viewing choices include, along with the property development shows, health based reality shows, quiz shows and soap operas which are the staple of British television, an interview with the novelist Martin Amis, a Korean gangster film, *Oldboy*, a broadcast of Jean Cocteau's *Orphee*, a documentary about the Dead Sea Scrolls and the televising of a staging of the Weil-Brecht opera *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* in Salzburg. It is notable here that these 'high cultural' texts are not solely delivered by public service broadcasting in the UK, but also through the BSkyB network's *Sky Arts* channels. Without denying the specific social location of the viewing of arts programmes this range and variety facilitates the exposure of a wider range of people in a wider range of places to a wider range of drama, film, music and literature all of which are either delivered, mediated or adapted within what most studies of culture and taste in the omnivore tradition posit as a literal and conceptual black box. This cultural over-load should not be claimed as evidence for the end of social distinctions but neither is it insignificant in their re-working, especially if we, following Bourdieu and Peterson, consider processes of circulation as part of the creation of hierarchies of value. Such developments do not unproblematically democratise access to culture, as one might

conclude from a reading of Cowen's (1998) tribute to the productive abundance of the cultural industries but, neither are they irrelevant to our understanding of the changing relationships between taste and social position which the omnivore debate reveals. They might in fact be more significant than has been previously considered to the emergence of the omnivore.

In particular, there are two substantive implications for the omnivore thesis wrought by an increase in the volume and diversity of culture available for people to consume or participate in. Firstly if omnivorousness requires the crossing of cultural boundaries, then these boundaries are less solid in a context in which both classical and popular forms of culture are produced and circulated on commercial terms and in which popular and commercial cultures are firmly embedded in the curricula of the accrediting institutions of universities themselves. The circulation of value among different varieties of fan community, for example, most notably with respect to forms of popular literature, has been a staple of cultural criticism for a number of years, with readers identified as resisting and subverting a unified canon in pursuit of their particular predilections for romance fiction, science fiction, horror fiction and other forms of genre fiction. Indeed, the sophisticated interpretation of novels by fan readers of various kinds has been central to the emergence of critiques of the canon as elitist, patriarchal and ethnocentric.

Diverse sources of and criteria for cultural value circulate in contemporary cultural consumers, however limited and specifically class located those consumers might be.

Despite this, a cultural hierarchy is assumed to be somehow settled, or moreover is required to be settled if the empirical questions which inquiries into omnivorousness ask are to make any sense. Recent attempts to empirically draw the boundaries between 'high' and 'low', such as those by Warde et al. (2007) reveal some intriguing contemporary patterns. A conceptualisation of high culture as the kinds of cultural tastes and practices which those people with the highest forms of institutionalised cultural capital appreciate, for instance, entails the raising of rock music and even heavy metal in to cultural canon of the early twenty-first century UK. The appreciation of these forms might not, at the present moment, feed through into the generation of the kinds of cultural capital which might allow liking heavy metal to generate the social advantages which Bourdieu proposed for the appreciation of 'traditional' legitimate cultures. At the same time, though, the recognition of commercially produced cultures as valuable by the relatively educationally privileged might also indicate more complex processes of accreditation of cultural forms, no longer traceable purely through the observation of the operation of educational curricula or through the pronouncements of critics, but also through the competing forms of capital that emerge from journalistic or sub-cultural sources. There are a range of accrediting institutions for whom academic value is as likely to be dismissed as stuffy and old-fashioned in the articulation of cultural hierarchy as it is to be accepted without question. Notions of 'cool' are determined through interactions between critics and reviewers attached to commercial organisations concerned with the production and circulation of things themselves. Even the kinds of ad-hoc debates facilitated by on-line reviews posted by consumers with no easily traceable

forms of accredited expertise (Verboord, 2010), and the soft-ware forms of recommendation enabled by the digital technologies of sites like *Amazon*, help shape cultural value alongside notions of the canon determined through accredited expertise and institutionalised forms of capital .

A second substantive point is linked to the recognition of this dispersion of value. There is a methodological question about how the empirical observation of omnivorousness is undertaken, and whether this captures the complexity of an expanded field of cultural production. As much of the debate about omnivorousness has been concerned with musical taste, it is instructive to consider the relationship between how musical taste has been measured in the omnivore research and the field of contemporary music. Peterson and Kern's (1996) article contained some 10 genres, spread across their three broad categories of highbrow (classical and opera) middlebrow (easy listening, musicals and big-band music) and low brow (country music, bluegrass, gospel, rock, and blues). More recent considerations of musical taste using British data have ranged from the four genres (opera and operetta, classical music, jazz and rock) of Chan and Goldthorpe's (2007) univore/paucivore contribution or the eight genres (rock, modern jazz, world music, classical including opera, country and western, electronic, heavy metal, urban including hip-hop and R&B) of Bennett et. al's. In the latter work, where the balance is with commercially produced music, there is an implicit recognition of the increased proliferation of genre in the context of the contemporary music industry. The inclusion of more genres which might readily be described as 'popular' rather than classical and of

genres such as hip-hop and electronic dance music is significant here. Both genres were in existence at the time of Peterson and Kern's interventions but had not achieved the kinds of broad recognition required for inclusion on a general, public, survey of participation. There is, in other words, a lag between the emergence or rise and fall of genres and their fitting into hierarchies of value. What Sandywell and Beer (2005) refer to as the hyper-commodification of genre in the production and circulation of music in the digital age is revealing here. Whilst sociologists of culture can use from four to ten genres of music in order to capture the significance of musical taste, the music industry works with far more fine-grained definitions. *Amazon's* music site has some 17 broad genre categories (discounting 'Christmas music' and 'children's music'). Each of these broad categories has a range of sub-categories, such that Dance and Electronic, for example includes big-beat, break beat, ambient, techno and trance, house and garage. Moreover the digital music company *Gracenote*, which provides genre classification information for marketers within the music industry, works with over 1100 different music genres and sub-genres. Differences within and between genres like this are significant to enthusiasts – but the possibility of internal, genre specific, forms of hierarchy wrought by fans rich in forms of sub-cultural capital might be equally significant for an account of what these genres and sub-genres might mean for broader questions of taste and social position.

Marketeers and digital entrepreneurs in the era of knowing capitalism (Thrift, 2005) are able to quickly respond to changes in tastes, allowing genres in music or other

fields to rise, fall, mutate and evolve in ways which simply are not captured by empirical research into cultural taste and its patterning as it is currently organised. This is accompanied by a rich variety of alternative sources of capital, from within and outside of the academy, to position emerging genres within and move them up and down cultural hierarchies. Thus attempts to know these expanded and variegated forms through the traditional methods of social science become at best, partial, and at worst slow-motion. The considerable variety of available works from across what have been considered the hierarchies of high and low facilitated by mass media, and indeed the proliferation of these media themselves, necessarily alter the solidity of the hierarchies upon which the omnivore argument rests. In the light of this kind of range and variety, and the embeddedness of variety into the everyday technologies and operations of the cultural or creative industries, the figure of an open and flexible cultural consumer again appears less remarkable.

Conclusion

This paper has offered some speculative discussion about the current state and future direction of research into cultural taste. In particular it has attempted to position omnivorousness in relation to the contexts in which culture is produced, circulated and consumed in the early twenty-first century. In doing so it has argued, through the exploration of the stories of abundance surrounding people and things in the field of culture that variety and the traversing of barriers – two central tenets of the

concept of the omnivore - are, in fact, rather unremarkable for contemporary cultural producers and consumers. In keeping with the processes outlined as explaining the emergence of the omnivore by the architect of the concept, Richard Peterson, this mundanity is arguably a function of some specific endogenous and exogenous processes which have accompanied the omnivore in time and space. The mundanity of variety raises fundamental questions for the omnivore debate - specifically its lack of an account of cultural production and circulation. Such an account might generate the conclusion that omnivorosity is a symptom, or even a statistical artefact, of the many changes in the cultural and creative industries of the last thirty years. These include changes in *volume*, i.e. the increased numbers of people working in the cultural industries, being trained through a more culturally reflexive academy to an omnivorous sensibility. There have also been changes in *composition*, whereby the form and make-up of cultural hierarchies, and the sources of cultural value upon which they are based are more variegated. Changes in *orientation*, in particular the spread of commercial imperatives into forms of cultural products and producers which previously defined themselves through the disavowal of commerce, are also important. Moreover, the orientations of those engaged in cultural production are less likely to be informed by the existence of a stable cultural hierarchy but are more likely to take account of, or indeed actively promote a fluid and open one.

It is important not to valorise these narratives— such changes do not necessarily represent a democratising of cultural hierarchies and the critical project of the sociology of culture should be sceptical about an unproblematic collapsing of the

distinctions between new kinds of ways of producing culture and new ways of being people. Indeed, one of the strengths of the omnivore thesis and of Bourdieu's homology thesis that preceded it is that they empirically reveal the social patterning of cultural choices which celebratory accounts of cultural production and consumption as liberation might miss. What the omnivore debate also reveals, though, is that there is a distinction between the cultural world as it is imagined by sociological scholars into relationships of taste and the cultural world as it is imagined by cultural producers themselves. If anything, somewhat disappointingly, the latter have more of an insight than the former into the rich variety of contemporary cultural life. Relationships between production and consumption are arguably central to the theoretical constructions of the cultural hierarchies across which omnivores are assumed to roam. These are central to, for example, the field of cultural production as outlined by Bourdieu and the production of culture perspective of Peterson – the key theoretical and empirical inspirations for the sociological study of taste. Changed relationships between producers and consumers are central to accounts of the place of culture in the new economy; they are less central to sociological accounts of taste itself as they are currently formulated in the omnivore debate. Scholars of cultural taste should not cede the understanding of the contemporary experience of cultural variety to the cultural industries but attempt to develop the methodological tools to take fuller account of the continued abundance of culture in describing emerging relationships between social position and the ways in which culture is produced, circulated and valued.

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Biography

David Wright works in the Centre for Cultural Policy Studies at the University of Warwick. He has research interests in the sociology of taste and popular culture and was co-author, with Tony Bennett, Mike Savage, Elizabeth Silva, Alan Warde and Modesto Gayo-Cal, of *Culture, Class, Distinction*, published by Routledge in 2009.

ⁱ Peterson 2005 provides the most comprehensive review of these.

ⁱⁱ It is noteworthy here that Peterson (2005) reveals 'cosmopolitan' was an early candidate for the name of the label for the phenomenon that eventually became 'omnivorousness'

ⁱⁱⁱ Baumann 2007 is a recent exception

^{iv} Source: DCMS (2009) *Creative Industries Economic Estimates Statistical Bulletin* and 'Table 4, Number of creative businesses in the UK', downloaded from [http://www.culture.gov.uk/images/research/Businesses - Table 4.xls](http://www.culture.gov.uk/images/research/Businesses_-_Table_4.xls), November 2009.