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INTRODUCTION

Beyond Contexts: Taking Cultural Objects Seriously in Media, Popular Culture, and the Arts

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When we began our work on cultural production in the entertainment industry almost two decades ago, we were fortunate to be able to build on pioneering work that was foundational in the field. Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning White's 1957 edited volume, *Mass Culture*, was a road map to many of the "popular arts" that command scholarly attention to this day—literature, film, television and radio, divertissement (which includes jazz, popular music, theater, and card playing), and advertising. It contained early insights into measurement and analysis of the so-called mass audience that unlocked its diversity. Its contributors recorded viewpoints both critical and hopeful about the presence of mass-marketed products in society and their impact that still pervade public debate and policy. Almost two decades later, Herbert Gans's *Popular Culture and High Culture* (1974) challenged sociologists to probe the value-laden basis of the critique of mass culture and further legitimated the popular by offering insightful observations about its relationship to aesthetics. By clarifying the pluralism of taste publics and the relationship of taste cultures to social structure, Gans provided the foundation for sociological understanding of the relationship of popular culture to class interests and concerns in the United States. Richard Peterson focused attention on the relationship between market structure and the production of popular culture (in particular, his influential 1975 *American Sociological Review* article, "Cycles of Symbol Production: The Case of Popular Music," with David Berger) and revealed how industry concentration and other forms of consolidation lead to product homogeneity. In subsequent work, his close analysis of the genre of country music yielded insights into the importance of authenticity in cultural production. Adding to the works of these key contributors were DiMaggio's findings about aesthetic entrepreneurs and other leaders of cultural institutions who appropriate nonelite art forms as resources in their claims to elite status (see, e.g., his 1982 article in *Media, Culture, and Society*). DiMaggio's insights into the social construction of cultural

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status and legitimacy brought understanding to the actions of institutional decision makers more generally as they strive to maintain credibility in the marketplace. A focus on the effects of popular media's visual representations was introduced by Gaye Tuchman, Arlene Kaplan Daniels, and James Benet's *Hearth and Home* (1978), which took up the matter of differences in textual and visual representation of women and men; and within our own media specialization, film and television, Muriel Cantor's *The Hollywood TV Producer* (1971) detailed the ways in which the production process of creative industries is shaped by the commercial demands of the medium and the marketplace.

This burgeoning work on the popular arts benefited from and was influenced by important scholarship on the analysis and production of art per se. Howard Becker's *Art Worlds* (1982) elaborated the significance of collaboration in the production of artistic works, not unlike the production of commercial commodities, and underscored how artistic creativity is, in fact, embedded in a cooperative process. Further, Becker's insights into the contribution of galleries and gallery owners to creating artists' reputations, and of critics as gatekeepers of artistic canons, demonstrated how social hierarchy constructs markets in art worlds. Diana Crane's *The Transformation of the Avant-Garde* (1987) demonstrated how innovation in art is itself an outcome of social actions in social contexts, and in other work she has argued for the arbitrariness of the distinction between high and low culture, suggesting in its place the concept of media and urban cultures in order to reflect better popular culture's locus of production (1992). Janet Wolff's influential book, *The Social Production of Art* (1981), argued that aesthetic judgment is amenable to sociological analysis, and although it is influenced by other, nonaesthetic values, it is not entirely reducible to them. The works of these authors and others were anchored in the cornerstones of sociology, including collective action, social stratification, markets, institutions, occupations, ideology, and the emerging focus on gender, and were guided by methodological approaches that foregrounded content analysis, fieldwork, and ethnography, and, in inaugural work by Charles Kadushin (1976) and Harrison White (1993), network analysis.

Up to the 1980s, American cultural sociology focused primarily on social context, with little attention to the properties of cultural objects themselves. That changed, through the influence of the European theorists Stuart Hall, Simon Frith, Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault, and Dick Hebdige, among others, and cultural sociology has become a centerpiece of the discipline itself as the turn to the cultural unfolds (see, e.g., Roger Friedland and John Mohr's forthcoming edited volume, *Matters of Culture*). The field of cultural sociology is increasingly complex in scope, and its practice has been broadening to include analysis of aesthetics, formal properties, the integration of production and consumption, and the relevance of meaning. It was our intent in selecting a theme for this special issue to include work that reflected these recent elaborations of the field. Thus we invited work that explored relationships between audiences and those who create culture, aesthetics and criticism, social practices and new media, sociology of performance, culture industries and culture work, and inequality and difference in media production and media texts. We were open to various theoretical perspectives and

methodological approaches, and we were especially interested in papers that transcend the boundary between humanistic interpretation and scientific explanation. The five articles included in this issue contribute to these emergent areas in the field.

Shin-Kap Han's article, "Unraveling the Brow: *What and How of Choice in Musical Preference*," contributes to burgeoning work in cultural sociology on cultural niches (e.g., Erickson 1996; Mark 1998). Han builds on Bourdieu's insight that social location shapes not only which cultural objects are chosen but also the processes by which individuals come to value them. Han's analysis elaborates patterns of cultural choice in music, identifying "clusters of sensibility" that characterize how musical tastes are exercised. In his exploration of this additional dimension of taste, Han also presents a methodology to measure the evaluative and distinctive criteria people invoke to classify the cultural objects they choose. While affirming the overall relation between class and taste, Han contributes to the work of Gans, Crane, Peterson, and others who have argued for a more nuanced, less rigid differentiation between elite and nonelite culture.

Karin Elizabeth Peterson's contribution, "Discourse and Display: The Modern Eye, Entrepreneurship, and the Cultural Transformation of the Patchwork Quilt," analyzes the process by which marginalized cultural products become legitimized as artistic works. In her reconstruction of the transformation of quilts from utilitarian objects rooted in folk practices to objects of higher cultural value worthy of presentation in art museums, Peterson demonstrates the importance of modernist aesthetics to contemporary definitions of art and cultural status. Specifically, she analyzes the social construction of the pure gaze, clarifying the contribution of notions of originality, artistic autonomy, and, in particular, the mechanism of formal analysis in the creation of artistic legitimacy. Peterson's work on quilts contributes to understandings of the variable boundaries between art and nonart, recognizing that legitimization strategies can carry a social cost for the marginalized creators of those objects.

Britta B. Wheeler's piece, "The Institutionalization of an American Avant-Garde: Performance Art as Democratic Culture, 1970–2000," addresses how and why performance art survives in the face of contradictions between artists' political and aesthetic intent and institutional pressures. Defining performance art as a field comprising an amalgam of art practitioners, Wheeler analyzes its emergence and persistence from the standpoint of the artists, who explicitly seek to incorporate a social and political agenda into their work. Wheeler explains how their strategies allowed the political core of performance art to survive despite the potentially co-opting force of legitimation and an increasing orientation toward audience acceptance. Wheeler's research illustrates one of the ways in which meaning and ideology serve as aspects of artistic agency to break down seemingly inherent distinctions about art as either elite or nonelite.

Evan Cooper's article, "Decoding *Will and Grace*: Mass Audience Reception of a Popular Network Situation Comedy," studies the decidedly nonelite popular art of humor in the American situation comedy. Noting the lack of sociological attention to the aesthetics of mass media, Cooper explores the properties of outsider (in this instance, gay) humor as a cultural form, how the commercial medium of

television successfully incorporated its sensibilities into the mainstream, and the ways in which it is perceived by discrete components of its mass audience. His findings underscore the difficulty of ascertaining media effects, given the variable ways in which ensemble television series are written to engage different audience segments. Cooper's analysis illustrates the importance of considering the aesthetics of popular culture for understanding the many ways in which cultural production and consumption can occur.

Susan M. Alexander's contribution, "Stylish Hard Bodies: Branded Masculinity in *Men's Health Magazine*," asks two compelling questions: Do notions of marketplace masculinity still hold in a society transformed into a postindustrial consumer-based economy? Are new postmodern ideals of masculinities emerging, and if so, what are they? Drawing on an in-depth case analysis of a leading men's magazine, Alexander finds that contemporary displays of masculinity have indeed transformed to emphasize what men consume, in contrast to displays that have traditionally emphasized what they produce. With this shift, definitions of masculinity are now linked to corporate brands (just as definitions of womanhood have been for some time), subverting more "authentic" understandings of masculinity.

Elsewhere, we have joined others in calling for more focused scholarly attention to the intersections of elite art worlds and popular art forms, to the interconnections of art-based and market-based production and audience consumption, and to popular culture as a cultural form in its own right (see, e.g., Bielby and Bielby forthcoming; Gamson 1998; Harrington and Bielby 2000). The articles in this special issue are a step in that direction. We thank the many reviewers for their expertise and generosity in assisting us in this effort. Finally, we especially thank Peter Nardi, editor of *Sociological Perspectives*, for the opportunity to develop this special issue and for his steady assistance throughout the editorial process.

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