A question of perception: Bourdieu, art and the postmodern

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Abstract

Bourdieu and Darbel’s classic study of European art museum audiences, *The Love of Art* (1991), remains one of the most influential academic studies of the social indices of art perception. Its findings were central to Bourdieu’s on-going study of culture-mediated power relations, as found in the book *Distinction* (Bourdieu 1984), as well as social surveys of the behaviour of museum audiences across the world. Much in Bourdieu’s account of art perception, however, has begun to appear dated and in need of supplementation. This paper will be a critical but sympathetic re-reading of Bourdieu’s sociology of art perception in the light of recent criticisms of his approach. Whilst fine art and its institutions continue to function as sources of social identification and differentiation, this paper argues that the relationship between perception and stratification is somewhat looser than connoted in Bourdieu’s work. Beyond the shift to a less rigid taxonomy of social formations, the immense expansion of the visual arts complex has opened up possibilities for the dissemination of art knowledge beyond the cultivated bourgeois. The erosion of boundaries between the aesthetic and the economic, between art and popular culture, are the result of processes of commodification that have placed museums alongside shopping malls within the realms of consumption and entertainment. New audiences have emerged from this mix with less dichotomized – that is, either cultivated or popular – ways of seeing culture that suggest a revision of Bourdieu’s overly integrated account of class and cognition. An alternative, ‘postmodern’, approach to art perception is entertained, where an aesthetics of distinction is replaced by a culture of distraction, but this abstracts culture from any structural grounding. Capturing the shift to an accelerated cultural present, instead, requires a warping of Bourdieu’s categories to account for broader patterns of culture and economy and the accentuation of modern visual culture.

Keywords: Bourdieu; art; perception; museums; postmodern

In a recent episode of the American sitcom *Friends*, Ross, the culture-capital rich palaeontologist is implored by his naive friend Joey, a second-generation
Italian immigrant, to provide a bluffer’s guide to ‘doing’ a museum. Joey has a date at New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art with a professorial colleague of Ross’, who he wants to impress with a knowledge of high culture. ‘She wants to go to all these cultural places’, declares Joey, ‘and I don’t know how to talk about that stuff’. Joey has already given away his lack of cultural capital when he misrecognizes references to ‘the Met’ as New York’s baseball team: ‘Okay, let me stop you right there’, blurts Joey, ‘the Mets suck okay, you wanna see the Yankees’. Eventually, Ross capitulates to Joey’s demands for guidance and provides him with a series of crib cards to memorize, containing high-octane snippets of aesthetic discourse that describe the form and quality of nearby artefacts: ‘Note the painterly lines and subtle impasto on this canvas, Monet painted quickly and usually outdoors as his elusive subject was light itself’. Joey is also provided with a set of directions to be taken in the museum itself, including a directive to turn right on entry. But, of course, things in sitcom-land never go smoothly. Turning left rather than right, Joey ends up waxing art historical about paintings that are nowhere to be seen. Realizing that they are socially incongruous, the date confides in Ross that she should perhaps find someone more compatible. Later in the series the two professors get together.

The Bourdieusian quality of this encounter suggests a particularly easy, but naively realist, *prima facie* reading. Episode 921 of *Friends* has managed to depict the realities of differentials in cultural capital and art consumption, revealing the veracity of Bourdieu’s rules of cultural engagement, where taste is a function of one’s social location, and where lower social groups (and autodidacts) give away their social positions in the mistakes they make in the game of high culture. The ‘structuring structures’ of the *habitus* discipline both mind and body, here, in that Joey’s perceptual and corporeal faculties fail to handle the museum’s objects. He doesn’t *belong* here, his social origins having failed to equip him with the appropriate means to decipher the refined trappings of bourgeois culture. The objective limits of his position in the social world map onto the subjective orientations he has towards the universe of cultural objects, an orientation effected by means of his *habitus* – whilst recounting flowery epithets, Joey admits he is thinking ‘monster trucks’.

But there is another reading that owes itself to the postmodern turn. If a popular cultural text like *Friends* is able to recognize and reveal the logic of cultural capital, then surely the game is up: art consumption can no longer take on the mystifying logic of misrecognition and symbolic violence central to Bourdieu’s work. As high and low culture have interpenetrated, the tight classificatory schemes attending to each have given way to blurred cultural categories, replacing the self-reproducing logic of distinction with a flatter and more open universe of cultural declassification. Not only does this herald a weakening of class mediations of the symbolic and cultural, but registers an opening up of art perception to the ‘space of flows’ (Castells 1989), an
increasingly mobile space of global influences that unsettles distinctions between ‘contemplation’ and ‘barbarism’.

Both readings raise important questions about Bourdieu’s sociology of culture – in particular the relevance of Bourdieu’s categories in understanding the complexity and richness of contemporary society and its cultural forms. Do stratified systems of hierarchy reproduce conditions of domination without the recognition of society’s members? How, in complex societies like ours, are categories of high art and popular culture ordered, classified and reclassified? Is it legitimate to apply concepts forged to understand the rise of modern societies to conditions where the modern itself has been reconfigured and perhaps superseded? If we keep faith with Bourdieu’s categories a satisfactory answer to these questions can only be accomplished with some analytical flexibility. Whilst Bourdieu’s arguments still retain a good degree of explanatory value – taken together habitus, capital and field still provide the most comprehensive set of instruments available to understand the fate of modern art fields – we need to find satisfactory ways of updating and warping his ideas to account for inflections in the cultural landscape. In other words, we need to explore a position between these readings, between the modern and the postmodern, that draws on, but also extends, Bourdieu’s powerful arguments to address an increasingly complex and accelerated cultural present.

Bourdieu’s sociology of art perception

We can orient to Bourdieu’s sociology of art by differentiating three interdependent dimensions, forms or locales: 1) the artist and the art works themselves – concrete products produced by cultural workers in particular historical conditions; 2) what might broadly be called ‘social space’, ranging from the local settings in which art works figure – museums, academies, cities – to the overarching sets of relations within which struggles over art occur, Bourdieu’s fields; 3) the audience, possessing sums of cultural and economic capital that activate their attitudes, artistic preferences, bodily habits and cognitive competences – in short, their habituses. Whilst each dimension functions only in relation to each other, Bourdieu feels himself able to differentiate them for the purposes of his cultural analysis. In The Rules of Art (Bourdieu 1996) and in the collection of essays, The Field of Cultural Production (Bourdieu 1993), for instance, we find discrete essays on the artistic field in late-nineteenth century France, on Flaubert’s literary works, and on the artistic gaze. It is the third, broadly conceived under the term ‘art perception’, that contains some of Bourdieu’s most provocative and influential comments on how the body and its schemata mediate power relations and which forms the focus of this paper.
In broad terms, what Bourdieu does most effectively is to demonstrate the social and economic fundaments of a hierarchized system of cultural preferences that are themselves generative of ideas defining patterns of legitimation in culture at large. Like Durkheim’s *Suicide* (1951 [1897]), Bourdieu’s *Distinction* (1984) attempts a demystification of the ‘inner sensibility’ by pointing up the ineffable as eminently social, and revealing the hidden social forces threaded through aesthetic judgment (Wacquant 2000). From the drinking of choice wines to the consumption of rock music, symbolic forms operate within a system of exchange and domination central to the reproduction of the class system itself. Patterns of high consumption are actually active processes of appropriation, for Bourdieu, precisely because they take on the patina of grace – culture is turned into nature. Hence, Kant’s insistence on disinterested aesthetics is nothing but the operation of a logic of classification of a privileged social class, one that conceals its class origins behind the façade of objectivity. Instantly, then, the seemingly opaque realm of artistic perception is opened up as a system of hierarchized differences.

In ‘Outline of a Sociological Theory of Art Perception’ (Bourdieu 1968b), first published in 1968, Bourdieu sets out a series of statements on how best to understand the relationship between artistic competence and social stratification, driving a wedge between ideas (revealed as ideologies) of the ‘fresh eye’ and the hidden realities of culture’s social uses. For Bourdieu, art perception presupposes an active mechanism of deciphering that works more or less unconsciously. Because artworks are coded, meaning is dependent on socially-acquired mechanisms of comprehension possessed by perceivers at varying levels. Successful reception only occurs if there is a fit between the work’s codes and those possessed by the beholder (Bourdieu’s debt to the educational sociology of Basil Bernstein is clear, here). This is why, for Bourdieu, those with adequate levels of education ‘feel at home’ with high culture, while subordinate groups are bound to be disoriented. Reduced to the ‘grasping of primary significations’, the perceptual schemes of the latter constitute a ‘mutilated perception’ (1993: 219) because the source of uninitiated perception is practical experience.

Bourdieu, the consummate sociologist, assigns to art competence a relational rather than universalistic logic. It is the ability of beholders to handle art as a universe of divisional schemes, characteristics, schools and periods that marks them as properly sufficient in deciphering discrete works. Division and vision are, therefore, complementary mechanisms of artistic appreciation, enabling a representation to be grasped, paradoxically, in a manner that references nothing but itself, aesthetically removed from the codes of everyday life. This is what Bourdieu in ‘The Historical Genesis of the Pure Aesthetic’ (1968a) calls the ‘pure gaze’ – a distinctly modern orientation towards art that separates and privileges the aesthetic over the non-aesthetic.¹

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The satisfactions gained from aesthetic appreciation, then, are caught in a logic of structural disparity, where inequalities in access to the instruments of artistic perception translate as inequalities in the ways art works are comprehended. The very command over the pure aesthetic is governed by processes of accumulative internalization, making familiarity with works a matter of ‘unconscious mastery of the instruments of appropriation’ (Bourdieu 1993: 228), a kind of second-nature relationship to artistic rules. Hence, the schemes and categories that are employed to appreciate artworks have a double relationship to the historical context in that ‘they become the subject of usages which are themselves socially marked by the social position of the users who exercise the constitutive dispositions of their habitus in the aesthetic choices these categories make possible’ (1993: 263). In other words, schemes of artistic competence are historically bound by their ability to mark ‘taste’ but also by their power to constitute the very categories of ‘art’ appropriated by those with such taste.

Art museums are particularly important, here, because they institutionalize two powerful, but seemingly contradictory, ideas. Firstly, as sacred shrines to high culture, museums symbolically purify the values of civilized culture. Their very physical arrangements – the quiet surroundings, the sacred display settings, the neo-classical architecture – are signatures of auratic culture that distinguish the experience from the popular or unrefined. For this reason, museums mesh with the aspirations of a bourgeois class eager to differentiate itself as leading in matters of culture. Secondly, however, museums also function within discourses of political democracy. Their ubiquitous presence becomes testament to Enlightenment narratives of improvement and universal access – places of ‘moral betterment’, as early museum reformers put it, providing national citizens with a ‘wondrous and transforming experience’ (Duncan 1995: 16). Or, in the context of more recent neo-liberal political management, they are vehicles for popular education and citizenship that might help combat intolerance, poverty and social exclusion if made widely accessible enough. In the UK, this has taken the form of government reports extolling the virtues of museums and galleries as agents of individual, community and societal cohesion as well as the scrapping of entrance fees to national museums (Sandell 2003).

The implications of this double-coding are traced in Bourdieu and Darbel’s *The Love of Art*, published in 1969. For the authors, the fact that European museums were free did not mitigate the fact that free entry was also optional entry. In fact, the whole point of the study was to show that the ‘preference’ to visit the museum could only be explained by agents’ social position in that those endowed with high levels of cultural capital and most removed from the urgencies of material life were the most likely to choose such refined pursuits. Those from the lower classes, on the other hand, were already dispossessed of
the routes, maps and codes – in short the savoir-faire of the museum experience. Phenomenologically, Bourdieu identifies the museum as a daunting place for these visitors, crammed with exhibits that are alien to them. Just as the ‘cultural need’ to visit increases the more it is satisfied, the feeling of estrangement is increased in the absence of this disposition. This is indicated, for Bourdieu and Darbel, not just by the relative lack of visits of the working classes to museums, but also by the more modest amounts of time spent devoted to contemplating works, considered as the time needed to ‘exhaust’ the meanings available to them in the act of deciphering.

If successive surveys pointed to the social conditions of visiting a museum, it was Bourdieu’s theoretical gloss that provided a pointed critique of the museum as a place where the ‘cultural arbitrary’ was sustained. For museums, like schools, act as the meeting point of class formation and social reproduction, for Bourdieu. Their mechanism is one of institutionalized separation whereby structural alignments between educational level and ‘enjoyment’ are veiled by principles of universalism. This has the effect of reinforcing class divisions as natural divisions, legitimating patterns of social and cultural inequality. Holders of high volumes of cultural capital are, in fact, the equivalent of an aristocracy, for Bourdieu, a ‘cultural nobility’ whose social being is defined by an essence: not of kin, blood, estate or tradition, but of aesthetic competences seen as ‘gifts of nature’ (Bourdieu 1984: 29). These are manifested in the self-assured detachment of the aesthete, the aptitude to appreciate a work ‘independently of its content’ with an air of ease or ‘cultivated naturalness’. Indeed, it is for this reason that cultivated visitors are largely hostile to the provision of information and instruments of access such as arrows, signposts and bigger labels, because the programme of cultivated perception which they carry with them and which comprises their culture is shrouded by ideologies of the natural gift.

In any case, bringing culture to the masses was not something that could be achieved simply by improving the layout of the museum, staging large-scale blockbuster exhibitions or establishing programmes of cultural democratization such as those promoted by the French cultural ministry under Malraux in the 1960s. The acquisition of cultural capital, instead, was the product of complex socio-temporal processes that originated in the family and the school. ‘The love of art’, in short, ‘is not love at first sight but is born of long familiarity’ (Bourdieu and Darbel 1991: 54).

A contemporary assessment

Expanded to become Bourdieu’s Distinction (1984), the early groundwork on art perception excavates many of Bourdieu’s core assumptions about culture, power and social stratification. And there’s much to commend and retain here,
not least the bold sociologism that reveals traditional aesthetics to legitimate the symbolic power of high culture – part of sociology’s move to historicize and denaturalize. Sociologists now have a corpus of ideas at hand to probe the social function of symbolic and cultural codes and dislodge the certainties of Kantian-derived notions of ‘disinterestedness’ that still pervade popular and elite definitions of the aesthetic. In the academic field, Bourdieu’s ideas can be a useful corrective to transcendental phenomenologies of perception, from Gadamer’s ‘aesthetic consciousness’ and the reception theories of the Konstanz School (Robbins 2000) to Czikszentmihalyi’s theories of ‘flow’. In the sphere of cultural policy, on the other hand, Bourdieu’s theories can be pitted against the hackneyed espousals of governments and organizations rhetorically committed to exposing the mass of the population to ‘great works of art’ in order to improve their cultural knowledge. Despite Bourdieu’s often self-contradictory stance on the issue of what the state can achieve (Mattick 2003), a major implication of his work is that cultural democratization cannot be severed from the more systematic need to equalize social, educational and economic differences across different fields.

As Bourdieu puts it, ‘in the privileged case of artistic perception I wanted to try to clarify the specific logic of “practical knowledge” . . . to create an adequate theory of artistic perception as a practical execution of quasi-corporeal schemata that operate beneath the level of the concept’ (Bourdieu 1992: 160). And, to a certain extent, he achieves this through the combination of a phylogenesis of the historical invention of the ‘pure gaze’ with an ontogenesis of the differentials bound up with the acquisition of such competences (Bourdieu 1996). Even studies that purport to show the limitations of the Bourdieusian model such as Halle’s (1993) study of the consumption of art in US homes, tend to support many of its fundamental propositions, such as the greater likelihood of upper-middle class residents to name the artists of their paintings and to use the discourses of art to identify value and difference in them.4

As for museums, many of the findings of The Love of Art are still considered relevant today in the field of museum studies. Socio-demographic differences between art-museum visitors still support the cultural-capital framework, where class fractions richest in cultural capital and lowest in economic capital embrace an aesthetic that allows them to employ their cultural resources to the maximum (DiMaggio 1996). Membership of arts institutions, for instance, is clearly a form of cultural distinction for such groups, whose identities are embellished through participation in private previews, openings and other prestige events (Glynn, Bhattacharya, and Rao 1996). Fractions lowest in cultural capital, on the other hand, are shown in qualitative studies of arts audiences to find art museums irrelevant and intimidating, or to see the museum less as a benign cultural resource than some kind of archaic monument to the past (Moore 1998; Harland, et al 1995; Merriman 1989). And lest Bourdieu be
charged with French specificity, such patterns of arts consumption and audi-
ence interpretation have cross-national applicability, a fact reinforced time and
time again in social surveys of arts consumption (DiMaggio, Useem and

Whilst Lash’s comment that ‘Bourdieu’s general sociology of culture is not
only the best, but it is the only game in town’ (Lash 1993: 193) is exaggerated,
it is surely Bourdieu who comes closest to providing a comprehensive
overview of the economy of symbolic practices, including the function of
modern art fields. Very few alternative approaches come close to synthesizing
evidence and analysis in the field of arts consumption with such theoretical
adroitness. And yet, at the same time, much in Bourdieu’s account has begun
to appear dated and in need of supplementation. This is, of course, not
surprising given that both The Love of Art and Distinction drew on data col-
lected during the 1960s, but it might also point to more fundamental gaps in
Bourdieu’s conceptual apparatus as a whole.

Firstly, as several commentators have noted, Bourdieu operates with a vague
and monolithic version of the institution. Certainly, his characterization of the
museum as a static and unreflexive upholder of a tightly-bound high culture
lacks subtlety and precision. On the one hand, museums have changed over
the last century and should certainly not be perceived as one-dimensional
agents of social reproduction (Fyfe and Macdonald 1996). The rise of outreach
programmes, populist exhibition strategies and shifts in institutional power
away from curators to educationalists are just some signs of an attempt to
reflect on and rectify socio-demographic limitations in audience perception,
raise awareness of social exclusion and afford a space to marginalized com-
unities (Hooper-Greenhill 1997). This does not amount to a sea-change in
access to the arts, but it does fit with a more general social transformation
towards what Beck, Giddens and Lash (1994) have called ‘reflexive modern-
ization’, a product of institutions and agents reflecting upon the excesses and
consequences of modernization. The resultant changes in decision-making
practices have implications for how institutions confront their own limits. In
the museum, internal monitoring procedures are now standard practice, as
are socially-inclusive policies aimed at widening the participation of local
communities.5

These are social and institutional changes that Bourdieu could be forgiven
for not predicting, and they often stem from government or corporate pres-
sure to present museums as social servants that gloss their function as spaces
of social differentiation. To this extent, such programmes are often no more
than well-intentioned gestures, the efficacy of which are tendentious and
provisional. Yet, Bourdieu’s treatment of the museum is indicative of a more
general tendency to revert to a kind of dominant ideology framework when it
comes to analysing institutions. Indeed, critics have admonished Bourdieu for
having a ‘black-box’ model of organizations, where the internal fluidity and

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complexity of institutional life is ignored or reduced to a caricature (Garnham 1986; Jenkins 1992). After all, if institutions were merely conduits of power how could they ever meditate on their own borders and relations with other bodies? And if museums were merely agents of social reproduction how does this square with Bourdieu’s own comments on the field as a space of struggle between agents? Whilst one should not, of course, underestimate the exclusionary effects of the museum, the analysis is short-circuited if the institution is not treated seriously as an active agent or process with its own internal forms of contestation and struggle. In fact, tracing how various constituencies within the museum battle over policy-making has been a valuable and necessary feature of new literatures within museum studies and cultural policy (Fyfe and Macdonald 1996; Bennett 1998).

Secondly, Bourdieu’s focus on social class over other dimensions of audience stratification limits the analysis of social inequalities to an outdated classification of social formations. Despite the attempt to analyse the gender specificities of symbolic capital, there is a distinct lack of attention to the complex and cross-cutting mechanisms of inequality based on class, gender, sexuality, age and ethnicity in Bourdieu’s work. Contemporary studies of consumption, even those that have adopted the approach taken in *Distinction*, have pointed to the need to replace Bourdieu’s rather rigid conceptions of class with a more fluid, diverse and declassified conception of stratification, or to supplement the Bourdieusian model with more empirical conceptions such as those of Erik Olin Wright and John Goldthorpe (Bennett, Emmison and Frow 1999). Class, in this argument, continues to be a significant axis of inequality and embodiment, but is imbricated with other dimensions of stratification, requiring a broader account of cultural inequalities – as well as increasing equalities – than is provided in Bourdieu’s work. This is particularly important when it comes to analysing the diffuse connections between social divisions and popular culture, partly because *Distinction* itself fails to adequately address how mass-mediated cultures might also attenuate class configurations. But even in relation to museums, whilst recent audience surveys have often confirmed Bourdieu and Darbel’s conclusions, they have also pointed to a broadening and diversification of the audience, with different museums exhibiting variations in visitor profile according to their location, history and type (Hooper-Greenhill 1997; Merriman 1989; Smith and Wolf 1996).

The objective, then, is to move away from a unified model of class-taste where class alone is the predictor of consumption patterns, to refined demarcations based on multiple dimensions such as age, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, geography and employment. But it would be wrong to suggest that there is no room for these dimensions within the Bourdieusian framework, as evidenced in recent applications of Bourdieu’s ideas to the ‘situated intersubjectivity’ of gender and working class women’s experiences of respectability (McNay 2004;
Skeggs 1997). In fact, whilst it is clear that Bourdieu himself privileges class in most of his analyses, he is also quick to point out that such groupings exist only through the relative social distances they have from others within a given social space (that is, a field), and that the model rises or falls according to whether it can predict patterns of social and cultural behaviour (Bourdieu 1998b). Moreover, as DiMaggio argues, the high arts have become a valued cultural currency precisely because ‘they are subject to few barriers of age, region, or gender, and are consecrated in school curricula’ (DiMaggio 1987: 443). Having a taste for high art is, then, still firmly bound up with the symbolic practices of dominant social groups, even if it is not a unitary reflection of rigid class groupings.

A third, related, criticism comes from critics taking a broadly postmodern view on social change, consumption and visual culture. From this perspective, the tight correspondence Bourdieu posits between cultural habits and social class fails to account for broader patterns of culture and economy that stretch the visual arts beyond the confines of a limited cultural elite. In its more ‘Bourdieu-friendly’ form, the argument sets up parallels between changing forms of visual consumption, the rise of mass higher education and economic restructuring, particularly the contraction of heavy industry and the predominance of a service economy. A new middle-class fraction has emerged from this mix with less dichotomized – that is, either cultivated or popular – ways of seeing culture that fits snugly with the proliferation of ‘postmodern’ outlets of visual consumption, from shopping malls to lifestyle magazines (Featherstone 1991; Urry 1990). Processes of urban regeneration and aestheticization have presaged the city as both consumer playground and gentrified residential space, here, facilitating the consumption habits of an enlarged middle-class fraction and destabilising boundaries between high and low culture (Wynne and O’Connor 1998). Indeed, under conditions where the aesthetic and the commercial are increasingly meshed, the boundaries between art and popular culture have withered to such an extent, in this argument, that museums and department stores have become interchangeable cultural spaces offering spectacular consumer experiences (Prior Forthcoming).

Taste remains embedded in the stratification order, then, but the relationship Bourdieu fixes between socio-economic background and cultural capital is weakened by processes of commodification, dedifferentiation and deautonomization (Lash 1990; DiMaggio 1996). In the USA, Peterson and Kern (1996) note the arrival of the ‘cultural omnivore’, with a penchant for high and popular cultural forms, as emblematic of a diffusion of taste in modern society. DiMaggio (1996) points to a similar move away from a system of tightly-bounded status groups towards looser agglomerations in which mastery over high culture is only one of many signs of a person’s status; whilst research in both Australia (Bennett, Emerson and Frow 1999) and the UK (Warde, Tomlinson and McMeekin 2000; Chan and Goldthorpe 2004) has captured a
weakening of homologous relations between class and culture such that consumption habits cannot be said to map directly onto conventional class groupings. But these are modifications that could reasonably sit alongside or within the Bourdieusian framework. One might note, in fact, that Bourdieu’s intellectual debt to Weber, in particular the latter’s emphasis on status hierarchies and lifestyle, actually allows for this kind of adaptation. Moreover, the taste for varied cultural styles and forms, from soap opera to opera, can itself be seen as a marker of cultural superiority and difference from more restricted tastes and, therefore, another example of the persistence of relations between culture and social stratification. Even omnivoric consumption habits, in other words, adhere to a logic of distinction not least because the high volumes of cultural consumption across a range of forms marks the omnivore as culturally distinguished (Chan and Goldthorpe 2004).

In strong forms of postmodern theory, however, the argument is advanced a step further to account for wholesale transformations in modes of perception across contemporary society, irrespective of class or other dimensions of stratification. Distinction has been replaced by distraction, in this argument, visual culture accelerated to such a degree that image forms can no longer be scrutinized with any deliberative faculty such as a ‘pure gaze’. Pure speed has undermined an aesthetics of meditation and replaced it with a culture of instantaneous simulation, where the eye can no longer discriminate between images. For Bauman (1996) for instance, postmodern life is embodied in the figure of the tourist – a figure whose meanderings through culture are episodic, instantly gratifying and directionless. In fact, under conditions of information overload, ‘cultural capital’ is itself undermined as a valued resource, for Bauman, because it is no longer a stable currency. Value can only be extracted from a postmodern culture of instant obsolescence through strategies of strolling, vagabondage and purposeless travel. Virilio (1991) adds to this diagnosis of an accelerated modernity by announcing the ‘end of geography’ as space and visual perception are annihilated by an ever-proximate and exposed media travelling at the speed of light: ‘our whole life passes by in the prostheses of accelerated voyages’ he declares (1991: 61); whilst both Jameson and Baudrillard assess the impact that all this has on the museum by pointing to a dissolution of high culture and its meanings – pathos, depth, transcendence – under the weight of mass consumption (Prior 2003).

If this vision of ‘liquid modernity’ is provocative, however, it is also imprecise and naïve. Not only is there a complete dismissal of class as an outdated relic, but also a retreat from understanding perceptual competence as socially stratified at all. Instead, we find a rather blasé acceptance of declassification theories and voluntarism, where ‘increasingly individualized individuals’ are able to choose freely from the cultural hypermarkets as they adorn their radically decentred identities with the trappings of a plastic postmodern culture (Bauman 2001: 13). So, rather than finessing pre-existing theories of culture
and class, we are treated instead to a pithy abstraction of a culture that lacks any real structural grounding at all. In a sense, such a vision is the postmodern flip side to government and corporate rhetoric that assumes individual freedom and promotes culture as if it were a free-floating entity open to all and unencumbered by inequalities. Clearly, the metaphors of liquidity, mobility and plasticity have somewhat run away with themselves in such work.

Yet, there is an advantage to be had by raising the question of dematerialization and fluid perception, and that is to point to the somewhat inflexible account of perception that distinguishes Bourdieu’s work. For it is often true that Bourdieu reads perception as a closed system, a well-oiled machine that, whilst containing some irregularities – the lag between production and consumption produced by a field’s inertia, for instance – works repeatedly and involuntarily. There is a structural, if not structuralist, logic working here. Bourdieu chooses the mechanistic language of system to capture the methodical workings of artistic perception and the automatic transference of aptitudes. The effect is to assume a direct correspondence between quantitative material on audiences and the more nebulous realm of interpretation. But the fact is, we still do not know much about what the visitor actually thinks or feels in the museum (Smith and Wolf 1996) and we certainly cannot reduce the nature of readership to the amount of time spent in front of the object. Working-class visitors might spend on average 25 minutes less in the museum than upper-class visitors (Bourdieu and Darbel 1991), but we cannot assume these groups read the objects uniformly (within classes) or differently (between classes). This statistical reductionism homogenizes readings amongst tightly-defined classes and does not allow for polysemy, nor even the more complex communication of codes present in Hall’s (1980) ‘encoding/decoding’ model, for instance, where communication is a process or event, not a closed system of equivalences.

Furthermore, Bourdieu’s rather inelastic version of perception is underpinned by a fundamentally inelastic dichotomy between restrained art and commercial culture which devours any potential slippages between cultural knowledge and mechanisms of social reproduction. If the accumulation of popular knowledge via secondary education is entertained by Bourdieu, it is only to be then neutralized as secondary to family socialization. If the possibility of ‘mass producing’ culturally-competent individuals through formal processes of education is raised, it is only to be crushed by self-producing mechanisms of social privilege that undermine the possibility that the binaries between legitimate and illegitimate might be subject to redefinition. And if the possibility of recognizing these conditions is mooted, only the privileged social scientist is objectively placed to comment on how the system works to reproduce each position.

It’s no wonder that in On Television and Journalism (1998a) Bourdieu finds it necessary to describe the media’s failure to deliver any type of democratic
promise of educating the French population as a grave problem. Bourdieu’s characterization of ‘mass’ or ‘popular’ culture is a rather one-dimensional one – it only serves to reproduce inequalities in that any potential for television (even ‘high’ cultural programming) to flatten hierarchies is dismissed. For Bourdieu, like Adorno, only the transformative effects of an autonomous high art (the ‘symbolic revolution’ championed Manet, for instance), are worthy of serious consideration. Certainly, whilst Bourdieu’s collaboration with Hans Haacke has produced some more up-to-date attacks on patronage and sponsorship in the arts, a lot of the nuances of post-1960s culture and its audiences are missing, here. The absence of any reference to pop art, multi-media art or popular literature, for instance, is glaring (Fowler 1997), and the overall thrust of Bourdieu’s analysis of art becomes less powerful the further one moves away from the great ruptures of the nineteenth century, and particularly in the light of highly-commodified, mass-mediated, visually-intensified societies.7

Conclusion: towards a warped and accelerated Bourdieu

The question, then, is to what extent Bourdieu’s ideas can be warped and quickened without them loosing their explanatory value. We need a Bourdieu who can account for a fissured cultural terrain that has been extended and radicalized since the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: where, under more fluid circumstances, the mesh of interactions and visual cultures through which identities are stitched has become ‘more intricate, more multi-layered, more extensive, more transitory in composition, more subject to reconfiguration for just about every (situated) body’ (Pred 1997: 129). In short, we need a Bourdieu whose categories can keep up with an accentuated modernity, a modernity maximized, a modernity where cultural forms are more mobile, institutions more permeable, and where the embodied inequalities of gender, class and ethnicity are relatively durable but also frequently reconstructed.

We might, for instance, allow the field concept more fluidity in order to explain overlapping fields, dissolving fields and processes of de-autonomization that have begun to redefine how boundaries between art and popular culture are defined. The field, after all, should not be seen as a fixed geometrical space but more as a process, an accomplishment produced over and over in and through social relations. We might consider making the habitus concept more able to comport itself to changing social figurations and to take seriously Bourdieu’s own wish to theorize strategies over rules in the spontaneity of social action – a wish that is often neutralized by static versions of the field where the subject is stuck into a position and fated to play out its logic. We might attempt to loosen the grip of the always hidden unconsciousness that plays itself through Bourdieu’s characterization of action in order to account for reflexivity in the realm of institutions and individual behaviour.
And we might think about how best to theorize the complex double-games that are being played by institutions and agents who transcend more than one field in order to be successful across them – Nicholas Serota and Damian Hirst being prime examples in the British art scene (Prior 2003).

Whatever the specifics, we need to be nimble with Bourdieu’s categories, not to slavishly duplicate the master’s tools, but to extend them, radicalize them and apply them. Softer versions of the postmodern audience have been mentioned – the ‘cultural omnivore’ in particular – and studies of contemporary art fields such as London’s during the rise of the ‘Young British Artists’ have also been incisive (Cook 2000). But more studies that are willing to critically interrogate and strengthen Bourdieu’s categories in the process of application are needed. For the contemporary world is neither a completely integrated totality, nor a free-floating mix of disconnected fragments. And we need to encourage approaches contemporary enough to capture ‘the presence of the past in a present that supersedes it but still lays claim to it’ (Augé 1995: 75), the interweaving of the old and the new and the contradictions of an accelerated cultural present. In which case it is better to start with Bourdieu’s categories in order to warp them than to start with a postmodern social theory that, in its quest for social-science fiction, outstrips the social and leaves reality trailing.

(Date accepted: January 2005)

Notes

1. Bound up with the autonomization of cultural fields throughout nineteenth-century Europe, the pure gaze emerges with the set of agents, spaces and institutions, including museum, galleries, critics, curators, academics, dealers, art historians, that makes it possible to conceive of art as irreducible to anything but itself.

2. Appointed de Gaulle’s minister of culture in 1959, André Malraux oversaw a series of high-profile plans to make France’s greatest works of art accessible to as many French citizens as possible. The aspiration to bring high culture to the masses was manifested both in official programmes related to the Fourth Plan (1962–5) and in the staging of international blockbuster exhibitions such as those of Picasso and Tutankhamun.

3. In their assessment of the emotional and intuitive aspects of the aesthetic encounter, Czikszentmihalyi and Robinson conclude that although ‘the aesthetic encounter occurs when information coming from the artwork interacts with information already stored in the viewer’s mind’ (Czikszentmihalyi and Robinson 1990: 18), there exists a universal structure of aesthetic experience that works irrespective of one’s background. This is what they term ‘flow’ – an utterly unselfconscious merging of attention and awareness of the art object through which the viewer is absorbed and enriched with a deeper understanding of the artwork. That the study is based on semi-structured interviews with museum curators and directors – who the authors say, are experts at seeing – reveals just how learned principles of appreciation and classification associated with cultivated (dis)positions are naturalized as legitimate and universal. After all,
is it really that surprising that curators describe the aesthetic experience according to criteria implicit in the Kantian belief that art is separate to everyday life, or that in its ideal form aesthetic appreciation actually requires no effort – it just ‘flows’?

4. Halle’s gripe is with Bourdieu’s rigid use of the term ‘cultural capital’ and the tight relationship postulated between class and consumption. The study argues that whilst abstract art is, indeed, more likely to be enjoyed by the educated classes the terms of enjoyment do not markedly differ from those associated with the less class-bound love of landscape painting, which is valued for its decorative qualities. But even within the supposedly universal landscape category, higher class respondents tended to either own the painting or display works set in historical and ‘foreign’ contexts. And, as Alexander notes, the ‘quoted excerpts from his respondents demonstrate that the higher-class respondents discussed their artworks much more knowledgeably. This ability to speak knowledgeably and to display an interest in esoteric art forms is exactly the basis of cultural capital which Bourdieu describes’ (Alexander 2003: 241).

5. In fact, for Bennett (1998), a central component of modern forms of government is the control of the moral conduct of the population through the management of culture. The modern museum is, from this neo-Foucauldian view, an apparatus of governance and behavioural control that functions in the public domain to constitute modern subjects who self-regulate. To this extent, the political rationality of the museum (though not, perhaps, so much the art gallery) is partly determined by its insertion into governmental logics of civility and public instruction.

6. Bauman’s aestheticization of postmodern types like the tourist finds its most extreme and problematic expression in a celebration of the vagabond, whose world, at least according to Bauman, is a sensible postmodern strategy revolving around keeping one’s options open and cherishing one’s out-of-placeness (Bauman 1996: 29).

7. As technologies of cultural production have opened up reception beyond the space of the gallery it has become more important than ever to account for forms suspended between the high culture pretensions of painting and the Hollywood charms of pop culture. Video art and electronic art, for instance, appeal to both circuits of culture, drawing in a mix of audiences that, whilst not undermining high/low dichotomies, clearly generate new strategies of spectatorship irreducible to the pure or popular gazes. Bourdieu’s work on photography as a ‘middle-brow art’ gives some purchase on this kind of intermediate positioning of technology, but it is clearly insufficient as an account of the evanescence and merging impulses of new image technologies (Kotz 2004).

8. Known for their stained bed sheets, cut up sheep and self portraits cast in blood the ‘young British artists’ constituted an especially powerful artistic ‘scene’ revolving around the patronage of Charles Saatchi. Exhibited together in 1997 at the Royal Academy exhibition Sensation, artists such as Damian Hirst, Tracey Emin and Rachael Whiteread were packaged as the latest in a long line of avant-garde provocateurs shaking up the art world.

Bibliography


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A question of perception


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