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Omnivore vs Univore: A Reflection on *the* Current Knowledge on Cultural Taste and Cultural Consumption

Abstract:

As the contemporary debates on cultural taste and cultural consumption continue to develop, the term “cultural omnivore” is discussed by an increasing number of sociologists and other scholars specialising in cultural and media studies. The study’s main objective is to offer a complex set of theoretical outlines related to the notions of “cultural omnivore” and “cultural univore”. The author of the study works with the basic assumption that today’s research findings on the topic do not aim to reject Pierre Bourdieu’s influential works and theories from the 1980s but they rather revisit the issues of cultural consumption in the light of the present-day globalised society and cultural situation. Referring to various academic reflections on the given issue, the study points out that the concept of “cultural omnivore” may not be flawless and impeccable but it still represents a significant contribution to revitalisation of the knowledge on cultural consumption in the 21st century.

Key words:

commercialisation, cultural consumption, cultural levels, cultural omnivore, cultural univore, media genres, taste patterns

Instead of Introduction: A Historical Overview of Critical Discussions on Cultural ‘Levels’

Money, economic potential and/or intellectual and educational inequalities have separated people for thousands of years. However, the globalised Western cultural environment of today is able to reduce at least some of these disparities; for example, in the context of cultural consumption and preferred taste patterns. Following the cultural situation of the late 1990s, new cultural trends in the 21st century have made the ‘traditional’ distinctions between highbrow, middlebrow and lowbrow cultural tastes even more unclear than ever before. Although the most influential texts that addressed the topic in question decades ago, e.g. the works by MacDonald¹ and Eco² still maintain their timeless importance, there are many new facts to consider.

Modes of cultural consumption in the second decade of the new millennium are formed by many different circumstances. The use of media products and works of art involves

¹ For more information, see: MacDONALD, D.: *Masscult and Midcult: Essays Against the American Grain*. New York : The New York Review of Books, 2011.

² See also: ECO, U.: *Skeptikové a těšitelé*. Praha : Argo, 2006.

a lot of closely intertwined aspects; some of them are also philosophical.³ As noted by Roubal, “the consumers’ relationships to products are not formed only by these products’ useful and functional value but rather by their individually defined, socially determined and shared symbolic meanings and sign systems. Much as they fulfil their utilitarian and practical functions, today’s commodities also represent symbolic indicators through which the consumers reproduce cultural meanings, structuralise social space, model their interpersonal relationships and shape their own identities”.⁴ Branding is becoming more and more important; brand is also an inherent part of quality media products and art.⁵ In case of cultural consumption, we may identify various previously non-existent relationships and connections between elite cultural practices and (presumably) ‘lower’ cultural forms (such as mass culture and popular culture).

Fostered by people of high economic and cultural status, elite culture has condemned mass culture and popular culture for decadence, striving to strengthen its own superior position in the society. Plencner claims that elite culture once refused, humiliated and shunned mass culture which served as a viable source of easily accessible, banal and imitated products based on simplified elite cultural elements. In this way the cultural elites tried to fulfil their need to preserve their own supreme social status, endangered by modernity and entertaining cultural forms aimed at the masses. Afraid of losing their previously

³ See, for example: GÁLIK, S.: *Filozofia a médiá: K filozofickej reflexii vplyvu médií na utváranie (súčasnej) kultúry*. Bratislava : Iris, 2012.

⁴ ROUBAL, O.: Sociology of Branding: “Just Do It” in the “No Limits” World. In *Communication Today*, 2017, Vol. 8, No. 1, p. 49.

⁵ See: PRAVDOVÁ, H.: The Myth of Quality Media or Seriousness as a Brand. In *European Journal of Science and Theology*, 2017, Vol. 13, No. 6, p. 53-63.

unchallenged superior social and cultural position, intellectuals and elite cultural circles therefore saw avant-garde as a source of their consolation, leaving kitsch for the mass audiences. However, technological advancements of this era brought other results than the elites had originally expected. Quite paradoxically, the elites found a new source of its dominance in culturally overpowering the newly formed ‘lower’ social spheres. Elite culture therefore became truly ‘elite’ at the moment it was confronted with mass culture and its percipients.⁶ Before that, no such distinctions had been necessary as there had been a very wide gap between social classes – one that no ordinary people had been able to overcome.

The long tradition of distinguishing various cultural ‘levels’ originates from first attempts to ‘classify’ culture made by several cultural critics and essayists living in the early 20th century.⁷ DeFleur and Dennis state that the American journalist and critic Will Irwin was the first one to use the terms “highbrow” (intellectual) and “lowbrow” (philistine). Shortly after Irwin published his series of related articles in the tabloid newspaper *New York Sun*, those two words were applied to the whole sphere of culture.⁸ We might say that the publication written by the literary critic and historian of culture Van Wyck Brooks titled *America’s Coming-of-Age*⁹ (originally published in 1915)

⁶ PLENCNER, A.: Konceptualizácia pojmu vysoká kultúra. In PETRANOVÁ, D., PLENCNER, A., SOLÍK, M. (eds.): *Nové diskurzy mediálnych štúdií - Megatrendy a médiá 2012*. Trnava : Faculty of Mass Media Communication UCM in Trnava, 2012, p. 91-96.

⁷ See also: PLENCNER, A.: Teória kultúrnych úrovní. In *European Journal of Media, Art and Photography*, 2013, Vol. 1, No. 2, p. 81.

⁸ DeFLEUR, M., DENNIS, E.: *Understanding Mass Communication*. 6th Edition. Boston : Houghton Mifflin Company, 1998, p. 281.

⁹ See: BROOKS, V. W.: *America’s Coming-of-Age*. Garden City : Doubleday Anchor Books, 1958.

played a very important role in the wide social establishment and further popularisation of the terms “highbrow” and “lowbrow”.

In the 1940s, mass culture was often criticised and quite radically refused by left-wing intellectuals. Probably the most influential critical article on culture and its condition in the era of mass society was written by the American art critic Clement Greenberg. The essay *Avant-garde and Kitsch*¹⁰ (originally published in 1939) became very famous. According to Plencner, Greenberg’s text is truly outstanding for several reasons, as its author points out to the cultural conflict between two utterly incompatible types of culture – avant-garde, i.e. the modern art and kitsch, i.e. the popular, commercial art and literature.¹¹ Dwight MacDonald,¹² another left-wing intellectual, later walked in Greenberg’s footsteps and, as mentioned by Plencner, he even took a step ahead by presenting his opinions on the cultural production in a more universal way, by attempting to systematically categorise the cultural production into three levels: elite culture, midcult and masscult.¹³ The last influential contribution to the discussion on cultural levels was published by the American sociologist Edward Shils in 1963.¹⁴ His thoughts, however, represented a more liberal,

¹⁰ See also: GREENBERG, C.: *Avant-garde and Kitsch*. [online]. [2018-01-30]. Available at: <http://sites.uci.edu/form/files/2015/01/Greenberg-Clement-Avant-Garde-and-Kitsch-copy.pdf>.

¹¹ PLENCNER, A.: Teória kultúrnych úrovní. In *European Journal of Media, Art and Photography*, 2013, Vol. 1, No. 2, p. 79.

¹² See: MacDONALD, D.: A Theory of Mass Culture. In ROSENBERG, B., WHITE, D. M. (eds.): *Mass Culture. The Popular Arts in America*. New York : The Free Press of Glencoe, 1963, p. 59-73.

¹³ PLENCNER, A.: Teória kultúrnych úrovní. In *European Journal of Media, Art and Photography*, 2013, Vol. 1, No. 2, p. 81.

¹⁴ See: SHILS, E.: Mass Society and Its Culture. In BOYD-BARRETT, O., NEWBOLD, Ch. (eds.): *Approaches to Media. A Reader*. London : Arnold, 1995, p. 81-86.

somehow opposing approach. Shils did not reject 'lower' cultural forms and claimed it was necessary to respect individual cultural tastes. Moreover, he saw different qualitative levels of culture as a reflection of varying aesthetical, intellectual and moral preferences of their consumers. In Shils's words, there are three cultural levels – superior (refined), mediocre and brutal.¹⁵ The given theories have been criticised and revisited by many interested scholars; the most well-known are critical notions by Umberto Eco.¹⁶ We have to underline that most of the aforementioned attempts to qualitatively define cultural levels are now quite exhausted and out of date, i.e. they do not correspond with the present cultural situation.

The French left-wing intellectual Pierre Bourdieu later offered an important impulse to revisit the theories of cultural levels in terms of late-modern thinking. His publication named *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* from 1979¹⁷ was a ground-breaking contribution to the debates on social theories, influencing sociology and cultural studies for the rest of the century. Plencner states that Bourdieu's aim was to find out to what extent are cultural refinement and cultural competences (manifested through selection of cultural products) dependent on social status of an individual and the cultural field in which they are situated.¹⁸ According to Pierre Bourdieu, cultural practices (e.g. selection of cultural products, critiques on works of art) are primarily related to one's education and secondarily to her/

his social background.¹⁹

In Alexander Plencner's words, Bourdieu divides the society into three levels – dominant (bourgeoisie), middle-class (petty bourgeoisie) and working-class. Belonging to one of these classes is based on the amount of capital one is able to accumulate. His idea is original due to the fact that holding this capital cannot be understood simply as possessing economic and material resources. There are various forms of capital; the most important of them are economic capital and cultural capital. Bourdieu also defines three different types of taste – legitimate taste, middlebrow taste and popular taste. Popular taste is the most widespread form of taste. It aims to encounter cultural products which immediately affect human emotions and do not cost a lot of money. The popular taste is most commonly expressed by the working-class people who lack higher education.²⁰ This thesis suggests that individuals with low income and low levels of education cannot belong to higher classes, as they lack both economic and cultural capital. If we further analysed Bourdieu's thoughts, we would have to presume that people lacking economic capital and cultural capital alike are not able to understand more elite forms of culture and they do not even want to. However, the issue is much more complex, especially in the 21st century when globalised media culture as well as the Internet and virtual media such as digital games²¹

are changing everything we have ever known about culture and society. New generations of so-called "digital natives" are growing up and they are nothing like the generations before them.²² Bourdieu was certainly not wrong – however, in the last 40 years the cultural production has changed too much.

We have to acknowledge that Bourdieu's theory of cultural distinction still maintains most of its initial significance and remains unchallenged in many ways,²³ and for good reasons. However, Friedman's study published in 2012 points out that in recent decades, the dominant paradigm in cultural sociology has shifted considerably; from placing emphasis on culture as a vehicle for class reproduction (as influentially discussed by Bourdieu and other authors in the 1980s) towards the widespread adoption of Richard A. Peterson's thesis of "cultural omnivore" in the early 1990s. This argument is, according to Friedman, based on both theoretical notions and empirical evidence that "contemporary 'elites' no longer use highbrow taste to demonstrate their cultural distinction, but are better characterised as inclusive 'omnivores', happy to consume both high and low culture".²⁴

As the article's title suggests, our aim is to offer a complex body of knowledge on the current understanding of the contradictory

Women's Studies. Sofia : STEF92 Technology, 2017, p. 149-156.

²² See, for example: VRABEC, N.: Digitálni domorodci na Slovensku: Komunikácia a nová identita mládeže v on-line prostredí. In *Communication Today*, 2010, Vol. 1, No. 1, p. 83-92.

²³ See, for example: VIŠŇOVSKÝ, J.: K sociologicky orientovanému výskumu novinárstva: Pierre Bourdieu a teória novinárstva. In MATÚŠ, J., RYBANSKÝ, R. (eds.): *Interakcia masmediálnej a marketingovej komunikácie: Zborník z medzinárodnej vedeckej konferencie Nové trendy v marketingu 2010*. Trnava : Faculty of Mass Media Communication UCM in Trnava, 2010, p. 325-335.

²⁴ FRIEDMAN, S.: Cultural Omnivores or Culturally Homeless? Exploring the Shifting Cultural Identities of the Upwardly Mobile. In *Poetics*, 2012, Vol. 40, No. 5, p. 468.

concepts of "cultural omnivore" and "cultural univore". We also have an ambition to discuss their contexts, especially their place within the sphere of media culture. We assume that the theory of "cultural omnivore" proposed by Peterson is not an attempt to deny Bourdieu's older notions of cultural distinctions and taste patterns; it is rather a different view of the same issue that does not claim to possess universal relevance. Which is particularly interesting, however, is that even though the notion of "cultural omnivore" is largely based on quantitative research inquiries, it has literally 'revitalised' the whole sphere of sociology of culture.

The Notion of "Cultural Omnivore" in Today's Scholarly Discourse

The current thoughts and opinions of interested scholars on commercial, industrially produced culture disseminated by mass media and digital media tend favour the term "media culture" over the older and somehow more expressive or rather critically condemned conceptualisations of "mass culture" and/or "popular culture". Preferring the word "media culture" is not surprising as the concept better corresponds with the contemporary cultural situation. The reason why we mention media culture is that this field of scholarly inquiry is closely related to critical notions on mass production of cultural elements, increasing vulgarisation of elite culture, volatile tastes of the media audiences and social reality as such.

However, even the given sphere of academic interest has changed its ways of criticising industrially produced culture. For example, Gans originally published his book titled *Popular Culture and High Culture: An Analysis and Evaluation of Taste* in 1974²⁵ and his

older opinions are quite different from those presented in the revised edition of the same publication from 2008. Considering the development tendencies of the social and cultural situation in the 21st century, Gans states that there are new aspects of the relationship between popular culture and elite culture to focus on. According to him, people still prefer cultural and media contents that are associated with their social class; on the other hand, this statement cannot fully explain the problem of seeking specific types of culture and entertainment. The categories of age, race and gender of the audience members are increasingly important – however, we may still presume that two different individuals of the same age, race, gender and social class would both subject their 'cultural choices' to their similar class determination and related financial resources.²⁶ Moreover, it can be observed that many recipients of culture do not limit their entertainment choices and cultural taste patterns just to one sphere (level) of culture. This phenomenon defines the consumers of culture (at least some of them) as "cultural omnivores".

The term "cultural omnivore" first appeared in Peterson's research study titled *Understanding Audience Segmentation: From Elite and Mass to Omnivore and Univore*.²⁷ Smith Maguire's recent definition characterises "cultural omnivore" through the following words: "Cultural omnivores are people whose consumption tastes range widely across both elite and popular

regards "mass culture" and "popular culture" as synonyms and thus does not distinguish between them.

²⁶ GANS, H. J.: *Popular Culture and High Culture: An Analysis and Evaluation of Taste (Revised and Updated)*. New York : Basic Books, 2008, p. 8-12.

²⁷ See: PETERSON, R. A.: Understanding Audience Segmentation: From Elite and Mass to Omnivore and Univore. In *Poetics*, 1992, Vol. 21, No. 4, p. 243-258.

genres; they differ from people with 'univorous' tastes, which are narrowly restricted to highbrow, middlebrow or lowbrow activities and preferences."²⁸ It is necessary to mention that this conceptualisation (supported by empirical data we mention below) results from the rapid development of the cultural production and consumption and its far-reaching consequences.

What is especially important is that the addressed cultural shift (from 'snobbishness' to 'omnivorousness') is not just a reflection of common changes in fashion, but rather an outcome of significant alterations in social power relationships. Peterson and Kern suggest that these may be divided into five intertwined factors:

- structural change – geographic migration, rising levels of living, broader education and presentation of the arts via the media which have made elite aesthetic taste more accessible to wider segments of the population, devaluing the arts as markers of exclusion,
- value change – the change from "exclusionist snob" to "inclusionist omnivore" can be seen as a part of the historical trend towards greater tolerance of those holding different values (e.g. values concerning gender, ethnic, religious and racial differences and their acceptance),
- art-world change – in the latter half of the 20th century, the old criterion of a single aesthetic standard became stretched beyond the point of credibility. It became increasingly obvious that the quality of art did not inhere in the work itself, but in the evaluations made by the art world,

²⁸ SMITH MAGUIRE, J.: Cultural Omnivores. In COOK, D. T., RYAN, J. M. (eds.): *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Consumption and Consumer Studies*. Chichester : John Wiley and Sons Ltd, 2015, p. 214.

¹⁵ PLENCNER, A.: Teória kultúrnych úrovní. In *European Journal of Media, Art and Photography*, 2013, Vol. 1, No. 2, p. 82.

¹⁶ For more information, see: ECO, U.: *Skeptikové a těšitelé*. Praha : Argo, 2006.

¹⁷ See: BOURDIEU, P.: *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Cambridge : Harvard University Press, 1984.

¹⁸ PLENCNER, A.: Teória kultúrnych úrovní. In *European Journal of Media, Art and Photography*, 2013, Vol. 1, No. 2, p. 84.

¹⁹ BOURDIEU, P.: *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Cambridge : Harvard University Press, 1984, p. 13.

²⁰ PLENCNER, A.: Teória kultúrnych úrovní. In *European Journal of Media, Art and Photography*, 2013, Vol. 1, No. 2, p. 85.

²¹ See, for example: RUSŇÁKOVÁ, L., BUČKOVÁ, Z.: Culture of Digital Games in the Context of Media Studies. In *SGEM 2017: 4th International Multidisciplinary Scientific Conference on Social Sciences and Arts: Science & Humanities Conference Proceedings. Volume I: Human Geography, Media and Communications, Information and Library Science, Demography and*

- generational politics – youngsters who like popular music and popular culture in general are no more expected to ‘move on’ to more serious fare as they mature. Since the late 1960s, youth culture has ceased to be seen as a “stage to go through in growing up”; it is now a viable alternative to established elite culture,
- status-group politics – we have turned away from defining popular culture as brutish (as something to be suppressed or avoided) towards acknowledging and incorporating elements of popular culture into the dominant status-group culture. “Omnivorous inclusion” seems to be better adapted to an increasingly global world managed by those who make their way, in part, by showing respect for the cultural expressions of others.²⁹

The study of ‘cultural omnivores’ undeniably builds on the theoretical and empirical work of Bourdieu and other authors focusing on the issue of cultural consumption in the 1980s. Most of initial researches on this topic were conducted in the United States in the early 1990s, trying to explain how and in which ways respondents participate in reception of arts, especially music. Smith Maguire analyses the beginnings of Peterson’s work related to ‘cultural omnivores’ by saying: “Examining survey data on arts participation in the United States, Peterson and his colleagues found that high-status respondents were more likely than others to include highbrow genres (such as opera) in their musical tastes, and also more likely to include non-highbrow genres, such as country music.” The prevalence of ‘omnivorous’ tastes within the high-status respondents supposedly meant

that elite taste had been redefined as “an ability to appreciate the aesthetic dimensions of a wide range of cultural forms, and not only those of highbrow culture”. According to Smith Maguire, subsequent research studies in North America, Europe and Australia have explored how ‘omnivorous’ tastes (for example, in music, literature and art) are patterned by various factors. Much of this research methodologically relies on survey data and therefore usually measures ‘omnivorousness’ in terms of volume (liking a greater number of genres than other individuals) and composition (liking genre forms that cross cultural boundaries).³⁰ We might say the initial body of research on ‘cultural omnivorousness’ is of quantitative character.

The related knowledge on “cultural omnivores” (at least some of it) thus suggests that the term tends to refer to well-educated people who respect (and, what is more important, seek) various cultural spheres regardless of their presumed aesthetic value. Craik claims that the term “cultural omnivores” aims to characterise people whose cultural tastes range across different genres and forms – independently of their generally highbrow, middlebrow or lowbrow character. She also notes that should the percentage of ‘cultural omnivores’ in a society markedly increase then the division between arts and culture and existing modes of supporting and representing art and culture might change significantly.³¹ Warde, Wright and Gayo-Cal see “cultural omnivores” as a group of (mostly) elite cultural consumers who do not deny their interest in popular culture, adding

30 SMITH MAGUIRE, J.: Cultural Omnivores. In COOK, D. T., RYAN, J. M. (eds.): *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Consumption and Consumer Studies*. Chichester : John Wiley and Sons Ltd, 2015, p. 215-216.

31 CRAIK, J.: *Re-Visioning Arts and Cultural Policy: Current Impasses and Future Directions*. Canberra : ANU E Press, 2007, p. 27-28.

these ‘lower’ cultural forms to their overall cultural repertoire. A somewhat idealised reason why they do so is that their antisnobish attitudes are able to overcome the old hierarchical cultural ‘borders’, that they are more tolerant towards the industrially produced culture (as well as they accept a higher extent of democracy and overall tolerance).³² It is necessary to point out that such cultural consumers do not have to ‘like everything’; they are rather open to various cultural choices, to respecting non-uniform aesthetic values.

‘Omnivores’ tend to be perceived as well-educated and well-situated, tolerant individuals who are interested in exploring various cultural spheres and cultural styles. It seems they may be driven by the need for experimenting with consumption of multiple kinds of culture. As Chan states, “omnivores” express a new aesthetic paradigm which is much more complex than any aesthetic judgments posed by previous generations of cultural elites. However, the present-day elites might still demonstrate their cultural and social superiority.³³ Nevertheless, it is reasonable to presume that at least some of these cultural consumers have changed the old ways of snobbish thinking to fulfil their desire to encounter new cultural forms and expand their existing knowledge on culture.

The given definitions suggest that the term “cultural omnivore” is quite difficult to analyse. According to Chan and Goldthorpe, it has been observed that two different understandings of cultural ‘omnivorousness’ are possible. It could be taken to refer either

32 See: WARDE, A., WRIGHT, D., GAYO-CAL, M.: Understanding Cultural Omnivorousness: Or, the Myth of the Cultural Omnivore. In *Cultural Sociology*, 2007, Vol. 1, No. 2, p. 143-164.

33 CHAN, T. W.: *Understanding Cultural Omnivores: Social and Political Attitudes*. [online]. [2018-01-28]. Available at: <http://users.ox.ac.uk/~sfos0006/papers/att3.pdf>.

to a general cultural ‘voraciousness’, in the sense of a large appetite for all forms of cultural consumption or, more specifically, to a tendency towards ‘taste eclecticism’ which finds its expression in patterns of cultural consumption that cut across established categories of ‘high’ and ‘low’. In fact, ‘omnivorousness’ does not – or not necessarily – imply a tendency to like everything in a quite indiscriminating way.³⁴ Peterson and Kern claim that ‘omnivorousness’ simply signifies “openness to appreciating everything”. However, particular ‘omnivorous’ tastes and consumption patterns may or may not develop; ‘omnivorousness’ is thus to be contrasted with snobbish consumption patterns based on rigidity and exclusion.³⁵ Moreover, the thesis of “cultural omnivore” is also associated with an opposite term – “cultural univore”. As suggested by Longhurst, those at the bottom of social hierarchy are better able to choose their favourite type of music, which implies that in Peterson’s view they can be characterised as ‘univores’ (thus neither mass-like nor ‘omnivorous’).³⁶ “Cultural univore” is therefore a rather degrading term that mostly refers to working-class consumers who possess quite narrow and maybe even one-dimensional taste patterns (for example, they may only like one music genre, one kind of movies or one type of television production).

Although high-status individuals are more likely to be ‘omnivores’, ‘omnivorousness’ is not limited to elite groups. Nevertheless, as Smith Maguire notes, elite groups have been

34 CHAN, T. W., GOLDTHORPE, J. H.: Introduction: Social Status and Cultural Consumption. In CHAN, T. W. (ed.): *Social Status and Cultural Consumption*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 7-8.

35 PETERSON, R. A., KERN, R. M.: Changing Highbrow Taste: From Snob to Omnivore. In *American Sociological Review*, 1996, Vol. 61, No. 5, p. 904.

36 LONGHURST, B.: *Cultural Change and Ordinary Life*. Maidenhead : Open University Press, 2007, p. 95.

of especial interest to researchers focusing on the patterns of cultural consumption: “Historically, popular or low cultural forms were shunned by elite groups; today, however, research finds that individuals with exclusively highbrow tastes (snobs) are a rarity.” The figure of the ‘omnivore’ is very different from the elitist snob; the research on ‘cultural omnivores’ thus tries to explain how patterns of elite taste have changed in the contemporary consumer cultures, and offers insights into the relationship between class, taste and cultural capital.³⁷ In this way the given knowledge clearly continues in Bourdieu’s work on cultural consumption and taste patterns.

Exploring ‘omnivorousness’ is also related to the ways people perceive media genres, especially genres of music.³⁸ According to Webster, it is worth noting that the studies on ‘cultural omnivorousness’ typically ask people how much they like standard music genres: “In doing so, they often assume that people (1) will recognise each genre, (2) have clear, unequivocal judgments about each genre, and (3) actually listen to what they say they like.” The existence of ‘cultural omnivores’ is “consistent with the speculation that media users, rather than being devotees of a single genre”, like having a variety of music genres at their disposal. Moreover, “dislikes are more powerfully aligned with genres than are likes”. It means that many people will consume across genres, but they are likely to name entire categories of music they avoid at all costs, i.e. they

37 SMITH MAGUIRE, J.: Cultural Omnivores. In COOK, D. T., RYAN, J. M. (eds.): *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Consumption and Consumer Studies*. Chichester : John Wiley and Sons Ltd, 2015, p. 214.

38 See, for example: PETERSON, R. A., SIMKUS, A.: How Musical Tastes Mark Occupational Status Groups. In LAMONT, M., FOURNIER, M. (eds.): *Cultivating Differences: Symbolic Boundaries and the Making of Inequality*. Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1992, p. 152-186.

have aversions to specific genres.³⁹ It is therefore reasonable to expand the existing body of research on ‘cultural omnivores’ to find out more about which kinds of media production these ‘omnivores’ typically reject, despite of their widely proclaimed tolerance towards a wide spectrum of cultural production, and why. Moreover, asking respondents about specific media products instead of genres might lead to more complex results. Many media products, especially the mainstream ones, tend to apply various extents of genre hybridisation, combining multiple genre forms so neatly that the media audiences are not even aware that they are encountering a media product based on a hybrid genre scheme. Although the general knowledge on which genres are liked and not liked by large groups of ‘omnivores’ is useful, an inquiry into the cultural tastes of ‘omnivores’ is definitely enriched by analyses of respondents’ relationship to specific media products which correspond with the examined genre categories. Moreover, these results are not so dependent on empirical generalisations that typically follow quantitative research surveys and try to explain data obtained through questionnaires.

In fact, much has been gained from the studies of ‘omnivorousness’ that employ interpretative methods (typically, interviews or textual analysis). Smith Maguire remarks that this kind of interpretive research offers more insight into “the fluidity of boundaries around legitimate culture” and “the normative value (and potential prestige) of displaying diverse tastes”. In terms of cultural consumption, dislikes – not just likes – may tell us more about constructing class identities via ‘omnivorous’ tastes. That is why “a more nuanced description” of

39 WEBSTER, J. G.: *The Marketplace of Attention: How Audiences Take Shape in a Digital Age*. 2nd Reprint. Boston : MIT Press, 2016, p. 31.

29 PETERSON, R. A., KERN, R. M.: Changing Highbrow Taste: From Snob to Omnivore. In *American Sociological Review*, 1996, Vol. 61, No. 5, p. 904-906.

'omnivorousness' continues to develop. According to the author, it is important to acknowledge that "a simplistic dichotomy of high-status 'omnivores' versus low-status 'univores' has been replaced by a better understanding of how and in what ways omnivorous tastes are exhibited across different groups".⁴⁰ Getting to know the reasons why people dislike a media genre or a specific media product might give us new impulses to reflect on aesthetic intolerance which tends to be, as Bourdieu claims, unbelievably aggressive.⁴¹ Finding out what people dislike – regardless of whether they are 'omnivores' or 'univores' – is therefore highly relevant as well.

Critique of the Concepts of "Cultural Omnivore" and "Cultural Univore"

Even though we have mentioned that most researches on 'cultural omnivores' do not attempt to reject Bourdieu's earlier work associated with cultural consumption and cultural taste, there are some whose results obviously contradict several of Bourdieu's findings from the 1980s. For example, the research study *Australia Everyday Culture Project* does not confirm Bourdieu's notes on the close relationship between economic position and taste practices – according to the study's authors, cultural practices are implicated in the processes of social division and social exclusion but operate independently of class.⁴² Van Krieken

et al. comment the research's results by saying that two important taste cultures were identified – inclusive and restrictive. Primarily drawn from high-status groups, inclusive taste cultures referred to Peterson's theory of 'cultural omnivores' and were characterised by tertiary education, urbanity, youth and female gender (most of these people were managers, professionals and, to a lesser extent, paraprofessionals and employers). On the other hand, restrictive cultural tastes were the direct opposite – individuals in this grouping tended to favour a narrow selection of consumption practices, they had lower levels of education and a rural or regional location. However, the study also detected another very important notion – what people knew about was very different from what they truly liked. For example, many people, especially professionals such as doctors and lawyers, were able to identify the artists associated with different songs over a range of genres and still their true tastes were not 'omnivorous'. They may have known a lot about everything, but their tastes remained somewhat upscale and discriminating. Managers, paraprofessionals and small-business owners were much closer to the ideal concept of 'cultural omnivore' who knows, likes and consumes a large variety of highbrow, middlebrow and lowbrow media products.⁴³

Once again, we have to underline that cultural 'omnivorousness' seems to be a truly appealing concept but, in fact, it is based on empirical generalisations; so far these generalisations have not been able to explain the true reasons behind the given cultural shifts.⁴⁴ Quite understandably, 'omnivorous' tastes are more common in urban and

younger consumers. However, survey research, Smith Maguire remarks, is "poorly equipped to capture the manner in which people practice their preferences", which is central to Bourdieu's conceptualisation of taste.⁴⁵ Methodological limitations of such kinds of empirical inquiry are also mentioned by Peterson himself. He also criticises the tendency for publicly funded quantitative researches surveying cultural activities – they may be explicitly related to justifying public funding of the arts that are popular, and without acknowledging different ways this popularity manifests itself in the everyday lives of the individual respondents.⁴⁶ In other words, distinguishing between what people know about and what people truly like is very, very difficult – as well as getting to know what one consumes and, more importantly, how one consumes. The publicly funded (or even commercial) researches do not even try to find out more about the individual and social modes of cultural consumption; typically, their primary purpose is to assess the commercial potential of specific cultural products.

However, even though it may seem that the thesis of "cultural omnivore" is so complex and Bourdieu's thoughts related to social status of individuals as well as societal groups, i.e. the notions of economic and cultural capital are no longer up-to-date, there are scholars who see the issue from a different perspective, referring back to Bourdieu's work in new contexts and considerations. In Slovakia, for example, Bourdieu's theories were reflected on by Višňovský, in relation to contemporary journalistic

production.⁴⁷ Moreover, Lizardo and Skiles say it is reasonable to be sceptical about the novelty of 'the omnivore'. According to the authors, culture has played its significant role in the reproduction of class privileges in Western societies for a long time.⁴⁸ Wright's opinion on the matter is similar – cultural consumption patterns are "likely to have been developed over a significant time period and unlikely to be transformed substantively in the few generations between Bourdieu's *Distinction* and the 'discovery' of the 'omnivore' in North America and beyond". The conceptualisation of "cultural omnivore" may refer to "an end of simplistic notions of snobbishness that preclude any possibility of elite people liking any popular culture". After all, even Bourdieu mentioned younger well-educated societal groups, especially those close to the cultural or symbolic industries, and their attempts to "assert their presence in the cultural field by consecrating popular items as part of inter-generational struggles".⁴⁹

Furthermore, the binary divisions between 'omnivores' and 'univores' are often very straightforward and one-dimensional. Ollivier claims that such binary oppositions stand alongside with other shallow divisive binaries in the cultural life of today (mobility and inability to travel, cultural 'openness' and closed cultural framework, heterogeneity and homogeneity).⁵⁰

47 VIŠŇOVSKÝ, J.: *Aktuálne otázky teórie a praxe žurnalistiky v ére internetu*. Trnava : Faculty of Mass Media Communication UCM in Trnava, 2015, p. 91.

48 See: LIZARDO, O., SKILES, S.: Reconceptualizing and Theorizing "Omnivorousness": Genetic and Relational Mechanisms. In *Sociological Theory*, 2013, Vol. 30, No. 4, p. 263-282.

49 WRIGHT, D.: Cultural Consumption and Cultural Omnivorousness. In INGLIS, D., ALMILA, A.-M. (eds.): *The SAGE Handbook of Cultural Sociology*. London : SAGE Publications, 2016, p. 570.

50 For more information, see: OLLIVIER, M.: Models of Openness to Cultural Diversity: Humanist, Populist, Practical and Indifferent Omnivores. In *Poetics*, 2008, Vol. 36, No. 2-3, p. 120-147.

This is quite paradoxical since, as remarked by Rothenberg, Peterson argues that the old association of the masses with commercial culture and the elites with high (elite) culture no longer holds. Peterson's arguments seem to be quite convincing as audiences for popular and high art forms indeed overlap, at least to some extent. Today, all forms of culture are much more heterogeneous than they were in, for example, the 1950s. However, there are "still significant differences between forms of culture that rely exclusively on a mass market and commercial distribution and those that do not". Cultural forms that are relatively independent from the mass markets do not generate much profit and thus they are freer to experiment and innovate.⁵¹ In other words, the problem of cultural consumption is related to commercialisation and market environment as well;⁵² it always has been. As the media audiences of today are oversaturated with advertisement campaigns, it is necessary to look for new ways of presenting products.⁵³ Once any innovative (often highbrow) creative concepts are widely popularised and accepted by the global media audiences, large production concerns and conglomerates tend to exploit them to 'refresh' their overused production strategies and the exhausted thematic or visual aspects they use at the moment. Most creative ideas innovative in form and content therefore become standardised, homogenous, adapted to the frameworks of mass production, i.e. subject to economic imperatives. And

51 ROTHENBERG, J.: *Sociology Looks at the Arts*. New York, Abingdon : Routledge, 2014, p. 34.

52 See, for example: ČÁBYOVÁ, L.: *Marketing a marketingová komunikácia v médiách*. Łódź : Księży Młyn Dom Wydawniczy Michał Koliński, 2012.

53 See, for example: WOJCIECHOWSKI, L. P.: *Ambient Marketing: + Case Studies in V4*. Kraków : Towarzystwo Słowaków w Polsce, 2016.

so they became middlebrow or lowbrow just because they have been widely popularised, commercially successful and accepted by the mainstream. Just because many people like them.

On the other hand, it would be quite unreasonable to think that the best educated and culturally superior audience members do not seek mainstream media products for purposes of entertainment and emotional pleasure. The outlined factors of cultural change related to the blurred boundaries between once irreconcilable and sharply defined 'cultural levels' are also associated with general technological development and global presence of digital media.⁵⁴ In present-day societies, members of higher social strata, apart perhaps from a very small minority, do not shun popular or lowbrow culture, but they regularly participate in it, and they do so yet more actively than members of lower strata.⁵⁵ Although expressing more tolerant or even openly positive attitudes towards non-elite forms of the cultural production, the contemporary dominant social classes which consider themselves 'elite' are far from 'perfect'. Some of them still preserve and foster the idea of their own symbolic excellence, emphasised by their parents and grandparents. Maybe, Plencner thoughts, one of the reasons why (some) intellectuals and critics still refuse to accept popular forms of culture is the fact that experiencing these cultural patterns does not require employment of the type of cultural capital which they have accumulated, so laboriously and for a long time, within educational

54 See also: RADOŠINSKÁ, J.: New Trends in Production and Distribution of Episodic Television Drama: Brand Marvel-Netflix in the Post-television Era. In *Communication Today*, 2017, Vol. 8, No. 1, p. 4-29.

55 CHAN, T. W., GOLDTHORPE, J. H.: Introduction: Social Status and Cultural Consumption. In CHAN, T. W. (ed.): *Social Status and Cultural Consumption*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 7.

40 SMITH MAGUIRE, J.: Cultural Omnivores. In COOK, D. T., RYAN, J. M. (eds.): *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Consumption and Consumer Studies*. Chichester : John Wiley and Sons Ltd, 2015, p. 215.

41 BOURDIEU, P.: *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Cambridge : Harvard University Press, 1984, p. 56.

42 For more information, see: BENNETT, T., EMMISON, J. M., FROW, J. A.: *ACCOUNTING FOR TASTES: AUSTRALIAN EVERYDAY CULTURES*. MELBOURNE : CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 1999.

43 VAN KRIEKEN, R. et al.: *Sociology*. 5th Edition. Frenchs Forest : Pearson, 2014, p. 181-182.

44 See also: RADOŠINSKÁ, J.: *MEDIÁLNA ZÁBAVA V 21. STOROČÍ: SOCIÁLNO-KULTÚRNE ASPEKTY A TRENDY*. TRNAVA : FACULTY OF MASS MEDIA COMMUNICATION UCM IN TRNAVA, 2016, P. 62.

45 SMITH MAGUIRE, J.: Cultural Omnivores. In COOK, D. T., RYAN, J. M. (eds.): *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Consumption and Consumer Studies*. Chichester : John Wiley and Sons Ltd, 2015, p. 215-216.

46 See: PETERSON, R. A.: Problems in Comparative Research: The Example of Omnivorousness. In *Poetics*, 2005, Vol. 33, No. 5-6, p. 257-282.

system.⁵⁶ That is why a significant amount of inequalities remains in the consumption of high or more 'distinguished' cultural forms.

According to Chan and Goldthorpe, such consumption is, in fact, largely confined to higher social strata, while in lower strata consumption does not tend to extend beyond more popular forms. Moreover, the cultural consumption of individuals in more advantaged social positions differs from that of individuals in less advantaged positions, being both greater and wider in its range. It comprises not only more highbrow culture but more middlebrow and lowbrow culture as well.⁵⁷ Despite of being seen as democratic, tolerant and open to all kinds of the cultural production, 'cultural omnivores' might still express their cultural and social superiority – even unwittingly. For instance, as Coulangeon states, purposeful employment of considerable cultural resources during consumption of 'lower' cultural forms actually leads to empowerment of elite's cultural dominance: "Clearly there is no surer way for upper-status class members to affirm their symbolic domination than borrowing forms of expression from outside the perimeter of highbrow art..." Instead of manifesting true 'omnivorousness', the elites rather demonstrate their ability to "culturally empower" the popular culture in order to further distinguish themselves from societal members with lower class status.⁵⁸ The ways the elites encounter

popular cultural forms may be ironic or otherwise condescending.⁵⁹ For example, some well-situated and educated percipients of 'lower' cultural forms might only express their interest in them to publish analyses or critiques, to socially humiliate those who like these products, mocking them along the way.

Reflecting the contradictory scholarly opinions on 'cultural omnivorousness', the previous parts of the study suggest, in accordance with thoughts of Chan and Goldthorpe, that despite the considerable amount of related publications and research studies the mechanisms involved in constructing, legitimating and circulating new definitions and repertoires of 'good taste' are not explored enough. The same is true in case of the new, socially esteemed mentalities about taste and consumption. 'Cultural omnivorousness' has been linked to the plurality of lifestyles, to the democratisation of culture, to a greater openness and acceptance of diversity: "Nevertheless, culture and taste remain potent sites and tools of social stratification." Knowledge of and participation in highbrow culture are no longer exclusive markers of distinction. 'Cultural omnivorousness' therefore offers a means of demonstrating distinction (without appearing to be antidemocratic), of being elite but not (appearing to be) elitist.⁶⁰ In this way it might not be so much different from other public expressions of 'political correctness' or the condescending late-modern theses of 'social and cultural inclusion'.

Of course, the current 'omnivore' debate involves other important aspects; some of them are mentioned by Hazir and Warde. First of all, despite the increased amount of contributions to the discussion, interested scholars do not seem to be any closer to establishing a universal framework of measuring or even defining 'cultural omnivorousness'. Secondly, quantitative studies persistently identify groups of 'omnivores' in Europe and North America who have higher socioeconomic status and who are also more active in their cultural participation; data exploring the concept in terms of mature and commercially interesting Asian cultural markets such as China or India is notably absent. Thirdly, even though there are various qualitative studies aimed at identifying different types of 'omnivores', theoretical explanations of the origins and reproduction patterns of 'omnivorous' cultural orientations are rudimentary. That is why we have to take into account institutional contexts and national policies; comparative and historical analyses of the phenomenon are needed.⁶¹

Conclusion

Considering the body of knowledge discussed above, we have to acknowledge that some of Bourdieu's notions on cultural consumption may have lost their initial significance and universal relevance. However, as Santoro remarks, there are several reasons why, and not just because cultural consumption is nowadays becoming much more individualised and therefore detached from the processes of social stratification: "A new kind of relationship between social

(Supplement), p. 126-127.

59 CHAN, T. W., GOLDTHORPE, J. H.: Introduction: Social Status and Cultural Consumption. In CHAN, T. W. (ed.): *Social Status and Cultural Consumption*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 8.

60 SMITH MAGUIRE, J.: Cultural Omnivores. In COOK, D. T., RYAN, J. M. (eds.): *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Consumption and Consumer Studies*. Chichester : John Wiley and Sons Ltd, 2015, p. 216.

56 Plencner, A.: Teória odlišnosti Pierra Bourdieuho. In PETRANOVÁ, D., MAGÁL, S. (eds.): *Marketingová komunikácia a Media Relations: Nové trendy v marketingu 2011*. Trnava : Faculty of Mass Media Communication UCM in Trnava, 2011, p. 144.

57 CHAN, T. W., GOLDTHORPE, J. H.: Introduction: Social Status and Cultural Consumption. In CHAN, T. W. (ed.): *Social Status and Cultural Consumption*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 7-8.

58 COULANGEON, P.: Social Stratification of Musical Tastes: Questioning the Cultural Legitimacy Model. In *Revue Française De Sociologie: An Annual English Selection*, 2005, Vol. 46, No. 5

structure and cultural consumption is emerging." Bourdieu's influential thoughts on cultural taste drew attention to the theoretical dimensions and analytical potential of the topic. A few years later, Peterson "contributed a great deal to the revitalization of the field" – by offering a certain alternative to Bourdieu's theory of the social determinants of cultural taste and by showing that much work could still be done within this area. Actually, many of Peterson's proposals were just initial insights, "puzzling enough to inspire fresh research", interesting enough to solicit refinement, especially from an interpretative perspective. Nevertheless, they help us better distinguish among different types of cultural openness.⁶² Furthermore, the thesis of "cultural omnivore" allows us to look at some of the most recent and essential problems related to media culture from a new perspective. One of these issues is the ability of 'elite' audiences to draw experiences from the contacts with cultural artefacts of varying aesthetic quality – even though these products may be purely entertaining.

One may even say that in the contemporary cultural situation saturated by entertainment, seeking differences and distinctions (or even boundaries) separating elite culture and industrially produced, media-disseminated culture is losing its original meaning and purpose. Despite claiming otherwise, the 'omnivore – univore' dualism still primarily reacts to the cultural practices preferred by people with high social status – by financially secured and well-educated individuals. On the other hand, research on 'cultural univores' is quite modest and often considers one-dimensional cultural choices of hard-working,

but less educated and culturally experienced people without the necessary critical distance and 'looking at the big picture'. In other words, further attention to the sociohistorical factors underlying the rise (and future decline) of 'omnivorousness' as a possibly dominant mode of 'good taste' in Western consumer cultures is still required, as Smith Maguire insists. These sociocultural factors include the expansion of higher education, the commercialisation of highbrow cultural forms and the aesthetic determination of everyday life (elite culture is now more accessible). However, the theses of deepening globalisation, liberalism and identity politics are important as well; the accessibility and legitimacy of diverse cultural forms and practices are increasing, too. In this context, cultural tolerance, which regards any genre as potentially worthy of aesthetic assessment, is becoming an especially valuable form of cultural capital.⁶³

In the 21st century, the idea of "matching of social and cultural hierarchies is called into question, as in turn are Bourdieusian claims that cultural taste and consumption closely reflect 'class conditions', via the mediation of distinctive and exigent forms of habitus". The ideas of cultural consumption might now essentially reflect nothing more than "the highly personalised choices and self-identity projects that individuals pursue".⁶⁴ In a way, these personalised choices related to lifestyle may be – at least to a certain extent – free of constraints posed by social structures and inequalities. Media culture of today is a lot of things – above all, it

63 SMITH MAGUIRE, J.: Cultural Omnivores. In COOK, D. T., RYAN, J. M. (eds.): *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Consumption and Consumer Studies*. Chichester : John Wiley and Sons Ltd, 2015, p. 216.

64 CHAN, T. W., GOLDTHORPE, J. H.: Introduction: Social Status and Cultural Consumption. In CHAN, T. W. (ed.): *Social Status and Cultural Consumption*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 9-10.

is entertaining: "Products of popular culture must reflect everyday lives of their users – if the users do not 'find themselves' in popular cultural products, these products will not be able to gain the status of popularity. The power of popular culture lies in the numbers of its users who are given a chance to independently construct their own social identities. Popular culture is also a source of inspiration, an impulse leading to certain transformations of one's own social situation."⁶⁵ Not only it is just much more easy and pleasant to be open to various types of cultural artefacts, trashy or sophisticated, but people without cultural prejudices are also able to thoroughly enjoy cultural products, which is, from their perspective, the most important thing to do.

As of people who would probably considered as 'cultural univores', definitely not all of them are old, uneducated or ignorant; some of them may even be too young, less experienced or affected by lack of available cultural stimuli. These factors would certainly define them as 'univores' in any quantitative research of this kind. However, it does not mean they would not be open, i.e. curious to explore new cultural spheres or media genres if they were able to. After all, openness to cultural experience is not the same thing as willingness to express one's now-existing cultural preference – cultural preferences are not fixed and might change throughout one's whole life.

The critiques of today's mass, popular and media culture therefore have to acknowledge that popular and commercial cultural forms are now perceived and accepted with increasingly widespread openness – even by the cultural and social elites.

62 Santoro, M.: Cultural Omnivores. In SOUTHERTON, D. (ed.): *Encyclopedia of Consumer Culture*. 1st Volume. Thousand Oaks : Routledge, 2011, p. 391-392.

65 SOLÍK, M., KLEMENTIS, M.: Mimicry of Cultural Production for the Majority: Development Tendencies of Mainstream Culture. In *European Journal of Science and Theology*, 2015, Vol. 11, No. 6, p. 103-104.

Regardless of the contradictory opinions of scholars on the conceptualisation and true sociocultural significance of 'cultural omnivores', we may claim that 'omnivorous' people of all educations, races, genders and social classes have at least one undeniable advantage over 'univores'; it is their extensive, 'omnivorous' knowledge on the wide spectrums of media and cultural products shaping our complex, globalised and culturally diverse world full of secularised media entertainment.⁶⁶ That is why we believe that it is about time to go beyond identifying that 'cultural omnivores' truly exist, i.e. towards considering what their existence really means and what kinds of changes in our cultural environment they may inspire.

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⁶⁶ See also: PRAVDOVÁ, H., HABIŇÁKOVÁ, E., HUDÍKOVÁ, Z.: Secularization Process of Homo Medialis. In *European Journal of Science and Theology*, 2014, Vol. 10, No. 1, p. 189-197.