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Brian O'Neill
Dublin Institute of Technology, brian.oneill@dit.ie

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The Arts Show Audience: Cultural Confidence and Middlebrow Arts Consumption[1]

Introduction

The arts constitute a form of cultural consumption that has been relatively neglected in recent academic discourse in comparison to the burgeoning literature of cultural studies dedicated to popular and mass media forms of culture. This emphasis within cultural studies on popular genres over traditional forms of art, what has been labelled its 'cultural populism' (Mc Guigan, 1992), systematically emphasises common, ordinary taste and resistant aesthetic strategies while denigrating 'high culture' as an elitist, middle class leisure pursuit that has little relevance to most people (Willis, 1990). Going against this populist tide, this chapter argues that an examination of popular cultural consumption must crucially incorporate the category of the middlebrow within its analysis. The purpose of this chapter is to explore the middle ground of arts consumption in Ireland, an area of mainstream consensus which incorporates aspects of both popular and high culture. For the purposes of analysis, the middle ground of Irish arts consumption is represented by a study of audience responses to the popular radio arts review programme, The Arts Show, and in this analysis distinct discourses of the arts are identified which define and situate the meaning of middlebrow. The Arts Show's popularisation of traditional forms of high culture provides a unique opportunity to study audience forms of identification with different types of cultural experience and while sometimes denounced as middlebrow , I want to argue that its successful appeal to mainstream aesthetic taste is a mark of the cultural

confidence of the programme's largely middle class audience. This characterisation should be set against the foregoing evaluation of the current dominance of 'cultural populism' within cultural thinking in general and how this has resulted in a neglect of the social context for cultural consumption, in particular, the question of stratification and persistent inequalities in access to culture. Following this, the discussion turns to a consideration of some of the ways in which the work of Pierre Bourdieu has been applied to the analysis of culture in particular social situations. Of particular interest is the question, largely unexamined in the literature of cultural studies, of the relationship between the arts and social class. The claim that consumption of the arts in Ireland reveals a society that is becoming more culturally democratic is examined in the light of data about arts consumption presented by the Arts Council (Clancy *et al*, 1994). While the revitalisation of the Irish arts sector and the high levels of reported attendance at arts events suggest a broadening of cultural participation, this is restricted in the main to middle class participants and as in the case of The Arts Show provides evidence of the cultural aspirations and appeal for cultural legitimacy of that particular segment of the audience rather than characterising the cultural fabric of the society as a whole.

Cultural Studies and Audiences for the Arts

At the heart of the cultural studies project, there is, as Jim Mc Guigan has observed, a populist sentiment towards culture (Mc Guigan, 1992: 13). In what he has influentially labelled the 'cultural populism' of much recent work within the cultural studies paradigm, there is the almost axiomatic assumption that 'the symbolic experiences and practices of ordinary people are more important

analytically and politically than Culture with a capital C' (Mc Guigan, 1992: 4). This, it should be acknowledged, has both liberating and destructive consequences. From the time of Raymond Williams' assertion that 'culture is ordinary' (Williams, 1958, reprinted 1989) with its rebuttal of the elitist and hierarchical conception of culture represented by the tradition of Arnold and Leavis, to Paul Willis' eulogy for the 'grounded aesthetics' of young people's consumption practices (Willis, 1990), a tremendous impetus has been given to the validation of contemporary, ordinary and readily available cultural experience. The struggle for the popular, however, has been achieved with the abandonment of a range of cultural experience, traditionally denoted as high culture, and a relative silence on key questions of the sources of cultural authority, cultural value and the relation between social and cultural hierarchy. The assumption within cultural studies much of the time is, to echo Willis, that the arts and high cultural pursuits no longer possess any meaningful relation to audiences and are sustained merely by subsidy and patronage. Williams, among others, was, however, deeply ambivalent about the uncritical celebration of the sometimes exploitative, mass produced and often undistinguished quality of popular cultural forms (see Williams, 1989). Within the paradigm of cultural studies itself, there has recently been a reaction against some of the populist excesses of audience and reception studies. Starting with Mc Guigan's own *Cultural Populism* (1992) which initiated a debate about the status of cultural studies there are now numerous works examining the origins of the discipline (Davies, 1995; Easthope, 1991; Storey, 1993; Strinati, 1995, Turner, 1990) and a number which attempt to reorient its direction (Blundell *et al*. 1993; Frow, 1995; Inglis, 1993).

One strand among the various attempts to reorient the direction of cultural studies research has been the call to reappraise the nature and role of high culture. In an

article entitled 'High Culture Revisited' (1989), Jostein Gripsrud suggests that there is much in high cultural discourse that can be of use to the cultural studies theorist and that the sense of critical distance that is central to the aesthetic standpoint of high culture is precisely what is now lacking in cultural studies (Gripsrud, 1989). He voices the fear that the critical potential of cultural studies has been blunted by an inflexible orthodoxy in its conception of the popular and that its original mission of ideological critique of capitalist cultural forms, the 'total social critique' that was the ambition of the new intellectuals of the 1960's, has been lost by being too close to the objects of popular culture under scrutiny. Singled out for all the worst excesses of cultural populism cultural critics such as John Fiske whose celebration of the 'semiotic democracy' that a polysemic media environment affords, are said to have 'sold out' in their fascination for contemporary (North American) cultural life (Fiske, 1987, 1989a, 1989b; but see Frow, 1995). It is claimed that populists' assertions of a cultural democracy in which all forms of culture are of equal value and equally accessible to all are simplistic and neglect the social facts of inequality in the distribution of economic and cultural value. Far from being defunct, the distinction and the gap between the culture of the ordinary and the culture of the elite is as real as ever, the denial of which is itself a ploy in the intellectuals' game of claiming authority for their interpretation of culture and their definition of the popular (see Mc Guigan, 1992:9).

A further critique of cultural studies is that by the standards of sociology, its empirical work has also been methodologically unsophisticated. Referring to the vogue for ethnographic studies of 'active audiences', Seaman criticises the generalisation from small numbers of cases to the characterisation of whole audience groups and the spurious claims that have been made from minimalist forms of ethnographic observation (Seaman, 1992). Even in the most celebrated

of ethnographic readership studies such as Morley's *The 'Nationwide' Audience* (1980), Radway's *Reading the Romance* (1984) or Ang's *Watching Dallas* (1985) processes of data collection, the establishment of a sample and the attention to social factors like gender, age, class have by the standards of mainstream sociology been notably haphazard. For this reason, many commentators wishing to develop a more sociologically-informed cultural studies have turned to the work of Bourdieu (1984; 1990a; 1990b; 1993) as offering one of the most promising avenues of development for the study of culture (Garnham, 1990: 70; Moores, 1993: 10; Storey, 1993; Strinati, 1995: 259). For cultural theorists, the turn to Bourdieu accomplishes a number of things: it offers a macro sociological framework in which cultural tastes and preferences are tied to particular class interests; it conceptually unifies the field of culture and cultural consumption in a way that the binarism of cultural studies populism does not; it foregrounds key problems concerning cultural authority and cultural hierarchy which are effaced in cultural studies; and it also legitimates the use of a number of standard social science instruments including interview and survey research for the study of cultural practices. Bourdieu's major work *Distinction* (1984) offers a survey of class tastes in France circa 1968 and proposes that the making of aesthetic choices is based on a process of distinction from other social groups in an ordered hierarchy of taste ranging from the popular to the aristocratic. The significance of Bourdieu's work for sociologies of culture in different societies is not in the application of the highly culture-specific model offered in *Distinction* but rather in its particular mode of enquiry into the functions of cultural consumption.[2]

Arts Consumption in Ireland

The place of the arts in Irish society has always represented something of a paradox: on the one hand, the reputation of the Irish literary and theatrical tradition and more recently Irish film and Irish music, both traditional and popular, gives the impression that the Irish are a profoundly artistic race. On the other hand, the philistinism of the Irish middle classes so bitterly referred to by Yeats in his diatribes from the stage of the Abbey Theatre, the low priority given to arts education in schools (Benson, 1979) and the perception that the Irish are 'indifferent and almost hostile to culture with a capital 'C' (Kennedy, 1990: 106) all make for a more sobering assessment of the state of the arts in Ireland. The issue of the relative health of the arts in Ireland really turns on the question of participation in artistic and cultural life and up to recently, this is an area of social science in Ireland that has been greatly under researched.[3]

There are a number of reasons for believing that the arts in Ireland are now in a better position than at any time before in the history of the state. Over the course of a decade there appears to have been a remarkable cultural shift in terms of levels of participation in the arts. Attendance at arts events per annum went from 60 percent of the population in 1982 to 78 percent in 1994 - or even 83 percent if an expanded definition of 'arts event' is taken into account.[4] This increase seems to be supported by public perceptions of the availability of the arts in that 84 percent of people now believe that the arts have become more accessible in the past ten years. The arts are viewed positively not only for themselves but also in terms of their economic benefits: 89 percent feel that arts activity helps to bring tourists to Ireland; 73 percent think arts education is as important as science education and 60 percent believe that the current level of spending on the arts should be maintained even in times of economic recession.

In economic terms, the arts sector had a gross revenue of some £450 million in 1993 (Durkan, 1994: 17); about 21,500 are employed directly in the arts sector accounting for 2.4 percent of total employment and the sector is responsible for 1.6 percent of GDP and exports worth £100 million.[5] Two areas in particular, music and film, account for 75 percent of turnover and 80 percent of employment.

This impressive level of activity has been accompanied by concerted political activity to develop the arts sector as an area of economic and cultural significance and to broaden access to the arts in general. Throughout the 1980's, the Arts Council has pursued a policy of regionalism, counterbalancing the centralisation of resources in national institutions located in the capital and developing a network of regional arts centres and arts officers in all county regions. In 1993 the first cabinet ministry of Arts and Culture with responsibility also for broadcasting was established. A major initiative was undertaken in relation to film with the re-establishment of the Irish Film Board to provide development money for indigenous Irish film and a package of tax incentives which have succeeded in revitalising the film production industry and attracting numerous international productions to Ireland. A task force has reported on the potential for employment in the music industry. An innovative Three Year Plan for the arts has been put before government to develop regional centres of excellence in the arts, improve conditions of employment for artists and to campaign for a greater role for the arts in education (The Arts Council, 1995).

Official Irish arts policy as expressed by The Arts Council reflects this changing attitude. Ciarán Benson, chairman of The Arts Council, has described three successive phases in official arts policy: firstly, the period of Catholic and

nationalist ideology which guided arts policy from the foundation of the state up to and including the foundation of the Arts Council in 1951; this gave way to a period of liberal elitism during the period 1960-1973 and is expressed most clearly in the Arts Council's enthusiastic support of modernism; and finally, the period in which cultural democracy began to exert influence and gain dominance in arts policy thinking from 1973 on (Benson, 1992; see also Kelly, 1989). An ideology of cultural democracy is now firmly established in official thinking about the arts and received explicit endorsement with the appointment of a new board to The Arts Council in 1993 and the adoption of a carefully balanced but essentially populist mission statement endorsing 'meaningful access to and participation in the arts' for all.[6]

The Public and the Arts (1994), only the second arts audience survey of its kind to be commissioned, provides some backing for the claim that access to the arts is now more widespread.[7] The rate of annual attendance at any arts event at 83 percent compares favourably with most European countries. All social classes have increased their aggregate attendance since the last survey in 1981 but, as the following table of attendance at arts events by occupational class reveals, gaps between classes remain:[8]

TABLE 1
Attendance at arts events by occupational class
(in percent)

	All Respondents	Middle Class	Skilled Working Class	Semi & Unskilled Working Class	Farmers
Play	37	58	35	20	31
Classical Music	14	30	10	6	7
Popular Music	39	53	40	33	22
Visual Arts	23	43	22	8	12
Traditional Music	24	26	26	20	27
Ballet	3	6	2	1	1
Film	55	71	60	47	30
Attended any	78	92	81	68	63

Source: *The Public and the Arts*(1994)

There remains a persistent class-based distinction between mass cultural participation and traditional or high culture in the distribution of attendance above. Working class groupings consume predominantly mass media forms of film and popular music where audiences for classical music and the visual arts are drawn largely from the middle class. A striking feature is the high level of arts consumption for all middle class respondents who have higher levels of consumption not just for the high arts but for all types of culture (see DiMaggio and Useem, 1978b). A greater proportion of middle class respondents report attending popular music events and films than in any other grouping. Film as a medium is popular with all social groups and similar proportions in each social class report attending traditional music and popular music. Classical music and visual arts exhibitions as already indicated remain substantially middle class and, interestingly, theatre alone of the high arts maintains a claim to being a more socially mixed art form. What this means is that cultural participation of any form is associated more with middle class membership than with other socio-economic

groups and that middle class audiences enjoy what Gripsrud has called a privileged 'double access' to not alone the historically bourgeois forms of art but also to mass forms of popular cultural expression (Gripsrud, 1989). At a more local level, there appears to be a growing impetus to consume and participate in the arts among the Irish middle class for whom culture has acquired a significance and a value that it did not possess previously. The process of modernisation begun in the 1960's, the change in Ireland's class structure from one based on family property to a meritocracy more typical of Western nations (Breen *et al*, 1990: 53) and the general upward shift in mobility that was experienced in the decades following economic expansion can be said to have created fertile ground for the emergence of new forms of arts participation. What remains to be examined is the basis of such cultural confidence, the nature of audience's identification with the arts and the role, if any, that such cultural participation plays in middle class identity.

Cultural Hierarchy and Social Class

One of the most important contributions to discussion about the relationship between culture and class is that contained in the work of Pierre Bourdieu. In his sociology of culture Bourdieu outlines a hierarchy of aesthetic tastes which resembles a similar hierarchy of social classes in the economic field and reflects the stratified distribution of educational and cultural capital. While his aim is not to produce a classification of artistic tastes as such, the field of culture, according to Bourdieu, classifies its consumers better than almost any other object in the social world and revolves around that most prized possession of social positions: cultural legitimacy. The expression of aesthetic taste involves a process of

competing for cultural stakes that in addition to informing one's sense of identity and belonging in the social world also mark by differentiation one's separateness from other positions and groups. In the analysis offered in *Distinction* (Bourdieu, 1984) the organisation of cultural taste is relational and rigidly hierarchical. The taste for legitimate, high brow culture, 'pure taste', dominates the field of culture and confers through its self-legitimating activity of aestheticisation a status of artistic and cultural dominance. Central to the operation of pure taste is the aesthetic attitude, the pure gaze of aesthetic distancing, characterised above all by a separation from practical function and a refusal to view objects in any other way than in purely aesthetic terms. The aesthetic disposition stands opposed to 'barbarous' vulgar taste, a zone of aesthetic taste associated most prominently with the practical, utilitarian attitudes of working class respondents who consistently reaffirm a continuity between art and life and systematically resist the aestheticisation of objects as useless and pointless. Between pure and barbarous tastes lie the various dispositions and aesthetic strategies of the middlebrow field which reflect in various degrees an aspiration to cultural legitimacy while maintaining some of the experiential basis of popular aesthetic consumption. The discrete zones of taste form a hierarchy of aesthetic forms: legitimate art forms such as the symphony or appreciation of difficult, avant garde art dominate over types of lesser status such as popular folk music or such middlebrow forms as jazz and cinema. Between these zones of taste there exists a hierarchy of discriminatory competence shown in the increasing ability of arts consumers to produce meaningful distinctions based on knowledge and familiarity with the art forms concerned. With the differential and stratified distribution of resources, the cultural field comes to reflect the stratification of society as a whole. Ultimately, the game of culture is a competitive struggle expressed through stylistic distinction between occupational groupings and class fractions who seek

to maximise the return from economic and cultural resources and whose trajectory in social space reveals a career of investment in social, economic and cultural capital.

The apparent reductionism between class and culture implicit in Bourdieu's model has been questioned by Di Maggio (1987). He observes that artistic tastes cluster far less in reality than we imagine them to do and that the social significance of taste lies in its role as a form of cultural currency in the complex world of social networks rather than as an expression of class interests. Consumption of the arts, Di Maggio suggests, has powerful symbolic functions which go some way towards explaining the emergence of distinct class-related aesthetic tastes but is not reducible to the class origins of the individual arts user (Di Maggio, 1978). The arts, for example, have an important screening role: possession of particular artistic interests and tastes is a convenient means of identifying membership of a social class and acts as a boundary marker to exclude outsiders (Di Maggio, 1982: 182). Cultural goods, style and competencies , what Bourdieu calls 'cultural capital' and which includes above all a familiarity with the high arts, function as effective means of class reproduction, ensuring the selection of members from the dominant, cultured status group and providing for the socialisation of new members into the class group. Furthermore, Di Maggio argues, arts consumption provides an important source of identity for the middle class, informing and building class solidarity through shared experiences, languages and aspirations (1978: 151). The collective participation in public forms of cultural entertainment acts as a social ritual which builds social solidarity through mutual identification and reinforces the social and ideological cohesion of the class or status group.

A common factor in the accounts of both Bourdieu and Di Maggio on the

relationship between culture and class is that of education (Di Maggio and Useem, 1980; Bourdieu, 1993). Education, it is recognised, is one of the single most important variables in the distribution of arts consumption. Arts appreciation is a trained capacity; art exists as such only for those who have the appropriate knowledge to decipher it (see Bourdieu, 1993: 215) and access to the codes of literary and artistic analysis is predominantly achieved through the acquisition of recognised educational credentials. Strategically, acquisition of the appropriate forms of high culture can facilitate upward social mobility and as the preponderance of teachers among audiences for the arts reveals, the cultivation of high brow artistic tastes in the absence of the appropriate economic capital enhances claims for at least marginal membership of the middle and upper middle class.

A sociology of arts consumption of the arts as indicated by this brief discussion illustrates some of the parallels that exist between an economy of practice in the cultural field and the social world of stratification. Whether in terms of how the arts contribute to class reproduction or act as source of classification between different social groups and class fractions, arts consumption is a phenomenon that is situated in the social and steadfastly rooted in the activity of social beings. To investigate the social character of the aesthetic in more direct fashion the following section presents data from a study of audiences for the radio arts magazine programme, The Arts Show, and examines some of the ways in which the arts have become important for sections of the Irish middle class.

The Arts Show: The Middle Ground of Arts Support

The Arts Show is the flagship arts review programme of Ireland's national public radio service, RTE Radio 1. It was introduced in 1988 as part of a revamping of speech programming in order to meet competition from newly established local radio. The brief of the programme was to provide a compendium of current arts, popular and traditional, domestic and international, in an entertaining and accessible fashion. The programme was allocated relatively substantial resources with a team of three full time producers, a well known personality presenter and a strategically important time opening the evening schedule 3 times a week. The populist intentions of the programme were clear from the choice of Mike Murphy as presenter of the programme. Having had a successful career in light entertainment and variety in the previous twenty years, his pivotal role as presenter of a serious arts programme bemused many and caused consternation among more traditional-minded producers and audience members.[9]

The purpose of the present research was to investigate the middlebrow popularisation of legitimate, dominant culture that characterises The Arts Show's approach and in particular to examine audience responses to the eclectic mix of art forms that it presents from across the cultural spectrum. A survey closely modelled on that for *The Public and the Arts* survey (Clancy *et al*, 1994) was carried out and a self-selected sample of listeners recruited through the programme.[10] This is not a random sample of the audience but rather consists of a cohort of dedicated listeners to The Arts Show. The differences between this sample and that of the evening time radio audience are illustrated in Table 2. For comparative purposes, a demographic analysis of the general public derived from Clancy *et al* (1994) is also presented:

TABLE 2
The Arts Show survey - sample structure
(in percent)

	Arts Show sample	Radio 1 evening (1)	National population (2)
Age:			
15-24	6	8	23
25-34	28	10	19
35-44	34	16	18
45-54	23	21	14
55+	9	45	25
Gender:			
Male	45	54	50
Female	55	46	50
Region:			
Dublin	42	40	30
Rest of Leinster	13	24	26
Munster	30	22	26
Connaught/Ulster	13	14	18
NI/UK	2		
Education:			
Primary	3		17
Secondary	28		64
Third level	69		17

(1) Source: JNLR/MRBI 1993/94 (2) Source: The Public and the Arts
n=106

Listeners to Radio 1 in the evening are traditionally thought to be older, often female, living alone and people who use the radio for company. Figures from the JNLR show that in the evening time female listeners slightly outnumber male listeners, are predominantly in the 35+ age group and disproportionately based in Dublin. It is also a largely middle class audience with 58 percent of listeners in the ABC1 category. By contrast, listeners to The Arts Show as shown in this survey are significantly younger and in comparison to the general population very highly educated. As such, they appear to constitute quite a distinctive group in contrast to the older profile of the Radio 1 listener in the evening set apart by their age,

their cultural interests, their high levels of education and by middle class membership.[11]

The main strategy of this research was to employ elements of discourse analysis in order to identify and analyse distinct audience discourses about the arts as well as some of the discrete interpretative positions adopted by listeners in their engagement with the programme. Drawing on the opposition within Bourdieu's sociology of culture between the legitimate taste of the pure gaze and the popular aesthetic (Bourdieu, 1984: 30), the research was premised on the availability of a range of discursive positions between the two extremes of elitism and populism in the arts. The discourse of elitism is characterised above all by the 'disinterestedness' of the aesthetic attitude, the belief that the appropriate relationship between the art object and spectator is a wholly aesthetic one, valued for its own sake alone (Stolnitz, 1961). The discourse of populism typically inverts elitist aestheticism and is perhaps best illustrated by the quintessentially populist observation by Marx in *The German Ideology* that: "The exclusive concentration of artistic talent in particular individuals, and its suppression in the broad mass which is bound up with this, is a consequence of the division of labour" (Marx, 1846/1968: 416). As interpretative positions, elitism and populism constitute what Michael Billig would describe as the twin poles of an 'ideological dilemma' (Billig *et al*, 1988) about art, the nature of artistic creativity, cultural participation and the source of aesthetic value. In this study, elitism and populism are viewed less as formal systems of discourse than as 'practical ideologies', rhetorically-defined and argumentatively constructed positions produced by audience members in their responses to and evaluation of a radio programme.

Respondents to the survey were coded according to a series of Likert scaled items

in the questionnaire which queried listeners' perceptions of a number of defining features of elitism and populism in the arts. An open-ended section on the questionnaire inviting listeners' comments on The Arts Show was also coded and a combination of these indicators was used to define membership of either category. Elitists, therefore, scored strongly on statements such as: "Being able to appreciate things like classical music is a sign of being cultured" and tended to argue that The Arts Show was often very lightweight in its approach. Populists, on the other hand, scored more on statements such as "I think popular arts like rock music and photography are as much an art form as the so-called high arts" and also tended to argue that the programme was not sufficiently populist enough in its approach. The spread of responses in this continuum produced outliers at both elitist and populist poles and a significant number of responses at both upper and lower quartiles. There was also, however, a substantial middle ground between the two extremes and the middle 50 percent of the distribution was reworked as a middlebrow category defining the core listenership to the programme. An analysis of the three categories appears in Table 3 and gives an illustration of the variety of demographic backgrounds associated with these cultural positions:

TABLE 3
Demographic analysis of elitist, populist and middlebrow groups
(in percent)

	Elitist	Middlebrow	Populist	Total
Age				
15-24	0	4	13	6
25-34	27	26	32	28
35-44	36	36	29	34
45-54	27	24	16	23
55+	9	9	10	9
Gender				
Male	50	51	32	45
Female	50	49	68	55
Region				
Dublin	41	38	48	42
Rest of Leinster	18	15	6	13
Munster	36	32	23	30
Connaught/Ulster	5	11	23	13
N.I./UK	0	4	0	2
Education				
Primary	0	6	0	3
Secondary	27	30	26	28
Third level	73	64	74	69
Column Totals	100	100	100	100

Elitists are evenly mixed in age, gender and according to the geographical spread of listenership but are relative to other groups overwhelmingly in the highly educated bracket, with 50 percent having post graduate qualifications. Populists, by comparison, are younger and there is a greater proportion of female members. The middlebrow category is more mixed and is closer in gender and age to the evening time JNLR audience but again like all Arts Show listeners possesses a high level of the education which goes hand in hand with an interest in arts and culture. Bearing out the observations of di Maggio and Bourdieu, possession and use of any aesthetic discourse is in this sense dependent on educational capital and further emphasises the exclusivity of this form of cultural consumption.

In an analysis of attendance at different types of art forms, elitists' preferences are, not uncharacteristically, consistently of a high cultural nature and count classical music, contemporary dance, art house film and visual arts exhibitions as events they visit more than six times per year. The populists' mix is more eclectic with mainstream film being the most commonly pursued event and including in addition to theatre, visual arts and classical music, the more typically populist forms of traditional/folk music and rock/pop. Middlebrow audiences have lower levels of frequent attendance and choose from a narrower range of events. Film, visual arts and theatre constitute the most popular choices and as such as well as in the level of attendance approximate the national average described in *The Public and the Arts* more so than either the elitist or populist segments.

Elitism and populism emerged most clearly as distinct discourses in the non-structured, qualitative data from the open ended section of the questionnaire. As discourse, elitism and populism function as 'interpretative repertoires' (Gilbert and Mulkay, 1984; Potter and Wetherell, 1987) or registers of terms and categories used by listeners to describe and evaluate the programme. Elitists, for example, characteristically described The Arts Show as an 'important' programme which was 'intelligent', 'informative' and 'essential listening' for anyone with an interest in the arts. Some of the typical elitist appraisals of the programme included:

> The Arts Show fills a very important slot in radio listening, enjoyable and informative. Without it, keeping in touch would be very difficult.
> (Female, 35 - 44, Mature Art Student, Cork)

It is intelligent. It is one of the only programmes on radio which presents intellectual discussion (which is non-political). I think there could be more of this.

(Male, 25 - 34, Secondary Teacher, Dublin)

I rate it a must when I'm home and think it should be extended to give an intelligent coverage for a mix of classical music -like Peer Gynt - Stravinsky, Mussorsky - try and lead the Irish listener away from Radio Eireann calls CHUNES. We hear far too much of rubbishy current noises without melody all day long.

(Male, 55+, Hospital Pharmacist, Dublin)

Elitism as a distinctive discursive position is most marked in the view expressed by some listeners that the programme was too light and should , in effect, assume the higher cultural ground:

Very predictable interviews with a soft approach to most issues - no real debate on any of the serious issues - just a token nod.

(Female, 35 - 44 Teacher)

My strongest criticism is that it's often too "chatty", cosy; that it lacks sharpness, intellectual depth and adventurousness.

(Male, 35 - 44,Financial Controller)

On the whole I enjoy The Arts Show but sometimes I find it bland and uninspiring. Often I feel there is not enough meat in it because it tends to scan rather than delve into Arts issues.

(Female, 35 - 44, Potter/Mature Student)

The elitist aesthetic espoused by some segments of the audience argued that the programme should incorporate more debate on intellectual and cultural affairs and include a greater number of specialised, in-depth features as opposed to the type of dabbling or delving into art which they associated with magazine programmes:

> Since my main area of interest is the visual arts -painting and sculpture - I would like a lot more informed coverage here.
>
> (Male, 45 - 54, Lecturer)

> I would like to see more thorough, in depth reports on specific projects, artists, theatre etc. Also a critical review of institutions and their policies and impact they make on the arts in Ireland.
>
> (Male 25 - 34, Designer)

Populism as a discursive position stands opposed to this type of approach. Populists typically celebrated the wide ranging, eclectic mix of arts on the programme and were happy to endorse its attempts to popularise high culture and make it more accessible to those with little background knowledge of the subject. The most important attribute in the populist repertoire was that of ‘entertaining’, ‘enjoyable’ listening, suggesting an entirely different set of aesthetic priorities:

> Excellent and entertaining and not elitist or high brow - but only with Mike Murphy!
>
> (Male, 45-54, Unemployed, Tipperary)

> I find it very entertaining and I enjoy listening to items about areas of the arts of which I know very little.
> (Male 25 - 34, Secondary Teacher, Cork)

Yet populists could also be critical of The Arts Show, perceiving it at times as not being quite populist enough :

> It's good but it comes across as elitist. Too nice, too cosy. Arts Awards show from Bank of Ireland had some years ago made me wonder if you wanted ordinary people ever to be involved. Art is for everybody not just the wealthy or formally educated. Cut out the 'arty' tartiness and put a little edge to what is happening.
> (Male, 45 - 54, Credit Union Manager)

> Show tend s to be 'safe' sometimes - is it possible to question policy in arts , discuss new work without becoming totally high brow?
> (Female, 25-34, Primary Teacher)

One of the central criticisms in this respect is the identification of the programme with an exclusive arts clique consisting of people who all know one another and possess a language of their own:

> Some of the reviews are far too much like promoting the work of friends.
> (Female, 45-54, Arts Officer)

> The whole atmosphere of the show comes across as an exclusive or semi exclusive club of Mike Murphy's friends having a chat and bit of banter about

> odds and sods in the arts world!
>
> (Female, 35-44, Management Consultant)

A priority of the populist position is that art should be available to all and in this context populists universally argued in favour of a greater involvement of ordinary people in the programme:

> Improvements: By engaging with 'ordinary people' and recording their responses to the contemporary arts.
>
> (Female, 35 - 44, Teacher)

> This programme initially launched itself as an arts show with a small 'a', sort of catering to the people, by the people for the people. Punters - those who support the arts should, I think, be given a voice I think sometimes. Having been a regular listener I'm getting a bit irritated by some of the permanent reviewers.
>
> (Female, Homemaker,45-54)

> Why not have 'punter reviewers' if they can articulate well what they review and do not usurp the 'professional reviewers' space/credit. The results might be surprising.
>
> (Female, 55+, Manager Art Gallery)

Elitism and populism represent two extremes of the field aesthetic discourse covered by The Arts Show. In fact, the programme might more properly be thought of as addressing the middle ground, middlebrow type of listener who is an arts enthusiasts but without the professional knowledge of the expert and is not

overly concerned with issues of cultural populism. In this survey there is a substantial middle ground among the audience for the programme who are both very satisfied and entertained by what they are listening to. Many of the comments returned in the survey were of this confirmatory and affirmative type:

> It's informative and easy to listen to, the interviewing is relaxed and the information mainly forthcoming. It's topical and the coverage is wide and balanced in general.
> (Female, 45 - 54, Retired)

> Whenever I have listened I have found it interesting particularly in areas where I haven't been familiar with current events. Also I like to hear reviews of current shows.
> (Female, 45-54, Secretary)

> I am usually interested in what topics it is covering each night. Mostly by the end of the programme I find I have information, been stimulated and have enjoyed it.
> (Female, 35 - 44, Counsellor)

Acclamation such as this would appear to endorse the very definite policy of the programme to be an accessible and listener-friendly vehicle for the arts. Producers of The Arts Show are conscious that any arts programme risks being elitist but are satisfied that their policy of a cultural bricolage presented in an entertaining populist fashion has met with the approval of the middle ground of arts interest in the country and it is a matter of some satisfaction to programme makers that The Arts Show has achieved credibility and a 'must hear' status among

culturally-literate, arts-aware consumers:

> I suppose I am pleased at the fact that we have gained a huge audience and I do really believe that and I do know that anybody who is - I was going to say kind of thinking and I suppose that is what I mean and I don't mean that to sound in any way elitist or exclusive or anything - it has become something that 'Oh yes did you hear that on The Arts Show!' or 'I was going into town and I heard it on The Arts Show!' or something and that the kind of snobbery that is associated with the arts could never really be associated with The Arts Show and I think that that's important. And that it is an accessible programme and that it is an interesting programme and in lots of ways it is a vitally important programme to listen to if you are involved in the arts.
> (Series Producer - The Arts Show)

The middlebrow position defined by producers and articulated further by dedicated listeners to the programme constitutes an attempt to celebrate in populist fashion the practical, experiential enjoyment of the arts while retaining an appeal to the elitist sense of the arts as a cultural imperative, a sense of being 'important' and commanding respect for their intrinsic worth. The many uses of the arts for audience members consistently reproduce this conjunction of pleasurable enjoyment, an affirmation of the continuity of art and life, while appealing to art's quasi-magical powers to transform and enliven the mundane:

> I don't think I could live without having the visual arts around me, the written word around me, it's just, it would be unthinkable really, I just can't think of a duller life. It's just, it's always been a part of me and always will be a part of me.

(Female, 55+,Manager art gallery, Cork)

It's great enjoyment and it makes life not so dull.

(Female, 35-44, Chiropodist, Dublin)

It is basically entertainment. It is a way of spending leisure time. It's a way of getting my mind off the other stuff I'm thinking about all the day and maybe thinking about the big issue in life or the little issues in life or it'll make you laugh or cry or whatever in some way that will engage me.

(Male, 25 - 34, Company Accountant, Dublin)

Listeners in this category very much support cultural eclecticism, the indiscriminate mix of high and popular culture that is seen as integral to the populist ethos of postmodern culture (Jameson, 1984):

I am very pleased that so much of what was dismissed as popular art when I was young is now accepted as really important culture. For instance, popular music, The Beatles, my favourite Jimi Hendrix, for instance. But then also cinema. They were seen almost as escapism or bubblegum but now I really see no difference between good popular music and good classical music if you follow me so I'm happy that what was once derided as just popular or escapism is now accepted as good and valid.

(Male, 35 - 44, Illustrator, Dublin)

For such listeners cultural legitimacy is no longer restricted to certain forms of art. They display a sense of cultural confidence that their cultural experience and background is just as valid and important as traditional high culture. Further, the

culturally confident middlebrow expresses the belief that participation in the arts is available to all, even betraying a certain impatience with the suggestion that barriers to arts access exist:

> I think a lot of the barriers that people have in going to the arts is sometimes just the thought of walking into a particular institution that they have never walked into before.I think probably the thing of actually down to the Abbey Box office and booking tickets and they go well it's not for me. And that's in their own mind really.
> (Male, 25 - 34, Company Accountant, Dublin)

> I can never understand people - I remember working with a colleague and he said they wouldn't let me into the Concert Hall . I mean all you do is go and pay your money. You know people have this most extraordinary idea - I don't know - do they want to put their hands under their feet to encourage them to go in.
> (Female, 55+, Microbiologist, Dublin)

However, expressions of such confidence must be reviewed in the light of the fact that only 3 percent of this sample of listeners had left school with a primary education. While The Arts Show does seek to attract listeners with its light and easy mix of arts and entertainment, the audience remains an exclusive one of highly educated and largely middle class arts enthusiasts who are predisposed to engaging in this form of cultural discourse. The programme has succeeded in raising awareness of the arts and popularising less accessible forms of art for its listeners but it is unlikely on the evidence of this research to have introduced listeners to an experience of the arts that was not prefigured in their background

experience or education. What remains to be considered, then, in the final section is the function of such cultural confidence for this particular fraction of the middle class which The Arts Show has apparently been so successful in reaching.

Conclusion: Middlebrow Cultural Confidence

Part of the success of The Arts Show has been in identifying and satisfying an audience of middlebrow arts enthusiasts which hitherto had gone unrecognised. In doing so, it also retains the support and admiration of elitist and populist arts listeners. Clearly, were The Arts Show to radically shift its emphasis and move significantly up to the higher cultural ground which the elitist group appear to call for or, alternatively, move in some of the directions indicated by populists, it would risk alienating some of its core middle ground support. Unifying the middle ground is a consensus which is broadly populist in tone expressed in the belief that the arts are for everyone, that they are primarily meant to be experienced and enjoyed and that most forms of cultural expression can legitimately claim to be art once they satisfy certain basic aesthetic criteria. The middle ground of The Arts Show's audience responds positively to The Arts Shows' presentation of aesthetic experience as a source of both intellectual stimulation and personal enjoyment. It is an aesthetic experience characterised by immediacy: it requires no specialised knowledge; its mode of address is to the 'arts enthusiast', the amateur or ordinary listener who is literate, aware and possesses a love of art. This positive portrayal of middlebrowism, however, with its associated attitude of cultural confidence contrasts sharply with what is often perceived as the conservative and cautious nature of middlebrow culture (see Bourdieu, 1990b).

An important concept in Bourdieu's analysis of middlebrow taste in *Distinction* is the phenomenon he labelled 'cultural goodwill' (Bourdieu, 1984: 318) or the act of deference to dominant forms of culture. Cultural goodwill is, for example, expressed in the aspiration of the petit bourgeoisie to climb in social and cultural space but without either the cultural or economic means to do so. In consuming middlebrow versions of culture - accessible collections of art, listening to light classical music, reading popular but not avant garde forms of literature - middlebrow arts enthusiasts perform an act of cultural goodwill, upholding the traditional sources of cultural legitimacy and sustaining the implicit hierarchy of the fine arts. Contemporary mass media like radio, television, magazines and newspaper supplements are among the most important of what Bourdieu calls 'cultural intermediaries', mediators and popularisers of dominant culture. Cultural intermediaries are, Bourdieu suggests, always cautious in their taste and 'resolutely avoid vulgarity' (1984: 326). They demand guarantees of the quality and authority of their aesthetic choices and avoid moving far from the legitimate centre even if they juxtapose new and traditional art forms in peculiar and sometimes contradictory ways.

The taste for a wide range of popular arts and popularised versions of high brow art among The Arts Show audience is certainly emblematic of middlebrow culture. The intention of the programme is to bring 'the wide world of the arts' to the non-specialist listener and for the committed group of listeners in this survey at least that appears to have been a successful venture. Following Bourdieu's account, one can argue that The Arts Show performs an act of cultural goodwill by affirming the value of the aesthetic as well as promoting the ability of its audience to participate in this heightened cultural practice. The evidence in this survey is that most committed listeners to The Arts Show do approve of what they hear and do

participate in some active way. For Bourdieu, however, there is an element of self-deception about this. Middlebrow culture, for Bourdieu, is an imitative reflection of legitimate culture that disguises the social basis of its submission to dominant culture. Middlebrow arts consumers 'misrecognise' their place in social and cultural space and the hierarchical stratification of society that underlies a taste for the arts. They see in the arts a realm of legitimacy, refinement and status and middlebrow culture appears to promise easy access to such cultural dominance. But just as the culturally dominant can, Midas-like, aestheticise whatever they touch, so for the middlebrow legitimacy remains an elusive goal: once popularised or incorporated into the middlebrow category, art is diminished and degraded in aesthetic status.

Bourdieu's account of the nature of middlebrow culture need not , however, be accepted in its entirety. The cultural confidence of the arts enthusiast appears to offer a strong countercurrent to the notion of cultural goodwill and the conservativism traditionally associated with middlebrow culture. The self assurance of culturally confident middlebrows counterbalances the naive attitude of deference that Bourdieu supposes to be the basis of cultural goodwill. It is perhaps a measure of the post-modernising of the contemporary cultural scene that the barriers between middle and high brow taste have been levelled to the extent that cultural supremacy has in fact passed to the zone occupied by middlebrow arts consumers who self-assuredly display their aesthetic prowess and independence from models of cultural hierarchy inherited from the past. There is no reason to think that the very rigid forms of cultural domination that Bourdieu

described in 1960's France still apply in 1990's Ireland. But this is not to deny that hierarchies and stratification in the arts continue to exist and that social, cultural and geographical barriers to cultural democracy remain. There is ample evidence in these findings from The Arts Show survey that audiences for the arts remain strongly rooted in the educational and cultural experience of the middle class. What is suggested, however, subject to further research is that the type of middle ground support that a programme like The Arts Show receives indicates just how significant the arts have become for the image and identity of an expanded and progressive new middle class and how class fractions such as this have become the repository of post modern cultural values.

NOTES

[1] An earlier version of this chapter was awarded a post graduate essay prize by Royal Irish Academy's Social Science Research Council. I am grateful to members of the Council for permission to reprint the work here. I would also like to acknowledge the helpful comments of Dr. Brian Torode, Dept. of Sociology, Trinity College.

[22] See the work of Michèle Lamont for a sympathetic application of Bourdieu's approach in an American context. Lamont (1992) is a comparison of the process of 'distinction' among the French and American upper middle class. (Lamont and Fournier, 1992) presents more wide ranging studies of cultural consumption in the United States. (Halle, 1994) is another work inspired by Bourdieu offering a sociology of the uses of art in contemporary America. Bourdieu has also been particularly important in a revival of interest in the study of middlebrow culture and is evident in the work of Long (1986;1987) and Radway (1989) on middle class literary tastes.

[3] *Audiences, Acquisitions and Amateurs* (1983) was the first systematic survey of arts consumption in Ireland. *The Public and the Arts* (1994) sought to update this analysis and to compare the rate of change in arts consumption since that time. With the appointment of a new Arts Council in 1993, much greater attention has been given to arts research. See in particular *Views of Theatre in Ireland* (1995), the reports of the PIANO (1996) and FORTE (1996) working groups and *Poverty: Access and Participation in the Arts* (1997).

[4] These statistics are reported in *The Public and the Arts - A Survey of Behaviour and Attitudes in Ireland* (1994) Dublin: The Arts Council/ UCD Graduate School of Business. The methodology and overall findings of this report are discussed in greater detail below.

[5] Further statistics on the size and employment potential of Ireland's cultural industries are reported in *The Employment and Economic Significance of The Cultural Industries in Ireland* (1995) Dublin: Coopers and Lybrand.

[6] The full mission statement is as follows:
'As the statutory body entrusted with stimulating public interest in the arts and with promoting knowledge, appreciation and practice of the arts, An Comhairle Ealaíon/ The Arts Council believes that everyone in Ireland has an entitlement to meaningful access to and participation in the arts. The Council understands that it has a primary responsibility to encourage and maintain high standards in all art forms, especially in the living contemporary arts. It also understands that it has a clear responsibility to foster those structures which assist and develop dialogue between artists, the arts and the communities from which they emerge'·
[reprinted in *Art Matters*, No. 16, Nov. 1993]

An equally strong endorsement in official arts policy of cultural populism is to be found in the discussion document of the Arts Council of Great Britain: *A Creative Future - the way forward for the arts, crafts and media in England*, London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1993.

[7] The first survey was commissioned and conducted in 1981 and provides the basis for comparison and analysis of growth trends in the 1994 survey - *Audiences, Acquisitions and Amateurs: Participation in the Arts,* Dublin: The Arts Council/An Chomhairle Ealaíon, 1983.

[8] The aggregate attendance at arts events in RSGB Omnibus Arts Survey, 1991. Cited in *The Public and the Arts,* (1994: 81)

[9] *'The Arts Show* was introduced in the revamped Radio 1 schedule of 1988 when RTE faced competition from legal independent radio for the first time. The programme is hosted by the popular personality presenter Mike Murphy and maintained since its introduction in excess of a 1 percent national audience share for its 7 p.m. evening slot which was considered to be good for the relatively 'dead time' of night time radio. Considered to be one of the successes of the evening schedule, the programme moved in September 1996 to an afternoon slot, 2.45 p.m. to 3.30 p.m., Monday to Wednesday, with an omnibus evening repeat where it has attracted up to four times its previous audience. An account of the production context of the programme is presented in O'Neill (1993).

[10] The survey was conducted in May/June 1994 and advertised both through the programme and in the RTE Guide. 143 requests for questionnaires were received both by telephone and post and a total of 106 completed questionnaires were received.

[11] BBC research has shown that the audience profile for Radio 4's 'Kaleidoscope' also deviates from the norm and is in some senses a unique audience grouping. See *Radio 4 in the Late Evenings*. BBC Unpublished Report (BBC, 1989).

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