

TASTE

Why You Like What You Like

A Cultural Studies Analysis

by

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San Francisco State University

Illustrated by the Author

Series in Sociology



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Sociology reveals that the idea of personal opinion (like the idea of personal taste) is an illusion. From this, it is concluded that sociology is reductive, that it disenchant, that it demobilizes people by taking away all their illusions....If it is true that the idea of personal opinion itself is socially determined, that it is a product of history reproduced by education, that our opinions are determined, then it is better to know this; and if we have some chance of having personal opinions, it is perhaps on condition that we know our opinions are not spontaneously so.

Pierre Bourdieu. *Sociology in Question*. (1993).

Whereas the ideology of charisma regards taste in legitimate culture as a gift of nature, scientific observation shows that cultural needs are the product of upbringing and education: surveys establish that all cultural practices (museum visits, concert going, reading, etc.), and preferences in literature, painting or music, are closely linked to educational level (measured by qualifications or length of schooling) and secondarily to social origin.

Pierre Bourdieu. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*.

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I owe a debt of gratitude to all the semioticians, psychoanalysts, sociologists, Marxists, journalists, and others whose writings I have used and discussed in this book. I also appreciate the support and help of my editor, Blanca Caro Duran, and the production staff at Vernon Press for their work on this book. Finally, I want to thank Greg Rowland, an Oxford-trained semiotician, for contributing his analysis of the semiotics of taste to this book. Note: A relatively small amount of material is based on my previous writings.

Dedication

In memory of my two uncles, Philip Fishman and Jacob Savel, who spent endless hours debating whether Brooks Brothers or J. Press was the better brand of clothing for men of good taste.

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Takeaways

This book discusses the ideas of (and offers brief quotations from) key texts written by some of the most important thinkers who have concerned themselves with taste, in the broadest sense of the term. Readers of this book will not only have learned about their ideas but also been able to see how they expressed themselves. Here are some of the most important takeaways; many are also briefly discussed in the glossary:

Pierre Bourdieu was a French sociologist whose 1997 book, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, is considered one of the most important sociology books published in the twentieth century. It deals with the relationship between socio-economic class and cultural consumption and taste. Bourdieu argues, in essence, that taste is socially constructed and shaped by many factors, such as the family in which a person is raised, the family's social status, and related concerns.

Ferdinand de Saussure is one of the founding fathers of semiotics, the science of signs. He defined a sign as a combination of a signifier (a sound or object) and a signified (the meaning of the sign), adding that the relationship that existed between signifiers and signified is conventional and can change over time. His book, *Course in General Linguistics*, is one of the foundational texts in semiotics.

The theories of the French philosopher **Michel Foucault**, about the codes that shape culture and about his ideas about power being ubiquitous and part of all human interactions. Foucault is one of the most important and influential thinkers of recent years and the author of many books, such as *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*.

A study by an important psychoanalyst, **Erik Erikson**, which considers the difficulties adolescents face as they grow up. He discusses this topic in his book, *Childhood and Society*. Erikson argues that people all have to confront eight developmental crises, such as initiative and guilt in childhood, and positively resolve them all if they are to avoid psychological problems.

The work of an important psychoanalytic theorist, **Joan Riviere**, who has interesting things to say about the trauma babies have when breastfeeding and about greed and our desire for things as proof that we are worthy of love. Her essay is part of a book, *Love, Hate and Reparation* that has a second essay by Melanie Klein.

Milton Sapirstein, an American psychiatrist, wrote a book, *Paradoxes of Everyday Life*, that dealt with the paradoxical aspects of everyday life from a psychoanalytic perspective. The book has chapters on topics such as screaming mothers, neurotic children from happy families, and male infidelity.

Melanie Klein, a controversial psychoanalytic theorist, discusses the experiences babies have when breastfeeding and other topics and argues that people often continually go through the cycle of loving, hating, and making reparations.

In his 1971 book, *Beyond Laughter*, **Martin Grotjahn** offers a psychoanalytic perspective on detective stories, horror stories, humor, and many other aspects of popular culture and everyday life.

The British-American poet, **W. H. Auden**, is considered to be one of the greatest poets of the twentieth century. His poems often dealt with ethics and political concerns.

An English anthropologist, **Geoffrey Gorer**, wrote from a psychoanalytic perspective and analyzed the way Great Russians raised their babies in his book *The People of Great Russia: A Psychological Study*. Gorer argued that the use of swaddling for babies by the Great Russians led to them being extreme in terms of their attitudes towards gratifications when adults.

The theories of another psychoanalyst, and marketing consultant, **Clotaire Rapaille**, on what he calls *The Culture Code*, which explains how children from the age of one to seven become “imprinted” by the codes of their culture and this imprinting stays with them throughout their lives. Rapaille shows how people from various countries differ from one another in terms of the codes that shape their cultures and taste preferences.

A study by an important psychoanalyst, **Erik Erikson**, which considers the difficulties adolescents face as they grow up. He discusses this topic in his book, *Childhood and Society*. Erikson argues that all people have to confront eight developmental crises, such as initiative and guilt in childhood, and positively resolve them all if they are to avoid psychological problems.

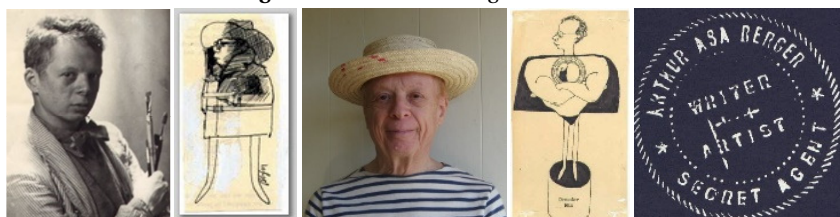
Gerald Zaltman, a professor of marketing at Harvard University Business School, is the author of *How Consumers Think: Essential Insights into the Mind of the Market* (2003), which asserts that ninety percent of our thinking takes place in our unconscious. He also discusses the role that metaphors play in marketing.

The theories of **Sigmund Freud** and his hypothesis about the three levels of the psyche: consciousness, the subconscious, and the unconscious. Freud believed we cannot know the contents of the unconscious, but must recognize that it affects much of our thinking and behavior. Freud was one of the most

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About the Author

Figure 16.1: Assorted Images of Author



Arthur Asa Berger is Professor Emeritus of Broadcast and Electronic Communication Arts at San Francisco State University, where he taught between 1965 and 2003. He graduated in 1954 from the University of Massachusetts, where he majored in literature and philosophy. He received an MA degree in journalism and creative writing from the University of Iowa in 1956. He was drafted shortly after graduating from Iowa and served in the US Army in the Military District of Washington in Washington DC, where he was a feature writer and speechwriter in the District's Public Information Office. He also wrote about high school sports for *The Washington Post* on weekend evenings while in the army.

Berger spent a year touring Europe after he was released from the Army and then went to the University of Minnesota, where he received a Ph.D. in American Studies in 1965. He wrote his dissertation on the comic strip, *Li'l Abner*. In 1963-64, he had a Fulbright to Italy and taught at the University of Milan. He spent a year as a visiting professor at the Annenberg School for Communication at The University of Southern California in Los Angeles in 1984 and two months in the fall of 2007 as a visiting professor at the School of Hotel and Tourism at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. He spent a month lecturing at Jinan University in Guangzhou and two weeks lecturing at Tsinghua University in Beijing in Spring, 2009. He has lectured at many universities all over the world.

He is the author of more than one hundred articles published in the United States and abroad, numerous book reviews, and more than 90 books on the mass media, popular culture, humor, tourism, and everyday life. Among his books are *Bloom's Morning*; *The Academic Writer's Toolkit: A User's Manual*; *Media Analysis Technique*; *Seeing is Believing: An Introduction to Visual Communication*; *Ads, Fads And Consumer Culture*; *The Art of Comedy Writing*; and *Shop 'Til You Drop: Consumer Behavior and American Culture*. Berger is also an artist and has illustrated many of his books.

He has also written many comic academic mysteries such as *Postmortem for a Postmodernist*, *Mistake in Identity*, *The Mass Comm Murders: Five Media Theorists Self-Destruct*, and *Durkheim is Dead: Sherlock Holmes is Introduced to Sociological Theory*. His books have been translated into German, Italian, Russian, Arabic, Swedish, Korean, Turkish and Chinese, and he has lectured in more than a dozen countries in the course of his career.

Berger is married, has two children and four grandchildren, and lives in Mill Valley, California. He enjoys traveling and listening to classical music. He can be reached by e-mail at arthurasaberger@gmail.com.

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