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Let's Talk About Love

A Journey to the End of Taste



Carl Wilson

Bloomsbury Academic
An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
B L O O M S B U R Y
NEW YORK • LONDON • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

Bloomsbury Academic
An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Inc

1385 Broadway
New York
NY 10018
USA

50 Bedford Square
London
WC1B 3DP
UK

www.bloomsbury.com

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First published in 2007 by the Continuum International Publishing Group Ltd
Reprinted 2011

Reprinted by Bloomsbury Academic 2013, 2014, 2015 (twice)

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Wilson, Carl, 1967-

Let's talk about love: a journey to the end of taste / Carl Wilson.
p. cm. -- (33 1/3)

ISBN-13: 978-0-8264-2788-5 (pbk)

1. Dion, Céline-Criticism and interpretation.

2. Popular music-History and criticism. 3. Dion, Céline. Let's talk about love. I Title. II. Series.

ML420.D565W55 2007
782.42164092-dc22

2007040095

ISBN: PB: 978-0-8264-2788-5

Series: 33 1/3, volume 52

Printed and bound in the United States of America

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1.

Let's Talk About Hate

"Hell is other people's music," wrote the cult musician Momus in a 2006 column for *Wired* magazine. He was talking about the intrusive soundtracks that blare in malls and restaurants, but his rewrite of Jean-Paul Sartre conveys a familiar truth: When you hate a song, the reaction tends to come in spasms. Hearing it can be like having a cockroach crawl up your sleeve: you can't flick it away fast enough. But why? And why, in fact, do each of us hate some songs, or the entire output of some musicians, that millions upon millions of other people adore?

In the case of me and Céline Dion, it was Madonna's smirk at the 1998 Oscars that sealed it. That night in March, the galleries of Los Angeles's Shrine Auditorium were the colosseum for the latest gladiatorial contest in which art's frail emissaries would get flattened by the thundering chariots of mass culture. And Empress Madonna would laugh.

Until that evening, I'd done as well as anyone could to keep from colliding with *Titanic*, the all-media juggernaut that

had been cutting full-steam through theaters, celebrity rags and radio playlists since Christmas. I hadn't seen the movie and didn't own a TV, but the magazines and websites I read reinforced my sureness that the blockbuster was a pandering fabrication, an action chick-flick, perfectly focus-grouped to be foisted on the dating public.

Now, I realize this attitude, and several to follow, probably makes me sound like a total asshole if, like millions of people, you happen to be a fan of *Titanic* or of the woman who sang its theme. You may be right. Much of this book is about reasonable people carting around cultural assumptions that make them assholes to millions of strangers. But bear with me. At the time, I thought I had plenty of backup.

For instance, Suck.com, that late 90s fount of whip-smart online snark, called *Titanic* a "14-hour-long piece of cinematic vaudeville" that "had the most important thing a movie can have: a clear plot that teaches us important new stuff like if you're incredibly good-looking you'll fall in love." It was contrasted with Harmony Korine's *Gummo*, a film about malformed but somehow radiant teenagers drifting around rural, tornado-devastated Xenia, Ohio—as if, after the twister, Dorothy's Kansas had been transformed into its own eschatological Oz. Suck said that *Gummo* evoked "the vertigo we encounter when people discover and make up new standards of cool and beauty," a sensation resisted by mass society because those standards could be "the wrong ones, and we can't allow ourselves to look at that too hard or long."

CNN.com's review, on the other hand, described *Gummo* as "the cinematic equivalent of Korine making fart noises, folding his eyelids inside-out, and eating boogers," and the director as a punk-ass straining in vain to be a punk.

For cred, the writer namechecked the Sex Pistols, saying that unlike theirs, Korine's rebellion came down to making fun of the hicks.

I knew which argument I bought, and it wasn't just because the same CNN reviewer called *Titanic* "one swell ride." After all, Korine was a lyrical *enfant terrible* who'd gotten fan letters from Werner Herzog; *Titanic* director James Cameron made Sylvester Stallone flicks. Korine was New York and Cameron was Hollywood. And just consider their soundtracks: *Gummo* had a soundscape of doom-metal bands, with an alleviating dash of gospel and Bach. *Titanic* had Celtic pennywhistles, saccharine strings and . . . Céline Dion.

Living in Montreal, Quebec, made it impossible to elude *Titanic*'s musical attack as neatly as the celluloid one. Dion had been intimate with the whole province for years, as first a child star, then a diva of all French-speaking nations and finally an English-French crossover smash. Her rendition of James Horner and Will Jennings's "My Heart Will Go On" had come out first on her bestselling 1997 album *Let's Talk About Love*, then on the bestselling movie soundtrack and then again on a bestselling single. (Ten years later, by some measures, it's the fourteenth-most-successful pop song the world has ever seen.) I hadn't listened regularly to pop radio since I was eleven, and I got agoraphobic in malls, but that tin-flute intro would tootle at me from wall speakers in cafés, falafel joints and corner stores, and in taxis when I could afford them. Dodging "My Heart Will Go On" in 1997–98 would have required a Unabomber-like retreat from audible civilization.

What's more, I was a music critic. I hadn't been one long: I'd done arts writing at a student paper, veered into leftish

political journalism and then become the arts editor at one of Montreal's downtown "alternative weeklies." I wrote profiles and CD reviews on the side for the rakish punk-rock guitarist who edited the music section (when he dragged himself into the office in the mid-afternoon). I championed experimentalists and the kinds of unpopular-song writers I was prone to calling "literate." I would not have deigned to listen to an entire Céline Dion album, but it was a basic cultural competency in Montreal to know her hits well enough to mock them with precision. In Quebec, Dion was a cultural fact you could bear with grudging amusement—a horror show, but *our* horror show—until *Titanic* overturned all proportion and Dion's ululating tonsils dilated to swallow the world.

* * *

With "My Heart Will Go On," Céline-bashing became not just a Canadian hobby but a nearly universal pastime. Then-*Village Voice* music editor Robert Christgau described her popularity as a trial to be endured. Rob Sheffield of *Rolling Stone* called her voice "just furniture polish." As late as 2005, her megahit would be ranked the No. 3 "Most Annoying Song Ever" in *Maxim* magazine: "The second most tragic event ever to result from that fabled ocean liner continues to torment humanity years later, as Canada's cruelest shows off a voice as loud as a sonic boom, though not nearly so pretty." A 2006 BBC TV special went two better and named "My Heart Will Go On" the No. 1 most irritating song, and in 2007 England's *Q* magazine elected Dion one of the three worst pop singers of all time, accusing her of "grinding out every note as if bearing some kind of grudge against the very notion of economy."

* * *

The black belt in invective has to go to Cintra Wilson, whose anti-celebrity-culture book *A Massive Swelling* describes Dion as "the most wholly repellant woman ever to sing songs of love," singling out "the eye-bleeding Titanic ballad" as well as her "unctuous mewling with Blind Italian Opera Guys in loud emotional primary coloring." Wilson concluded: "I think most people would rather be processed through the digestive tract of an anaconda than be Céline Dion for a day."

My personal favorite is the episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* in which Buffy moves into her freshman university dorm and her roommate turns out to be, literally, a demon—the first clue being that she tacks a Céline Dion poster up on their wall. But the catalogue of slams, from critics to Sunday columnists and talk-show hosts to *Saturday Night Live*, could fill this book. I've mostly seconded those emotions, even when a blog ran a Dion joke contest that produced the riddle, "Q: Why did they take the Céline Dion inflatable sex doll off the market? A: It sucked too hard."

But it was at the Oscars that things got personal.

* * *

The night was the expected *Titanic* sweep, capped by director James Cameron's bellowing self-quotation, "I'm the king of the world!" (Which from that podium sounded like, "My brand has total multiplatform synergy!") But in the Best Original Song category, *Titanic*—and Dion—had one unlikely rival, and it happened to be Elliott Smith.

Smith was a hero of mine and of the late-90s indie subculture, one of those "literate," bedroom-recording songwriters whose take on cool and beauty seemed leagues away from the

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pop-glamour machine. Pockmarked and shy, with a backstory that included childhood abuse and (though I didn't know it yet) on-and-off heroin addiction, he had recorded mainly for the tiny northwestern Kill Rock Stars label, but had just signed to Dreamworks, which would release his next album, *XO*, that summer.

Smith wrote songs whose sighing melodies served as bait for lyrics laced with corrosive rage. They dangled glimpses of a sun "raining its guiding light down on everyone," but everyone in them got burned. They were catchy like a fish hook. As his biographer Benjamin Nugent later wrote in *Elliott Smith and the Ballad of Big Nothing*, "Smith effectively deploys substance abuse as a metaphor for other forms of self-destructive behavior, and the metaphor is a handy one for several reasons. For one, a songwriter taking substance abuse as his literal subject (even if love is the figurative one) can easily steer clear of the Céline Dion clichés of contemporary Top 40 music, the language of hearts, embraces, great divides. [Instead] he participates in a hipper tradition, that of Hank Williams, Johnny Cash and Kurt Cobain—their addiction laments, disavowals and caustic self-portraits."

Smith also dealt frankly, I felt, with one of the ruling paradoxes for partisans of "alternative" culture: It might look like you were asserting superiority over the multitudes, but as a former bullied kid, I always figured it started from rejection. If respect or simple fairness were denied you, you'd build a great life (the best revenge) from what you could scrounge outside their orbit, freed from the thirst for majority approbation. This dynamic is frequently rehearsed in Smith's songs: In "2:45 a.m.," a night prowler that begins by "looking for the man who attacked me / while everybody was laughing at me"

ends with "walking out on Center Circle / Been pushed away and I'll never come back." If laments and disavowals were your lot, you would shine those turds until they gleamed. And you'd spread the word to the rest of the alienated, walking wounded—which, in a late-capitalist consumer society, I thought, ought to include everyone but the rich—that they too could find sustenance and sympathy in a voluntary exile.

So how had Smith ended up in center circle at the Shrine Auditorium, smack up against the "Céline Dion clichés," a juxtaposition that seemed as improbable as *Gummo* winning Best Picture? An accident, really. Years before, he'd met independent filmmaker Gus Van Sant hanging out in the Portland bars where Smith's first band, Heatmiser, played. That friendship led to writing songs for Van Sant's first "major motion picture," *Good Will Hunting*, and so to Oscar night, featuring (as *Rolling Stone* put it) "one of the strangest billings since Jimi Hendrix opened for the Monkees," with Smith alongside the pap trio of Trisha Yearwood, Michael Bolton and Céline Dion.

He tried to refuse the invitation, "but then they said that if I didn't play it, they would get someone else to play the song," he told *Under the Radar* magazine. "They'd get someone like Richard Marx to do it. I think when they said that, they had done their homework on me a little bit. Or maybe Richard Marx is a universal scare tactic."

(Richard Marx, for those who've justifiably forgotten, was the balladeer who in 1989 sang, "Wherever you go, whatever you do, I will be right here waiting for you"—threatening enough? But if Dion hadn't been booked, her name might have worked too.)

On Oscar night, Madonna introduced the performers.

Smith ended up following Trisha Yearwood's rendition of *Can't Air's* "How Do I Live?" (written by Dianne Warren, who also penned "Because You Loved Me" and "Love Can Move Mountains" for Dion). He shuffled onstage in a bright white suit loaned by Prada—all he wore of his own was his underwear—and sang "Miss Misery," *Good Will Hunting's* closing love song to depression. The Oscar producers had refused to let Smith sit on a stool, leaving him stranded clutching his guitar on the wide bare stage. The song seemed as small and gorgeous as a sixteenth-century Persian miniature.

And what came next? Céline Dion swooshing out in clouds of fake fog, dressed in an hourglass black gown, on a set where a white-tailed orchestra was arrayed to look like they were on the deck of the *Titanic* itself. She'd played the Oscars several times, and brought on her full range of gesticulations and grimaces, at one point pounding her chest so robustly it nearly broke the chain on her multimillion-dollar replica of the movie's "Heart of the Ocean" diamond necklace. Then Dion, Smith and Yearwood joined hands and bowed in what *Rolling Stone* called a "bizarre Oscar sandwich."

"It got personal," Smith said later, "with people saying how fragile I looked on stage in a white suit. There was just all of this focus, and people were saying all this stuff simply because I didn't come out and command the stage like Céline Dion does."

And when Madonna opened the envelope to reveal that the Oscar went to "My Heart Would Go On," she snorted and said, "What a shocker."

I liked Madonna, who danced on the art/commerce borderline as nimbly as anyone. But right then, I squeezed my fists wishing she'd preserved a more dignified neutrality

("dignified neutrality" being the phrase that springs right to mind when you say "Madonna"). In retrospect, I realize she was making fun of the predictability, not of Elliott Smith; my umbrage only showed how overinvested I was. I wasn't surprised the Oscars had behaved like the Oscars, that the impossibly good-looking people had spotted each other across the room and as usual run sighing into one another's arms. But the carnivalesque reversal that wedged Elliott in there with Céline and Trisha was one of those rips in the cultural-space continuum that make you feel anything may happen. I was enough of a populist even then to dream that love might move mountains and heal the great divide.

But when Madonna seemed to chuckle at Elliott Smith, the grudge was back on. And not with Madonna. With Céline Dion.

* * *

Lamentably, this story requires a coda: Elliott Smith had an adverse reaction to his dose of fame. Paranoid that his friends resented him, he distanced himself, relapsing into mood swings and substance abuse, even public brawls. His songwriting suffered, with the so-so *Figure 8* in 2000 and then zip until 2003, when he reportedly had sobered up and was finishing a new album. Then, on October 21, 2003, police in Los Angeles got a call from Smith's girlfriend in their Echo Park apartment. They had been arguing. She had locked herself in the bathroom. Then she heard a scream. She came out to find Smith with a steak knife plunged into his chest, dead at thirty-four.

I hadn't thought much about the Oscar debacle between 1998 and 2003. I'd moved from Montreal to Toronto, from

there must be a fan base: some middle-of-the-road Middle England invisible to the rest of us. Grannies, tux-wearers, overweight children, mobile-phone salesmen and shopping-centre devotees, presumably."

Reading that, my heart swells for these maligned wearers of inappropriate tuxedos, these poignantly tubby prepubescents pining away to the strains of songs of love sung by a pretty lady with the best voice in the whole world. And far more than I hate Céline Dion, I hate this anonymous staffer from the *Independent on Sunday*. But he's only fleshing out the implication in, for instance, my use of the phrase "Oprah Winfrey-approved." If his portrayal of Dion's audience is accurate, it includes mostly people who, aboard the *Titanic*, would have perished in steerage. If my disdain for her extends to them, am I trying to deny them a lifeboat?

The *Independent's* bile demonstrates why the critical redemption of abject music tends to come years after its heyday: lounge exotica stops sounding like a pathetic seduction soundtrack on the hi-fi of a smarmy insurance salesman and starts to sound charmingly strange, governed by a lost and thus beguiling musical rulebook. In the present tense, submerged social antagonisms and the risk of being taken for one of the "tacky" dullards make it less attractive to be so all-embracing—to hear Céline Dion as history might hear her.

* * *

This book is an experiment in taste, in stepping deliberately outside one's own aesthetics. It has to do with social affinities and rancors and what art and its appreciation can do to mediate or exacerbate them. At a time when the whole issue

of the meaning and purpose of art has grown very murky, the exercise might open a few windows. Primarily, though, the question is whether anyone's tastes stand on solid ground, starting with mine.

One condition, I think, is that the dislike in question has some personal bite. A random target won't do. While I generally give a wide berth to any epic pop ballad, the fact that Céline Dion is a Canadian makes her more grating than Michael Bolton: shots at her come with collateral damage to my entire country, as in the *South Park* movie anthem, "Blame Canada," which crows, "When Canada is dead and gone / There'll be no more Céline Dion." I feel implicated: "Hold on," I want to protest, "we hated her before you did!"

My test case will be *Let's Talk About Love*, the album that includes "My Heart Will Go On." It's not her bestselling release (that would be 1996's *Falling Into You*), nor the most esteemed among her fans. But it was huge, and came out at the peak of both Dion's fame and my animosity. Besides, what better title for a study of cultural passions and antipathies?

Along with immersing myself in this record, I'll examine Dion the same way I do any artist I get interested in—her background, career and influences, the genre she belongs to, what sensibility she expresses. But I'll also look at taste itself, what has been said about it, its role in aesthetic theory and the research that's been done scientifically and not-so-scientifically. Will I find my inner Céline Dion fan? The goal isn't to end in a group hug. If I end up warming to her music, that will be one lesson; if I don't, we might draw others.

As a goodwill gesture, let's proceed on a first-name basis, the way her fans do: Hi there, Céline.

The exercise isn't as far as it seems from my usual criti-

cal leanings, toward knotty music like art rock, psych-folk, post-punk, free jazz or the more abstract ends of techno and hip-hop. I write about such sounds in the belief that "difficult" music can help shake up perceptions, push us past habitual limits. As Simon Frith wrote in his book *Performing Rites*, difficult listening bears in it the traces of a "utopian impulse, the negation of everyday life"—an opening toward "another world in which [the difficult] would be 'easy.'" And isn't Céline Dion, for me, actually more "difficult" music than any postmodern noise collage? It sure is more uncomfortable. It could turn out to be more disorienting than the kinds of "difficulty" I've come to take for granted.

Whatever Céline's merits, after all, they are not sonic innovation, verbal inventiveness, social criticism, rough exuberance, erotic charge or any of the other qualities I and a lot of critics listen for. Her fans must hear something else. What is it, and in what language might it be addressed? Hard as it is to admit, part of the answer could lie in the music's very mundanity. After years of pursuing music in which the "difficulty" carries intimations of "another world," sonic forecasts of transformation, I've begun to wonder whether "easier" music might contain hints for reconciliation with the world into which we're already thrown. Maybe it deals with problems that don't require leaps of imagination but require other efforts, like patience, or compromise. There may be negotiations there, but not the ones I'm used to.

At the same time compromise is what worries me: Maybe I am heading down a relativistic rabbit hole. If even Céline can be redeemed, is there no good or bad taste, or good and bad art? If I decided not to condemn the sleek musical baubles of Céline Dion, would I also have to reconsider the facile decora-

tions of glass sculptor Dale Chihuly, or the kitsch paintings of Thomas Kinkade, "Painter of Light™"? Kinkade is the most commercially successful painter of our time, whose nostalgically purified landscapes, untouched by trouble, humor or irony, command hundreds of thousands of dollars from followers outside the art scene. What about mediocre books, or the doublespeak of conservative punditry? Maybe if you don't stand for something you'll fall for anything.

Maybe if hating Céline Dion is wrong, I don't want to be right. ~~Stop~~

Whatever the perils, it turns out I have an unexpected ally.

* * *

In refreshing my memory about the 1998 Oscars, I came across a story I had never heard: Elliott Smith admitted to the music zine *Comes with a Smile* that he arrived that night "prepared to keep a lot of distance from Céline Dion. I thought she'd blow in with her bodyguards and be a weird superstar to everybody," he said. "But she wasn't like that at all."

"She was really sweet," he added in another interview, "which has made it impossible for me to dislike Céline Dion anymore. Even though I can't stand the music that she makes—with all due respect, I don't like it much at all—she herself was very, very nice. She asked me if I was nervous and I said, 'Yeah.' And she was like, 'That's good, because you get your adrenaline going, and it'll make your song better. It's a beautiful song.' Then she gave me a big hug. It was too much. It was too human to be dismissed simply because I find her music trite."

Smith's friend Marc Swanson, a visual artist, gave biog-

Perhaps cumulative advantage's semirandomized conformity helps explain why the history of art is not all blue landscapes. When "early adopters" help make a Picasso famous, his reputation becomes self-inflating; the mutation becomes the mainstream, even though few people immediately like his paintings. Taste's insecurity turns out to be the prerequisite for artistic growth.

Aesthetics is the discipline created to contend with this insecurity, but considering that philosophy of art has been underway for at least three centuries (since the Enlightenment, and much longer if you include Aristotle), it comes up quite short on accounting for taste. It has analyzed elegantly the myriad ways the elements of art function, but when it confronts conflicts of taste, it engages in more retroactive rationalization than convincing illumination—and its verdicts on "good taste" often conveniently align with the taste the writer happens to hold.

In one landmark essay, "Of the Standard of Taste" (1757), David Hume describes the tasteful person in terms that seem intuitively right: "Strong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison and cleared of all prejudice, can alone entitle critics to this valuable character; and the joint verdict of such, wherever they are to be found, is the true standard of taste and beauty." But that's a job description for critics, not a standard of taste. For that, Hume can only appeal to authority: the tasteful person will give approbation to works that stand the test of time—the works still approved by tasteful people later. It's a tautological, survival-of-the-fittest view that's no help in resolving quarrels of taste in our own lifetimes. His stipulation that the critic be credentialled with wide knowledge and experience could

itself be described as a prejudice—a bias in favor of tradition, which may punish deviation from the "highest" standards and obstruct the creation of new ones. Exactly this kind of prejudice kept most high-culture Brahmins from accepting pop music or film as art at all until the 1960s. Hume acknowledges the need for artistic change, but he underestimates how determinedly his elite of taste aristocrats would resist it: the demand to be at once expert and unbiased is enough of a paradox that you could say Hume's ideal critic by definition cannot exist.

Aesthetic philosophy's other great-granddaddy is Immanuel Kant. His Third Critique, *The Critique of Judgment* (1790), like Hume's essay, begins from the dilemma that people can disagree on what is beautiful. But the parts of the Third Critique that dazzle are its limnings of the nature of beauty and of the sublime, and its subtly kinetic account of how reason, imagination and perception interact in "free play" to produce aesthetic judgment: Kant seems almost to intuit, two centuries in advance, how disparate chambers of the brain light up simultaneously when we listen to music, as recounted in Levitin's book. When he tries to account for how these processes produce opposing judgments, however, Kant falls back on a fantasy that there's a *sensus communis*, a "common sense" of beauty that *would* generate a consensus if only there were "ideal" conditions—including ample education, leisure, etcetera. Aesthetic agreement only eludes us because circumstances distort some people's perceptions. A modern reader can't help noticing that Kant's ideal conditions suspiciously resemble being an educated eighteenth-century gentleman in cultured Koenigsburg. This "common sense" is not only unconvincing from a

contemporary, diversity-oriented viewpoint—it doesn't even sound *desirable*.

But some of his insights still seem crucial. Kant was the first to say that aesthetic judgments are by nature unprovable—they can't be reduced to logic. Nevertheless, he pointed out, they always feel necessary and universal: when we think something's great, we want everyone else to think it's great too.

Not long after Kant and Hume, whose contributions were only the weightiest in a more widespread dispute, the veracity of taste was largely put on the philosophical shelf. The "man of taste" tended to become a caricature—a figure out of Molière or Oscar Wilde, the dandy who lavishes more care on niceties of form and style than on deeper values. (In fact the clinching portrait of such a character was drawn even in the thick of the Enlightenment, in Denis Diderot's extraordinary *Rameau's Nephew*.) Many writers (Nietzsche among them) have lambasted Kant, in particular, for saying the appreciator of beauty must be "disinterested," adopting a personal distance from the origins, content and implications—the meaning, if you will—of the work of art.

The great American art critic Clement Greenberg, one of the rare later thinkers to take up the question, suggested that Romantic ideology raised art to such a sacred status in the nineteenth century that it seemed gauche to call attention to the process of evaluating it. Following Kant, Greenberg offered brilliant descriptions of the mental "switch" that is flipped when we regard something aesthetically—as we can do with anything, he argued, not just art, by contemplating an object or scene or person as "an end in itself," apart from any other role or use—echoing Kant's definition of beauty as

"purposiveness without purpose." Greenberg was also lucid on Kant's insinuation that to enjoy art is also to judge it—you like it because it gives pleasure, but it can't give you pleasure if you don't like it.

Greenberg's answer to taste conflict, however, was the same as Hume's: we know there is objective taste because, over time, a consensus is reached on the great works of the past. (Never mind that anything ruled out by previous generations' consensus is probably lost and unlikely to come messing with the current consensus.) The most objective taste in the present, he said, belongs to those who know that canon deeply but are also open to novelty. Which (surprise, surprise) sounds a lot like Clement Greenberg, although his openness seemed to ebb by the mid-1960s, when he began trashing new art movements as a decline from the modernism on which he'd made his critical reputation—a vivid case of the contradiction between mandarism and flexibility. And that's not even to mention his dismissal of mass culture as, first, "kitsch" and, later, "middlebrow"—either way, the enemy of "genuine" culture.

Rather than by science or philosophy, the story of how aesthetic judgment reached the crisis felt by Komar and Melamid is best understood as a product of western art itself. To oversimplify wantonly, the disenchantment begins with the severing of visual art and music in particular from their religious role, in which the Church (and, rhetorically, God) is the ultimate art critic. After the Enlightenment, art gradually moves from an aristocratic status to a bourgeois one. The Romantics, in reaction, celebrate artistic genius as an autonomous agent of revelation, proudly outside society. Modernism gives that outsider status a harder edge: Art's

mission becomes not just to reveal higher truth but also to attack social falsehood. The very idea of "beauty" becomes a second-rate capitulation to bourgeois values—now ugliness, obscenity, formlessness and randomness all can be in the best of taste. Innovation becomes the yardstick, as artists continually attempt to outpace taste, to violate its terms or render it irrelevant. The belief is that to bring about a higher consciousness, it's necessary not just to delight with newness but also to mount a shock attack on the old, bourgeois, decadent consciousness. As critic Boris Groys puts it, "Now it is not the observer who judges the artwork, but the artwork that judges—and often condemns—its public." The motivations are varied—for some, it's a psychoanalysis-inspired faith in the irrational; for others, it is revolutionary politics or plain misanthropy; for most, it's just what bohemians do. And improbably, they succeed. Not that taste comes to an end, but the expectation of consensus withers.

This is possible because attacks on conventional taste have been mounted from several directions. It's an outcome of the disillusioning course of the twentieth century, as sounded in Theodor Adorno's question of how to write poetry after Auschwitz. But mainly it's a more upbeat, good-humored attack from the paradoxical partnership of capitalism—which seeks to remove any barriers to reaching all possible marketplaces—and democracy, which fosters the view that elite opinion is no better than anyone else's. (Today they've been supplemented by their advanced outgrowths, globalization and identity politics.) The most powerful vehicle for that alliance is mass culture. Pop songs and movies and genre fiction and magazines are so appealing, achieve so much aesthetically for so many people, that snobbery cannot hold the line

against them. With Pop Art, camp aesthetics and rock'n'roll, the notions of highbrow, middlebrow and lowbrow—which from nearly the dawn of mass culture dominated discussions of taste (see historian Michael Kammen's *American Culture, American Tastes*)—start to fall apart. By the early twenty-first century, almost no one believes in them.

Among artists themselves, the continual process of violating limits seems to reach an endpoint or at least exhaustion, and anything-goes eclecticism takes its place (critic and philosopher Arthur Danto calls this "the end of art history" or "post-art"). Among audiences, a growing fragmentation and subculturalization accomplishes similar ends: though indie-rock and classical listeners, science-fiction fans and architecture buffs, rockabilies and swing kids, hip-hop heads and salsa dancers may believe strongly in their own tastes, in aggregate they are acclimated to the notion that separate "taste worlds" can coexist peacefully, without need for external, official inspection and verification.

Early on, this shift brought pop-culture criticism into its own. While there had been a few serious commentators on movies and jazz, the treatment of pop and mass culture in North America was mainly confined to light journalism until the advent of writers such as Pauline Kael and Andrew Sarris on film (as well as their equivalents in France) and the "counterculture" press that created rock criticism, with writers such as Robert Christgau, Greil Marcus, Lester Bangs and Ellen Willis. While film critics usually made the case that film deserved appreciation on a par with high art, rock criticism began with a more radical stance against elite taste, arguing *no* work was too humble for aesthetic contemplation—that a form's most "low" or "impure" qualities could be its

strengths. As the field grew, that attitude was watered down: some writers reintroduced traditional hierarchies in updated forms; a rough idea of a pop/rock canon began to coalesce in books like the *Rolling Stone Record Guides*; other fans and critics, especially after punk, adopted a harsh line on "selling out" to an entertainment industry that, like Greenberg or Adorno before them, they considered a capitalist scheme to foist brainless product on a beclouded public; and so on. The debates over "rockism" and "popism" are symptoms of present unease about standards and subjectivism, as is, of course, this book. But the mandate to dethrone taste orthodoxies remains part of pop criticism's legacy, so much so that it may help bring its own extinction: Within what more than one writer has called "No-Brow" culture, who needs professional critics? What do they offer, if not objectivity?

The one bothersome matter in this anarchic taste universe (a utopia or dystopia, depending on your ideology, but one that cannot be wished away) is the persistence of a mainstream—what Greenberg or his contemporary Dwight Macdonald would have called "middlebrow" culture, the politely domineering realm where Céline Dion is queen, untached to any validating subculture. Middlebrow is the new lowbrow—mainstream taste the only taste for which you still have to say you're sorry. And there, taste seems less an aesthetic question than, again, a social one: among the thousands of varieties of aesthetes and geeks and hobbyists, each with their special-ordered cultural diet, the abiding mystery of mainstream culture is, "Who the hell *are* those people?" Perhaps Komar and Melamid are right: the way to the heart of taste today may be through a poll.

START



8. Let's Talk About Who's Got Bad Taste

The poll I have in mind was conducted in the mid-1960s in France by a team of researchers under sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. It surveyed thousands of people on what kinds of culture they knew, liked and participated in—not just in the arts, but sports, hobbies, foods, styles of dress and furniture, the newspapers and TV programs they followed, etcetera. All this data was correlated with information about their incomes, education levels, family backgrounds and occupations, and supplemented with interviews in which people were asked to discuss and defend their preferences.

The result was a milestone of social science, Bourdieu's 1979 tome *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Note the subtitle, a flip of the bird to Kant's Enlightenment notion of disinterested aesthetic judgment: For Bourdieu, taste is always interested—in fact, self-interested—and those interests are *social*. His theories press the point that aesthetics are social all the way down, just a set of euphemisms for a starker system of inequality and competition: if you flinch at

seeing a copy of *Let's Talk About Love* or *The DaVinci Code* on a friend's shelves, what you are trying to shake off is the stain of the déclassé, the threat of social inferiority.

What made him think so? His survey data had confirmed stereotypes to a staggering degree: almost exclusively, French people with working-class jobs knew and liked only relatively "lowbrow" culture; the middle classes liked "middlebrow" stuff; and the better-off were patrons of "highbrow" culture. Aesthetic and lifestyle choices even clustered along more minute divisions within classes: workers in factories had different tastes than workers in shopping centers; office managers differed from small-business owners; surgeons' tastes were unlike those of corporate executives.

But it was in asking people the reasons behind their choices that Bourdieu exploded the assumptions embedded in the whole "brow" system (which originated in racist nineteenth-century theories about facial features and intelligence). What he found was that poorer people were pragmatic about their tastes, describing them as entertaining, useful and accessible. But from the middle classes up, people had much grander justifications. For one thing, they were far more confident about their dislikes, about what was tacky or lame. But they also spoke in elaborate detail about how their tastes reflected their values and personalities, and in what areas they still wanted to enrich their knowledge.

Bourdieu's interpretation was that tastes were serving as strategic tools. While working-class tastes seemed mainly a default (serving at best to express group belongingness and solidarity), for everyone else taste was not only a product of economic and educational background but, as it developed through life, a force mobilized as part of their quest for social

status (or what Bourdieu called symbolic power). What we have agreed to call tastes, he said, is an array of symbolic associations we use to set ourselves apart from those whose social ranking is beneath us, and to take aim at the status we think we deserve. Taste is a means of distinguishing ourselves from others, the pursuit of *distinction*. And its end product is to perpetuate and reproduce the class structure.

His argument may seem less counterintuitive if you put it in terms of evolutionary psychology: if human beings are driven to advance in status in order to acquire mates and provide security to their offspring, Bourdieu was proposing that taste is a tool of those instincts, used to gain competitive advantage; and in a capitalist society, class is how this competition is structured (and exacerbated), to the advantage of the dominant elite.

Was he saying that when you become a bank manager, you automatically start liking the music other bank managers like? No, nothing so mechanical. Unlike previous, reductive Marxist theorists of culture, Bourdieu wanted to account for the fact that we experience tastes as both spontaneous attractions and personal choices. To square individuality and agency with the consistency of his data, he needed new conceptual terms. He made an analogy with economics: Imagine that capital comes in forms other than money and property, such as *cultural capital* (knowledge and experience of culture, ideas and references) and *social capital* (personal connections and influence), terms he coined that have come into common usage. As with money, cultural and social capital's value depends on scarcity, on knowing what others don't. Sometimes forms of capital are interchangeable: I can buy cultural knowledge through education, which may lead to a better job and con-

nections. Often they are not: a university professor may have top-flight cultural and social capital, but she cannot command a CEO's salary. For Bourdieu, class is determined not just by income or occupation but by how much of all these forms of capital you have, and in what combinations.

The class segment you're born, raised and schooled in produces what Bourdieu called your *habitus*, meaning both your *home base* and your *habits*: the attitudes, abilities and expectations your upbringing has nurtured. You then make choices, consciously or unconsciously, to maximize your satisfaction in life within the bounds your *habitus* makes thinkable: it does not dictate what you do, but it serves as a filter for your predilections and decisions. It's like a jazz musician improvising on a standard: You can alter the notes and rhythms of the melody, but your improvisation is limited by the tempo and chord changes available in the song. To choose otherwise would be to play "badly" and discordantly and risk failure and ostracization. (On the Bourdieuvian bandstand, there is no free jazz.)

Along with *habitus*, the other major social structures for Bourdieu are *fields*—social institutions or networks through which we pursue our goals, such as the political, cultural, corporate, academic, legal, medical or religious fields (each including subfields with their own rules and pecking orders). The pursuit of distinction takes place in those fields. Tastes are the result of the interaction of *habitus* and field—attempts, informed by our backgrounds, to advance our status by accumulating cultural and social capital in particular spheres—and, perhaps more importantly, to prevent ourselves from ever being mistaken for someone of a lower status. Bourdieu wrote that "tastes are perhaps first and foremost distastes, disgusts provoked by hor-

ror or visceral intolerance of the tastes of others."

His point is not that people are only pretending to like or dislike the culture they like and dislike, trying to con people into thinking highly of them. The pleasure of listening to music or playing a sport is obviously real. The argument is that the *kinds* of music and sports we choose, and how we talk about them, are socially shaped—that the cultural filters and concepts that guide my interests in and reactions to music, clothes, films or home decoration come out of my class and field. At worst I am conning myself, but to what I feel is my advantage.

It's not so strange an idea that there are social subtexts to our tastes: You might be a Julliard music student with a trust fund who associates authenticity with the inner city or the backwoods, and feel a little realer yourself when you kick it to Snoop or clean the condo with some bluegrass on. You may be less enamored of what you imagine about frat boys or soccer moms, and avoid music that conjures up such listeners. Or if you *are* a soccer mom, you may want to be the soccer mom who listens to Slayer, because you want to stay a little young and wild, not like those soccer moms who listen to Sheryl Crow.

In early twenty-first-century terms, for most people under fifty, distinction boils down to *cool*. Cool confers status—symbolic power. It incorporates both cultural capital and social capital, and it's a clear potential route to economic capital. Corporations and culture-makers pursue it as much as individuals do. It changes attributes in different milieus. As much as we avow otherwise, few of us are truly indifferent to cool, not a little anxious about whether we have enough, and Bourdieu's theory may illustrate why that's not merely

shallow: Being uncool has material consequences. Sexual opportunity, career advancement and respect, even elementary security can ride on it. To ignore cool may mean risking downward mobility at a time when many people are falling out of the middle class.

Even being *deliberately* uncool doesn't save you, as that's an attempt to flip the rules in your favor. Having a "guilty pleasure," for instance, can be an asset in this system of cultural capital because it suggests that you are so cool that you can afford to risk it on something goofy, ungainly and awkward—which makes you that much cooler. A few people with real panache, like an Andy Warhol or John Waters, can assemble taste profiles that consist of nothing *but* guilty pleasures and be ultra-cool, but that takes at least social capital, so that the kitsch connoisseur can be distinguished from the doofus who just likes goofball stuff. (For you to be cool requires someone else to be less cool.)

The clearest way to understand distinction may be in high-school terms: Say you're a white, nerdy fifteen-year-old boy who listens to *High School Musical* (if you're too old to know what *High School Musical* is, substitute the Andrew Lloyd Webber of your choice) but you come to see you have a chance at becoming friends with the tough kids who smoke behind the school. So you start listening to death metal and wearing hacked-up jean jackets. This isn't a ruse: you just start to see what's *plausible* and *exciting* for you about those tastes. Here, death metal is cultural capital, high-school cliques are the field and your *habitus* is what's likely to determine whether you can carry off the slang and the haircut. Your instinct is to distinguish yourself from the nerds by becoming one of the tough kids, who, incidentally, hate *High*

School Musical (or *Cats*) with a vengeance, because that's what nerds listen to. That's distinction.

The indie-rock cliché of "I *used* to like that band"—i.e., until people like *you* liked them—is a sterling example of distinction in action. In fact, distinction helps explain the rapidity of artistic change (artists are competing for distinction) as well as some of the resistance: changing styles threaten to bankrupt some people's cultural capital, to lower the status of those who associated themselves with the older style. Bourdieu argues innovation will usually come from individuals in a field who do not yet have secure positions, attempting to change the game to their own advantage, while established artists, curators, critics, producers, etcetera, try for as long as they can to preserve the rules by which they were winning.

Distinction might also demystify Kant's claim that taste always desires others' agreement. Your love of hip-hop or hatred for Céline Dion (or vice-versa) is part of your cultural capital, but it only gains value in the competition for distinction if it is *legitimated* in the contexts that matter to you. Unlike Kant, though, Bourdieu would say the last thing you want is that agreement be universal: you want your taste affirmed by your peers and those you admire, but it's just as vital that your redneck uncle thinks you're an idiot to like that rap shit. It proves you've distinguished yourself from him successfully, and can bask in righteous satisfaction.

To the extent we agree that coolness and lack of same are enormously influential—and that coolness is a social category, not a natural attribute (with the possible exception of Keith Richards)—we are all Bourdieuvians.

* * *

One of Bourdieu's most striking notions is that there's also an inherent antagonism between people in fields structured mainly by cultural capital and those in fields where there is primarily economic capital: while high-ranking artists and intellectuals are part of the dominant class in society thanks to their education and influence, they are a *dominated* segment of that class compared to actual *rich* people. This helps explain why so many artists, journalists and academics can see themselves as anti-establishment subversives while most of the public sees them as smug elitists. And this opposition between cultural and economic capital carries down into less-privileged class strata, perhaps helping to motivate school teachers to vote for Democrats (currently the party associated with cultural capital) and auto workers to vote Republican (symbolically the party of economic capital).

Artistic taste is most competitive among people whose main asset is cultural capital. That's why high school serves as such a vivid backdrop for illustrations of how distinction in artistic taste works: Not only is high school a field we all know, it's one in which there's practically nothing but cultural and social capital; money plays more of a backstage role. In adult life, it's only in culture-centered fields (the arts, academia) that musical or other artistic taste matters the way it does in high school. However, recall that Bourdieu defines taste very broadly, to include tastes in clothes, food, leisure activities, architecture and interior decoration, sports, news sources, etcetera, and you can see how much taste continues to count for the social position of adults in business and political life.

The theory of distinction is reminiscent of Thorstein Veblen's famous critique of conspicuous consumption, but it is less liable to self-congratulatory misreading. It's not that

some people are in the grip of a craven obsession with keeping up the Joneses while less materialistic sorts can stand aloof. *Inconspicuous* consumption can be distinction-oriented too: It distinguishes us from those tacky, materialist people. No one is exempt.

And neither is any artistic field. Bourdieu's tools also offer a revision of the mid-century Frankfurt School critique of the Culture Industry, in which Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (having witnessed the Nazi use of mass communications for propaganda) talked about popular culture as if it were a quasi-fascist conspiracy to dull and numb the masses. What if, instead, the mass-cultural field is just another zone of competition for distinction, no more or less venal than others? Bourdieu (who died in 2002 at age seventy-one) disliked mass culture himself, but his theories imply that high culture is at least as culpable for social inequity as popular culture is, riddled with gambits to raise its own status and derogate its inferiors. By Bourdieu's lights, if there's such a thing as false consciousness, then everybody has it, at least until they become self-conscious of the social nature of their tastes. It's a useful corrective to the biases of fans and critics who think alternative or independent music is somehow inherently less status-seeking, more real, than pop music. (Which is simply a less-coherent repeat of Adorno's anticommmercial attack on jazz.)

The translation of *distinction* to *cool* leads us to one of the problems with applying Bourdieu's model nearly forty years after his research: his original survey did not reflect the relatively recent shakeup in taste categories, the seeming collapse of high and low culture into a No-Brow society in which an in-depth knowledge of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Japanese *ganguro* fashions and the latest graffiti artists may carry more cachet

than a converseance with Molière, Schoenberg and Donald Judd. Does that mean his theory is outmoded?

No. For Bourdieu, it doesn't matter what the objects of good taste are at any moment. Change the value of x and the equation stays the same. He notes that a once-refined or highbrow piece of music, such as the *Moonlight Sonata*, can be reassigned to middlebrow culture when it has become overly familiar. Its relative uncoolness is an attribute not of the composition, but of its commonplaceness. Cool things gradually become uncool.

Still, in a hyper-mediated, mass-production culture, a lot of reference points are shared across classes. Almost everyone now will wear jeans. Nearly everybody has spent time listening to rock music. So there is more mixing and matching than Bourdieu's theories would seem to permit. American sociologists Richard Petersen and Roger Kern in the mid-1990s suggested that the upper-class taste model had changed from a "snob" to an "omnivore" ideal, in which the coolest thing for a well-off and well-educated person to do is to consume some high culture *along* with heaps of popular culture, international art and lowbrow entertainment: a contemporary opera one evening, the roller derby and an Afrobeat show the next. They speculate that the shift corresponds to a new elite requirement to be able to "code switch" in varied cultural settings, due to multiculturalism and globalization. (Bourdieu's own son Emmanuel, now a film director in his forties, is a perfect omnivore, according to a recent profile in *The New York Times*: "He's capable of speaking equally seriously about Leibniz's philosophy and about Antonio Banderas's *Legend of Zorro*.") Petersen and Kern thought it likely that the less privileged would, correspondingly, have narrower patterns of cultural

consumption; other researchers think there might be distinct upper-, middle- and lower-class omnivore styles.

But nobody is a true omnivore. To have taste at all means to exclude. It's one thing to prove that well-off people now listen to classical *and* rock *and* hip-hop, read literary novels *and* watch sitcoms, but to show there aren't subtler hierarchies of preference would require dauntingly in-depth research. Most available studies suffer from an inbuilt bias: academics, as the studies themselves show, are nearly the only group in contemporary society that still pays most of its attention to high culture. So when they design their surveys, they ask people to choose between Bach, Philip Glass and hip-hop, not between, say, pop-chart hip-hop, cocaine-rap mixtapes and politicized underground rap, even though each one carries status and identity implications. Distinctions in a culture that valorizes omnivorism are simply that much more fine-grained, fast-changing and invidious.

Even without more meticulous divisions, though, you can still detect class bias in omnivore tastes: In a paper titled "Anything But Heavy Metal? Symbolic Exclusion and Musical Dislikes," Princeton sociologist Bethany Bryson compiled data on musical tastes and political attitudes, by education level, from the 1993 General Social Survey (conducted annually by a research center at the University of Chicago). Sure enough, she found that the most educated, high-cultural-capital respondents (who were also the most politically liberal and racially tolerant) disliked the fewest forms of music. In particular, highly educated white people were much less likely to reject Latin, jazz, blues and R&B than other white respondents; Bryson described them as maximizing their "multicultural capital." But they did have music they disliked—the four types that had the

least-educated fans: rap, heavy metal, country and gospel. Since in 1993 anti-rap feelings cut across all groups, in fact the white omnivores were distinguishing themselves quite specifically from "white trash." (Is this perhaps a reason Céline is more swiftly and rudely ejected from music discussions than her black-diva counterparts?)

As well, even when they're enjoying the same stuff, the classes still have different motivations. In a study in the *Journal of Consumer Research* in 1998, sociologist Douglas B. Holt found that there was plenty of high-and-low cultural mixology going on among the people he interviewed in a small Pennsylvania town, especially among higher-status subjects. But the "low cultural capital" interviewees talked about their cultural choices as practical, fun, community-oriented and easy to relate to. Meanwhile the "high cultural capital" subjects described their preferences as showing authenticity, uniqueness, quality, cosmopolitanism and personal creative expression. Overall, to quote the Starkist tuna ad, lower-class respondents said what they liked "tasted good," while the higher-class ones said what they liked was "in good taste." Just as in France in the mid-sixties, the privileged felt their tastes set them apart from the common horde and made them special.

* * *

At this point I should say that I don't think Bourdieu was entirely right.

Recent studies indicate that while social status—income and education—does correlate significantly with tastes and distastes, it is not nearly as all-explanatory as it seemed in Bourdieu's study. Other factors turn out to play a compa-

table role, such as ethnicity, gender and regional background. Other times tastes don't fall into any sociologically measurable categories. Perhaps France in the 1960s was unusually rigid and orthodox in its class stratifications (although in North America, class-mobility data says the average person is much less likely to rise in status today compared to thirty years ago). More likely, his research was unconsciously designed to present the strongest case for what he already believed, as research so often is: you might say Bourdieu's taste in survey questions operated to increase his own cultural capital. More generously, he was overcorrecting against the insular, ivory-tower view of taste and aesthetic "disinterestedness" that had come down from Kant through the cultural elite for two centuries, and shouting to make his point heard.

On top of that, his tendency to blame everything unpleasant about the way taste functions on modern capitalism was, well, very French. I suspect that the status-seeking reflex he was describing would re-emerge in any complex society: it can be ameliorated but not eliminated. Besides, we didn't start loving beauty, enjoying songs, making pictures and discussing them solely for competitive advantage. While they may be shaped partly to that end, we also do them for their own sake, for all the benefits traditionally ascribed to artistic experience. But even if Bourdieu was only fifty percent right—if taste is only *half* a subconscious mechanism by which we fight for power and status, mainly by condemning people we consider "beneath" us—that would be twice as complicit in class discrimination as most of us would like to think our aesthetics are.

And his account does feel at least half-accurate as a description of what is happening when I react allergically to Céline Dion. I'm intuiting that there's no sleight of hand or subtle

reinterpretation I can use to fit her music into my store of cultural capital: it can only make me dorkier if I listen to it, so I push it away hard and fast. Conversely, her fans, from another class or field standpoint, find something in the music that seems to increase their own cultural capital, the value of her voice or her romanticism or her westernness, so they latch on.

Besides being a bright caution light against rushing to call musicians naff, tacky or *kétaine*, this thought is discouraging for our experiment: Even if I can set my prejudices and status anxieties aside in a more fundamental way than Hume ever imagined, and find aspects of Céline's music to embrace, the research suggests that I'm not going to appreciate her in the same terms her fans do. The very act of writing this book suggests an effort to plug her back into my pre-existing, class-based sets of culture processors . . . perhaps by granting her a role in a social critique. Indeed you could fairly say that my experiment is an attempt to expand my cultural capital among music critics, to gain symbolic status by being the most omnivorous of all. My only answer is that any move I make as a critic is open to similar charges. What can you do? The game of distinction may reproduce class structure, but it also makes the world go 'round.

Still, that all depends whether Céline fans and I really, as Bourdieu would predict, come from different walks of life, at least enough so that I would want to distinguish myself from their "bad taste." That jerk in the *Independent* who said that Céline's fan base must be in "some middle-of-the-road Middle England invisible to the rest of us" was indulging in a bit of speculative Bourdieuvian sociology, extrapolating from taste to characterize her devotees as "grannies, tux-wearers, overweight children, mobile-phone salesmen," images straight

out of the BBC's class-hatted comedy series, *Little Britain*. I'd prefer something a bit more empirical, but I don't have a team of researchers to phone up thousands of households. Luckily, Céline's record company does.

* * *

The NPD Group, a market-research company in New York, assembled a demographic profile of American Céline Dion consumers for Sony from January of 2005 to December of 2006. It doesn't tell us whether they are overweight or sell mobile phones but what it does say is suggestive. It compared Céline listeners to US music consumers as a whole: In age, for example, the Céline Dion buyer was 75 percent less likely than your average music buyer to be a teenager. Aside from a bump in the early twenties (perhaps because those people were teens when *Titanic* and *Let's Talk About Love* came out), her audience skews to the over-thirty-five—in fact, around 45 percent of Céline listeners were over fifty, compared to only 20 percent of music buyers overall. Add to that the fact that 68 percent of her listeners were female: Grannies? Check. In fact, Céline fans were about three-and-a-half times more likely to be *widowed* than the average music listener. It's hard to imagine an audience that could confer less cool on a musician.

Céline fans were less likely than the average music buyer to be black, though 13 percent of them were. Reflecting her global-star status, they were more likely than most music fans to be neither black nor white. They were less likely to live on the coasts than in the "red" or "fly-over" states, the US equivalent of "Middle England," plus that haven for older ladies, Florida. They tended to buy their Céline albums from big-box discount

stores, and often they discovered her on TV. They were *much* less likely than other consumers to be downloading songs on the Internet, legally or illegally.

But let's get to the meatier socioeconomics: A disproportionate part of her audience was in the lowest income bracket, under \$25,000 a year, and again in the next-lowest category. Her fans were relatively underrepresented in the high-income brackets (over \$75,000 a year), but a quarter of them did claim to make at least that much. It was education that gave me a surprise: Céline fans were significantly *less* likely than the average music buyer to have only a high-school education or less. The shortage of teenagers helps explain that, but not entirely. More often, they had "some college," meaning an incomplete degree (or perhaps a community-college certificate), but the number of college graduates was only slightly below average, and those with "post-college" schooling slightly above (which could mean grad school but could also mean continuing education).

It's vague, but it does stimulate the imagination. Rather than the abject losers of the *Independent's* fantasy, what I picture is a striving bunch (grannies included), many of them with training in what I would guess (combining the education and income stats) are the ill-paid "helping professions," such as nursing, teaching, public relations, human resources and other middle-class service careers. Bourdieu painted these people (with far less sympathy than he had for manual workers and petty clerks) as the ultimate middlebrow sector, "the new petite bourgeoisie," who he said demonstrated an excess of "cultural goodwill": Having disconnected from their likely roots in working-class culture, they were gamely but not very suavely trying to adjust themselves to what they believed were "the higher things." In his interviews he found that they

held a fairly straightlaced set of moral values, tempered by a sentimental streak. Full of aspiration, but with prospects much lower than their dreams, they might fairly be guessed to overlap with readers of self-help books and attendees of motivational seminars. And based on their low Internet usage, not to mention the retro character of Céline's schmalz, there probably aren't a lot of bloggers and tech heads. In the wealthier part of the listenership, you'd probably find much of the Vegas crowd—middle managers, lower-rung executives and their families (or their widows), with a sizable smattering of business immigrants and ESL students. The survey didn't ask about sexual orientation, but with diva audiences, and Céline's in particular, there's little doubt gay men and lesbians are also represented, possibly skewing up the income and education curves.

Widows and grannies aside, what occurs to me is that this midlevel cultural-capital audience is not as far from the average white pop critic as we might have expected. We usually make middling incomes or worse, and while most have university degrees, our expertise is usually more self-taught than PhD-certified, a pattern Bourdieu believed would produce an anxious, fact-hoarding intellectual style in contrast with the relaxed mastery of a fully legitimated cultural elite. (If you've met any pop critics, you'll see his point.) When a critic or heavily invested music buff says, as they often do, that discovering music or writing "saved my life," I think what lurks behind the melodrama is a feeling that a facility with pop culture and words has saved us *from* the life of subservient career, suburban lifestyle and quiet desperation we imagine befalls people like Céline Dion's white American fans, as well as fans of Billy Joel, Michael Bolton and the other midlevel musicians whose

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names so often serve us as epithets. Perhaps our scathing tongues are enacting what Freud called the narcissism of small differences, in defense of what Bourdieu might call a very fragile distinction. If middlebrow has been designated the new lowbrow, maybe this is why.

Enough surveys, then. It's time to go out and meet some Céline fans. At least to say I'm sorry.

STOP

9. Let's Talk with Some Fans

It seemed like a good idea at the time: if you want to find Céline Dion fans, go to Las Vegas, to her nightly extravaganza *A New Day*. I would ask who they were, why they came, how they felt about the star's mixed reputation. What I hadn't counted on was Vegas. It was my first visit. I stupidly came alone. If there is a laboratory demonstration of the antagonism between economic and cultural capital, it is Las Vegas, a city of such pure commercialism that money is its entertainment, interrupted occasionally by a show. Nowhere else is it so palpable that art can be simply the green kid stepping in to give a brief break to the main, fiduciary attraction. Alcohol and sex, too, are reduced to lubricants for or after-effects of finance. In this nonstop carnival of social inversion, only money is purely beautiful, in Kant's sense of being an end in itself. Vegas's fabled love of the ersatz, like its mini Eiffel Tower, is money giddily blaspheming culture's sacred icons. All of which, in the abstract, seems kind of healthy. But in the flesh it depressed the hell out of me. I am averse