

the rules of the game

CULTURAL CONSUMPTION
AND SOCIAL CLASS IN AMERICA

How do films such as Titanic portray different types of culture and use them to represent characters' class affiliations?

THE 1997 BLOCKBUSTER FILM *TITANIC* IS AS MUCH A STORY ABOUT social stratification on the high seas as it is about the 1912 disaster itself. The top-grossing motion picture of all time, James Cameron's *Titanic* presents, in its first half, a world divided economically and culturally on the basis of social class, where the wealthy live on the upper decks and enjoy first-class accommodations—private cabins, formal dining, fine cigars—while third-class passengers enjoy raucous parties full of music and dancing, albeit while cooped up in steerage. Just as in other films about social class and cultural mores (Jean Renoir's *The Rules of the Game*, Whit Stillman's *Metropolitan*, Robert Altman's *Gosford Park*), in *Titanic* the lines dividing the culture and tastes of the affluent classes from the poor could hardly be drawn in a more stark manner.

Rightly or wrongly, we commonly distinguish between different kinds of culture by relying on labels such as “highbrow” and “lowbrow,” and associate them with their respective class affiliations. (The terms are an unfortunate survival from the nineteenth-century pseudoscience of phrenology in which intelligence was measured by the size of one's forehead, or literally the height of his or her brow.) In the most stereotypical sense, *highbrow* culture (or simply *high* culture) refers to the fine arts consumed by the affluent classes—classical music and opera, ballet and modern dance, abstract painting and sculpture, poetry and literary fiction. We might also include less traditional forms of high culture enjoyed by contemporary cosmopolitan audiences: National Public Radio programs like *This American Life* and *All Things Considered*, PBS television news shows such as *The News Hour* and *Frontline*, and world music recordings from Sufi chanting to Tuvan throat singing. In many ways high culture is merely synonymous with the traditionally humanist conception of culture itself, as the most intellectual and civilizing of leisurely pursuits. (When we say someone is *cultured*, we usually mean that he or she is familiar with *high* culture, just as we might go to an art museum or the symphony to “get some culture” [Grisword 2004, p. 4].)

Meanwhile, *lowbrow* or *low* culture typically refers to the kinds of mass culture stereotypically associated with working-class (or so-called *lower-class*) audiences, including rap, blues, heavy metal, and country music; professional wrestling, stock car racing, rodeos, and monster truck rallies; and gory horror films, gross-out comedies, and pornography. This pejorative label—*low* culture—suggests a set of activities and amusements lacking in virtue and associated with sexuality and the *lower* half of the body, certainly relative to its *highbrow* counterparts. Outrageous moral panics surrounding the imagined sexual and moral degradations of lower-class American culture seem to be a routine occurrence in our national discourse. In a 1985 *Newsweek* article about heavy metal entitled “Stop Pornographic Rock,” the writer complains:

My 15-year-old daughter unwittingly alerted me to the increasingly explicit nature of rock music. “You’ve got to hear this, Mom!” she insisted one afternoon . . . , “but don’t listen to the words,” she added, an instant tip-off to pay attention. The beat was hard and pulsating, the music burlesque in feeling. . . . Unabashedly sexual lyrics like these, augmented by orgasmic moans and howls, compose the musical diet millions of children are now being fed at concerts, on albums, on radio and MTV. (quoted in Binder 1993, p. 761)

These kinds of anxieties about lower-class culture in the United States have historically emphasized the liveliness and ribaldry of African American popular culture, often in hysterical overtones. In 1921, *Ladies’ Home Journal* published a piece that asked, in all seriousness, “Does Jazz Put the Sin in Syncopation?”

Jazz disorganizes all regular laws and order; it stimulates to extreme deeds, to a breaking away from all rules and conventions; it is harmful and dangerous, and its influence is wholly bad. . . . The effect of jazz on the normal brain produces an atrophied condition on the brain cells of conception, until very frequently those under the demoralizing influence of the persistent use of syncopation, combined with inharmonic partial tones, are actually incapable of distinguishing between good and evil, right and wrong. (quoted in Appelrouth 2005, p. 1503)

Today it is admittedly difficult to imagine that the brilliant (not to mention thoroughly inoffensive) music performed by 1920s jazz greats like Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong could have ever generated such fearful hysteria. Another article that same year exclaimed “Unspeakable Jazz Must Go!”

Those moaning saxophones and the rest of the instruments with their broken, jerky rhythm make a purely sensual appeal. They call out the low and rowdy instinct. All of us dancing teachers know this to be a fact. We have seen the effect of jazz music on our young pupils. It makes them act in a restless and rowdy manner. . . . They can be calmed down and restored to normal conduct only by playing good, legitimate music. (p. 1505)

Considered *lowbrow* at the time, jazz in the 1920s was even attacked for ruining the culture of elites, especially classical music. In 1929 the *New York Times* ran a piece entitled “Composer Sees Jazz as Feverish Noise,” in which Sir Hamilton Harty, the conductor of Great Britain’s Halle Orchestra, warns readers, “When future historians look upon the present epoch they will call it a machine age of music. They will see that in an age that considers itself musically enlightened we permit gangs of jazz barbarians to debase and mutilate our history of classical music and listen with patience to impudent demands to justify its filthy desecration” (quoted in Appelrouth 2003, p. 125).



Aretha Franklin singing at the inauguration of President Barack Obama.

Pete Townshend and Roger Daltrey of the Who; ballet dancer Mikhail Baryshnikov and country music singer Willie Nelson; opera singer Luciano Pavarotti and R&B performer James Brown. Blues music, an expressive cultural form that grew out of the life experiences of impoverished descendants of African American slaves, is regularly performed at Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center, and the White House (as is the jazz music once defamed by the *Ladies' Home Journal* and in the *New York Times*), while classical music is now performed at chic downtown nightclubs in New York City (McCormick 2009). Affluent white teenagers adore hip-hop music, while underprivileged African American youth appropriate Tommy Hilfiger's yacht-club clothes and other preppy brands (Polo, Nautica, Munsingwear) as inner-city fashion (Klein 2002, pp. 75–76). Meanwhile, much of our mass culture—notably professional men's football, baseball, and basketball—is celebrated by audiences from *all* social classes and walks of life.

Of course, cultural differences among social classes do abound: wealthy urban professionals are far more likely than the poor to listen to classical music and opera, decorate their homes with abstract art, and read books for pleasure (Peterson 1992; Halle 1993; Griswold 2008). But as illustrated by the preceding examples, the social organization of *taste*—one's preference for particular styles of fashion, music, cinema, or other kinds of culture—is dizzyingly complex. While the last two chapters emphasized the social and institutional worlds in which popular culture is created, we now turn toward an exploration of not only taste, but *consumption*—the reception, interpretation, and experience of culture. Are cultural tastes patterned in some sociological way? How might different consumers read and interpret the same cultural objects in different ways? How are these meanings shaped by larger social or contextual forces?

In this chapter we will attempt to tease out the complex relationship between cultural consumption and social class in America by examining the fluid nature of

Do these kinds of cultural class divisions still hold in contemporary American life? In terms of a high/low distinction, our national culture sometimes seems schizophrenic. At the 2009 inauguration of President Barack Obama, classical musicians Itzhak Perlman and Yo-Yo Ma performed on the same grandstand as soul and gospel singer Aretha Franklin. Past honorees of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C., include orchestral conductor Zubin Mehta and rock legends

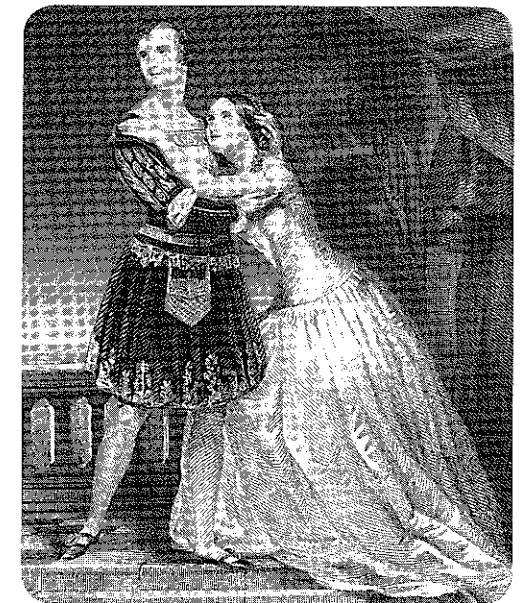
taste and class cultures, and how easily they change over time. We will try to understand how the persistence of certain cultural differences among audiences helps to maintain socioeconomic inequality among social classes. Finally, we will try to explain why the class boundaries surrounding the consumption of American popular culture seem so blurry and confusing, and have been for the last 150 years or so.

The Invention of Class Cultures in America

Like all cultural conventions, distinctions between highbrow and lowbrow culture and taste are socially fabricated and prone to drastic change over time. How do we know this? A brief cultural snapshot of nineteenth-century American society may be instructive. Today, we think of the plays of William Shakespeare as decidedly highbrow, largely considered the height of artistic and literary accomplishment. Students study *King Lear* and *Hamlet* in university courses, and write Ph.D. dissertations on the allegorical design of *Othello*. Audiences sit in silent awe during live performances of Shakespeare's tragedies, particularly those staged by the most prestigious thespian troupes in the world: Britain's Royal Shakespeare Company, the Shakespeare Theater Company in Washington, D.C., and the Public Theater in New York.

Yet during the nineteenth century, Shakespeare's plays were considered *popular culture*—and not only in England but in the United States. Working-class Americans as well as elites shared a deep familiarity and fondness for his plays. In his 1840 publication of *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville reports, "There is hardly a pioneer's hut which does not contain a few odd volumes of Shakespeare. I remember reading the feudal drama of *Henry V* for the first time in a log cabin" (1988, p. 471). According to historian Lawrence W. Levine (1991), Shakespeare's plays were regularly performed on steamboats and makeshift stages in mining camps and breweries as well as in more metropolitan theaters in Philadelphia and San Francisco. As Levine observes, "Shakespeare was performed not merely alongside popular entertainment as an elite supplement to it; Shakespeare was performed as an integral part of it. Shakespeare was popular entertainment in nineteenth-century America" (p. 163).

In many ways, Shakespeare's widespread popularity among Americans in the mid-nineteenth century should not be particularly surprising. His plays matched the



When did Shakespeare become highbrow? An 1849 portrait of Charlotte and Susan Cushman as Romeo and Juliet in act 3, scene 5. Charlotte (left) was considered the most powerful actress on the nineteenth-century stage and was the first American actress to attain critical theatrical acclaim.

mass tastes of the period: they are laden with dry humor and wit, as are the novels of Mark Twain, and his scenes are melodramatic and full of ghosts, just like the poems and short stories of Edgar Allan Poe. His most famous soliloquies, such as *Hamlet's* "To be or not to be . . ." speech, offer the kind of oratory familiar to a nation whose public life required studied attentiveness to lengthy preachers' sermons, and political speeches and debates. Unlike contemporary readers, nineteenth-century Americans would have had little trouble deciphering Shakespeare's Elizabethan English, since the most popular book of the era was the King James Bible, first published by the Church of England in 1611—the same year that Shakespeare introduced his comedies *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*. Moreover, American audiences would have sympathized with Shakespeare's worldview that placed the individual human being at the center of the universe, a creature of free will with ultimate responsibility for his or her own destiny: indeed, this is how Americans viewed themselves.

But perhaps the biggest reason that Shakespeare's plays were considered popular culture has to do with the social organization of American entertainment in the nineteenth century. Unlike the highbrow/lowbrow distinctions of today, 150 years ago Americans enjoyed a national popular culture consumed and experienced collectively by the masses, by people from *all* social classes. Live entertainment performances were attended by a microcosm of society, arranged according to socioeconomic status—aristocratic gentlemen and ladies luxuriated in the boxes, the merchant and professional middle classes sat in the orchestra, and working-class audiences crowded the gallery, or balcony. (As an illustration of the intense racial segregation of the period, African American attendees of all classes were relegated to the balcony as well.) During performances of Shakespeare, those in the cheap seats would express their derision of an inept actor by pelting him with eggs, apples, potatoes, carrots, lemons, cabbages, pumpkins, and in at least one reported instance, a dead goose (Levine 1991, p. 168).

Likewise, American entertainment blended diverse genres and styles in ways that would be thought blasphemous by today's standards. Theaters presented Shakespearean plays alongside acts by magicians, dancers, acrobats, and comics (p. 164). According to Princeton sociologist Paul DiMaggio's (1982) research on nineteenth-century Boston, concerts featured the mingling of classical music compositions, Italian opera, devotional and religious songs, and popular tunes (p. 34). As for other entertainment spaces,

Museums were modeled on Barnum's: fine art was interspersed among such curiosities as bearded women and mutant animals, and popular entertainments were offered for the price of admission to a clientele that included working people as well as the upper middle class. Founded as a commercial venture in 1841, Moses Kember's Boston Museum exhibited works by such painters as Sully and Peale alongside Chinese curiosities, stuffed animals, mermaids and dwarves. For the entrance fee visitors could also attend

the Boston Museum Theatre, which presented works by Dickens and Shakespeare as well as performances by gymnasts and contortionists, and brought to Boston the leading players of the American and British stage. The promiscuous combination of genres that later would be considered incompatible was not uncommon. As late as the 1880s, American circuses employed Shakespearean clowns who recited the bard's lines in full clown make-up (p. 34).

Today, the idea of *King Lear* being performed at the circus stretches and boggles the mind, as does the image of rowdy working-class audiences hurling rotten vegetables down from the balconies of the Metropolitan Opera House. So what happened? Well, the Industrial Revolution happened, creating a new upper-class American elite of successful entrepreneurs, bankers, and businesspeople. (The richest men in American history—John D. Rockefeller, Cornelius Vanderbilt, John Jacob Astor, Stephen Girard, Andrew Carnegie—first amassed their great fortunes in the nineteenth century during this time.) This *nouveau riche* (literally "new rich") class enjoyed untold wealth, but few of the refinements that grow from an aristocratic upbringing—in fact, many came from rather humble backgrounds. These increasingly status-conscious industrialists therefore drew on the trappings of European nobility—family crests, indulgences in French cuisine, classical art and music—in crafting newfound cultural tastes and symbols of distinction for themselves (Beisel 1993). To this end, in the late-nineteenth century this new bourgeoisie began erecting class boundaries concretized in elite arts and cultural organizations, including the Boston Symphony Orchestra and the Museum of Fine Arts, the Art Institute of Chicago, New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Philadelphia Academy of Music (Zolberg 1981; DiMaggio 1982).

With these elite institutions, the upper classes of the Gilded Age successfully *invented* the highbrow/lowbrow class-based cultural distinctions that today we take for granted. This invention of class cultures required conscious efforts at boundary maintenance and social exclusion, most obviously through the development of special entertainment venues, so-called legitimate theaters and museums in which to consecrate and present classical music, opera, drama and art as "serious" culture for upper-class audiences. By making ticket prices and subscriptions prohibitively expensive and strictly enforcing dress codes and rules of social etiquette (no throwing cabbages allowed, I presume), the elite effectively excluded members of the working classes from participating in these new worlds of cultural esteem. By the turn of the twentieth century, the American upper classes had eventually succeeded in bifurcating the nation's once diverse *mélange* of popular culture—Shakespearean tragedy, circus clowns, acrobats, contortionists, mermaids, dwarves—into separate stylistic offerings of "serious" and "popular" culture, each redefined on the basis of class and prestige. Given the wholly manufactured nature of this prestige, it is perhaps fitting that the word *prestige* itself was originally used to describe the illusions, tricks, and fakery of magicians and jugglers.

Class Status and Conspicuous Consumption

For the American upper classes, attendance at classical symphonic music and Shakespearean theater performances represented part of a larger set of rituals and customs designed to exhibit status and distinction in public. In his classic work *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, Thorstein Veblen ([1899] 1994) coined the term *conspicuous consumption* to describe these status displays since they represent attempts to show off one's wealth through the flagrant consumption of expensive and luxurious goods and services, particularly those considered wasteful or otherwise lacking in obvious utility, like diamond bangles or high-heeled shoes. Even today, upper-class tastes tend to emphasize *form over function* as well as *quality over quantity*, which is why expensive restaurants often serve tiny portions of elaborately presented foods, such as salmon sashimi or Spanish tapas. Of course, the very wealthy not only enjoy an excess of money but also free time, as displayed in pursuits that Veblen called *conspicuous leisure*. They include playing sports that emphasize specialized technical skill and elaborate training, such as golf, polo, fencing, or equestrian riding, and studying dead languages like ancient Greek.

The conspicuous consumption of luxury SUVs, summer homes, ski vacations, and spa treatments has a noteworthy counterpart—the purposeful *avoidance* of popular culture associated (rightly or wrongly) with working-class tastes. Health crazes among the affluent typically revolve around the denigration of foods preferred by poor people, chiefly inexpensive yet efficient sources of protein, fat, and carbohydrates: fried chicken, cheeseburgers, tacos, pizza, and so forth. According to sociologist Bethany Bryson (1996), when asked about their music preferences and dislikes American respondents are most likely to express disapproval for those genres associated with less educated audiences: heavy metal, country, gospel, and rap. Pejorative class-based characterizations like “ghetto,” “trailer-park,” and “white-trash” are commonly affixed to low-status behaviors and styles as a strategy of dismissal.

If affluent Americans studiously avoid symbolic or cultural associations with the working class, the opposite is almost certainly not true, since the members of all social classes often try to emulate the conspicuous consumption of the superrich, at least in superficial ways. While poor African American youth embrace Tommy Hilfiger and Polo country-club fashion, young inner-city mothers adorn their babies in expensive brand-name clothes like Reebok and Nike (Anderson 1990, p. 125). Another example

might be the widespread popularity of designer knockoff handbags, wallets, earrings, and sunglasses, replicas of high-priced brands from Prada to Chanel to Louis Vuitton. (Perhaps as a means of competing with the imitation jewelry industry, Tiffany and Co. sells a small heart-shaped charm for \$80, which caters to a significant market of consumers who desire the celebrity luster of the Tiffany brand but cannot afford their \$7,100 diamond bracelet.) More audacious emulators of the rich and famous hire personal paparazzi firms like Celeb 4 a Day to follow them around with cameras while nightclubbing. Meanwhile, the success of the \$161 billion American wedding industry depends on the strength of the fantasy that everyday people deserve the trappings of wealth—limousines, glamorous clothing, catered cocktail parties, ice sculptures, endless glasses of champagne—if only for one special evening (Mead 2007).

Cultural Capital and Class Reproduction

One might reasonably ask what is at stake here. If cultural consumption is all about image making, why do the images matter so much? After all, the billionaire who drives a beat-up pickup truck and wears discount-store clothes (as Wal-Mart's founder Sam Walton did) still has his overflowing bank accounts. Yet in fact, quite a lot might be at stake, if we bear in mind that cultural tastes and consumer habits have social consequences that extend far beyond one's wardrobe or iPod playlists. Rather, cultural tastes have value and can be transferred to others, converted into financial wealth, and ultimately help to reproduce the class structure of our society.

This is admittedly a big claim, so let us start with the basics. In his venerable book *Distinction*, French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1984) discusses his concept of *cultural capital*—one's store of knowledge and proficiency with artistic and cultural styles that are valued by society, and confer prestige and honor upon those associated with them. Cultural capital refers to one's ability to appreciate and discuss intelligently not only the fine arts but elite forms of popular culture as well, such as art-house cinema and foreign films, critically acclaimed novels, television and NPR radio programs, and sophisticated magazines like *Harper's* and *The New Yorker*. It also includes one's experience with cosmopolitan culture, particularly one's fluency in foreign languages, and the cultivation of taste for global, international, or fusion cuisine. Cultural capital also refers to one's familiarity and competence with the rules of dress and etiquette appropriate for upper-class social situations, such as knowing how to tie a necktie in a Windsor knot, when to applaud during symphonic concerts, and how to eat sushi with chopsticks in an expensive Japanese restaurant.

Why call this kind of knowledge *cultural capital*? Bourdieu uses the term *cultural capital* because it shares many of the same properties as economic capital or wealth. Like wealth, cultural capital is unevenly divided among the social classes, largely because it tends to be *inherited*, passed among generations within families. One's taste and appreciation for the fine arts is never derived naturally but taught through constant exposure and positive reinforcement, often at a young age. The homes of upper-class families are brimming with



Yachts at the dock in Nantucket Harbor. Over the past decade the island has come to be dominated by the conspicuously superrich.

collections of novels and nonfiction books, paintings and drawings, atlases and maps, and all kinds of music. Wealthy families introduce their children to the arts by taking them to museums, plays, and concerts, and by sending them to private piano, violin, and ballet lessons. They take them to exotic ethnic restaurants, bring them on European vacations to world capitals like Paris and Rome, and send them to college preparatory boarding schools. In doing so, parents try to cultivate in their children the same sense of respect and esteem (if not actual affection) for the fine arts and cosmopolitan culture that they themselves have come to appreciate, or at least value.

Of course, the transfer of cultural capital from upper-class parents to their children can be a pricey proposition—think of the expense of all those years of ballet and music lessons, foreign travel, and private school. In this sense, economic capital itself can be *converted* into cultural capital as an investment. In fact, the returns on such an investment can be substantial given that once accumulated, cultural capital can be converted back into economic capital. High-paying law firms and consulting agencies screen their applicants not only on the basis of their intellect and academic achievement but on their cultural skills and habits as well. During interviews, recruiters evaluate candidates on their business attire and hygienic appearance, and their articulateness in English and fluency in other languages. Once hired, new employees may be expected to socialize with their bosses or associates while skiing or playing golf (both expensive recreational pursuits requiring years of training), or else they may be asked to entertain clients at dinner parties at fancy restaurants—they will need to know how to order wine from a sommelier, correctly distinguish between their salad and entrée forks (the salad fork is always on the outside), and know how to properly break and butter their dinner roll (in small pieces). In much of the business world, the rules of the game privilege those with impressive levels of cultural capital, and access to high-income occupations (or otherwise prestigious jobs in higher education, publishing, or the performing arts) may require it. During the application process and on the job itself, recruits who make the most of their cultural capital are able to convert it back into economic wealth, as represented by the financial rewards of the high-paying job itself.

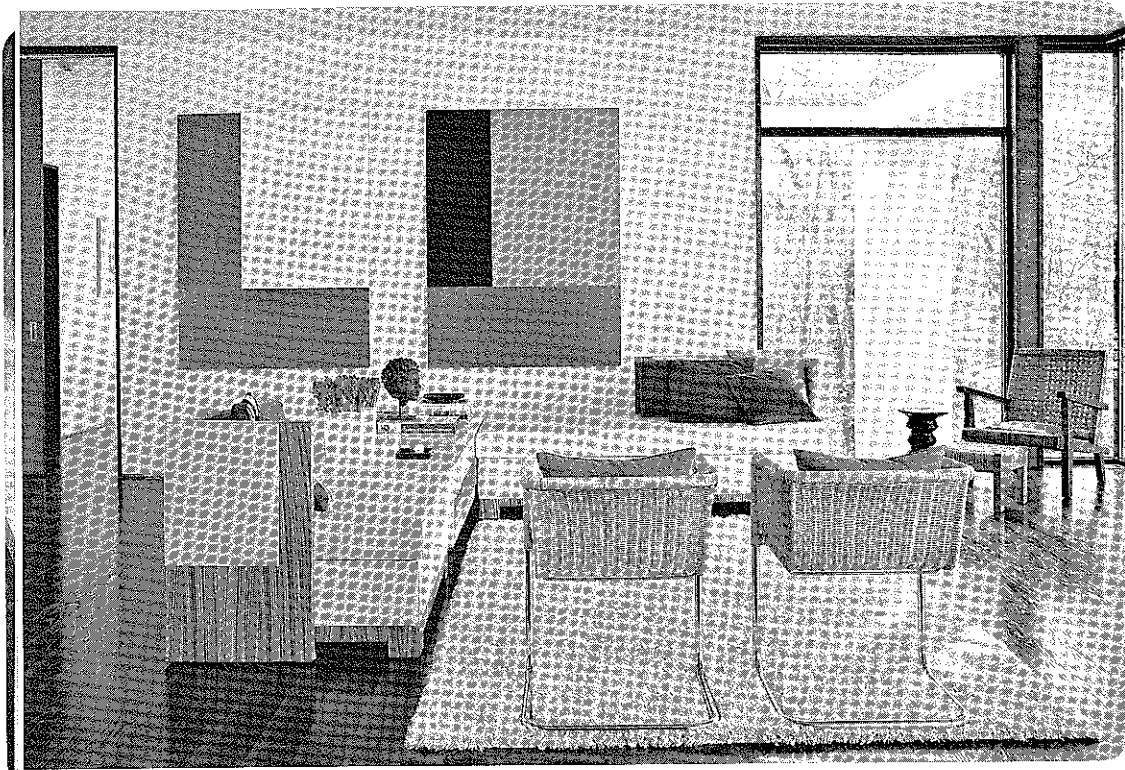
If cultural capital is therefore transferable (from parents to kin), and convertible (to economic rewards), then it is hardly a stretch to hypothesize that over time the organization of cultural tastes and consumer habits might work to reproduce the class structure of our society. Upper-class adults use their cultural capital to secure lucrative jobs and invest their incomes in cultivating the same tastes and cultural skills in their children, who eventually generate enough cultural capital of their own that they can effectively continue the cycle. In doing so, the upper classes reproduce themselves over and over again, in perpetuity if they wish, leaving behind those who lack basic competence in elite cultural consumption themselves and the resources to train their children to do all that much better.

Of course, when accessing how cultural capital operates in the United States, we must remember that our industries and social institutions not only

discriminate on the basis of socioeconomic class, but race, ethnicity, and gender as well. As University of Pennsylvania anthropologist Philippe Bourgois (2002) discovered during his research among young Puerto Rican men in New York City, the tough style of interpersonal communication they developed while on the streets of East Harlem was completely incompatible with the white-collar culture of the corporate world, a sad fact that consistently resulted in job termination for these otherwise hardworking employees. Research also suggests that within the business world, familiarity with professional sports probably matters much more than knowledge of the fine arts (Erickson 1996); this could give males a powerful advantage over equally qualified women when competing for jobs and promotions. (Obviously, since the 1970s the female audience for American sports has grown tremendously, particularly among active women who participated in high school or intercollegiate athletics at earlier ages, and so to a certain degree this is changing.)

We should also bear in mind that different professions may reward different kinds of knowledge. For example, in today's global postindustrial economy, *technical* expertise likely matters more than cultural capital, especially in professions such as financial services, investment banking, real estate development, insurance, engineering, and software development. These fields employ many smart workers admired more for their mathematical prowess than their aesthetic sensibilities and who often work in hidden backstage settings rather than face-to-face with clients. In fact, during the Internet boom of the 1990s, startup firms regularly hired computer programmers whose dress ranged from casual to slovenly, and who pulled all-nighters by gorging on leftover pizza and cola between games of ping-pong and foosball. (My guess is that the salad/entrée fork distinction was somewhat irrelevant in this environment.) Alternatively, many jobs in the media industries—advertising, publishing, Web site design, music and film editing—obviously *do* demand a wide set of aesthetic skills, while employment in high-end retail, dining, entertainment, and other service industries in which workers interact with wealthy customers may require cultural competencies and communicative skills that resonate with upper-class style (Grazian 2008b, p. 47).

In the end, Bourdieu's arguments about cultural capital depend on whether differences in cultural tastes and consumer habits persist among social classes in the United States. In fact, it turns out that they do, but only *sort of*. According to surveys conducted in 12 major U.S. cities by the Ford Foundation in the 1970s, professionals and managers were more likely than their blue-collar counterparts to have attended live symphony, ballet, and opera performances in the past year. But social researchers made an interesting discovery: while *relative* attendance among the upper classes was quite high, in fact the *absolute* number of participants was quite low—shockingly low. Among professionals, only 18 percent had attended the symphony in the past year; the ballet, 9 percent; the opera, only 5 percent (Halle 1993, p. 8). As a potential strategy of class domination, this would seem like an especially weak effort on the part of the upper classes.



UCLA sociologist David Halle found that most of the upper-class residents in Manhattan whom he interviewed hung abstract art in their homes, while none of the residents in a lower-middle-class neighborhood in Brooklyn did. What does his research tell us about contemporary elites and class-based taste?

Still, if participation in the arts among the affluent seems tepid, perhaps it can be explained by the vast amounts of cultural capital needed to actually comprehend and experience such highbrow fare in the first place. To find out, UCLA sociologist David Halle (1993) interviewed a variety of people from different neighborhoods in the New York City metropolitan area about their consumption of modern abstract art (i.e., Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee, Piet Mondrian, Jackson Pollock), typically regarded as highbrow culture enjoyed by contemporary elites. Sure enough, he discovered that 55 percent of the residents he sampled from Manhattan's ritzy Upper East Side display abstract art on the walls of their homes, while *none* of his respondents from a lower-middle-class urban neighborhood in Brooklyn did. Instead, these less well-off residents tended to decorate their homes with landscapes, and photographs and portraits of family members, and only a quarter of them claimed to even *like* abstract art. Of those who expressed their dislike for it, 30 percent complained that abstract artists are "charlatans" and "frauds," while nearly half said that abstract art was "too complex to understand" (p. 127). Others decried that it is "cold," "harsh," "unemotional," "ugly," and ultimately has no meaning.

Judging from these findings, it would seem that the consumption of abstract art reflects class differences in aesthetic taste, attributable to social inequality on the basis of cultural capital—until the reader learns exactly *why* Halle's affluent respondents collect abstract art. In interviews with Halle on this question, upper-class professionals emphasized the most mundane features of abstract art, like its decorative qualities—its lines, colors, and shapes (p. 129). Some admitted that they liked certain pieces because they matched their furniture, or otherwise improved the décor or even the acoustics of a room in their home. According to one lawyer, "I like the colors. I think of art in semidecorative terms. I think of how it will blend into the room. To me lines and colors are important in themselves. For instance [discussing a large, bright tapestry by Sonia Del'áunay] I like the vibrant colors—the dark sinks and recedes. And we wanted a tapestry to absorb sound, since we had taken up the carpets." Another Manhattan resident confessed, "I like them because they're colorful. They brighten up the wall. I aimed for colorful art because of the grayness of the wall and the grayish carpet" (p. 130). As Halle observes, it is hard to imagine why one would need much cultural capital at all to make these kinds of "aesthetic" evaluations; certainly, contrasting a colorful painting to a gray wall does not require an advanced degree in European art history or visual studies. Of course, this hardly means that the consumption of abstract art is *unrelated* to status and distinction—far from it—but it does emphasize the superficial and sometimes flaky character of class-based tastes.

From Cultural Snob to Omnivore

One of Halle's more interesting findings is that while Manhattan professionals are more likely to feature abstract art in their homes than other cultural consumers, they are also much more likely to collect a wider variety of other kinds of art as well. Among Halle's urban elites, 58 percent display non-Western art in their homes, including African, Oceanic, and Native American figurines, masks, weapons, baskets, jewelry, pottery, textiles, musical instruments, and other artifacts, higher than any other group sampled in his research (p. 149). They are also more likely to display painted portraits (45 percent), and landscapes that depict the past (77 percent), or past or present foreign societies (79 percent), or Japan, Britain, or France (38 percent) (pp. 81, 94).

Research on other kinds of cultural consumption suggests similar findings. According to Vanderbilt University sociologist Richard A. Peterson (1992), highly educated professionals are more likely than others to attend opera, jazz and classical music concerts, Broadway musicals and dramatic plays, art museums, ballet and modern dance performances, as we might expect of the stereotypical upper-class snob. (Think Frasier and Niles Crane from the NBC sitcom *Frasier*.) However, they are also more likely to participate in almost *all other* recreational activities than their lower-class counterparts as well, including attending sports events, exercising, gardening, boating, camping, hiking, and photography. (They are also more likely to listen to blues, soul, and big band music.) This suggests that in the context of American life, elite status is signified not only by an



Jay-Z, platinum-selling rapper, entrepreneur, and CEO. How is he an example of Elijah Anderson's concept of code-switching?

affinity for highbrow culture but an appreciation for practically *all* major kinds of leisure activities, creative pursuits, and cultural consumption, highbrow *and* low.

Peterson (1992) calls these affluent consumers *cultural omnivores* because of their far-ranging tastes, as illustrated by well-off suburban teenagers who enjoy hip-hop and punk rock, or the college professor who loves country music. Undergraduate students often display omnivorous consumer tendencies as well. Among those enrolled in my courses at the University of Pennsylvania, in informal surveys students express their simultaneous affinity for radically different pop cultural touchstones. Among movies, the same students seem to like the 1939 epic *Gone with the*

Wind as much as *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy; the most recent adaptation of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and the Will Ferrell comedy *Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby*. One student hit a trifecta: *Casablanca*, *Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery*, and *Hotel Rwanda*. Their music choices are equally omnivorous: folk-rock singer Bob Dylan and R&B pop star Kanye West; jazz artist Miles Davis and pop singer Alicia Keys; country singer Johnny Cash and glam-metal band Guns N' Roses. (And another triple-play: Australian heavy-metal band AC/DC, country music singer Reba McEntire, and the NYC rap group the Wu-Tang Clan.)

Like these students, cultural omnivores rely on their cultural capital not only to consume highbrow fare but also to successfully inhabit several different kinds of social universes, each with a different set of taste expectations, rules of etiquette, and codes of subcultural behavior, language, and style. Yale sociologist Elijah Anderson (1999, p. 36) refers to this ability to negotiate among multiple and varied cultural worlds simultaneously as *code-switching*—a social dexterity famously illustrated by rapper Jay-Z, who moves easily between underground hip-hop clubs and the executive suites of Def Jam Recordings, having served as its president and CEO. (Perhaps Rose, the *Titanic* heroine played by Kate Winslet who smoothly transitions from elegant dining to Irish dancing below deck, provides a suitable fictitious example.) In contemporary American life, the capacity for code-switching and omnivorous consumption signifies class status without necessarily appearing snobbish, which is why so many Facebook members and online daters overload their profiles with dozens of favorite music genres and

seemingly contradictory activities that mix highbrow and lowbrow to dizzying effect—motorcycle riding and ballroom dancing, rollerblading and knitting, bullfighting and ballet. In *Bobos in Paradise* David Brooks (2001) similarly argues that the new upper classes combine elite, bourgeois tastes with bohemian sensibilities, rejecting traditional luxury goods for Costa Rican fair-trade handicrafts, Ethiopian coffee beans, Malaysian curries, Salvadoran fleece sweaters, and vacations to formerly war-torn countries like Cambodia and Vietnam.

(While the upper classes do not fit the image of the stereotypical snob, working-class consumers do not represent an indiscriminate mass audience either, contrary to most negative depictions of low-income Americans. Peterson (1992) observes that as one moves down the class hierarchy, cultural tastes are extremely varied and more easily explained on the basis of other factors besides class, such as regional background, racial and ethnic identification, age, gender, and religiosity. For instance, note the social differences among “lowbrow” consumers of daytime soap operas, hardcore rap, and Christian rock.)

What can explain the emergence of the cultural omnivore? One might speculate that upwardly mobile Americans who hail from working-class backgrounds never really shed their cultural tastes but merely add to them as they acquire cultural capital. The persistence of working-class tastes among the nouveau riche helps explain why four-star restaurants serve upscale, gentrified versions of otherwise pedestrian foods like meat and potatoes. Barclay Prime, an expensive steakhouse in Philadelphia's ritzy Rittenhouse Square district, serves a \$100 Philly cheesesteak prepared with Kobe beef, lobster meat, shaved truffles, caramelized onions, heirloom tomatoes, and melted triple-cream taleggio cheese on a brioche bun; the sandwich comes with a complimentary bottle of Veuve Clicquot champagne (Grazian 2008b, p. 69). (Barclay Prime also serves Kobe “sliders,” a refined take on White Castle's mini-hamburgers.) The persistence of formative tastes among upwardly mobile immigrants who carry traditional ethnic and religious customs and cultural practices—Sicilian cooking, Hindu wedding rituals, Mexican folk art, Senegalese dance—into the high-society world of the upper class might also help to explain the omnivorous consumer habits among elite Americans (Peterson 1992, p. 255).

Another possible explanation for the emergence of the omnivore could be the rising commercialization (and thus increased accessibility and acceptance) of numerous types of working-class, folk, ethnic, and non-Western popular culture. In the early 1980s New York art dealers sold samples of the street graffiti common to the city's ghetto walls and subway trains in exclusive downtown galleries (Lachmann 1988). Recent best-selling books include *Reading Lolita in Tehran* by Iranian author Azar Nafisi, *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Afghan-born novelist Khaled Hosseini, and *A Long Way Gone*, Ishmael Beah's memoir of growing up in Sierra Leone as a child soldier. Starbucks' Hear Music catalogue promotes CD compilations of a range of folk and world music, including Jamaican ska and rocksteady, Brazilian bossa nova, and Mississippi Delta blues. Starbucks also sells CDs by Matisyahu, a Hasidic Jew turned reggae performer who puts spiritual themes to a dancehall beat.

Finally, we must consider that omnivorous consumption is a product of our national ideals concerning democracy and equality. American ideology emphasizes the importance and value of egalitarianism, as reflected in our typically casual dress and informal norms of etiquette, at least when compared to our European counterparts. In her book *Money, Morals, and Manners* Harvard sociologist Michèle Lamont (1992) shows how disparaging Americans are of “social climbers” and “phonies” who “put on airs” (p. 26). Perhaps because we place so much value on equality in our national culture, a 2008 Pew Research Center report estimated that a majority of Americans (53 percent) identify as being “middle class.” If you include those who self-identify as being lower-middle and upper-middle class, the proportion of self-identified “middle class” Americans jumps to over 90 percent, or just about everybody.

Given how Americans so readily identify with the concept of equality as a symbolic ideal, perhaps omnivorous consumption among the affluent classes allows one to perform cultural distinction without appearing overly snobby, pompous, highfalutin’ or out of touch with so-called “common” people. In fact, sometimes it seems as though most would just as well forget about seeming highbrow altogether. In American politics, highly stylized candidates often emphasize their working-class tastes, however manufactured. For example, during the 1990s Tennessee Republican Fred Thompson’s U.S. senatorial campaign reinvented the wealthy lobbyist “as a good old boy: it leased a used red pickup truck for him to drive, dressed up in jeans and a work shirt, with a can of Red Man chewing tobacco on the front seat” (Krugman 2007). Likewise, although he was a graduate of Phillips Academy, Yale, and Harvard, and the eldest son of a former U.S. president, former President George W. Bush’s political career benefited from his handlers’ ability to depict the scion as a rough-riding cowboy and all-around “regular guy.” During Bush’s two terms in office he customarily took his vacations at his ranch in Crawford, Texas—a more ruggedly populist setting than his family’s oceanfront retreat in Kennebunkport, Maine:

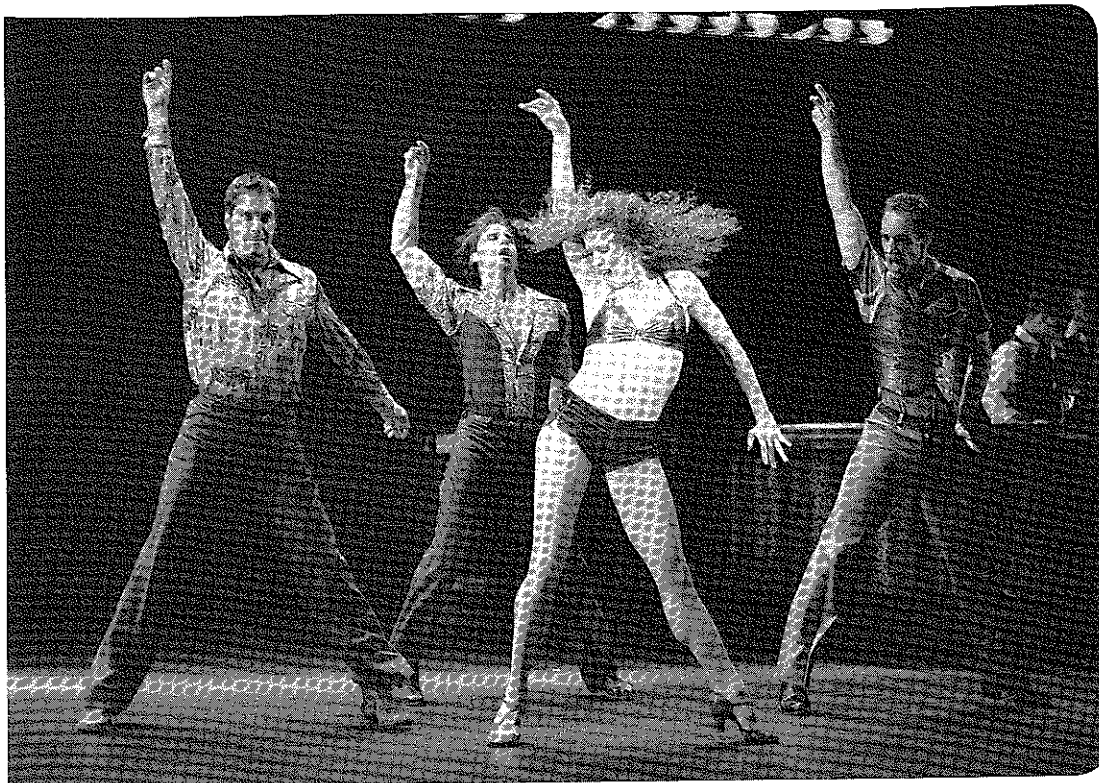
President Bush has spent the last three Augusts at his ranch in the scorched flatlands of Crawford, Tex., where he has cleared brush, gone for runs in 105-degree heat and summoned sweaty cabinet members to eat fried jalapeño peppers at the only restaurant in town. No one ever confused the place with that white-wine-swilling island in the Atlantic Ocean, to reprise the president’s put-down of Martha’s Vineyard, and so Mr. Bush has loved it all the more. (Bumiller 2004, p. A12)

Similarly, after Alaska Governor Sarah Palin’s selection as Arizona Senator John McCain’s vice presidential running mate in the 2008 election, the campaign and media promoted the conservative Republican’s credentials as a middle-class hockey mom, citing her small-town sensibilities, long-standing membership in the National Rifle Association, knack for aerial wolf hunting, and expert ability to properly field dress a moose. Her political fortunes in that campaign began to dwindle when it was discovered that the Republican National Committee spent

\$150,000 on clothing, hair styling, cosmetics, and accessories for Palin and her family in a single month, an outlay that included a \$75,000 shopping spree at the upscale department store Neiman Marcus. For a time McCain himself had been similarly packaged by his staff and the media as a self-proclaimed “maverick” who named his campaign bus the Straight Talk Express. Late in the campaign he touted the support of an everyman working-class figure called “Joe the Plumber,” a fellow who, as it turned out, was not actually a licensed plumber, nor was his name Joe. McCain’s act had already begun to sour when it was revealed that, when asked during an interview, he couldn’t remember how many houses he owned. (And in the interests of bipartisanship, it bears remembering that the 2004 Democratic presidential nominee John Kerry was ridiculed for windsurfing off the hyper-rich coast of Nantucket, and his running mate, John Edwards, was similarly chastened by the press and public for his \$400 haircuts.)

The Blurring of Class Boundaries in American Popular Culture

I began this chapter by suggesting that our national culture today sometimes seems schizophrenic, but the evidence indicates that class boundaries in the United States have always been a bit blurry—in the live entertainment of the nineteenth century, replete with Shakespearean actors, clowns, and acrobats; in the conspicuous if purely symbolic emulation of the wealthy by the working classes through the purchase of designer baby clothes; in the commercialization of graffiti and folk music; and finally, in the cynical masquerading of wealthy politicians and the filthy rich. As historian Michael Kammen (1999) reminds us, the blending of highbrow, lowbrow, and mass culture has been a recognizable quality of American popular culture, entertainment, and art since at least the 1920s. In the late part of that decade, Duke Ellington’s harmonious compositions and performances blended together European classical music, ragtime jazz, and the Mississippi blues, as best illustrated by his 1927 record “Black and Tan Fantasy,” a song that combines the blues melodies of the Deep South and the muted trumpets and stride piano of Harlem’s jazz sound with, of all things, Frédéric Chopin’s Funeral March from his Piano Sonata No. 2 in B-flat minor (Grazian 2003, pp. 28–29). In Walt Disney’s 1940 film *Fantasia* animated elephants, hippopotamuses, ostriches, and Mickey Mouse are accompanied by selections from the classical music canon: Bach’s Toccata and Fugue in D Minor, Tchaikovsky’s *Nutcracker Suite*, Beethoven’s sixth symphony (the *Pastoral Symphony*), and Stravinsky’s *The Rite of Spring*. Starting in the 1950s, Hugh Hefner’s *Playboy* magazine began publishing serious short fiction along with its pictorial centerfolds: its authors have included such luminaries as Vladimir Nabokov, Saul Bellow, Norman Mailer, John Cheever, Gabriel García Márquez, John Updike, Joyce Carol Oates, and Philip Roth. Citing creative influences as canonical as Bach, Vivaldi, Paganini, and Pachelbel, progressive rock and heavy metal artists like Rush, Deep Purple, Van Halen, Randy Rhoads, and Yngwie Malmsteen incorporated complex classical music techniques (harmonic progressions, sliding chromatic figures, minor modalities,



A scene from *Twyla Tharp's Movin' Out*, a musical based on the songs of Billy Joel.

fast arpeggios) into their songwriting and performing during the 1970s and 1980s (Walser 1994).

This blurring of class boundaries continues in contemporary American popular culture, especially as elite culture absorbs more popular influences. Choreographer Twyla Tharp's creations include ballet, interpretive modern dance, and theatrical performances set not only to Brahms and Haydn but also the jazz music of Jelly Roll Morton and the pop songs of Frank Sinatra, Bob Dylan, and Billy Joel, just as in 1993 the Joffrey Ballet premiered a rock ballet danced to the recorded music of Prince. Minimalist composer Philip Glass has written symphonies based on the albums of David Bowie. Mainstream film and television similarly borrows from classical and avant-garde sources. The 1995 movie *Clueless* starring Alicia Silverstone is a modernization of the Jane Austen novel *Emma*, just as Gus Van Sant's 1991 drama *My Own Private Idaho* is based on Shakespeare's *Henry IV* plays. The final season of the TV comedy *Seinfeld* included an episode loosely based on the experimental Harold Pinter play *Betrayal*: like the original, the episode's scenes were presented in reverse chronological order, with punch lines delivered before their setups (Johnson 2006, p. 88).

More to the point, one should consider the central attractions of American popular culture consumed by vast audiences whose members hail from all social classes. The longest running and most successful talk show in television

history, *The Oprah Winfrey Show* is watched by 30 million American viewers every week; its famous host, the highest-paid personality in television, attracts an enormous base of largely female fans from all walks of life. Late-night TV is similarly inclusive as well as popular: in 2006, NBC's *Tonight Show with Jay Leno* enjoyed nightly ratings of 5.7 million viewers, while CBS's *Late Show with David Letterman* drew in another 4.2 million viewers. Professional men's sports, particularly football, basketball, and baseball, attract fans from all social classes, with games enthusiastically followed on fuzzy TV sets in working-class bars and flat-panel plasma-screen home theaters, in upper-deck bleachers as well as in corporate skyboxes. Of all American sporting events, perhaps the Super Bowl is the most celebrated, watched in 2009 by an estimated 98.7 million American viewers of all social classes, its inclusiveness illustrated by the diversity of pop music stars that have performed during its live halftime shows since 2001: U2, Aerosmith, Britney Spears, Nelly, Shania Twain, P. Diddy, Paul McCartney, Sting, Kid Rock, Jessica Simpson, Mary J. Blige, the Rolling Stones, No Doubt, Prince, Janet Jackson, Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers, Justin Timberlake, and Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band. Like Shakespeare's comedies and tragedies during the nineteenth century, the sporting event best represents the nationwide reach of our mass entertainment and popular culture.