

Obituary

Michèle Ollivier (1957–2010)

We are saddened to report the passing of Michèle Ollivier on June 6th at the age of 53. Michèle was a well-known scholar in the sociology of culture and the arts, who served as Professor of Sociology at the University of Ottawa. As many readers of *Poetics* likely know, her work focused on—to use her own words—“symbolic representations, discourse, ideologies, knowledge, classification systems, and artistic hierarchies” (Ollivier, 2004, p. 188).

In the 1990s, building on her dissertation research at Harvard University, Michèle focused on the (symbolic) production of culture, examining how people’s classification and evaluation of the work of artists influence the type of career that artists pursue (Ollivier, 1994, 1997, 2001). In the 2000s, Michele shifted her attention to the interplay between status and tastes, trying to understand “how status and tastes operate in a world where social representation, including status beliefs and rules of distinction, are seen as fragmented and, individualized, and radically detached from the social matrix” (Ollivier, 2004, p. 188).

Together with various North-American and European colleagues, Michèle explored new directions in feminist research (Ollivier and Tremblay, 2000) and research on new media use (Denis and Ollivier, 2001, 2003) and cultural consumption—particularly omnivorous cultural consumption and its relation to class and gender inequality. This pioneering research culminated in several thought-provoking publications (Fridman and Ollivier, 2002, 2004; Ollivier, 2000, 2008a,b; Ollivier and Fridman, 2001, 2002; Ollivier and Gauthier, 2007; Ollivier et al., 2009), including a special double issue of this journal (Ollivier et al., 2008). Whereas previous research on omnivorism had been overwhelmingly quantitative, Michele and colleagues demonstrated the fruitfulness of “mixed methods” in addressing a different set of questions:

What do omnivores look like when examined from up close, using qualitative, disaggregated, or alternative quantitative approaches? Are there different types of omnivores? Is omnivorousness expressed in different ways depending on cultural contexts and domains? Does it vary not only in degree, but in nature, according to factors such as gender, age, nationality, and class? Beyond volume and compositional measures of tastes and practices, do omnivores share a particular orientation towards culture? Are omnivores really more “open” to appreciating a wide variety of aesthetic forms compared to other types of cultural consumers? How does openness manifest itself concretely in the discourses that peoples use to discuss their practices? Is omnivore consumption an extension of past practices and discourses about culture or does it represent a radical break with them? Is it associated with specific social and political orientations in domains other than culture? (Ollivier et al., 2008, p. 116)

As a critically engaged scholar, Michèle challenged some of the assumptions underlying research on the omnivore—such as the conceptualization of omnivorousness as an exclusively highbrow attribute or as a single unified attitude towards culture. She called upon sociologists to show greater awareness of how their empirical work on cultural categories is influenced by, and contributes to, society-wide classification struggles around cultural and social boundaries (Ollivier and Tremblay, 2000)—as when, for example, researchers argue that their own class, gender or ethno-cultural group embody desirable qualities of openness and diversity (Ollivier et al., 2009). In her own empirical work, Michèle aimed at (and succeeded in) providing a more complex understanding of different types of eclecticism and cultural orientation, focusing on the justifications people draw upon to describe their tastes, the linkages between cultural classifications and social divisions, the discrepancies between the discursive and behavioral aspects of cultural consumption, the nuanced details of personal trajectories and social contexts that influence people’s cultural preferences and practices, and the ways in which they talk about these practices. Her findings suggest, among other things, that cultural eclecticism builds upon, rather than displaces, the older categories of high and mass culture in which it remains thoroughly embedded. Far from being dismantled, social and artistic hierarchies are being reconfigured in more individualized ways. Modes of openness rest on different models of agency which are themselves hierarchized along class and gender lines (Ollivier, 2008a).

With regard to the relationship between cultural classifications and social divisions, Michèle and colleagues (2009) find—contrary to Bourdieu’s thesis of homology between the space of lifestyle and the space of social class—that behavioral differences between groups are often small and relative and that, even among the most highly educated, only a minority participate in highbrow activities. Michèle’s research thus amends social and academic discourse that tends to present socially dominant categories—e.g., privileged in terms of class situation, gender, age—as embodying the valued characteristics of openness and diversity, while less privileged groups are implicitly presented as closed.

As cultural sociologists, we encourage our readers to (re)acquaint themselves with Michèle’s publications, as we believe that her work offers many thoughtful and creative lessons on the complex relations between tastes, cultural consumption and social inequality, as well as the discursive construction of cultural categories and social divisions. As editors, we are also grateful for her contribution to *Poetics*, in particular, for serving as an advisory editor and a guest-editor and for providing insightful and constructive comments to those who submitted papers to the journal. In addition, we both had the pleasure of discovering her excellent qualities as a presenter and discussant at various international conferences, including the *Classification in the Arts and Media* conference at Erasmus University Rotterdam (2008) and the *Social Stratification and Cultural Consumption* conference at Oxford University (2006). To us, and to many other people in our field, Michèle was not only an admirable scholar, but also a friendly and helpful colleague, who will sorely be missed.

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