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Review by: Black Hawk Hancock
American Journal of Sociology, Vol. 117, No. 6 (May 2012), pp. 1851-1852
Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](http://www.press.uchicago.edu)
Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/664814>
Accessed: 29/06/2012 15:17

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The Opera Fanatic: Ethnography of an Obsession. By Claudio E. Benzecry. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011. Pp. x+246. \$29.00 (paper).

Black Hawk Hancock
DePaul University

The Opera Fanatic: Ethnography of an Obsession is a wonderfully eye-opening work that draws us into the complex world of the opera fanatic in Buenos Aires. Both cultural sociology and ethnography, it offers a refreshing engagement with Pierre Bourdieu's magisterial *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Harvard University Press, 1984) by bypassing the well-trod ground of studies that examine institutional mechanisms of domination through cultural means, and individual aspirations to make distinctions over others. Instead Claudio Benzecry provides us with a richly textured depiction of the dense discursive practices of the upper floors of the opera house, populated by nonelites who purchase the cheaper tickets, creating a world onto themselves of dense sociability through their consumption of and engagement with opera.

Benzecry takes us into the rich history of opera in Argentina and its complex relation to nonelite audiences by surmounting the simplistic dualisms of high and low, elite and popular that mark so many analyses of cultural institutions. Our attention is then turned to focus on six in-depth life stories highlighting specific characteristics that lend themselves to becoming an opera lover, then proceeding to explore the phenomenological account of being an opera fan through both formal and informal means of learning how to listen to and what to listen for in opera. He vividly shows us how these fans are differentiated from other fans through their passion and practices of attachment, and the ways that they use cultural capital not for dominating others, but for self-construction through their affective relationships to the music and the self-transcendent possibilities that opera affords them. Drawing us back out of these nuances, Benzecry then contextualizes the internal dynamics of the opera house in relation to the world outside, as the opera house functions as its own spatiotemporal arena apart from the more general everyday impoverishment of Argentina. In doing so, we come to understand how autonomy must be preserved, and repaired when breached, in order to maintain the sanctity of the opera world.

Astutely drawing on the music-in-action approach of scholars Tia DeNora and Antoine Hennion, Benzecry develops a theoretically sophisticated and informed emphasis on the techniques of embodiment, whereby opera is utilized as a resource and medium for agency and identity construction. By complicating the notion of taste as self-evident, we are shown how the activities and practices of opera afford people opportunities to forge "moral careers" through the negotiations and sacrifices they make to engage in their passion for opera. In doing so, we are able to see the

ways that people's long-term investments and relationships with music define their worlds and their own sense of dignity through their commitment to sustaining the art form and preventing the distortion of what opera means to them. The crafting of self that takes place in and through these investments serves as a vehicle of self-transcendence within a larger sociohistorical context of Argentinean decline.

Most compelling in Benzecry's analysis is his use of embodied practices, the affective and embodied character of engagement with and attachment to cultural forms like opera that come not from a seeking cultural domination, but rather through a "love" or a "topos of eros" in the diverse regimes of cultural engagement that leads to the subjective styles of self-construction and self-cultivation. Beyond preferences or presentation of self for strategic effect, we come to understand how the sensual engagement with culture draws out and cultivates particular parts of the self that cannot be captured through cognition alone. Here Benzecry is at his best by turning traditional applications of *Distinction* inside out and showing us how what impresses the opera fanatic is not what is passed off as effortless in the concealment of naturalized labor and investment; rather what is permanently revealed in their passion for self-discipline and self-sacrifice in acquiring those abilities that defines the true opera enthusiasts.

By drawing attention to a much-neglected aspect of cultural analysis in relation to issues of culture and taste, Benzecry sheds light on an important area of research that I hope will inspire future scholarship along these lines. Like the Scotch aficionado who stocks the bar with the most impressive single malts and is able to recite the appropriate tasting notes on cue, and yet cannot articulate a sense of *how* this knowledge provides any deeper sense of aesthetic pleasure or personal connection, Benzecry's insightful reading of arguments around cultural distinctions unmasks the dissembling connoisseur as having no substance. In doing so, he provides a fruitful dialogue between his analytical frame and embodied practices as a way to intervene between issues of social structures and taste.

Thoughtfully crafted and vividly written, Benzecry's *The Opera Fanatic* will appeal to a wide audience and be an excellent addition to courses on culture, social psychology, and qualitative methods. As a pedagogical tool, the book provides an excellent template for younger scholars to explore the challenges and the promises of ethnography, especially those who are willing to go beyond their intellectual presuppositions and follow their passions in and out of the field.