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Audience aesthetics and popular culture

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Introduction

Aesthetics are systems through which attributions of value are made regarding cultural objects. If asked, cultural sociologists would acknowledge that aesthetic systems are socially constructed, but there is little agreement among cultural sociologists about whether the concept of aesthetics is a topic worthy of empirical analysis. Some take the position that engagement with the qualities or properties of the cultural object should be avoided altogether. This stance assumes neutrality toward the analysis of artistic works and practices as objects of inquiry in their own right. Guided by the production of culture perspective which attends to the "objective facts of production and consumption . . . found in the social relations governing the production of art: 'the socialization and careers, the social positions and roles' of artists, 'the distribution and reward systems' [and] 'tastemakers and publics'" (Bird, 1979: 30, cited by Bowler, 1994: 251), sociologists who circumvent engagement with the cultural object do so to avoid questions of meaning and value. To these sociologists, meaning is a subjective state that is inaccessible to sociological analysis (Wuthnow, 1987). In this view, such matters are best left to art historians and literary critics.

Emerging more recently is a stance among cultural sociologists that poses questions designed to yield insight into cultural meanings and creative practices underlying the production and reception of cultural objects. In an early contribution to this stance, Barbara Rosenblum's (1978a, b) work on contemporary professional photographers sought to explain variation in photographic styles. While her work on the effects of different distribution channels underscored the importance of production contexts, it also sought to explain recognized differences in style and the aesthetic expectations those styles, in turn, embedded in production contexts. This stance acknowledges how cultural forms and

practices play a constitutive role in society. That is, art or cultural objects are not simply reflections of structural features or material conditions; cultural forms themselves can shape society. Ann Bowler (1994: 253) refers to this as a methodological position arguing for the autonomy of art:

> Specifically, it allows for the conceptualization of artistic production as a sphere always connected with but not reducible to other social processes. Similarly, it allows for the analysis of aesthetic works and practices without recourse to the myth of the transcendent object or artist-as-genius. Finally, this approach positions the relationship of artistic works and practices with social processes at the center of analysis. For the autonomy of art in both of these definitions does not imply that art and society are somehow "separate" in some absolute sense but that the autonomy of art as either a differentiated sphere or an object not reducible to some other social factor *itself* becomes an important focus of the analysis.

Although aesthetics is integral to the operation of art worlds, its contribution to sociological analysis has largely been limited to exploring how aesthetic conventions shape the social organization of cultural production (for example, Becker, 1982) or how distinctions between types of art articulate with class differences or other social groupings (Bourdieu, 1984; Gans, 1974; Halle, 1993). Analysis of aesthetic systems themselves has remained in the domain of art historians and literary critics, because sociologists believed that to study them would reinforce the notion of the solitary, creative artist-as-genius and generate unreflexive, canonical classifications of "great works." Ironically, as Bowler (1994: 254) observes, sociologists' avoidance of aesthetic analysis contributes to that value-laden divide because, "the very act of choosing what *kind* of art to study entails an evaluative component which assigns significance to the objects selected for analysis."

The problematic status of aesthetics as an analytical focus is evident in sociological analyses of all forms of artistic creation, particularly so in studies of the complex art worlds of popular culture such as television and film, where creative interests must co-exist with commercial ones. The issue that frames our analysis is the importance of considering the aesthetic properties of the cultural product itself, not just the circumstances of its production and consumption. While some might argue that issues of aesthetic value are absent, by definition, in the popular realm, in fact popular culture is an important venue for studying aesthetic systems precisely because audiences, as well as creators and critics, can legitimately make judgments about the value of cultural objects. In this chapter, we address the place of aesthetics in the analysis of popular culture through discussion of scholarship and evidence pertaining to two interrelated topics: the critical capacity of audiences in popular culture, and the properties of aesthetics in popular genres. We conclude with a discussion of why sociological

understanding of popular culture requires analysis of the interdependence among aesthetics, the production process, and audience reception.

Aesthetics in sociological analysis of culture

Aesthetic principles and aesthetic systems are part of the package of interdependent practices that make up art worlds (Becker, 1982). Aesthetic systems – criteria for classifying works of art as "beautiful," "good," "not art," "bad," and other expressive categories used to "handle" art – are formulated by those expert with the art form and applied by critics and connoisseurs to arrive at judgments of value or worth of the object in question. In complex and highly developed art worlds, aesthetic consensus provides working participants in the production of specific art works a set of stable values which help regularize practice.

Aesthetician D. W. Prall wrote that aesthetics is "knowledge of qualities in their immediacy and their immediately grasped relations, directly apprehended in sensuous structures" (1967: 30–31). Aesthetic analysis is the demonstration of the relations among elements comprising a scheme or "structure," and, according to Prall, those constituent elements or properties must attain a known or understood coherence before the object can be understood (Prall, 1967: 25). That understanding is achieved because we are "already familiar with them as wholes or types, or with their kind of elements and the kinds of relations native or possible to these elements in complexes" (1967: 41); but, is this kind of understanding of aesthetic elements necessary for a *sociological* analysis of cultural objects and the contexts in which they are produced and received?

Sociologists' disagreement on this question centers on whether the discipline ought to embrace or avoid aesthetics as an independent variable in the analysis of art. Even among those who subscribe to a production of culture view of art worlds, a perspective which generally ignores aesthetics, opinion varies. Some attend only to the socioeconomic strata, market systems, or organizational arrangements through which cultural objects are produced. Examples include: work by DiMaggio (1982), whose study of aesthetic entrepreneurs of the visual and musical arts in nineteenth-century Boston revealed that those cultural forms succeeded because they coincided with class-based interests; Faulkner and Anderson (1987), whose analysis of the film industry showed that directors' careers develop because of economic success on past projects, not artistic innovation; Peterson and Berger (1975), who studied aesthetic innovation in the popular music industry but defined innovation as organizational, not product, diversity; and Bielby and Bielby (1994), who analyzed the organizational context of prime-time television programming as one in which network executives claim to choose innovative programming but instead select from

those with prior successes. To the extent that aesthetics is addressed among these cultural scholars, it is as a dependent variable determined by market structure or industrial organization.

Becker, who also studies the organizational or collective processes through which cultural objects are created, addresses aesthetics in art worlds but asserts: "developing an aesthetic in the world of sociology would be an idle exercise, since only aesthetics developed in connection with the operation of art worlds are likely to have much influence in them" (Becker, 1982: 145). While eschewing the content of aesthetic systems, Becker endorses the concept of "institutional aesthetics," systems which account for the emergence of new aesthetics from existing ones and legitimate artists and their work as art. An example of Becker's approach is Peterson's (1972) study of jazz as a musical style, in which he elaborates sociopolitical conditions and the circumstances of the music industry which led to the aesthetic mobility of jazz from folk to popular to fine art (see also Gilmore's [1987] analysis of the New York concert world, and Gitlin's [1983] of the factors that shape the quality of prime-time television series).

Compared to scholars working in the production of culture perspective, sociologists of art take stronger positions on all sides of this debate, although they disagree among themselves. Among those pressing to forego analysis of aesthetic content altogether is Crane (1987: 148), who argues that "systematic analysis of visual materials by social scientists has rarely been done and few guidelines exist for a sociological examination of aesthetic and expressive content in art objects." In opposition to Crane's position is Wolff (see also Balfe and Wyszomirski, 1985), who centrally locates aesthetic content in analysis of art and art worlds, for "art always encodes values and ideology, and . . . art criticism itself, though operating within a relatively autonomous discourse, is never innocent of the political and ideological processes in which that discourse has been constituted" (1981: 143). While acknowledging that the sociology of art demonstrates the "very arbitrariness [of aesthetics] in laying bare its historical construction" (1981: 141), to Wolff, "it is an historical fact that there is, in contemporary industrial societies, a distinct sphere of life (or level of experience, or discourse) which we designate the aesthetic." While she is agnostic on what is involved in assigning value to cultural products, Wolff stakes out a clear position on the causal status of aesthetics: "although I would argue that any aesthetic judgment is the product of other, non-aesthetic, values, it does not seem to me to have been demonstrated that it is entirely reducible to these" (1981: 142).

The problem lies, according to Wolff, in sociology's inability "to acknowledge the constitutive role of culture and representation *in* social relations" (1992: 710). For Bowler (1994), it lies specifically in the discipline's avoiding the problem of meaning, interpreted by some to be nothing more than the subjective, psychological experience of individuals (e.g., Wuthnow, 1987). But to Bowler, meaning occurs in social interaction and, as Griswold asserts, it can be studied "as a property of specifiable social categories and groups, which are empirically accessible and comparable" (Griswold, 1987: 3–4).

Two examples illustrate this point. Lachmann's (1988) work on New York subway graffiti artists studied how social relations, aesthetics, and ideological meaning fostered graffiti artists' careers. Taggers' "corners," where subway lines intersect, allowed art from different neighborhoods to pass on display and individual muralists' work to become known throughout the community of graffiti artists. Notions of fame, reputation, and territory organized writers' communities and the audiences they addressed. Fundamental to their social organization was "a qualitative conception of style [which] allowed them to develop a total art world, formulating aesthetic standards for evaluating one another's murals and determining which innovations of content and technique would be judged advances in graffiti style" (1988: 242). In their words, the audience of these muralists' art world is appreciative "'cause we's bringing style around" (1988: 244). In another example, Dowd (1993), coming from an avowed "production of culture" perspective, attempts to incorporate elements of "musical attributes" to further understanding of cyclical diversity in the music industry. Specifically, he incorporated the measures of song length and of portion of the song devoted to instrumental passages as aesthetic characteristics affecting the potential for variation in musical innovation, independent of market structure or other product characteristics. In findings that upheld his hypotheses, Dowd demonstrated that musical diversity is something that inheres within the form of the cultural product itself, and is not fully explained by market structure or organizational diversity.

In sum, sociologists who favor analysis of the social structural and institutional determinants of cultural production typically forego altogether any consideration of the qualities of cultural products that make them interesting or appealing to those who engage, utilize, or otherwise appreciate them and create demand for them in the first place. Aesthetic qualities matter, as other scholars demonstrate; they must resonate coherently before a product can be understood, appropriated, or otherwise used in ways that carry its impact outward. Moreover, aesthetic considerations are important if for no other reason than that they serve as the basis for artistic innovation (Becker, 1982). Thus, the constitutive role of aesthetics, culture, and representation in the social relations that comprise everyday interaction and social institutions cannot be overlooked.

Aesthetics, audiences, and popular culture

The contribution of aesthetics to the analysis of cultural products becomes particularly salient when considering popular vs. high art or popular vs. high culture because of the still pervasive assumption that aesthetic quality is lacking in popular art forms (see, for example, Adorno, 1976 [1962]; Shrum, 1991). Gans (1974) challenged such claims, arguing instead that aesthetic criteria apply equally to popular art forms and warrant the sociological analyst's attention. In discussing aesthetic considerations in popular culture, he says:

> I use the term aesthetic broadly, referring not only to standards of beauty and taste but also to a variety of other emotional and intellectual values which people express or satisfy when they choose content from a culture, and I assume, of course, that people apply aesthetic standards in all taste cultures, and not just in high culture. (1974: 14)

Gans raises two important considerations by including popular art in the world of so-called legitimate art. The first is that there are recognizable and observable aesthetic elements or properties (his reference to standards of beauty and taste) in popular cultural forms, and the second is that those properties are aligned with the expression of emotional and intellectual values. That is, even though the cultural object is popular, individuals are applying aesthetic judgments in their selection and engagement of those objects. Gans identifies the collective expression of those judgments as "taste publics"; whether individual or collective, those taste publics are the manifestation of human interest in an art form.

While Gans proposes a multidimensional view of aesthetics in both popular and "high" art worlds, theoretical and empirical research on relevant underlying dimensions is still at an early stage. However, empirical research on audience reception has been pivotal in opening up direct examination of popular aesthetics. That research originated from literary scholarship of texts and their meanings (see, for example, Eco, 1990; Holland, 1975; Holub, 1984; and Iser, 1978), and it became especially relevant when scholars focused on how reception of intended meaning, particularly of popular written and televisual texts, was "negotiated," "resisted," or otherwise transformed though alternative uses (see Press' 1994 review of these developments). Scholarship on readers of romance novels (Radway, 1984), and studies of viewers' reception of "Dallas" in the Netherlands and Israel (Ang, 1985; Liebes and Katz, 1990), along with studies of alternative "Star Trek" fan communities (Bacon-Smith, 1992; Jenkins, 1992; and Penley, 1991) unequivocally revealed the potential for interpretations among popular audiences, autonomous from producers' intended meaning. Scholarship on dedicated viewers of daytime serials (Harrington and Bielby, 1995) introduced another element to understanding audience autonomy

by demonstrating that resistance and marginalized status are not essential for audience authority. This was also the case in Long's (1986; 1987) research on book choices of reading groups, which focused specifically upon the bases for cultural authority in members' selections and textual interpretations. She found that group selections and interpretations are informed by both literary critics and readers' own experientially based preferences. In particular, her work reveals how cultural autonomy is present even among those attuned to the literary criteria of cultural authorities. Although Long's findings do not speak to the bases and content of audience aesthetics as they engage strictly popular art forms, her findings are consistent with work showing how audiences readily partake in their own aesthetic judgments as they engage products of art worlds.

What should be key elements of a sociological approach to the study of a popular culture aesthetic? To achieve broad appeal, the aesthetics of popular cultural objects necessarily emphasize a sense of the familiar and of cultural knowledge widely shared, while simultaneously incorporating sufficient novelty to perpetuate interest. Popular art is understood to be "essentially a conventionalized art which restates in an intense form, values and attitudes already known; which reassures and reaffirms, but brings to this something of the surprise of art as well as the shock of recognition" (Hall and Whannel, 1967: 66). Thus, textual elements such as cultural themes, medium, myth, and formula all warrant attention (Cawelti, 1973). Formula assures entertainment and recreation, which are essential ingredients of popular culture. Formula in particular, engages shared social and cultural rituals and synthesizes cultural values, and thus guarantees the patterned experience of excitement, suspense, and release within the realm of fantasy.

Because of their familiarity, narratives in popular genres are sufficiently "open" for interpretation by different groups and are relatively easily accessible. It is not uncommon for audience members to draw upon their own expert knowledge, participating alongside artists, producers, and critics in the evaluative process (Dunlop, 1975). As a result, popular art forms elicit audience-based critical insight about the worth or value of cultural products which competes with expert authority in popular art worlds. "Word-of-mouth" and other personal endorsements are potentially as influential as the evaluations of professional critics on a cultural product's reception (Shrum, 1991). Thus, consideration of audience-based criticism is a key element of a sociological analysis of popular culture aesthetics.

Not only do popular audiences contribute to critical authority, they also make claims to ownership which take the form of debate over who a text "belongs to," regardless of who actually creates it. Indeed, in many popular artistic realms, the issue of who "owns" the text, who can legitimately speak for it, and who has rights to it is often ambiguous and contested. For example, Star Trek fans contest

or "poach" the narrative in order to write homoerotic fan fiction that transcends the heterosexual specifications of the text (Jenkins, 1992; Penley, 1991), fans of comic-book superheroes vigorously debate the authenticity of screen portrayals of heroes and villains alike (Bacon Smith and Yarbrough, 1991), and fans of country music evaluate whether artists are remaining true to rural traditions (Peterson, 1997). In the remainder of this chapter we explore critical authority, audience criticism, and claims to ownership in popular genres by examining how viewers of daytime serials frame their discussions about aesthetic quality. Doing so allows us to suggest general principals for sociological analysis of popular aesthetics.

Critical authority and claims to ownership: an example from the world of "soaps"

The issues of aesthetic criteria and judgments and of critical distance from popular cultural texts arise in interesting ways within the audience of the daytime serial genre – the "soaps." Ever since soap operas began as a genre of storytelling on radio in the 1930s, cultural and moral gatekeepers have claimed its audience is unable to distinguish fantasy from reality (see, for example, Berg, quoted in Thurber, 1948). Domestic in content and initially targeted to housewives, soaps were devalued by both scholars and media critics. Consequently, the actual critical practices of soap viewers have been overlooked, even though they provide a unique opportunity in which to explore the interconnections between audience aesthetics, evaluation, and popular culture.

Like audiences of other popular media, soap opera viewers frame issues of quality in terms of contested ownership of expert knowledge (Harrington and Bielby, 1995). Critics play an important role in other artistic mediums, and audience members often debate the value of critics' interpretations. For example, film critics mediate between industry and audience, basing their assessments upon specialized, scholarly knowledge that is not readily available to popular audiences (see Bordwell, 1989). Although the content of critics' insights may be questioned, their presence is generally understood and accepted as a legitimate part of the art world of cinema. In contrast, in the world of daytime serials, the role of professional critics has not been fully institutionalized, and soap opera critics rarely represent themselves as having unique, expert knowledge about the aesthetic qualities of the soap opera form. Consequently, audiences directly engage industry producers about issues of quality. Debates typically arise when continuity in storyline or characterization is perceived to have gone astray, and they become arguments about who possesses the most expertise about the history of the narrative or character in question. Thus, in the absence

of professional critics, soap audiences assume that role and feel entitled to make claims to ownership of the narrative. That is, they feel that they know the narrative and its qualities better than the producers do (Bielby, Harrington, and Bielby, 1999; Harrington and Bielby, 1995).

This unique interconnection between the industry and its audience has its origin in the unique properties of the genre. Soap operas are open-ended narratives with storylines that never achieve closure (Cassata, 1985; Intintoli, 1984; LaGuardia, 1974; Whetmore and Kielwasser, 1983). To sustain continuity, soap producers must make the narrative appear authorially seamless, despite the fact that soaps are collaboratively authored by many different participants – producers, writers, directors, actors, and others – who come and go in the world of soap production (Allen, 1985). Ironically, it is soaps' very success at creating and sustaining a seamless fictional world that opens up a space for viewers to assert their claims when they perceive continuity is broken (Harrington and Bielby, 1995).

The distinctive features of the genre's narrative content and structure establish a long-term loyalty in its audience that can last for decades (Hobson, 1982; Seiter et al., 1989; Williams, 1992). As a result, viewers acquire a stock of knowledge and expertise that generates a unique relationship between soap producers and writers, on the one hand, and the daytime audience on the other. Soap audiences believe that their expert knowledge is comparable if not superior to that of the serials' producers and writers, and for this reason they feel entitled to pass judgment on their shows. A typical example of the soap audience's critical capacity is illustrated in the following excerpt from a letter to a daytime magazine. In it, a viewer directly criticizes a show, and by implication its headwriter and executive producer, for debasing the continuity of a narrative that is an audience favorite:

> Patrick's proposal to Margaret on OLTL should have been so beautiful. Instead, it was anticlimactic and hollow, because their love has been forever contaminated by the fact that Patrick slept with Blair and got her pregnant . . . The wonderful unbridled spontaneity of their connection is now forever strained by the wretched new "history" in which they have now been mired. It seems like a trite, cheap melodramatic ploy with no consideration for the fans, the rich history of the show or the integrity of the characters as we remember them, and can only serve to leave us feeling unfulfilled and betrayed by this storyline no matter how it proceeds. (viewer letter, *Soap Opera Weekly*, March 25, 1997: 44)

Soap operas specialize in narratives about emotional life, often told in real time, foregrounding character over plot. Characters are written to exist in many different situations; thus, they have lives and in effect are potentially as knowable as friends and family are in real life (Modleski, 1982). For viewers, "watching

over a long period of time leads to an understanding of what makes a certain character tick – why he or she will seem conniving at times and at other times unselfish. Plays and movies may give an insight into what people are like when they are caught in a certain specific situation – but only soaps can show what people are like in a thousand different situations" (LaGuardia, 1974: 3). Also, soaps' fictional world parallels the vicissitudes of real life. As an art form, soap operas represent lives that are separate from but continuous with those of its viewers. "Fate is the only real villain of daytime serials – and that point is brought home again and again by the death of 'good' characters and the sudden sadnesses inflicted on happy families. In real life people are trapped by fate, and *that* is upsetting . . . All viewers implicitly understand these parallels and react to the serials the way they react to life" (LaGuardia, 1974: 4). Consequently, unexpected plot turns are accepted only if they are perceived as authentic to the patterns of everyday life. Otherwise, viewers reject them as contrived and as violations of the tacit understanding between producer and audience, as the following viewer makes clear:

In all the 30 years of watching soap operas, I have never felt more outraged, sick to my stomach and betrayed as I did today watching *Sunset Beach*. I've invested a year of my time in Ben and Meg's romance, and I am absolutely appalled that Ben is the killer. Executive producer Aaron Spelling [producer of *Melrose Place*] can get away with this kind of sensational stuff in prime time, but on daytime, where viewers like me watch our soaps every day and feel like they know these characters inside and out, to have your leading romantic male character turn out to be a psychotic killer is just the worst kind of betrayal imaginable. I feel like I've been stabbed in the back – or should I say the heart. I really loved Ben and Meg. (letter in *Soap Opera Weekly*, February 10, 1998)

Character development is central to soap narratives, and viewers consider soap characters engaging when they resonate "true to their conceptualization." Especially important in this regard is the consistency with which characters are written and the authenticity of the emotions they express. Dedicated viewers know when a soap is failing to deliver the emotional authenticity they seek, and because they closely monitor the telling of a given story, they feel entitled to complain publicly about how the quality of the show has been compromised, and by whom (Harrington and Bielby, 1995; Hobson, 1982). The criticism is often intense and direct, as can be seen in the following Internet newsgroup posting:

For me OLTL is soulless now, filled with new characters I don't care about, old ones that are unrecognizable, idiotic stories . . . I *want* to return to Llanview, hopefully I will be able to soon, when a writer who cares about Llanview and its characters gets hired. (rec.arts.abc, August 15, 1997)

Soap opera producers often seek to interject social issues with topical relevance into storylines (Gledhill, 1992). "Soap writers and producers, unlike most of their counterparts on the evening shows, are socially concerned enough to run storylines with the specific purpose of conveying socially important information to the viewers" (LaGuardia, 1974: 6–7). One might expect such stories to complement successfully the narratives about everyday experience that are the staple of soap operas. However, as is sometimes the case, the social realism interjected through topical storylines competes with or even undermines the emotional verisimilitude of the fictional narrative. Consequently, soap viewers do not always appreciate these stories when their purpose supplants the overarching goal of soaps, which is to offer "a day-to-day world that palatably combines realism and fantasy" (LaGuardia, 1977: 1). Said one fan about a critically acclaimed and popular storyline about AIDS that appeared on *General Hospital* a few years ago:

I did like the Stone [the hero] story, because I loved Michael Sutton [the actor portraying Stone], and Claire Labine [the headwriter] did a wonderful job with it. And it was incredibly educational, a story and subject that needs to be told about in a medium that reaches people emotionally. But, here again, that's a social awareness story, which soaps in general do a good job with. I'm more impressed when soaps use more creative approaches in storytelling, rather than relying on social relevance all the time.

Because soap opera narratives and characters are observed closely by audiences over extended periods of time, the critical capacity of soap opera viewers develops into an understanding of the genre's conventions and codes, its narrative structure and appeal, and even its cultural marginalization. In the following communication to a fan e-mail group, a viewer articulates how the commercial purpose of soap operas can undermine its aesthetic accomplishments:

You have to justify relationship with characters as much as you can, otherwise people go HUH? where did that come from? That, in my opinion, is where soap operas go wrong again and again. They put in these little plot twists that do not necessarily have anything to do with the continuity of their characters. But maddening as it is, unfortunately, too often, it works. People keep watching hoping that their favorite characters will get straightened out. Then they wait too long to straighten things out, hoping to string you along a little longer and by the time they finally resolve things it is in a rush, some people are already turned off, and they give the characters a few days to be themselves until they are off on along long plot device . . . I think it is more the nature of the beast. They like to manipulate your emotions. As long as you watch the show, they don't necessarily care what you think of their plots. But the bottom line is this industry's chief purpose is to entertain and bring in the ratings. They are always going to do this to us guys.

Not only do viewers recognize the formulas, codes, and conventions that are uniform across the genre, they also understand that styles of telling stories within

the genre's parameters vary considerably by producer and headwriter. That variation is analyzed in discussions among viewers, generating dialog about their own preferences for the stylistic differences of one headwriter over another. For example, one long-term viewer's analysis of a former headwriter compares him to his predecessor and to his successor after his firing. Communicating with another viewer, she wrote:

As for Michael Malone, I'll admit he wrote 3 or 4 good stories, but that's all I'll admit to. And most of the stories he wrote fell apart at the end or were destroyed down the line . . . Michael Malone and Linda Gottleib (the executive producer) wanted to reinvent the wheel but the wheel had been working just fine. His movie-of-the-week plots – or short arc stories – as he called them didn't work in the soap format. His inability to write more than one or two stories at a time is not something I want to go back to either . . . Just like these [the then-current headwriters], his story pacing was awful. Storylines stopped and started on a regular basis. But his worst crime was destroying all the characters I gave a darn about.

Even when viewers accept variation across soap writers' narrative styles, they still debate the ways in which particular writers tell stories. For example, the central importance of romance to soap operas virtually assures that there will be debate among viewers about the ways in which it is portrayed. In the following illustration, viewers differ in their preferences for idealized versus cynical visions of romance, and they articulate their own scenarios for a troubled married couple and a possible interloper. One viewer prefers the "endless seesaw action" of a constantly shifting triangle, while the other feels it is important to have a couple that viewers care for and for whom some payoff and resolution is assured.

My dream storyline for these three [characters] is not one couple over another, but a true threesome. In this scenario . . . Todd will not allow himself to have a physical relationship with the wife for whom he is beginning to have romantic feelings. He will not subject a woman he admires and desires to the "beast" within him. But Todd would realize that because he cares for her, he wants his unfulfilled wife to achieve fulfillment. He will try to put his dangerous jealousy in the deep-freeze and give Tea tacit approval for her to exercise her pre-nup granted to other relationships . . . In the other corner at the base of this triangle is Andrew . . . At the apex of the triangle sits Tea, who is genuinely attracted to both of her possible partners, but is laboring under a heavy burden . . . Now this is the stuff of good soap opera, or at least the soap opera I grew up on. Couples who are thwarted from truly uniting stay viable, become legendary. Couples who get together must break up or suffer horrible conflict within months of that "happy ending."
(rec.arts.abc, January 7, 1998)

In response to this posting, another viewer voices her own preferences for how romantic stories should be told:

I couldn't disagree with you more strongly. I believe the audience needs couples, solid couples, to invest in and root for, and I think that the lack of good romantic couples is absolutely OLTL's [*One Life to Live*'s] weakest point. Soaps, especially OLTL under the Labines, have become overloaded with artificially-induced, by-the-numbers triangles, which instead of providing obstacles for the average couple, seem to have taken the place of the relationship entirely . . . Since the writers seem determined to keep their options opinion and perfectly balanced, making sure that whoever is in the middle can go either way at any time, little emotional depth is found in any of these triangles IMO [in my opinion]. I want to see great couples developing. I want to see why these TWO people are together, what makes them right for each other, how they build their relationship and make it unique. To do that, we need to see couples who are united and together – not always and forever, but enough so that they acutely face their problems together.
(rec.arts.abc, January 8, 1998)

In sum, our analysis of the soap world shows that audiences who engage popular genres have the capacity to do so analytically, and that their critical capacity is not undermined by the high value they place on the emotional authenticity of popular narratives. Indeed, as this example suggests, that capacity may be strengthened by the emotional value of a narrative.[1] Engaged audiences are well informed about the genre's conventions, formulas, narrative structures, production process, and industry context. Equally important, they fully understand the aesthetic qualities of the cultural form and share among themselves their assessments of how successful a cultural product is in delivering those qualities. When it fails to deliver, engaged audience members feel entitled to critique the decisions made by those who produce the product, and they draw upon the full range of their knowledge to diagnose what went wrong and what it would take to restore "their" cultural form to the level of quality the audience deserves.

Distinctive features of the soap genre, such as the open-ended storylines, narrative emphasis on everyday life, and illusion of authorial seamlessness, invite audiences to assert their claims to pass judgment on the quality of the cultural product; but, to varying degrees, all popular genres invite such claims, and the proliferation of print and electronic media for news about entertainment provides audience members with the requisite knowledge for both understanding the production process and making judgments about quality. Moreover the expansion of electronic sites for airing critical assessments, such as Internet newsgroups and electronic bulletin boards, provides autonomous space for audiences to assert their claims to critical authority (Bielby et al., 1999).

Emotion, critics, and the popular aesthetic

To what extent does a popular aesthetic mediate an audience's understanding of popular art forms? Does an audience's vigorous and often vocal quest for

elements such as emotional authenticity, narrative continuity, and consistency of characterization, as observed among soap viewers, indicate that audiences of popular genres are not sufficiently distanced to form reasoned judgments about quality? According to work in the sociology of culture (see Bourdieu, 1984; Gans, 1974), audiences approach highbrow culture with a "cultivated detachment" which allows meaning to be constructed in a way that is abstracted from the world of direct everyday experience. Emotions theorist Thomas Scheff (1979) describes this as an "overdistanced" reading position: the consumer is all observer, with no emotional participation in the unfolding drama. In contrast, the consumption of mass or popular culture is assumed to be largely unmediated and is based on the consumer's direct experience of the cultural product: "For genres such as revues and cabarets, as well as for soap operas, the world of everyday experience is sufficient grounds for understanding and appreciation" (Shrum, 1991: 370). Following this logic, the popular culture consumer is thought to hold an "underdistanced" reading position, one consisting entirely of emotional participation with no critical reflection or observation.

To Shrum, high art and popular art are differentiated by the extent to which understanding of the cultural object is mediated by professional critics. In high art, an audience member does not make an autonomous personal judgment about the quality of an art form but instead defers to the expert judgment of cultural critics. As Shrum argues, critics are "tastemakers . . . gatekeepers, structuring the experiences of audiences and cultural consumers" (1991: 352). That is, the audience's aesthetic values and preferences are interpreted, mediated, and shaped by the assessments of cultural authorities (Cameron, 1995). Thus, unlike Bourdieu (1968, 1984), Shrum does not equate highbrow culture with the class position and associated cultural capital of its consumers. A high status individual might embrace both high- and popular-art forms; the relevant distinction is the degree to which that individual defers to the authority of knowledgeable experts in the consumption of each (DiMaggio and Useem, 1978). At the same time, according to Shrum, consumers of highbrow art enter into a form of symbolic exchange or "status bargaining" whereby they relinquish in part their right to form an autonomous judgment in exchange for the prestige that accrues to participation in highbrow culture.

To both Shrum and Bourdieu, the experience of popular art forms is direct and unmediated, and the audience for such art is "undiscriminating," suggesting that there is little room for an articulated popular aesthetic. Thus, they avoid addressing questions about whether and how audiences make judgments about the quality of popular cultural art forms. We agree with Shrum that the "status bargain" associated with the consumption of highbrow culture involves a deferral of critical authority to the judgment of elite experts who interpret a cultural

form's aesthetic value; and we agree that, in popular genres such as soap operas, professional critics play only a limited role, serving mainly as advocates for the genre, not as tastemakers (Harrington and Bielby, 1995; also see Lang, 1958, about television criticism more generally). However, we take issue with the conclusion he draws, that the experience of popular art forms is direct and unmediated by aesthetic valuation. Shrum (1996: 198) seems to acknowledge that critical discourse is possible among audiences of popular art forms; what makes it popular is not the absence of critical discourse but an absence of deferral to critical authority, but, ultimately, he retreats to the position that popular art forms are directly experienced and avoids analysis of a popular aesthetic.

Our point is that appreciation and evaluation of popular art forms is highly mediated, but by an aesthetic that is fully accessible to engaged audiences. Our analysis of the soap genre suggests that consideration of the popular aesthetic must focus not only on the audience's understanding of the production context, but also on the aesthetic's grounding in shared cultural knowledge about emotion. In short, the prevailing view of popular culture consumption as a direct, underdistanced mode of experiencing reality fails to capture the complexity of audiences' relationship to cultural products. In the soap genre, for example, soap viewers distinguish between "realism" and authenticity; it is the latter that dedicated soap viewers seek, respond to, and critique. They do so from an understanding of a complex popular aesthetic, comprised of knowledge about the genre's codes and conventions about representations of emotion in everyday life.

In the soap opera genre, emotion, and the pleasure of experiencing it, are generated by the use of elements of melodrama as a stylistic form (cf. Williams, 1992). As Gledhill (1992: 107) describes, melodrama seeks "to prove (by making visible) the presence of ethical forces at work in everyday life, and thereby to endow the behavior of ordinary persons with dramatic and ethical consequence." In other words, melodrama efficiently conjoins the consequences of reality with the liberation of the imagination. As Peter Brooks (1976) articulates, melodramatic aesthetics push facts from the real world toward the symbolic activity of metaphor. Soap viewers are familiar with this stylistic form, recognizing that encoded in the personal talk that comprise soaps are the psychic and social contradictions that constitute soaps' fictional world of family and personal relationships.

To many, melodrama is not considered an aesthetic precisely because it plays to emotions. However, it is not simply the portrayal of emotions that defines the quality of the cultural form, it is doing so in a way that resonates with and has symbolic meaning to the audience. Melodrama is a stylistic form that provides that meaning. As Gledhill (1992: 108) explains,

> In melodrama what people feel and do, how they relate to each other, is of utmost consequence – the source of meaning, the justification for human action. Personalization in this respect is not simply a realist technique for individualizing the social world. Nor does it simply, as is often said, "displace" social and political issues into personal or familial terms in order to achieve a bourgeois fantasy resolution. Personalization is melodrama's primary strength. The webs of economic, political, and social power in which melodrama's characters get caught up are represented not as abstract forces but in terms of desires which express conflicting ethical and political identities and which erupt in the actions and transactions of daily life.

Not all fictional narratives that attempt to execute this stylistic form are successful. The audience for this form is not simply responding to the portrayal of emotions. Instead, they fully understand the melodramatic aesthetic, which mediates their appreciation of the narrative (Ang, 1985).[2] As we have observed in our example from the soap opera genre, audiences can and do make evaluations based on the success of a cultural production's realization of this aesthetic. They distinguish between good melodrama and "bad art," and they do so by relying on shared cultural knowledge and without deferring to the authority of professional critics (Harrington and Bielby, 1995).[3]

In the realm of popular drama portrayed in novels, plays, film, and television, melodrama is, of course, just one type of stylistic form among many that can serve as an accessible aesthetic understood by both producers and consumers of an art form. Our point is that what makes a popular culture art form both "culture" and "popular" is that appreciation and evaluation are mediated by a widely shared and understood aesthetic, and both the art form and the aesthetic are accessible to an engaged audience that invests in acquiring the requisite knowledge without deferring to cultural authorities. For example, the everyday experience required to make both professional wrestling and science fiction films accessible is likely to be shared by a large segment of the population, but that does not mean that nearly everyone can distinguish good art from bad art in each of those genres. To become a fan of either genre requires a personal investment to become expert in the subtleties of the genre's aesthetic and knowledgeable about the production context. A fan of science-fiction films who can differentiate a mediocre production from one that realizes the full potential of the genre is unlikely to have the capacity to appreciate and critique a professional wrestling exhibition, and vice versa; but fans of either genre can and do discuss among themselves what constitutes a successful or unsuccessful production, they bring a sophisticated level of cultural expertise to their critiques, and they know how and where to obtain further knowledge of both stylistic forms and production contexts that allow them to enhance their understanding and refine their critical capacity. Most important to the cultural sociologist, much of the social interaction around and discourse about popular aesthetics is public and

observable, providing the opportunity for empirical examination of aesthetics, interpretation, and meaning in popular culture.

Conclusion: toward an empirical sociology of popular aesthetics

Popular audiences do not defer to the judgment of elite critical authority, but that implies neither a direct, unmediated, and underdistanced experience of the cultural form nor an inability to respond critically and analytically. Research on the world of daytime serials shows that appreciation and evaluation of the cultural form is mediated by a popular aesthetic that is well understood by both an engaged audience and those who write and produce the serials. Critical authority in popular genres such as soap operas resides among those audience members who choose to invest in acquiring expertise about the genre's conventions, codes, and stylistic forms, and knowledge about the organization of production and its business context.

While our argument is based largely on empirical research on the world of daytime serials, we believe it applies to popular culture genres more generally. More importantly, to cultural sociologists, the ways in which it does so can be evaluated through systematic empirical research. In our view, three elements are essential to an empirical research program on popular culture and popular aesthetics. First, the distinctive feature of a popular aesthetic is the critical capacity of an engaged audience, which is revealed through social interaction. Thus, the starting point for an empirical research program is study of the discourse of audience members' interaction. Doing so will reveal where claims about quality and value are being made, who is making them, the criteria that are being applied, and the basis for the legitimacy of those claims. The cultural sociologist should ask: Where and how are audience members acquiring, sharing, and refining expert knowledge about a genre's codes, formulas, conventions, and circumstances of production? Central to studies of audience discourse should be an analysis of how the social organization of the audience allows critical communities to emerge and to survive. For example, what is it about the social networks and social relationships in which audience members are embedded that allows them to find opportunities for repeated interaction around critical discourse? One might explore the extent to which the proliferation of electronic forums such as Internet newsgroup discussion groups (covering popular genres as diverse as alt.comedy.standup, alt.music.christian.rock, alt.culture.bullfight, rec.sports.pro-wrestling, alt.gothic.fashion, and alt.graffiti, among thousands of others) and other commercial and audience-supported venues expand audience members' capacity to define, participate in, and refine a popular aesthetic.

Second, while critical discourse among audience members is a key ingredient of an empirical research program on popular aesthetics, cultural sociologists

simply cannot avoid empirical analysis of the features of popular culture art forms that allow accessibility to a popular audience and motivate its members to invest in acquiring the expert knowledge that builds critical capacity. Here, cultural sociologists must confront the reality that appreciation of a popular art form (or a high art form, for that matter) is an *expressive* experience; what makes it art is the emotional experience it elicits in the audience, and what makes it popular is the extensiveness of the shared experience. Thus, the cultural sociologist must study the cultural form's styles, formulas, genres, narrative themes and structures, media, and conventions to gain an understanding of points of accessibility and the basis for audience members' pleasures.

Third, while studying shared discourse and meaning among the audiences of popular art forms, the cultural sociologist must also attend to difference. A shared community of critical discourse does not imply uniformity in the value attributed to cultural forms or the criteria audience members use to assign value. Dedicated audience members are themselves cultural authorities, and in the relative absence of professional critics, their vigorous and vocal quest for authenticity and quality will often lead to vehement disagreements with one another about both the value of specific cultural products and the appropriate criteria to be applied in assigning value. Popular audiences are heterogeneous, and differences over aesthetic value and criteria most likely derive in part from the differentiated gender, class, and ethnic origins of audience communities and subcultures. A systematic approach to empirical analysis should consider how disagreements over a cultural form vary by an audience's needs and uses. However, the extent to which various audience segments evaluate cultural forms from a stance of "resistance" is an empirical question, as is the degree to which individuals of different race, class, or gender background participate in the same networks of discourse, share an appreciation for a specific form, or agree on how it is to be evaluated.

In sum, debates over the existence of a popular aesthetic and the degree to which audience members' understanding and evaluation of popular genres is culturally mediated fall squarely within the domain of sociological theory and research. Issues of aesthetics and meaning in popular culture can and should be topics of empirical inquiry of cultural sociologists, but those issues are not accessible in any scientifically interesting way when analysis is limited to interpretive readings of cultural texts. Instead, as sociologists we are uniquely qualified to contribute to debates about aesthetics and meaning by empirically examining the social interaction and discursive exchanges through which audience members reveal and debate their understandings and assessments of a cultural form's qualities. Moreover, since audience members engage popular culture from a stance informed by knowledge of a genre's conventions, codes, stylistic forms, and production context, an informed sociology of popular

aesthetics must proceed from a framework that attends as carefully to issues of the production of culture as it does to analysis of discourse and texts.

To many of those who have embraced the "cultural turn" in the humanities and social sciences, work in the production of culture tradition is often dismissed or devalued as nothing more than an application of industrial sociology to a distinctive kind of market. From this perspective, analyzing cultural production as any other kind of productive system may yield insights into the social organization of art worlds, but it is disconnected from sociological analysis of issues of aesthetics and meaning. To the contrary, from the perspective we have presented in this chapter, it should be clear that sociological analysis of the popular aesthetic requires asking questions about the properties of the cultural form and the circumstances of its production and consumption that allow for contestation between producers and audiences about meaning and aesthetic value. To understand how popular culture audiences ascribe value to cultural objects necessarily requires understanding of features of the production context that allows audiences, with some legitimacy, to make claims that they are as capable as creators to judge the value or meaning of the cultural object.

Notes

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1. We thank Carol Williams for this insight.
2. Melodrama is one of a variety of storytelling forms that are used in soap operas. Among others are fairy tales and folk tales (Williams, 1992).
3. On the other hand, critics are not completely absent from the world of soap viewers. Indeed, the role of the soap columnist–critic evolved in response to the increased visibility of a diverse and sophisticated viewing audience. As opportunities for public, fan-generated criticism proliferated (see Bielby et al., 1999), the daytime press found and acknowledged an audience for critical perspectives on issues within the medium. A sophisticated segment of the soap audience became an important resource to the daytime press. Increasingly, columnists–critics–editors began to monitor the boundaries of the soap genre and its audience, taking issue with commentary that failed to rise above outsiders' stereotypes of the subculture of soap-opera viewers. For example, soap columnists now regularly take the mainstream media to task for stereotyping or being condescending toward the soap industry and its viewers. In short, while soap critics generally do not perform the cultural mediation of their counterparts in highbrow genres, they are not simply extensions of the industry's

publicity apparatus. Instead, they perform an important institutional function, legitimating viewers' interests and concerns to the industry and representing the genre to outsiders who marginalize the status of the medium and its viewers.

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