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“Distinction and Subsidy in the Arts: Case Study of the New York City Mayor’s
Office of Media and Entertainment”

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Abstract

This research explores the rationales for and results of subsidies in the arts using the New York City Mayor's Office of Media and Entertainment as a case study. Although specifically about NYC MOME's film and television subsidy program, we hope that our method for critically analyzing the effects of arts subsidies may be more broadly applicable. We find that NYC film and television subsidies result in redistribution upwards. For example in 2019 (the most recent data available) the average annual salary of those working for NYC MOME-subsidized productions in NYC is \$121,000 whereas the average salary in New York City is \$91,000, a 33% differential in higher salaries for those working on projects receiving subsidies than those who do not work on these subsidized projects (MOME 2021). This means that those who earn less in New York City have to pay more in tax to subsidize those who earn more, all else being equal.

This redistribution upwards seems on the face of it regressive policy. The research question is how can these results, arts subsidies with redistribution upwards, be seen as *equitable*? This is where Bourdieu (1984)'s notion of social consecration leading to distinction may cast light. Politicians and technocrats gain social distinction from being associated with the arts. Likewise those in the arts gain social distinction from their involvement in politics. The act of creating and awarding state subsidies in the arts is itself a form of consecration leading to social distinction. This signalling of distinction may be a more important act than the regressive empirical consequences of the art subsidies themselves. We discuss three canonical arguments for state

subsidy to the arts made by cultural economists, illustrate why NYC MOME's screen media subsidy programs (and others like them) may not meet these requirements, and hypothesize that social distinction is more important in the political economy of electoral politics around the arts in New York City than is economic equity or equality.

Key words: cultural policy, economic development, screen arts, New York City, inequality

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