

## **Convergence Of High And Low Cultures: The Pursuit Of Class**

**by Nina Costanza**

Herbert Gans (Popular Culture and High Culture) has written extensively and significantly about the values and standards which constitute the basis of a taste culture and a taste public. The major source of differentiation between taste cultures and publics is socioeconomic level or class: The range of taste cultures and public follows the range and hierarchy of classes in American society (Gans, 1999). We are aware, however, of the nouveau riche, the yuppies, and the wannabes who dress in suits and gowns to attend performances at Lincoln Center, not to enhance cultural knowledge or aesthetic experience, not for individual pleasure and personal, artistic/intellectual journeys, but to imitate behavior, in other words, “to act as” or to pursue an elite or upper class aesthetic, even if they are “officially” (financially, culturally) of that class. Attending such performances (especially if one has season tickets), replete with the perceived obligatory regalia and complementary activities ( dinner at Tavern on the Green), creates an aura of refinement and the associated nostalgia of a past glamor of an antiquated aristocracy yearned for and momentarily revisited. Pursuit of class for our time in history seems to be characterized by a desperate, often individual quest for “proper” social identity.

On the political front, the New Left and the Right, usually politically, culturally, and socially polarized, converge at an interesting point: They perceive mass culture as inimical to democracy (Gans, 1999). At the cultural level, the Right and particular segments of the elite (high) culture, who may be more typically politically “liberal,” also intersect ideologically in enforcing demarcations of high and low art: Popular culture deadens the intellect and corrupts aesthetic/moral standards. Within the fine arts arena – comprised of creators, creators’ sponsors, critics, scholars, and educators – there is a profound and inflammatory schism concerning the import and impact of popular versus high art. What is interesting about these intersections and the schism is that they appear to be cross-class, or beyond class in content, and cross-political, though the debate and social concerns are actually located among the more privileged sections of the population. In contemporary debates, and within the modern temper defined by economics and fashion, these convergences (and divergence) appear to articulate a different

concept – not of solely of class per say, but the pursuit of class. Pursuit of class seems to be an activity that crosses typical class boundaries and is particularly prevalent and encouraged in today’s market and status-oriented society. The pursuit of class perpetuates an underlying elitist mentality, a way of thinking which “needs” to define and stratify various cultural hierarchies. It is the pursuit of class, more than clear aesthetic examination of various art genres, that generates in particular the battles in the art world of what is and what is not “fine art.”

For the purposes of this paper, social class and taste categories, as defined by Gans, are not specifically addressed as categorical entities (high culture, upper-middle culture, lower-middle culture, low culture, and quasi-folk culture); rather, political groups (Left to Right) and aesthetic hierarchies (from elite to the popular) are underscored. The “New Left,” the elite, the Right, and the creators, those social and aesthetic “classes” on which this paper focuses, actively segregate popular (or mass) from high culture for different reasons – on the surface: For the social elitists and creators (“aesthetics”), it is to maintain artistic and cultural standards, and for the New Left and the Right (sociopolitical grouping), to preserve morality. For both categories, the fundamental motivation for denigrating popular culture, however, is fear – fear of annihilation (or anonymity viewed as a result of convergence with the lower or popular culture). The pursuit of class is a defense against this fear.