

Television and taste hierarchy: The case of Dutch television comedy

When applied to television, the classical distinction between highbrow and lowbrow culture does not seem to make much sense. Such hierarchical ranking of taste, drawing a clear boundary between difficult and sophisticated highbrow taste and accessible, entertaining popular taste, seems to lose much of its validity when confronted with television's fragmented and eclectic mixture of information and entertainment; art, play and commerce. In fact, most of television's fare consists of what is generally subsumed under the heading of popular or lowbrow culture: the large majority of television programming consists of popular entertainment genres such as comedy, soap, popular drama, pop music, or sports.

There is a tendency, both in common sense and in academic thought, to simply write off the whole medium as lowbrow and popular (Seiter 1999, esp. 1-6). A very striking example, both of the low status of TV, and the (academic) prejudice against the medium, can be found in Pierre Bourdieu's *Distinction* (1984). *Distinction*, probably the most influential work on hierarchies of taste, describes taste differences between upper, middle and working classes in France. In what is probably the central figure of the book, showing the relationship between taste, economic capital (money) and cultural capital (education), newspapers, music and movie actors are mentioned individually, and occupy very different positions (Bourdieu 1984: 128-129). However, there are no television programs in this figure. Instead, only the medium itself is in the figure, and it is somewhere down in the middle, close to potatoes, sports fishing, ordinary red wine, foremen, and an income of 21,000 francs, which is well below average. TV is actually below most popular entertainments, such as funfairs, adventure stories, and love stories.

Due to the medium's low status, and its incompatibility with clearly demarcated taste hierarchies, television programs seem to elude hierarchical ranking (Davies e.a. 2000). However, it is definitely possible to rank television audiences hierarchically, as audiences tend to 'organize' themselves according to social status (Livingstone, 1993; Seiter, 1999; Webster e.a., 2000). People of higher and lower SES, educational levels, status groups, income groups, or any of the other names used to describe class differences, watch different channels, different programs, and different genres.

Such 'taste cultures' (Gans, 1999) are something both advertisers, scholars, and audiences themselves are well aware of. However, there has been considerable debate and disagreement about the nature of these taste cultures: are they 'different tastes' of equal value and worth, or are they different in a more fundamental way? Disagreements about the nature of taste cultures are often linked with the conceptualization of the relationship between these cultures, and the link between taste cultures and social groups and categories. The implications of such conceptualizations are far-

reaching, as each of these leads into a different notion not only of what people are doing when they are watching TV, but lead directly into question about the value and worth of the medium, as well as its programs. Moreover, television, more than any other medium, raises the question of the mechanisms behind taste cultures and hierarchies. How are audiences perpetuated, with the same programs entering into everybody's living room?

This paper explores these television taste cultures and hierarchies, and the mechanisms underlying and perpetuating them. It will focus on one specific form of popular television: television comedy in the Netherlands. Comedy as a genre is very varied, but is never truly highbrow. In this respect, like television, it eludes classical highbrow-lowbrow distinctions. The paper will draw on a combination of survey and interview data, collected as part of a larger study of social differences in sense of humor in the Netherlands (Kuipers 2001). Using a combination of survey data and interview materials, this article will look at Dutch taste cultures in television comedy, and the relationship between these taste cultures. The survey data will be used to the patterns of liking, dislike, and knowledge of Dutch television comedy, and their relationship to educational level. The interview materials will be used to interpret the survey data and to understand the mechanisms behind taste cultures and taste hierarchies in television comedy: how do they work? How are they perpetuated? And especially, how are they perpetuated with as fragmented and anti-hierarchical a medium as television?

Taste, it will be argued, has to be understood not only as a pattern of preferences and aversion, but as a form of cultural knowledge. This cultural knowledge is crucial in the development and perpetuation of taste hierarchies. Knowledge always precedes both appreciation and dislike: you have to be aware of something in order to like something, hate it, or be indifferent to it. But taste also requires the knowledge to interpret television shows, to recognize genres, to discuss television with others, and to make meaningful taste judgments. To enjoy television comedy, quite some knowledge is needed; and as I hope to show here: the nature, as well as the amount, of such cultural knowledge varies between social groups.

Taste cultures and taste hierarchies

Not all audiences are taste cultures, and not all taste cultures are hierarchically related. Only certain audiences are stable and comprehensive enough to be dubbed a taste culture: an audience can be a one-time alliance. Also, a very specific audience for only one kind of show – the people who always watch the eight o'clock news – probably does not comprise not a taste culture. A taste culture is a group of people with a shared system of preferences and dislikes, with its own 'logic', or criteria for good and bad quality or taste (Radway 1984; Kuipers 2001). These taste cultures are often (but not always) related to social background variables; and the status of this social category can (but does not have to) affect the status of the taste itself.

In general, taste cultures have been described in two, complementary, ways. First of all, taste can be interpreted as a preference for a group of cultural objects such as books, clothes, or television programs. Taste is then a 'style' that can be clearly demarcated, and captured in rather descriptive terms. Taste in this meaning, can be highly visible: by wearing, reading, using, and in other ways proclaiming one's preference for these objects, people show their taste. However, taste cultures do not have to correspond to such a visible preference: the same object can be appreciated for different reasons within different taste cultures (Fiske, 1989; Hall 1980). Thus, taste is also a way of looking, a system of preferences and criteria that is mainly in people's heads (and bodies), or a habitus, as Bourdieu (1984) has called it.

Taste cultures are best understood when contrasted with other taste cultures: they entail preferences as well as aversion, criteria for good and for bad taste. The relationship between taste cultures can have many forms, ranging from opposition to peaceful coexistence to complete ignorance. Not only is there considerable variety in possible relationships between taste cultures; scholars have conceptualized such relationships in many different ways. To clarify the relationship between taste culture, taste hierarchy, and social status, I will give a short overview of possible relationships between taste cultures, and link these 'models' of these relationships to some theoretical conceptualizations of these relationships. This is intended as a conceptual exercise, not an extended literature review of the theories about taste cultures and television audiences (for an overview and discussion, see for instance Livingstone 1998).

The relationship between taste cultures depends first of all on the awareness of taste cultures of each other. Such awareness depends on contact between taste cultures through interaction (within homes, institutions, geographical regions), as well as contact through mass media. Usually, taste cultures within one society are very much aware of each other. Many tastes and styles are defined in opposition to others: youth cultures are shaped in opposition to adult culture (Hebdige 1979; Willis 1977; 1990); avant-garde culture is a rejection of bourgeois or conservative highbrow culture (Crane 1987). Even status-based cultures usually have some element of opposition: working class culture is partly shaped in opposition to middle class culture (Willis 1977), but the opposite is true as well: middle class culture is also an attempt to distinguish themselves from working class culture (Bourdieu 1984). This oppositional model conceptualizes taste cultures as resistance, rejection, inversion, distinction, in short, attempts to *not* be something; it is probably the most prevalent in the literature on taste.

Whereas the oppositional model presupposes conflict (at least conflict of interest), the 'lifestyle model' describes a relation between taste cultures that do not compete, nor look down upon each other, but simply exist side by side. This is basically the traditional model of cultural difference between ethnic groups or nation states as self-contained cultures. Subcultures organized around musical styles may be understood from such a lifestyle perspective. Theoretical models assuming such a relationship between taste cultures tend to prevail in applied audience studies, such as advertising or

ratings analysis (Spangenberg, F & L. Liebrechts, 2002; Webster e.a. 2000), but also in some postmodernist perspectives celebrating 'lifestyle' as free choice, a coincidence of little consequence, or a charming source of variety (Featherstone, 1991). A cultural model of this kind is often used explicitly to counter interpretations in terms of domination and resistance: and unusual but very forceful example is the concept of 'gender culture' introduced by sociolinguist Tannen (1994).

Yet another model of the relation between taste cultures is the mainstream versus marginal/subculture. Here, the taste cultures differ in size or social importance, without necessarily implying status differences. Dominant taste cultures always coexist with smaller taste cultures. The relationship between mainstream and subcultures can vary widely. For one thing, they may be more or less compatible. Oppositional subcultures are intentionally incompatible, but in the taste cultures of strict religious minorities the incompatibility may be more unintentional. Other marginal taste cultures are very compatible with mainstream culture; an example would be children's culture (Davies e.a. 2000). In such cases, a smaller taste culture can easily be interpreted as a variety within a larger taste culture. Also, the status of the marginal taste culture may vary. There are marginal taste groups with a low status, subcultures of approximately the same status as the mainstream, but 'exclusive' tastes can be marginal to the mainstream while still being very prestigious. This mainstream-subculture model does not correspond very clearly with a theoretical model or perspective. Some scholars have focused on oppositional subcultures, interpreting the mainstream-subculture model in terms of opposition (see above). Many have taken a more ethnographic point of view, trying to link a specific subculture to the life experience of a specific social group (Ang 1985). And obviously, many studies of 'a television tradition' or 'a people' often focus, more or less consciously, on the mainstream.

A fairly recent model is the 'fragmentation' model: many different taste cultures, without one clear mainstream. This is basically a variation on the lifestyle model, but it is often used in opposition to the mainstream model, in the sense that this is what happens when the mainstream disappears: many different taste groups, that are not fixed but rather based on fleeting alliances; none larger or more powerful than the other. This model seems to work best to describe television taste cultures, especially in 50+ channel countries such as the US (Ang, 1991; Heeter & Greenberg, 1988; Webster & Phalen, 1997). In fact, with its stress on the fluidity of taste cultures, this model is almost a description of the end of taste culture.

All the above models describe relationships between taste cultures that are not inherently hierarchical. Very often, however, relationships between taste cultures become entangled with difference in status or power. In this case: taste cultures get a different status, and the relationship between taste cultures becomes a highbrow-lowbrow model. High status taste culture is not only a taste liked by people with more social status; this status difference is demarcated in the tastes themselves. Highbrow taste is usually less accessible, more difficult, more expensive, or all of these, than lowbrow or 'normal' tastes. Thus: highbrow taste is exclusive. Also, high status tastes usually become what Bourdieu (1984) has called the 'legitimate taste', a standard for good taste and quality,

and as such will be presented in museums, taught in schools, or subsidized by governments. A true hierarchical relationship implies the people at the bottom accept, in one way or another, the legitimacy of this taste. Most theories presuppose that people at the top of the social ladder look down upon lowbrow taste, but this is not necessary. Recently, some theorists have described the possibility that high status groups become omnivores: high status groups may have wider tastes, including both exclusive tastes and (parts of) less exclusive lowbrow taste. This model was based on a study of music lovers, where higher educated people would like both pop music and classical music; whereas lower status groups only appreciated pop music (Peterson & Simkus 1992), but Davies e.a. (2000) have described the relationship between children's television taste culture and adult culture in similar terms.

The highbrow-lowbrow differences are not necessarily related to size of a group, but the groups need to be aware of each other, and there usually is quite some deliberate incompatibility in highbrow and lowbrow taste cultures. For this reason, the highbrow/lowbrow model is often very close to the oppositional model. Highbrow tastes are also a negation of lowbrow tastes, or an attempt at 'distinction' as Bourdieu has called it, whereas lowbrow tastes tend to be rebellious about highbrow humor, as has been described most convincingly by Paul Willis (1977).

The highbrow-lowbrow model is where most of the theorizing has been done. Lowbrow culture has been interpreted in many conflicting ways, from resistance within hegemonic culture to the expression of 'false consciousness', from authentic self-expression to a creative and confident dealing with modern mass culture. High culture has been understood as expression of exclusion and dominance, as attempts to distinguish oneself from others, but also as the expression of true beauty, and strained and forced pretense (Kuipers 2001). However, as social mobility has increased significantly, and boundaries and genres are becoming increasingly blurred and fluid, scholars as well as laymen increasingly doubt the existence and viability of rigid taste hierarchies. Scholarly denouncement of this model is not only empirical, but also ideological: in most work on television, scholars have come to the defense of lowbrow cultures, trying to show the creativity and legitimacy in lowbrow culture, and the power, resistance, and agency of low status 'audiences' (Livingstone 1998). However, this 'celebration of forms of capital involved in the appreciation of television programs' (Seiter 1999, p.26) has led media/audience studies to downplay the possibility of hierarchical relationships between taste cultures.

Taste cultures and social background: the case of Dutch television comedy

For a study of social differences in sense of humor, a survey was done among a random sample of 340 Dutch. In this survey, people were asked to rate 35 jokes, along with a number of humorous television shows (talk shows, sitcoms, variety shows, satire, etc) and comedians and other people who were publicly known for their humorous performances (talk show hosts, a writer, some presenters, etc). 66 people were interviewed about their uses and preferences for humor. Of these 66, 32 were people who had also filled out the questionnaire: these were sampled by age, gender, and education. The other 34

interviews are less relevant to this article, although they will be cited as well: they were ‘joke-tellers’, people who know and tell a lot of jokes. These people were approached in different ways: some reacted to advertisements, some were recruited through snowball sampling, but most were approached during the selection of a television joke contest. All these joke-tellers had a working class or lower middle class background; which is related to the fact that joke-telling, in the Netherlands, is considered a form of lowbrow humor.

The survey ratings were analyzed to look for ‘clusters’ that could be interpreted as ‘humor tastes’ or ‘humor styles’. A combination of factor analysis (principal component analysis) and PRINCALS (non-linear principal component analysis) of these data resulted in four clusters of items loading .35 on one of the factors; one fairly small one, consisting of only three very famous comedians, and three larger clusters. Cronbach’s α for each of these clusters can be found in figure 1. This combination of techniques was necessary to deal with the structure of these data: there were systematic differences not only in appreciation of the items (5-point Likert scales), but also in the knowledge of the items. As will become clear later, this was a methodological hindrance, but theoretically a very relevant finding.¹

As the names of Dutch comedians and television shows in these humor styles probably do not mean much to an international audience, and I am not interested here in the nature of these styles, but rather in the relationship between them, I will only briefly describe the four clusters. The first cluster consists of a number of older comedians and two writers. They have been popular for at least thirty or forty years, and are mainly liked by older people. Most of them are very old themselves, and several are dead already. These I have called the ‘*oldtimers*’. The second cluster, which I have called the ‘*celebrities*’, consists of only three very famous comedians. One of them had a late night show at the time of the research, the others had both done the very prestigious New Years’ Eve television comedy show several times and toured the country with successful shows. The third cluster I have dubbed ‘*lowbrow comedy*’: it consists of four comedians (all working mainly for TV), a TV joke contest presenter, a professional joke-teller, as well as three sitcoms, a game show, a candid camera program and a variety sketch program. The fourth cluster I have called ‘*highbrow comedy*’. This cluster consists of three satirical TV shows, a humorous talk show, as well as the internationally well-known *Monty Python* and *Absolutely Fabulous*. The people in this cluster are somewhat harder to classify: one writer of children’s books as well as musicals and a number of hugely popular TV series, two poets/comedians who had, at some time, television shows, two artist/comedian/actor/TV-producers; as well as two ‘regular’ comedians, and one ‘real’ writer who definitely is not a television comedian.

Not all items were part of any of these tastes; 11 of the 45 items in the questionnaire did not fit into any of these categories. It is interesting to note that, apart from the two British contributions to the highbrow style, none of the foreign shows and comedians in the questionnaire, ranging from *Friends* and *Laurel and Hardy* to ‘*Allo ’Allo* and David Letterman, were related to any of these clusters. This

does not mean they were not liked. Some, like *Friends*, *Mr. Bean*, or *Married with children*, were actually rated quite high.

The next step of the analysis was to look at the relationship between these humor styles and social background. Scales were constructed to measure the appreciation and the knowledge of the clusters. Knowledge was the proportion of items from the cluster that was known to a respondent, on a scale from 0 (none) to 1 (all). In the highbrow cluster, there was considerably more variety in this than in any of the other clusters. Appreciation is the mean appreciation for all the items in one cluster that a respondent had rated. As not all respondents knew all the items (as a matter of fact, only 6 of the 340 respondents rated all items), the appreciation scores are not all based on the same or the same number of ratings. However, an appreciation score based on only one rating never occurred. In figure 1, the relation between these between knowledge and appreciation of these clusters and social background variables is shown.

Figure 1: Humor styles: the relation between appreciation, knowledge, and social background

CLUSTER	Mean	Standaard Deviation	Correlation with education	Correlation with age	Gender difference	Cronbach's α
OLD-TIMERS						
Appreciation	3.27 ^I	.73 ^I	-.04	.47	n.s.	.81
Knowledge	.94 ^{II}	.15 ^{II}	.08	.37	n.s.	
CELEBRITIES						
Appreciation	3.66 ^I	.93 ^I	.02	-.37	m > f	.63
Knowledge	.99 ^{II}	.00 ^{II}	.07	.00	n.s.	
LOWBROW						
Appreciation	2.90 ^I	.75 ^I	-.27	.24	n.s.	.87
Knowledge	.87 ^{II}	.14 ^{II}	-.19	-.24	n.s.	
HIGHBROW						
Appreciation	3.20 ^I	.70 ^I	.18	-.13	n.s.	.76 ^{III}
Knowledge	.66 ^{II}	.23 ^{II}	.35	-.11	n.s.	

Bold: $p < 0,01$

^I On a five point scale

^{II} On a scale from 0 (knows none) to 1 (knows all).

^{III} In the highbrow cluster, Cronbach's α was computed using the best known 10 out of 14 items; because of the amount of 'unknowns'. However, whereas adding or removing items leads to a large variation in the number of respondents used to compute α , it hardly causes any variety in the value of α itself; this remained always above 0.70.

^I For a more elaborate discussion of the statistics involved in this analysis, see author 1999.

Figure 1 shows the relationship between these clusters and both age and educational level. The appreciation of the old-timer and celebrity clusters was related to age; the old-timer clusters has a rather strong positive correlation ($r = .47, p < .01$) with age; the celebrity cluster a fairly strong negative ($r = -.37, p < .01$) correlation. Moreover, this cluster is the only one that is related to gender: men liked it significantly more than women. The appreciation of the lowbrow cluster correlated positively with age ($r = .24$); negatively with education ($r = -.27, p < .01$). The highbrow cluster, finally, shows a weak correlation between appreciation and educational level ($r = .18, p < .01$). In this cluster social background is not so much related to preference, but more to knowledge of these people and shows. The percentage of comedians and shows the subjects claimed to know, irrespective of appreciation, correlates $.35$ ($p < .01$) with education. In other words: many lower educated people do not even know the programs and people in this cluster, and consequently do not have any opinion.

This relation was also found for individual items in the highbrow cluster: appreciation of the comedians/television shows in this taste usually didn't correlate significantly, or only very weakly, with educational level. But apart from the very famous Freek de Jonge (whom everybody knew) and the almost completely unknown one-season *De Hunkering*, respondents who knew an item were always significantly higher educated than respondents who did not know them. As can also be seen in figure one, a similar pattern was found in the old-timer clusters; where age is correlated significantly with knowledge. This was less unexpected, as many of the people in this cluster had not been on television for some time, and younger people simply might not have seen them.

This survey of Dutch humor and comedy showed rather more simple, straightforward, and deterministic taste cultures than I expected, having read the literature on the increasing fragmentation and democratization of taste. Rather than a wide variety of lifestyles, eclectic omnivores, or fragmented taste cultures, the analysis resulted in a simple two-dimensional solution, with taste differences explained mainly by age and education, hardly by gender, and not at all by more ephemeral postmodern lifestyle variables.

To what extent do these clusters resemble the models described above? The age differences in comedy taste are symmetrical: young people dislike old people's humor, and old people dislike young people's humor. This pattern of mutual dislike can be easily explained by changes over time: there have been a number of significant changes in Dutch humor in the past fifty years, and older people were socialized in a different form of humor. This still shows in their preferences: older people generally find 'today's humor', as they called it during interviews, both too fast and too explicit. The objections of younger, as well as most middle age people, mirror this: they usually said older comedy slow, old-fashioned, and not very challenging. This seems to imply that there are no clear status differences between these taste groups; they both equally dislike the other groups' comedy.

The differences in knowledge can be explained by the time factor as well: many of the comedians in the old-timer group have not been on television for many years and younger people simply will have missed them. This pattern then comes close to the different-but-equal lifestyle model,

but for one thing: what is favored by younger people is at the same time the mainstream: the comedy preferred by younger people (or avoided by older ones) is the small group of extremely popular comedians. These are very well-known, and quite widely liked. Because of this, the difference between the age groups looks more like a mainstream-versus-subculture model, with, interestingly, the older people the subculture. Usually, young people are described from the perspective of subcultures

The difference between highbrow and lowbrow comedy looks, as the name suggests, more like a hierarchical ordering of taste. For one thing, it obviously is related to social status. Also, the nature of the two styles resembles in many ways the distinction between highbrow and lowbrow tastes: understated, ambivalent, slightly avant-garde versus exuberant and explicitly humorous. But the strongest indication here is the asymmetry: higher educated people disapprove of lowbrow comedy, while lower educated people don't even know highbrow comedy, and thus, do not even get the chance to disapprove of it (or like it). Such a pattern of disapproval of other's people tastes, lives, ideas, etc., while keeping those of oneself inaccessible, is typical of elite tastes. What this pattern shows is that highbrow comedy is exclusive in the literal sense of the word: it excludes people. Apparently, despite its accessibility, television can be very exclusive. However, what this pattern cannot show is the other aspect of hierarchy: do lower status groups accept the legitimacy of highbrow humor?

Knowledge and taste hierarchy

Both the age and the educational differences illustrate something that is often overlooked in studies of television audiences: you have to know something to appreciate it. Appreciation, but also dislike, presupposes awareness. As Webster e.a. write:

'Much theorizing about the audience presupposes perfect awareness on the part of audience members. In other words, media selections are assumed to occur with a full knowledge of the content options. (...) If, as is sometimes the case, people select programming without a full understanding of their options, the interpretation of program choice as an expression of preferences is oversimplified if not evaluated along with other factors.' (Webster e.a. 2000, p. 172-173)

In fact, such perfect awareness is not lacking 'sometimes' as Webster e.a. assume: it is very rare. In this study, only 6 respondents, or 1.8%, knew all the items, although, admittedly, the items were selected for maximum variety, and some of these people and shows had not been on TV for quite some time. The percentage of people who knew an item ranged from 99.7% (for Paul de Leeuw, one of the celebrities, with a daily late night show) to 36.4% (for Hans Teeuwen a relatively new and somewhat avant-garde comedian), with an average percentage of 72.9% of the respondents claiming to know a comedian or TV program.

What these data show is that the knowledge of television fare, or the awareness, as Webster e.a. call it, is divided very unequally across the population. On the whole, higher educated respondents

know more television comedians and television shows: educational level is weakly but significantly correlated ($r=.17$, $p < .01$) to knowledge of all items (including the ones not in clusters) in the questionnaire. Thus, higher educated have not only more knowledge of their own taste culture, they have more knowledge in general. Although there was no support for the omnivore model in the sense that higher educated people would have a wider taste, apparently they do have a wider knowledge.

The knowledge of older comedians was not related to knowledge in general, as it was in the case of education. On the contrary, there was significant inverse correlation between age and knowledge of all items ($r = .31$, $p<.01$). Thus, higher educated people truly have more knowledge of television comedy, whereas older people simply have more specific knowledge. This supports the notion that the taste cultures related to age differ from the taste cultures related to educational level. Knowledge can work in many different ways here: the knowledge of older people proved them experts in a marginal taste; whereas the lack of knowledge of lower educated showed them to be excluded from highbrow culture. This shows how central cultural knowledge is to the understanding of the relationships between taste cultures: the patterns in knowledge and unfamiliarity that the nature of the relationship between these taste cultures can be established.

Thus, taste is comprised of three things: it is not only liking and dislike, there is a third factor involved: knowledge. This knowledge is mediated by social background. In the case of age difference, this is understandable, but in the case of highbrow and lowbrow television, this is less easy to explain. This process of getting knowledge then seems to be at the heart of the exclusion process that is central to taste hierarchy.

To understand the relationship between knowledge and appreciation, another PRINCALS-analysis was done, looking at the relationship between liking, dislike, and knowledge of elite comedy. For this, the variables were recoded into a nominal variable with 3 values: liking (4 and 5 on a five point scale); dislike/neutral (1,2,3 on a 5 point scale); and no knowledge. This was related to educational level, and the result of this analysis is shown in figure 2. In this figure, which may be a little hard to read, most (not all) of highbrow comedians are shown three times: once the score for positive evaluation, once the score for negative or neutral evaluation, and once the score for their unknown-ness. It is shown how these three are related to educational level.

This figure shows clearly how awareness of highbrow comedy works: both the probability for positive and negative/neutral ratings increase with higher educational levels. One could say that educational level is a condition to get to know elitist humor; only from this point, people can decide whether they like it or not. This is related to an increase in cultural knowledge which apparently comes with education. A comparable analysis was run for lowbrow humor (not shown here); this showed a more direct relationship between education, and appreciation and dislike.

‘Doesn’t do anything for me’: lower educated interviewees and the inaccessibility of highbrow comedy

The understanding of taste hierarchies lies then, like with so many social inequalities, in the unequal division of knowledge. Who is it harder for lower educated people to get to know highbrow humor? Given the nature of television, everything should be knowable. And this applies even more to the Netherlands, where there were, at the time of the research only eight channels (and a handful British, Belgian and German that most people don’t watch). This question why people do not know things is rather hard to ask, and even harder to answer, but luckily, it came up many times during my interviews with both the 34 joke-tellers and the 32 interviewees from the sample, 16 of whom were lower educated and 15 of whom could be said to be part of the lowbrow taste culture, one of which was an M.D. – which immediately shows that taste cultures are related to, but not dictated by, social background variables.

The lack of knowledge of interviewees with a lowbrow taste is probably illustrated best by the example of Arjen Ederveen. Shortly before and during my interviews, this actor/comedian/television maker had caused quite a stir in ‘my circles’ with a series of programs called *Thirty minutes*, aired by intellectual and slightly elitist broadcasting corporation VPRO from 1997-1999. *Thirty minutes* received a lot of attention and rave reviews in the quality press, and was discussed widely among the people I know. It was a series of slow, extremely conscientiously performed fake documentaries (or ‘mockumentaries’). The most famous probably is the episode called ‘born into the wrong body’, about a farmer from the rural northern province of Groningen who undergoes a series of race-change operations; he is made over into a negro. The show could hardly be called a parody: the tone and atmosphere of serious documentary about a taxing psychological process was maintained so consistently, that it was hard to tell whether it was in humor or in earnest. Most higher educated interviewees called it ‘unbelievably good’, ‘very very funny’, also ‘very recognizable’, and, in the jargon of high culture, Ederveen was described as ‘a real artist’.

The questionnaire showed him to be known by only 51% of the respondents. Most lower educated informants from the sample, as well as the joke-tellers (who were all lower educated) had never heard of him, even after I gave a number of examples or described several of the things Ederveen had done, including older shows, in some detail. Those who did know him were completely uninterested. I will cite some of those more informed reactions:

Do you know Thirty minutes?

Husband: This VPRO-show. Well, I must admit in all honesty, When I saw that, with this weatherman I think it was, then I thought, this must be a documentary or something.

Wife: It seems very serious.

Husband: And then later, I was speaking to my daughter on the phone, and she says, man, you should watch that. I said: you mean that was humor? Didn’t look like humor to me. (husband is a longshoreman; wife is a seamstress; both lower educated)

Do you know Thirty Minutes?

'Thirty minutes. Well, I don't think I have ever really *seen* it. Well, once, some time ago. But after that, I never really watched. I don't really know it, really. It doesn't do much for me.' (male, technician, lower educated)

As is clear from these quotes, there were no clear objections to this shows, it was rather a matter of incomprehension and disinterest. People 'did not see the humor'; and they didn't see anything else in there. Many other comedians and shows in this cluster were commented on in a fairly similar tone. As one man said about comedian/poet/ presenter Dorrestijn: 'It doesn't have any meaning for me. He's there on TV, warbling away, and I say to that: it's all fine with me but it is clearly not my thing. And it's nothing personal about this character, because I couldn't care less, but it doesn't do anything for me. I've got no feelers for it, I guess.' (higher educated: doctor with distinct lowbrow taste)

This very much sums up the mechanism behind this lack of knowledge: people have no feelers for it. A show or a comedian simply does not amuse a person: it doesn't touch them, it doesn't move them; but it doesn't infuriate, insult, or even annoy them either. There is simple no substantial argument against it. After a first chance encounter on TV, it was dismissed, and often forgotten -- in many cases, people only remembered seeing something or someone after some probing. Also, it is very likely that the repeated probing might have resulted in people claiming to like it, because I asked them, and they did not want to seem stupid or uncultured. There is a strong performative aspect to taste as well; I will come back to this later. At any rate: it is clear that highbrow humor simple doesn't 'do' much for most lower educated people: neither the humor, nor the person, the story, the theme and the style.

The more famous comedians and shows from the highbrow style were known to most of the interviewees, but they were usually dismissed in a similar way: not on the basis of concrete objections, but because it didn't mean anything to them. The tone in these answers often was rather despondent. As one lower educated housewife said about satirist Van Kooten and De Bie: 'I am not sure, maybe I just don't like their faces.' Or, even more doubtful: 'Van Kooten en de Bie. Yes. No. Whether it was to highbrow for me, I don't know. Of maybe they were too harsh or something. I couldn't appreciate them.' (man, technician) What is striking here is the lack of arguments to sustain their opinion, and even their lack of words.

What happens there can be interpreted easily in terms of the encoding/decoding model of Hall (1980; see also Van Zoonen 1994), but this model seems to suggest that different readings may be what the author had intended, but that there is some pleasure in these readings, and some creativity in the interpretation. However, these people lack the knowledge to understand these forms of comedy in a way that gratifies them. They don't see something different, or have a different reading: many of my informants saw Ederveen, or Dorrestijn, or Van Kooten and De Bie, and saw nothing. Morley (1980), in an extension of the encoding/decoding model, described a form of reading he called 'rejection' which is closer to what is happening here, but even that does not quite capture the sense of 'failed

reading' or 'despondent' reading. This is, as Livingstone has called it, more like a 'battle between the hegemonic positioning of the text and the nonresponsiveness of the viewer' (Livingstone 1998, p. 203)

And even when people with this taste do see 'something' in highbrow comedy, I am not sure whether it makes sense to look at this in terms of 'another reading'. One retired traveling salesman described a parody of satirists Van Kooten & De Bie, in which they impersonate two posh middle aged sisters, pearl necklace, tweed skirt, burgundy turtleneck, affected speech and all. Maybe it is important to add that the creators have often been noted for their empathic and life-like characters. The salesman commented:

'When they are both dressed up as women, well, it might be funny to someone else, but it doesn't do much for me. It just comes across a bit peculiar. But anyone else might crack up over it, haha [fake laughter] very funny.'

This man saw a really cheap gag, an old variety show sketch: a man in women's clothes. He has a different reading from what I am quite sure is the 'preferred' reading, but he doesn't seem to get much satisfaction in any form from his own, 'puzzled' reading. What happens here seems to correspond closer with the more absolutist models of Pierre Bourdieu, who suggest that a specific cultural 'habitus' is needed to enjoy highbrow cultures, than with the more open encoding/decoding model. I think it makes more sense to describe this as misinterpretation, as a failure to 'get the joke', than to describe this as an interpretive act with some kind of gratification. This seems to miss the point, which is that this is a form of exclusion.

This is the mechanism supporting taste hierarchies in television: people look at the same thing, to which they have completely equal access, but they see something very different. Or in most cases: they actually see *nothing*. There is something in highbrow comedy that makes many people, not only lower educated people, but also a significant fraction of the higher educated, to lose interest. This is not because this humor contains references that people might miss, as I might when trying to understand American humor. The inaccessibility of this humor is mainly a matter of style: there is nothing about the subject matter that people disagree with, there usually are no words or references for which they lack the knowledge, it simple is the fact that it has no meaning to them. This lack of interest is an immediate reaction as fast and automatic as laughter or indignation. It is indeed, as my interviewee said, a matter of 'feelers' somebody might or might not have. Bourdieu might call these 'feelers' part of someone's habitus: a form of practical knowledge, consisting of embodied, automatic ways of seeing, feeling, behaving and interpreting, which is related to one's social position.

So what is it about highbrow comedy that excludes people? What does the cultural knowledge to understand and appreciate this comedy consist of? In many ways, highbrow comedy is more difficult than lowbrow comedy. This difficulty lies in the higher speed, in the references and allusions, and in the ambivalence of the humor. Highbrow comedy appeals to a number of different emotions at the same time, both pleasant and unpleasant. Furthermore, it is often not very clearly framed as

humorous; as in the description of Ederveen, people may not be sure whether this absurdity is truly funny. The overall effect is a form of humor that is not always recognizable as such, and that is bordering on the absurd or the disagreeable. This means that the appreciation of this highbrow humor requires a certain distance that is comparable to Bourdieu's esthetic disposition: the esthetic attitude that one needs for the appreciation of modern and abstract art. This disposition implies a distant, somewhat cerebral perspective on beauty and enjoyment: not the accessible pleasure of something that is attractive, pretty or nice at first sight, but a more distanced enjoyment of the things that have to 'grow on you'. Much of literature, modern art, of contemporary music (both classical and jazz, less pop or rock) is not attractive when you first come across it. A comparable thing goes for this Dutch highbrow comedy: it is not funny or nice at first sight, and it might even be outright unpleasant. Knowledge is required to see the 'fun' in this.

In practice, such a habitus is clearly exclusive, but does this mean it is snobbery? For those who have internalized this, the appreciation of this humor is completely automatic. Laughter about this Ederveen is as direct and reflexive as laughter at a joke, or the disinterest of the joke-tellers. Aficionados of highbrow comedy have different ideas of what good and bad humor is; and for this reason, they see something in this humor that others will not see. However, there is clearly an element of opposition to this taste culture: it is never easy-going or just for fun, it is never 'just a joke', it is always intended to stimulate, to irritate, to educate, to satirize, as well as to amuse. Thus, it is an oppositional taste culture: it is self-consciously trying *not* to be 'just amusement'.

The power to judge and the performance of taste: higher educated interviewees and the dislike of lowbrow comedy

While highbrow television comedy is mostly unknown to lower educated people (or people with lowbrow humor), higher educated respondents do have knowledge of lowbrow comedy. Moreover, they feel quite at ease judging and dismissing it. Although there was a weak inverse correlation between education and knowledge of lowbrow comedy and education, there was a much stronger inverse correlation between appreciation of lowbrow comedy and education. With an accessible and popular medium such as television, this knowledge of television shows seems to be more logical than lack of knowledge. Still, from the above, it is clear that television is not as accessible as it seems, so it is interesting to see how higher educated people get this knowledge, and what this knowledge entails. Their dislike of lowbrow comedy seems typical of a taste hierarchy: and using the interviews with the lover of highbrow taste, I will explore the mechanisms behind this dislike. There are considerably fewer interviews than with aficionados of lowbrow comedy: 15 higher educated interviewees, and one college dropout, of the sample of 32 average Dutch can be said to have highbrow taste in comedy.

On this side of the taste hierarchy, the question is not: why don't they know things, but why do they know? Or rather: what do they know? What cultural knowledge do they need and employ to see things and reject it? What is the knowledge behind dislike and disdain? Let me start again with one

specific example of the humor in this style. In the first stage of this study, I recruited informants at a joke-telling contest called *Moppentoppers* (the name is a contamination of ‘topper’, which means the same in English, and moppentapper, a popular term for joke-teller). This program was aired by commercial channel RTL4, which has a predominantly lower educated audience. Very soon I discovered that this name did not mean much to people in my immediate social surroundings – mostly university educated. However, after some explanation, people would usually say that they had ‘seen it in passing’ on TV. Interestingly, most of them then continued to explain that seeing that this show was presented by someone name Ron Brandsteder, they immediately switched to another channel.

The same pattern was visible in the interviews with the lovers of highbrow humor:

What about Moppentoppers?

Husband: No, that is horrible. Yes, I really think so. That’s this Brandsteder character, I think that has something to do with it.

Wife: What is this Moppentoppers? Does he do that?

Husband: Yes, and I watched it once or twice. Don’t you remember? It is a joke telling contest.

Wife: Yes, now I remember. Yes, that is horrible.

(to husband): I noticed you rated it (meaning the show) ‘one’ in the questionnaire.

Husband: yes, this man is such a self-complacent prig.

(Husband: college graduate-turned-carpenter.; wife, owner of antiques store)

GK: Have you ever seen Moppentoppers?

Is that with Ron Brandsteder? Once, I think. Well, that wasn’t very funny. You know what the problem is with things like this (and then he goes on to explain at length how telling jokes is never funny).

(man, English teacher)

Do you know moppentoppers

Is that with those children? Is that is? Or is it..

I am not sure you know it.

Maybe if you tell me.

It’s with Ron Brandsteder.

Right, it’s where they are on a stage and than they have to tell jokes. Well, I might have seen it, some of it, but it’s not really my thing.

(man, doctor)

What these quotes show, first of all, the contrast between the uncertain tone and the lack of words lower educated people had to denounce Ederveen, in contrast with the rather eloquent and very decided way in which higher educated people expressed their dislike of Brandsteder. These informants clearly felt they had the power to judge this man, and his show, after seeing it only once, or even less than once.

Obviously, Ron Brandsteder, provoked an pronounced distaste; and this distaste immediately affected people’s opinion of the shows he is doing, even if the don’t know anything about it. Brandsteder clearly was an example of all that is bad about lowbrow humor; he was called ‘fake’ and ‘exaggerated’ many times, as well as ‘contrived, because he laughs about everything’ and ‘complete rubbish. What can I say; it’s the accidental existence of cameras that made him famous, because he has not talents at all. I think he himself is the only one who thinks he’s funny, must be...’ (man, lawyer). People with lowbrow taste, on the other hand, usually liked Ron Brandsteder, who they felt was

charming, humorous, and good-natured, as well as *Moppentoppers*, which was called ‘real humor’, and was many joke-tellers’ favorite show.

Also, these quotes show how the negative judgments of these people are entwined with their previous knowledge of Ron Brandsteder, and they also show how they used this previous knowledge to immediately discredit the show as a whole. This is how the knowledge, as well as the distaste, of many higher educated people works. To a large extent, it is ‘working knowledge’: one recognizes people, or genres, and on the basis of this one dares to claim that it is not interesting.

During my interviews, I discovered there is usually not much knowledge, nor interest, behind their dismissal. This goes even for the most popular comedian in this cluster, Andre van Duin. All my informants knew he was doing a show at the time of the interviews, but higher educated informants weren’t quite sure what he was up to. When asked what they did not like about him, they usually referred to things that he did ten or twenty years ago. There are many examples of this: they knew (and disliked) the principle of the candid camera, and gave low ratings to the one show based on this genre (a show that had been on for a very long time), but they had no idea whether it was still on, and hadn’t seen a candid camera show for years. Similarly, they were very confident in claiming they disliked the sitcom called *Flodder*, but usually they had only seen the film on which it was based. In other words: much of the negative judgments of higher educated people was based on superficial and outdated knowledge. This knowledge was, however, felt to suffice for finding good shows on TV; and also for filling out my questionnaire. When asking further questions, people usually could not name any concrete examples, or described what these persons had been doing in the past ten years.

Unlike the lower educated respondents, higher educated informants never saw *nothing*. On the contrary: many of their judgments were very outspoken. Without hesitation, things were described as corny and vulgar; and people weren’t above using expletives to express their disgust. An 82-year old female lawyer said about comedian Sylvia Millemcam, with a strong look of disgust on her face: ‘Yugh! That’s such terrible affectation!’ Others were described as ‘teeeeeerribly coarse’, or ‘really much to facile’. This, then, is truly, a rejecting reading, as Morley (1980) described it: they did decode it, then completely rejected it. And I do think they did derive some gratification from this decoding, but no *humorous* gratification. But what they probably did think they got from this, is status.

What does this tell us about the knowledge behind dislike and dismissal? First of all, that higher educated informants, even if they said they never watched television, had superficial, but usually rather complete knowledge of what happened on television. Apparently, the channel switching during commercial breaks was enough to develop this working knowledge, which shows that this knowledge is embedded in a much more general ‘television knowledge’: of genres, names, faces. This working knowledge may be applied to shows, persons, as well as genres. Moreover, these people have great security about their own judgment: they are quite sure that theirs is the legitimate taste. What they have is the power to judge. This power is based on a more general knowledge, which enables them to interpret even the kinds of comedy they don’t like, and to denounce or applaud it with great

certainty. To be sure, lower educated informants did show certainty in their denouncements of comedy, and they also described certain comedians in a rather crass ways. But the scope of this knowledge was simple smaller. Hierarchy gives them plenty of power, and just enough knowledge.

However, with this power comes an obligation: the higher educated usually felt they had to have an opinion. This may be caused, in part, by the fact that I was a member of their group. But the notion that they had the legitimate taste did seem to give them the feeling that they had to show this knowledge, even if it was very superficial, and that they had to recognize names and shows. On several occasions, my middle class informants claimed to know someone and then went on to describe someone else – which never happened with lower educated informants. They were less afraid to ask. Higher educated informants seemed more reluctant to show such taste insecurity. In these interviews, I was usually very conscious of the performative aspects of taste. Taste always is a performance, something to show you are part of a specific group (Hennion 2000). This ‘performance of taste’ is usually described as an obnoxious problem for researchers: social desirability. However, research problems can often also be described as part of the research findings. In this case: the social desirability of taste performance and competence showed something about highbrow taste culture. Of course, lower educated also performed their tastes. But they did seem less bothered by the notion of legitimacy (in any case, if there was such a thing, I had a hard time discovering it). With the people at the upper end of the taste hierarchy, taste always is a performance of their competence, and their social worth. Thus, the power to judge comes with the obligation to perform.

Conclusion

How are hierarchical relationships between taste cultures possible in a fragmented, popular, and accessible medium like television? At least in the case of Dutch television comedy, television has not led to homogenization, nor to democratization, nor to fragmentation of taste. Instead, preferences for television comedy were found to be based in taste cultures related to simple social background variables: age and taste. The relationships between these taste cultures did not resemble the any of the more ‘postmodern’ models of taste cultures as fragmented, life-style based or omnivorous. Instead, the age difference was related to a distinction between the mainstream versus a marginal taste, with interestingly, younger people being the mainstream, and old-fashioned humor being the subcultural or marginal taste. The other taste cultures resulting from the analysis were highbrow versus lowbrow cultures, these were related to educational background.

The existence of a taste hierarchy within television is unexpected for three reasons: television is very accessible, fragmented, and almost exclusively devoted to popular culture. Of course, comedy is always popular culture. From the statistical analysis, as well as the interviews, it has become clear that popular culture, such as comedy, is a very stratified domain. This has been described for other television and domains as well: although genres are often reified as ‘high’ or ‘low’, genres such as news, drama, and crime have middlebrow, higher popular, lowbrow popular, and even more mixed

varieties (Creeber, 2000). The highbrow comedy preferred by higher educated informants is a mixture of the highbrow 'logic' of the esthetic disposition with popular techniques and a popular aim: amusement. The development of such mixed high-low styles could be described as one of the contributions of television to modern society: the emancipation of popular culture, the upward mobility of popular genres, and the increasing respectability of entertainment. However, such a development of popular highbrow and popular lowbrow could also be more typical of comedy than of other genres: humor tends to be a strong marker of social class, and also very strongly linked to identity and the drawing of social boundaries. The hypothesis that this rather pronounced taste hierarchy is domain-specific cannot be ruled out completely; and it would be interesting to compare the pattern found here with genres such as drama, crime, action or game shows.

The second reason why taste hierarchies seem incompatible with television is because TV is such a fragmented medium. However, from the data presented here, it seems reasonable to assume that audiences, at least in the Netherlands, are not as fragmented as television scholars have suggested or predicted. The reason for this is that the taste cultures found here are directly linked to social categories that are very strongly embedded in social life and social networks. This is probably one of the reasons why gender was not correlated with separate taste cultures: men and women may have some different preferences (and these were found in the interviews), but they often share lives, households, and television sets, so their preferences might not develop into true 'cultures'. People of different ages and educational backgrounds generally lead more separate lives. This is especially important because of the strong continuity between television comedy and everyday life: in the larger study of which this article is a part, television taste was shown to be an integral part of people's general taste: they employed the same criteria to judge television comedy and humor in everyday life.

Moreover, these variables have exceptionally strong 'sociological backing': the educational difference is linked what is probably the most pervasive institution in modern society, the educational system, which is constantly reproduced in work, neighborhoods, etc. The age difference is also influenced by something quite pervasive: the age in which you grow up and get socialized. It would be hard to conceptualize tastes that are not influenced by such things. However, it is possible that a more thorough study will show a number of different taste cultures within these 'basic' taste cultures based on 'hard' social background factors. For instance, on the basis of Bourdieu's theory, there should be a more conservative highbrow taste: these could be the people in figure 2 who know but don't like highbrow humor. A number of multidimensional analyses were run to look for such 'varieties' within taste cultures, but a larger study with more subjects, and especially: more items might be needed to look for such patterns of 'layered' taste cultures within the highbrow/lowbrow and mainstream/marginal patterns.

Thirdly, the existence of a taste hierarchy in television is unexpected because television is such an accessible medium: with television, the same programs enter undisturbed into everybody's living room, bedroom, kitchen, etc. None of the usual barriers to highbrow culture, financial, as well as

cultural (knowing how to behave, how to blend in) are present in television. Also, highbrow television is not labeled 'highbrow' in the same kind of way: television is mostly out of reach to the gatekeepers of high culture, such as teachers, critics, and increasingly: parents. However, what this study shows is that highbrow tastes still have plenty of barriers left. Television actually seems to be very fit for producing shows and programs that mean very little to many of its audiences. This specific form of popular culture is not 'open to many interpretations or readings. Although it is popular culture, it has the exclusivity and habitus of highbrow culture.

The enjoyment of television comedy, of any kind, actually requires a lot of knowledge: the knowledge to decode it comedy, to see something in it and to recognize it as humor, and then to enjoy it. A large part of this cultural knowledge of television is common to all taste cultures: everybody employs the knowledge to recognize style, genre, tone, character, to judge the dominant medium of our time. Really is undistinguishable from this form of knowledge: any preference, as well as dislike and disgust, is embedded in such forms of knowledge to the extent that taste really is a form of cultural knowledge. However, different groups not only have different kinds of knowledge, some knowledge seems to have wider reach than others, and some people simply have more knowledge.

Moreover, this knowledge seems to be a very specific kind of knowledge – much more so than television scholars have assumed. Alternatives to the preferred readings usually did not result in very gratifying humorous experiences. Only a very small number of comedians and shows appeared to be open to readings that were truly different from the preferred readings, and from these, only one was in the highbrow cluster, none in the lowbrow (see Kuipers 2001) Generally, for the comedy discussed here neatly fit in with Sonia Livingstone's summary of television fare: 'heavily overcoded, closed and repetitive'. And not at all accomodating to the active audience.

To be sure, all television viewers employ enormous amounts of cultural knowledge. Aficionados of lowbrow humor also have their cultural capital, their knowledge and skill to see something that others do not see. The difference is that, in some cases, people see nothing, in other cases, people see something they might disapprove of: something crude, easy, or vulgar – or maybe they will just think it is boring. It is not inaccessible in the same way: it could conjure up disgust, boredom, irritation, but never the non-understanding disinterest that can hardly be captured in words. As one of the joke-tellers, a lower educated mechanic remarked, quite to the point:

'Andre van Duin (the best-liked lowbrow comedian), everybody can listen to *him*, one might find it corny, they other might crack up over it, but it is accessible to everyone.'

In the case of Van Duin, everybody will see something that he feels legitimate in having an opinion about, and about whom he feels justified to have this opinion: for highbrow comedians like Ederveen this is much less likely. This is (part of) the profit of a high education: there is more to reject, more to look down upon.

But is the inverse also true? Do lower educated people look up to highbrow taste? The highbrow comedy described here was most certainly an exclusive taste, but was it the ‘legitimate taste’? Clearly, it was so in the eyes of my higher educated informants; this was quite certain from the security in their ‘performance of taste’. However, although the lower educated interviewees were rather puzzled or despondent about highbrow culture, they never seemed to have the feeling there was something truly wrong about that, and they were quite content, and definitely not ashamed about their own tastes. In other words, there had no ‘upward aspirations’ – which are the basis of all trickle down models of culture. Possibly, this is related to the fact that we were talking about humor, one of the few domains in which ‘the people’ usually believe they have more feeling for than ‘uptight’ intellectuals. However, it seems to be that lower educated people in the Netherlands are increasingly secure about their tastes, and that the legitimacy of high culture as well as high knowledge is steadily decreasing (see also Van Eijck e.a. 2002). After all, it is all on the same television, so why would it be worth more? What television might do to highbrow tastes, then, is to transform them from legitimate tastes to exclusive subcultures. And this may be the mechanism through which television may be a threat to highbrow-lowbrow models of taste culture: not through the removal of barriers to high culture, or the loss of exclusivity; but through the loss of legitimacy.

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