

**David HALLE, *Inside Culture: Art and Class in the American Home*, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1993, pp. xvi+261, 66 halftones, ISBN 0-226-31367-0 (Cloth), US \$29.95)**

**Robin Whitaker**

Volume 17, Number 1, 1995

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1087469ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1087469ar>

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Publisher(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (print)

1708-0401 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Whitaker, R. (1995). Review of [David HALLE, *Inside Culture: Art and Class in the American Home*, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1993, pp. xvi+261, 66 halftones, ISBN 0-226-31367-0 (Cloth), US \$29.95)]. *Ethnologies*, 17(1), 183–185. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1087469ar>

## COMPTES RENDUS/BOOK REVIEWS

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David HALLE, *Inside Culture: Art and Class in the American Home*, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1993, pp. xvi+261, 66 halftones, ISBN 0-226-31367-0 (Cloth), US \$29.95)

David Halle's book hinges on two interlocking assumptions which set it apart in important ways from many studies of art in society. First, general audiences are not passive consumers for whom the meaning of art is determined in advance by such factors as class-specific education, consumer culture, and the artistic establishment. Hence, audience preferences and interpretations must be documented in sociological analyses of art. Second, such research must attend to the domestic context in which art is most often displayed, and which Halle suggests is currently inseparable from broad social patterns operating across classes. These include racial segregation, "suburbanization", and an increasing emphasis on domestic privacy in the nuclear family unit in an age of common divorce. *Inside Culture* encompasses the salient genres of landscapes, portraits and family photographs, abstract art, "primitive" art, and religious iconography, based on interviews with the residents of 240 houses in six class-specific New York neighbourhoods.

Halle's theoretical perspective, combined with his research design, promises a rich and fascinating study. Numerous photographs and quotes from the interviews add to the book's appeal. In fact, had Halle been more generous with regard to the latter, he would have strengthened his claim that audiences must be treated as meaning-making agents. As things stand, the narrative is less nuanced than it could have been, partly because Halle often renders his findings as statistical patterns.

Still, Halle raises many important questions. Throughout his book, he challenges assumptions of a wide and clearly discernible gulf between working- and upper-class tastes in art, pointing, for instance, to his finding that landscapes are immensely popular regardless of social class. Also interesting is the suggestion that the increasing tendency for modern American landscapes to be devoid of people derives from suburban ideals of nature as a source of privately experienced leisure. Yet Halle is too ready to dismiss the role of "museums and other elite cultural institutions" (p. 86) in shaping public taste, I think. Surely we

cannot ignore their part in the production of pristine 'nature' as a spectacle for modern viewers, as the work of such scholars as Donna Haraway shows.

Halle's chapter on portraits and family photographs also contains some clever ideas, including that freestanding displays of family photos are symptomatic of the current fragility of marriages—this "arrangement makes it simple to subtract, add and regroup the photos" (p. 112). Halle accounts for the decline of realist portraits in terms of contemporary social mores, such as the informality of family life and the social stigma attached to appearing egoistic. Similarly, he suggests some fascinating connections between changes in social life and changes in religious iconography.

The weakest sections of *Inside Culture*, from my perspective, are the discussions of abstract art and "primitive" art. Halle is likely right that appreciating abstract art does not require the highly trained sense of aesthetics which some have suggested is available only to the upper classes (the "cultural capital" perspective). But it surely is significant that 55 % of upper-class households surveyed display abstract art, while it is of no importance in the working-class households sampled. Halle never really offers a satisfying account of what this means.

Nor does he offer a compelling discussion of the similar class division in terms of "primitive" art, although he makes the intriguing suggestion that the respectful display of "primitive" African art symbolizes "respect, one or two steps removed, [for] African Americans" (p. 154). But if "primitive" art is a salient political symbol as much as an aesthetic genre, Halle largely ignores issues relating to the politics of cultural appropriation. It is also somewhat problematic that this is the only chapter in which Halle discusses the findings of his sample of twenty interviews in an African-American neighbourhood.

The lack of attention to gender is a surprising gap, given that Halle shares the feminist conviction that the domestic sphere is an important site of cultural production. Halle states that gender was largely insignificant to his findings. If true, this begs discussion, for women have had most of the responsibility for maintaining the domestic sphere in recent history. Does one or another partner take the lead in selecting artwork? Are partners' interpretations of their artwork divergent or broadly similar? Are these meanings made in interaction with one another or privately? Do displays of art vary in different areas of the house, and if so, is this related to their gendered associations?

Halle's dialogue with class-based explanations of taste in art offers important challenges to those sociologists who "believe that underlying modern art and culture is the drive for power and class domination" (p. 6). Yet some of his arguments seem as speculative as those he criticizes, and he glosses over such class differences as do exist. (Why *does* religious art appear in working-class homes, but only rarely in those of the upper-middleclass?). This is a book worth reading for its insights into the importance of art's audiences, and for the

questions it raises. Hopefully, future studies will draw on these to provide more fully satisfying accounts.

*Robin WHITAKER*  
*University of California, Santa Cruz*

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Pauline GREENHILL, *Ethnicity in the Mainstream: Three Studies of English Canadian Culture in Ontario*, (Montreal & Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994, viii + 193 p., acknowledgments, notes, bibliography, index, ISBN 0-7735-1171-3, \$34.95)

"Culture, none; manners, beastly," the English explorer in an anthropological cautionary tale is supposed to have reported about the "natives" he discovered, thereby elevating British practices as the absolute exemplar of civilization and "culture." In the twentieth century, as Dean MacCannell and others have noted, the assignment of "culture," although not the distribution of power, has been inverted. "Mainstream," white Americans, Canadians, and Europeans see themselves as cultureless, colourless, and bland; we insist that only exotic "others"—ethnics and natives—still have an authentic culture. With her new book, Pauline Greenhill takes us a giant step further toward making sense of this nexus of ethnic identity, culture, and power and of folklorists' role in it.

The study of ethnicity in Canada has been flawed, Greenhill argues, by an implicit reliance upon three erroneous assumptions: 1) ethnicity has been seen as a quality of minority groups only, with the term "applied to a specific group of sociocultural collectives, always excluding Englishness" (15); 2) ethnic carnival and display events have been perceived as benignly apolitical; 3) English-background Canadians, because they have not been considered an ethnic group, have been seen as lacking carnivalesque traditions. In this provocative and penetrating book, Greenhill turns all three assumptions on their heads. Her crucial—and well-supported—assertion is that English Canadians behave just like any other ethnic group to the extent that they use various forms of display to propound and maintain their cultural distinctiveness, but that they are unique in denying or masking this display and that such denial—such self-construction as non-ethnic—is central to their (also unique) use of carnivalesque cultural display to maintain social dominance. Greenhill sets out to "deconstruct the ideological employment of culture as a method of marginalization" (28).